UNDERSTANDING THE *BACI-SOUKHWAN* RITUAL: A STEP TOWARDS INCULTURATION IN THE LAO CATHOLIC CHURCH

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Introduction

Three different experiences led me to have a particular interest in the *Baci-Soukhwan*[1] ritual in Laos. First of all, like many other outsiders, I usually associate Laos with Buddhism. In fact, many non-native observers of the Lao culture say, "to be Lao is to be a Buddhist." However, it would be a mistake to associate any culture with a single religion only. Religion is contextualized in a culture, not the other way around.

For most Lao people, including Catholics, the core of any important celebration is the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. This unique traditional practice made a deep impression on me when I stayed there during my two years of pastoral work. That is the second reason why I became interested in it and decided to write about the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual.

[1]Lao people generally use the terms *Baci, Soukhwan, Phukkhen, Makkhen* as interchangeable terms for a kind of *khwan* ritual. In my opinion, *Phukkhen* and *Makkhen* are basically named after the action of tying one's wrist [with cotton strings] in the ritual. Therefore, in this study, I use the general term *Baci-Soukhwan* for this wrist-tying ritual with the cotton threads. Regarding the transliteration in this study, the Pali and Sanskrit transliterations herein are conventional, except that I have not used diacritics. While quoting others in this study, I have changed their own romanization schemes into a unified transliteration so that there will not be variants of the same term.

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The third experience is the disagreement among missionaries due to the controversy regarding the practice of the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual in the Lao Catholic Church. Up to now, there are no official guidelines from the Church about this ritual. Nevertheless, the faithful in Laos practice it without being critically concerned whether or not it is compatible with the Catholic faith. The issue of inculturation is raised only among foreign missionaries who are more open-minded about local ritual practices.

I tend to agree with Paul Hiebert who says that trying to understand folk religions "does not mean we believe them to be true or biblical in nature. It does mean we must take them seriously and provide better answers if we want the old ways to die out."[2] Nonetheless, I, in no way, want this ritual to be wiped out for the sake of Christianity. On the contrary, as a Catholic missionary, I sincerely wish to understand it first as an anthropological phenomenon and then see how it is compatible with the Christian faith. In terms of inculturation, this is the first step in approaching a local practice of a traditional culture.

In this article, we will explain and analyze the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual before focusing on its inculturation. This study is an attempt towards a Christian understanding of the ritual and to propose theological principles for its liturgical inculturation.

The Explanation of *Khwan and Baci-Soukhwan*

Khwan and the Well-Being of a Person

There is an ancient belief which survives among the people of Laos that in every person either old or young, there is a *khwan*. *Khwan* is likely to roam around freely that it must be kept or recalled home as often as possible since it is liable to haunt

[2]Ibid., 10.

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unwholesome places or be led astray by evil companions.[3] It can leave the body temporarily during sleep and illness and permanently at the time of death. Without a *khwan*, a person would not be complete.[4]

According to tradition, a person can have as many as thirty-two *khwans*, located in various parts of the body. However, the number of *khwan* that a person is believed to possess varies from group to group. It is possible that the concept of having thirty-two *khwans* is a later development due to the influence of Buddhism where there are enumerated thirty-two integral parts of a human body.[5] In rituals, these *khwans* are often identified with the body's various senses and faculties, though not all the *khwans* are necessarily named. The numerous specific *khwans* are also collectively termed *khwan*.[6]

The folk category of the person significantly identifies the distinction between the body (*tua*) and *khwan*, and their unstable relationship. Accordingly, the individual subject consists of the body and *khwan*, maintaining an ever unstable equilibrium exposed and susceptible to external powers, often represented as spirits (*phi*). Consequently, *khwan* is not spirit (*phi*), but it shapes one's relations with the plural spirits.[7] The Lao people

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[3]Thao Nhouy Abhay, "The Baci," in *Kingdom of Laos: The Land of the Million Elephants and of the White Parasol*, ed. by Rene de Berval (Saigon: France-Asie, 2021), 129.

[4]Ruth-Inge Heinze, "Nature and Function of Some Therapeutic Techniques in Thailand," *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1977): 92, doi:10.2307/1177819.

[5]Rajadhon, ibid., 234.

[6]A. Thomas Kirsch, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1977): 253, www.jstor.org/stable/205372.

[7]Sarinda Singh, "Religious Resurgence, Authoritarianism, and 'Ritual Governance': 'Baci' Rituals, Village Meetings, and the Developmental State in Rural Laos," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 73, no. 4, (2014): 1063, www.jstor.org/stable/43553469.

believe that *khwan* remains with people for as long as they have good health, vigor and strength, and are comfortable with themselves and their environment. When the *khwan* leaves the body, the person will be ill or experience some ill effects. When the *khwan* is frightened, it will take flight into the wilderness and will not come back until it has regained its normal self.[8]

The Baci-Soukhwan Ritual

Baci is a ritual to call back, welcome, propitiate and unite the *khwan* with the physical body. The two Lao terms *"baci"* and *"soukhwan"* denote the same ceremony, with the latter being more common and colloquial while the former is more pompous and has connotations of royalty. *Baci* is a term that especially denotes a *Soukhwan* ritual, which is held for the Buddhist monks. In general, Baci is a special kind of *Soukhwan* ritual.[9] In fact, many publications dealing with the subject also conflate these two terms.[10]

Three elements are crucial in the performance of the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual: the phakhwan, the morphorn with the invocation, and the sacred cotton thread for the *phukkhene*.

The first element is the *phakhwan*. The *phakhwan* is a tray constructed with bamboo and rattan roughly thirty centimeters high. In everyday use, it is the family dining table, but during a *khwan* ritual, all the offerings, gifts, candles, and flowers used to attract the *khwan* are placed on it. It serves as

[8]Rajadhon, ibid.,120.

[9]Mayoury Ngaosyvathn, "Individual Soul, National Identity: The 'Baci-Sou Khuan' of the Lao," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 5, no. 2 (1990): 292-3, www.jstor.org/stable/41056801.

[10]Phoumirath, ibid.

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the central point of reference during the ritual, with everyone in attendance seated around it on the floor.[11]

The second element is the *phaiphukkhene*. The *phaiphukkhene* literally refers to the cotton threads tied on someone's wrist to symbolize the unity of the *khwan* and the body. Usually, the threads should already be blessed by either a monk in a religious ceremony or by a *morphorn* at the *Baci-Soukhwan* ceremony.

The third element is the *morphorn*, together with the invocation of *khwan*. The *Baci-Soukhwan* is conducted by a ritual specialist or an elder who is usually well-versed in Pali or knows the appropriate ritual texts or formulae which are often in a mixture of Pali and Lao. The ritual specialist, who usually wears a white garb or at least a white scarf, is generally known as *morkhwan* or *morphorn*.

Baci-Soukhwan Ritual Performance

In the book Kingdom of Laos, Thao Nhouy Abhay describes the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual as follows. The first step is to choose an auspicious day and hour for celebration of the ritual. It is said that to hold a *khwan* ritual, the elders, parents, relatives, and friends must be present. The candles and incense sticks are lit and thus a light mist of perfume and incense arises to enfold the ritual setting. The *morphorn* then begins a series of prayers to invoke the divinities:

> Today is a propitious day [...]
> You, the divinities of the mountains and the rivers,
> be favorable to us;
> Listen, all of you;

[11]Stephen K. Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness Among the Lowland Lao Informed by Worldview Themes in Khwan Rituals" (PhD diss., School of World Mission, May 2002), 223.

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Silent ones, lend a kindly ear to the invitation which
I send you;
Come and gather the gifts offered to you on this day.[12]

At the end of this first prayer, the *khwan* is invited to the *phakhwan* with its gifts. As this is done, everyone near enough touches the *phakhwan* with their right hand. Those who are not so close to the *phakhwan* can touch the back of the one in front of them. The transition between the first and second phases of the ritual is marked by the congregation saying in unison with the *morphorn*, "Come *khwan*, come!"13

The second prayer is, therefore, an invocation to call the *khwan* back. It includes the call to the *khwan* to return from the various places to which it has wandered. The *morphorn* appeals to the *khwan* to return to its owner. As this prayer ends, the congregation again recites the transition phrase in unison.

This is a very propitious day [...]
This is the day we have chosen to put on this tray
hard-boiled eggs, sweet potatoes...
Come home [...].[14]

The third prayer invites the *khwan* to the *phakhwan* for the feast. The arrival of the *khwan* is marked by women who sit in the back of the congregation and toss uncooked rice into the air. The rice is thrown to encourage the *khwan* to enter the house, as it might be standing in the doorway, hesitating shyly as it observes the situation. The prayer continues:

Do not fear when you come near [...]
Come, oh *khwan* [...]
Come back to this home [...]

[12]Abhay, "The Baci," 129-130.

[13]Bailey, "Communication Strategies," 208ff.

[14]Abhay, "The Baci," 130.

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> Come back, take your place before the *Phakhwan* and henceforth stay with us.[15]

At the end of this prayer, the *morphorn* takes some of the offerings (typically an egg, a banana, and some cooked rice) and places them in the recipient's hand. Meanwhile, the recipient sits passively with her left hand upright in a prayer position. The recipient acknowledges the blessing when the *morphorn* finishes by raising both hands together in the prayer position to her forehead. Once these incantations and prayers have been said, it is believed that the divinities are presiding over the ceremony and that all the souls have gone back into the body. The "wishes formula" is then recited.

> Be as strong as the antlers of a stag [...]
> May your life last a thousand years [...]
> Should you suffer with fever, may it disappear! [...]
> May you be all-powerful the world over!
> May everything yield before you and let you be free from want!
> Have a long life, good health, happiness, and strength.[16]

The audience, which had remained silent and with palms together at the forehead, now expresses its assent by murmuring: *sa!* Then, the oldest or most respected among the participants begins the *phukkhene* (or more commonly called *makkhen*), which is the tying of the cotton threads around the wrist of the *morphorn*. The participants grasp the knot of the thread with his thumb and forefinger, twisting it as they intone a wish for good fortune, good health, and longevity for the *morphorn*. Then the *morphorn*, in turn, ties unspun cotton threads around the wrist of the person for whom the *soukhwan* is performed. When the *morphorn* has finished tying the threads around the recipient's wrists, the relatives and friends do the same. The

[15]Ibid., 130-131.

[16]Ibid., 131.

consecrated threads are tied onto the recipient's wrist with an oral blessing spoken by the one tying, thus tying the words of blessing and the *khwan* to the person at the same time.[17]

Individual, Social and Cultural-Religious Spheres in the *Baci-Soukhwan*

During the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, three spheres – the individual-psychological, the social, and the cultural-religious – are intimately connected so that the curative efforts have religious aspects.[18] As for the individual-psychological aspect, the destructive effects on the unity of body and soul are best seen in cases of a violent attack by various spirits such as forest spirit (*phipa*), witch-spirit (*phika*), and "bad death" spirit (*phitaihong*).[19] Regarding its social aspect, the community is also bonded through a heightened sense of solidarity in the Baci-Soukhwan ritual. Lao people often say that no matter what you have or do not have, to do a khwan ritual properly, you must at least have the presence of the village community. In terms of its cultural-religious dimension, the concept of khwan does not only "objectify" certain psychological features, specifically the psychological balance or equilibrium of the individual, but also "spiritualizes" those characteristics.

Restoration of Harmony and Integration in the *Baci-Soukhwan*

The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is held whenever the totality of the physical, spiritual, and psychological person needs to be protected, blessed or restored to the status quo. Psychologically, the *Baci-Soukhwan* re-establishes the psychological equilibrium

[17]Ngaosyvathn, "Individual Soul, National Identity," 297.

[18]Heinze, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 91.

[19]Olivier Evrard, et al., *Mobility and Heritage in Northern Thailand and Laos* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 77.

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of the individual and provides her/him with its therapeutic value. Socially, the ritual is an occasion for social acceptance and respect for the individual and an expression of kinship. Thus, the *Baci-Soukhwan* is a ritual of recalling, welcoming, propitiating, and biding the *khwan* to return to the physical body of the person for whom it is performed in order to re-establish psychological equilibrium and strengthen the spiritual well-being of the person while making a cultural, social and political statement about the person's position vis-à-vis their worldly surrounding.[20] The "making" or "strengthening of the *khwan*" in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual operates on several levels simultaneously:21

(1) The psychological balance of the individual. It is meant to keep the *khwan* inside the recipient's body and to strengthen their essence of life. By this, harmony is restored and assured between the individual and their psyche.

(2) The presence of those close to the candidate offers the reassurance of society. By means of this, harmony is restored between the individual and their society and the recipient assured of the care and goodwill of those close to her/him by means of a socially sanctioned rite.

(3) The supernatural forces of deities are invited and propitiated, and their promise is made binding. By this, harmony is restored and assured between the individual and the supernatural. On the one hand, it protects the recipient against the evil forces from the outside. On the other hand, it seals a contract between the individual and the supernatural.

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[20]Thongrith Phoumirath, "The Soukhouane and The Lao People," *LaoPress*, 2020, accessed July 5, 2021, www.laopress.com/news/custom/soukhouane/index.htm.

[21]Heinze, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 96.

(4) In the microcosmic reenactment of a higher reality, all artifacts are charged with symbolic meanings and serve to reinforce the ceremony's efficacy. By this, harmony is restored and assured between the individual and the cosmos.

Thus, the *Baci-Soukhwan* touches the individual's psychological, the social, and the cultural and religious spheres where religion represents the ultimate values of a society and has important integrative functions.[22]

The Baci-Soukhwan Ritual and Christian Faith

Both the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual and the Christian faith share an analogous theological quest of the Absolute, an anthropological quest of the meaning of being human, and an existential quest about the meaning of life.

The Theological Quest: "Is there the Absolute – God?"

The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual tacitly asserts that our world is more spiritual than physical and material. People see themselves engaged in constant struggle with spirits, fellow humans, and supernatural and natural forces that confront them. In such a world, everything can be explained in terms of competing powers and power-encounters where the stronger dominate the weaker. There are no accidents.[23]

The people involved in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual have a concept of various groups of deities (lower than the Supreme Being) that inhabit the immediate human environment. They are believed to dwell in the rivers, lakes, rocks, or other spiritual phenomena. These spirits have powers superior to

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid., 85.

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humans and are asked to intercede with the Supreme God on behalf of the living. At the same time, they are also believed to have the power to harrass the living if they are displeased.

Regarding the belief in the Supreme God, Opoku-Boateng explains that since God is unapproachable without intermediaries, people call upon these lesser gods to take care of the mundane affairs of life.[24] According to the author's observation when he lived in Laos, the Lao people always mention God (*phachao*) in their wishes or blessings. However, tn the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, even God (*phachao*) is not called out in the prayer of the *morphorn*, but the participants still address God in their words of blessing when they tie the strings around one another's wrists. The God (*phachao*) that people of other faiths in Laos call out can be identified with the God of the Christian faith in the sense that this God is the highest among all beings. Analogously, the lifegiving and propitious deities that *morphorn* invoke in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual can be considered as specific and localized personifications of God's sustaining power. However, God's loving care for the universe is transcendental and cannot merely be confined to or conflated with the physical beings like how the Lao people understand spiritual deities in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual.

The Anthropological Quest: "What does it mean to be human?"

The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual implies that each subject consists of the body and *khwan.* Therefore, *khwan* is understood as a spiritual entity residing in a person's physical body. It is worth noting that the body and *khwan* are in a constant relationship. For as long as a person's *khwan* is present, they enjoy good

[24]Daniel Opoku-Boateng, "Animistic World View and the Search for Truth in the Christian Classroom: Towards a Holistic Approach," *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry*, 2 (1997): 100.

health and happiness and the *khwan* offers the person dignity and wholeness.

There is no exact or equivalent term for *khwan* in the Christian faith. "*Khwan*" is easily mistaken as "soul" because these two terms are quite similar. Both of them are the principle of life. There are Christian dualistic anthropologies that locate the image of God (*imago Dei*) exclusively with reference to the spiritual aspect of human nature. However, the *imago Dei* speaks of humanity as a whole. In order to maintain the unity of body and soul clearly taught in revelation, the Magisterium adopted the definition of the human soul as *forma substantialis*. In this regard, the Magisterium relied on Thomistic anthropology, which, drawing upon the philosophy of Aristotle, understands body and soul as the material and spiritual principles of a single human being. If the soul, created in God's image, forms matter to constitute the human body, then the human person as a whole is the bearer of the divine image in a spiritual as well as a bodily dimension.[25] In other words, we cannot deal with the soul in isolation from the body like what we do with *khwan.* A significant difference between *khwan* and soul is that while the former is likely to leave the human body, the latter departs from the human body only at the moment of death. Moreover, aside from human beings, certain kinds of plants and animals are also believed to have *khwan*. On the contrary, only humans are posited have an immortal soul that has its own existence apart from the body in the Catholic worldview.

[25]International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," *Vatican* (2004), accessed July 5, 2021, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html, no. 31.

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The Historical Quest: "What is the meaning of human life?"

According to Hiebert, humans – the ancestors, the living, and the unborn – are seen as actors in the universe and as the center of existence.[26] The common life that they share as a family, a lineage or clan, and society must be preserved by supplicating, coercing, or bribing the surrounding gods and the powerful but capricious spirits. These gods and spirits share the same vital force and are significant, not in their own right, but because of their involvement in the lives of human beings.[27] The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual deals primarily with existential questions – questions about here and now, and with the living, not the dead. The primary concerns are birth, diseases, promotions, money problems, jobs, marriage, new ventures, etc. People find security in their kinship groups, joy in their community gatherings, and resilience in their sacred rituals. They turn to the ancestors and the gods for help in rituals in order to protect them from surrounding dangers.[28]

The cosmological view underpinning the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual views everything in this world as interconnected. Because most life events are explained in relational terms, people spend much of their time trying to appease and coerce the gods, spirits, ancestors, and other people with offerings and bribes to gain their help and assuage their anger. This is the very purpose of performance of the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. In contrast, Christian cosmology is God-centered. According to the Christian faith, God governs creation as a loving *Abba*, making all things work for the good of all his creatures. Therefore, Christians experience the everyday trials of human life as associated with following and serving God. Instead of

[26]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 80.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid., 87.

being paralyzed by fear or driven about by anxiety, strong believers stand on the promise and experience of divine providence and move forward in firm obedience and submission to God's will.

Theological Principles for the Liturgical Inculturation in the *Baci-Soukhwan* Ritual

A Theology of the Triune God

Since the Trinitarian principle is undoubtedly the foundation of the Christian faith, so it must be for the liturgical inculturation of the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. Thus, the handbook used in the Lao Catholic Church for the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual also conforms to the theology of the Triune God. Accordingly, the ritual always begins with the sign of the cross and the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The presider starts the prayers by calling for the Holy Spirit, *"Come Holy Spirit,"* and then the congregation follows:

> Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.
>
> O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations, Through Christ Our Lord, Amen.[29]

Before the presider says the blessings for the recipient, the congregation recites one "Our Father", one "Hail Mary", one "Glory be". This formula of the Catholic *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is flexible and may be adapted to specific circumstances.

[29]The handbook of conducting the *Baci-Soukhwan* in the Lao Catholic Church (unpublished documents).

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However, the God that the Lao Catholics address in the ritual must always be the Triune God.

A Theology of Worship and Submission

In the liturgy, the Church acts not only in virtue of the commission given to her by Christ but also "in closest union with Him her Head," and through His mediation who is the one and universal mediator standing before the Father to intercede for us. Thus, the liturgy empowers us to act in the name of Christ, not by mere imputation, but enabling us to become His true mouthpiece or instrument to join His members to His eternal mediation before the Father.[30] Such a theology of worship is closely connected with the theology of submission.

In the book *Understanding the Folk Religion*, Hiebert remarks that people make sacrifices to gods and spirits to bargain for healing and prosperity. They turn to their honorable ancestors and divination in an attempt to control and assure their own well-being.[31] We can notice such intentionality in the traditional *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual as follows. The offerings are intended to attract and feed the spirits (*phi*). The tying of string is to keep *khwan* within a person. Following this logic, some Lao Catholics may be in the same disposition whenever they hold a *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual.

Nevertheless, the theology of submission steadfastly rejects an ego-centered religion and a magical mentality. The center of its message is God and what God does. In the Christian context, the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual must not be done with the ulterior motive of having to prove the practitioner's piety or winning God's favor or approval. God is not to be manipulated by human

[30]John H. Miller, "The Nature and Definition of the Liturgy," *Theological Studies*, 18, no. 3, Sept. (1957): 338, doi:10.1177/004056395701800301.

[31]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 371.

rituals and sacrifices. Instead, people should conduct rituals with an attitude of worship and submission to God.

A Theology of Ecology

The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual embraces a cosmological view where everything in this world is interconnected. It espouses a theology of ecology with two prominent aspects: relatedness and equilibrium. Such a viewpoint, however, appears to lack a holistic theology.

As for relatedness, human beings are related to the rest of the living world, including other-than-human entities and larger-than-human communities. In the article *Indigenous Nature Reverence and Conservation*, Jeffrey G. Snodgrass states that in the context of an indigenous interconnected cosmos, the term environment denotes an eco-social sphere of a "community-of-beings", where human and non-human entities co-exist and interact on a daily basis.[32] In the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, the first prayer that the *morphorn* offers is to invoke the divinities who are believed to dwell in natural objects like mountains, rivers, the air, etc. Similarly, the *khwan* of the recipient in a *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is believed to have left his or her body and begun to stay elsewhere such as in natural objects like rivers, trees, ricefield, huts... This is why in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, the *morphorn* must offer a prayer to call *khwan* back from those temporary dwelling places.

The other aspect of a theology of ecology in the *Baci-Soukhwan* is that it expresses and fosters equilibrium among all creatures. As mentioned previously, Heinze explains that during the ritual, the three spheres –individual-psychological,

[32]Jeffrey Snodgrass and Kristina Tiedje, "Indigenous Nature Reverence and Conservation: Seven Ways of Transcending an Unnecessary Dichotomy," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2008): 9, https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v2i1.6.

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the social, and the cultural-religious – are intimately connected so that the curative efforts have religious aspects.[33] Roger Gottlieb confirms that the relationship of health with ourselves, our community and with all creation is a spiritual relationship. The need of the universe is the individual need to be in harmony with the creator and other creatures.[34] In the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, the equilibrium between humans and all other creatures is also implied in the prayer for calling *khwan* back. Accordingly, the *morphorn* functions primarily as an intermediary between human and nonhuman worlds who summon *khwan* back from where it is wandering around, and only secondarily as a healer who restores the *khwan*-body harmony in the recipient of the ritual. Thus, the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is supposed to be "home" for *khwan* to come back. Such a home, then, must be something "better" than the places to which *khwan* has wandered. Hence, this home must be characterized by the harmony between good natural things (forest woods, elephants...), well-behaved humans (uncles, parents...) and *Phakhwan* (with the offerings made of natural material like rice, flowers, fruits, banana leaves...). In general, the theology of ecology expressed in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual recognizes the value of all creatures and emphasizes a harmonious connectedness between humans and all creatures.

The Second Vatican Council affirms such an ecological perspective in saying that "The faithful must learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation, as well as its role in the harmonious praise of God."[35] As envisioned in *Laudato Si'* and *Querida Amazonia*, the Lao indigenous communities "care for ecosystems and they recognize that the earth, while serving as

[33]Heinze, *Asian Folklore Studies*, 91.

[34]Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth*, 161.

[35]Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 36.

a generous source of support for their life, also has a maternal dimension that evokes respect and tender love."[36] However, a holistic Christian theology of ecology entails that this interconnectedness be expressed in solidarity with others, "that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others."[37] Moreover a holistic theology of ecology presupposes that an interconnected world, as stated in *Laudato Si'* must always include an eschatological vision in that "creation is projected towards divinization, towards unification with the Creator himself."[38]

A Theology of the Kingdom of God

Similar to holistic theology, this theological principle of the Kingdom of God acknowledges God's rule and work in the world. In ritual, time and space become holy. Through ritual, water, wine, and bread become means to understand and encounter the sacred that point to the Triune God. Amid these rituals, the participants are amazed and awed by the most transforming feature of all: God is here. The immanence of God represented in God-centered rituals disposes the participants to be encountered by God. Even more miraculously, they will understand that God eagerly seeks to identify with them in those moments, just as God does at all times. In the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, the joy and love expressed during these ceremonies powerfully demonstrate the presence of Christ among God's people. From

[36]Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 179. Cf. Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, no. 17.

[37]Ibid., no. 170.

[38]Ibid., no. 236.

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this ritual, many have been motivated to go to their families and friends and share what God had done for them.[39]

A Theology of the Power and the Cross

God is the God Almighty, who creates and sustains all things by divine power, who defeated Satan and associated hosts, and who will bring all things into subjection to God's eternal rule. Moreover, by his might, Jesus saves those who turn to Him and gives them the power to become like Him and bear witness to His greatness.[40] In a ritual like the *Baci-Soukhwan*, people are aware of the hierarchy of powers that affect their lives. Holding the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual also invokes a kind of supernatural power for protection or blessing. God's power is demonstrated supremely on the cross in the Christian faith. Divine power is always rooted in love, not pride, redemption, not revenge, and concern for the other, not the self. It is humble, not proud, and inviting, not rejecting. Its symbol is the cross, not the sword. That is why the world sees God's power as a weakness (cf. 1 Cor 1:23-27).

Christians and the believers of other faiths share in the common lot of fallen humanity, including famines, plagues, and illness. It does not mean that God is uninterested or uninvolved in people's situations. Rather, we realize that God is working out God's purposes in a fallen world, and that one day God will bring in a new and perfect creation.

Such a Christian perspective on human weakness, sickness, or fragility can transform the attitude of the Lao Christians when they hold the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. For example, in a traditional *Baci-Soukhwan* wedding ritual, the widows and

[39]Paul Henry DeNeui, "Strings: Media for Gospel Communication in Northeast Thai Lan," accessed April 8, 2006, www.thaicov.org/resources/documents/string_tying.html.

[40]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 374.

divorced women are not allowed to directly participate in the preparations because they represent incomplete married life.[41] However, in the ceremony of the Lao Christians in Northeast Thailand, it is not necessary to limit the participants in preparation to older women from good marriages because they believe that no one is able to be a pure person in and of themselves or through working their own good deeds. The only way a person can be pure is to accept the work of what Christ has done and is doing in their lives. Everyone who follows God is thus in a process of becoming a pure person in Jesus Christ through the power of God. Therefore, it makes no difference whether a person has ever divorced or not if they intend to help prepare the wedding.[42] Similarly, in the traditional *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, handicapped people are viewed with deep fear and suspicion. They are generally not invited to the ritual, since they are considered not to be whole. From the observation of the author of this study when he lived in Laos, such an opinion has been eliminated, especially among the Lao Catholic community. All are invited to the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual as brothers and sisters in Christ.

A Theology of Discernment

Hiebert remarks that "people seek signs to assure them that God is present, but apart from the fruits of the Spirit, there are no self-authenticating phenomena. Miraculous healings, speaking in tongues, exorcisms, prophecies, resurrections, and other extraordinary experiences are reported in all major religions."[43] Therefore, the vital question is "what are the signs

[41]Bailey, "Communication Strategies", 267.

[42]Wetchgama, "The Influence of String Tying Ceremonies on the Isan People," 163.

[43]Ibid., 375.

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that enable Christians to discern the actions of God and differentiate it from the works of self or Satan?"

In the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual of Thai Isan Christians, people are aware of the difference in the meaning of the ritual compared with a traditional one though they are still resorting to a similar form. It means that Christian people can still be faithful to their tradition as Jesus Christ has changed their internal values and attitudes. Banpote Wetchgama, a leader of Thai Isan Christian community, commented on this point, "We are not the same as all other Isan people, but we are real Isan people with a new life and new set of values. Our lives are being changed each day through the power of the Holy Spirit. We follow old and traditional forms of ceremonies with new meanings. These new meanings express that Jesus Christ is the foundation of our new life."[44]

Such a new meaning of the ritual is expressed in the way the Christians perform the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. For example, when they use the strings for wrist-tying, these strings are not referred to as sacred strings (*saisin*). Instead, it is explained that they are simply ordinary cotton thread used to represent a deeper religious meaning with no magical power attached. Even some items in the offerings on the *phakhwan* like candles, banana, betel nuts, tobacco, boiled eggs, boiled rice and alcohol may not be offered if the faithful are likely to believe that these are presents for the spirits. In general, anything in the traditional ritual that confuses people in their Christian beliefs must be used cautiously and explained clearly.

A Theology of the Church as a Caring Community

The Church is the sign of the kingdom of God on earth. The Church must be a caring community where the fallen, sick,

[44]Wetchgama, "The Influence of String Tying Ceremonies on the Isan People," 176.

oppressed, and needy find refuge, with preferential care for the earth too. The Church must also be a place where believers gather to pray for God's blessings and God's deliverance from public crises such as droughts, plagues, and wars. In other words, the Church must be a healing community.[45] The Christian recipients themselves, like the participants of the traditional *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, will be going through some liminal phases of transition, in a liminal position of life, and for whatever reason, are also in need of special blessings from the community.[46] In this case it is the kind of community that is significantly different. They are not merely the friends, relatives, and acquaintances that have some personal interests in wanting to become more closely linked with the recipient. Rather, all are part of the body of Christ who desire to express their unity to a new member of the family of God.[47]

The liturgy is the assembly of the priestly people who respond in faith to God's gratuitous call. Therefore, the liturgy should mirror the Church's universality, which knows no barriers, no social division based on class, race, ideology or nation. The liturgical assembly should project the value of hospitality; it should become a critique of sociocultural systems that deny human equality between men and women and the dignity of those who belong to the lower ranks of society.[48]

Today, Laos still ranks among some of the poorest nations in the world, and Christian assemblies should be the pinnacle of socioeconomic equality and care for our common home.

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[45]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 377.

[46]Wetchgama, ibid., 164.

[47]DeNeui, "String Tying Ritual", 99.

[48]Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen W. Tucker, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1070.

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Conclusion and Recommendations for Inculturation of the *Baci-Soukhwan* Ritual in the Lao Catholic Church

The *Baci-Soukhwan* Ritual as a Symbolic Action

In his book *The Drums of Affliction*, Victor Turner states that rituals are storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community.[49] The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual symbolizes the social structure and values of the Lao people as follows. First, the role of family is emphasized. The Lao basic social unit is the household, consisting of one or more nuclear families. Such a fact is clearly manifested in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. For example, the *phakhwan* tray is normally used as a meal table in family, but in the ritual, it becomes the central symbol of the gathering of participants. Moreover, the family members and neighbors play crucial roles from the beginning and end of the ritual. No one can celebrate the ritual by or for themselves.

Second, village life and communal solidarity form the underlying spirit of the ritual. Beyond the nucleus of the family, the *ban* or the village is also the basic social unit in Laos. The *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is the symbol of the community life in Laos. The ritual entails social acceptance and respect for the person undergoing the ritual. Curing or taking care of the soul, in effect, serves a psychological function because the ritual affirms the solidarity of those participating in it.

Finally, harmony is maintained and strengthened in the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual. The *Baci-Soukhwan* is performed on

[49]Victor Turner, *The Drums of Affliction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 2.

occasions where there is a need for integration or restoration. Such a special meaning of the ritual is partly expressed in the decoration of the offerings. Moreover, the tying of the threads restores harmony in body, spirit, and social relationships. Harmony is understood from various aspects: between the individuals and their psyche; between the individuals and their society; between the individuals and the supernatural; and between the individuals and the universe.

Inculturation Must Tap into the Power of Local Symbols

A symbol takes on it two simultaneous dimensions. As for the human dimension, Langdon Gilkey remarks that "religious symbols are drawn inexorably to participate in the life-world if they are to survive at all; for here alone is where reality, meaning, and transformative power are."[50] For him, symbols mean so powerfully to us because they shape and thematize our real world, our life-world, the ordinary social world in which we really are and know that we are. Regarding the religious dimension, the divine is present in the symbols that communicates the sacred presence to us through symbols, and our worship is a response to this divine presence. In this sense, any creature can become "symbols" of the divine being and activity: each in its own way, and each through its own character and integrity as a creature, becoming a medium or symbol of the ultimate. As a result, there is no clear distinction between "secular" and "religious" symbols, strictly speaking.

In the effort of inculturation in Laos, every kind of symbol must be appreciated and properly evaluated. This study presents an approach to the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual, which is full of symbols. These symbols should be appropriated in Christian rites in so

[50]Langdon Gilkey, "Symbols, Meaning, and the Divine Presence," *Theological Studies* 35, no. 2 (May 1974): 249, doi:10.1177/004056397403500202.

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far as it help the faithful experience God's lively presence in their ordinary everyday struggle in the Lao society.

Inculturation Needs to Address Individuals

This factor is especially significant in the Lao society where every individual is associated with their households and village communities. Therefore, when the Church takes care of a believer, there is a net of social relationship in which this person is involved that the Church has to engage in pastorally. In rituals like the *Baci-Soukhwan*, a group experiences itself most intensely as a unified community, and the members recognize themselves as belonging to one another as a part of the larger village and ecclesial community. The performance communicates to all the participants the strength in solidarity and collective existence. If an individual can claim any significance, it is only by belonging to the collective, and which is determined by participating in the group's rituals.[51]

The Lao basic social units, from family to village and district (*muang*), are significant, given its hierarchy and inequality in power. There is a hierarchy within the village based on sex, ability, and official function. The village head is almost always a man, and the council of elders usually consists of men. The inculturation challenges the Lao social hierarchy by calling for the new foundation of Jesus Christ who comes to serve, not to be served. The Lao morality is built on social obligations. However, the foundation of Christian morality is, first of all, a covenant relationship between humans and the Creator-God, made manifest in Christ. Therefore, when the vertical-covenant dimension of morality is accepted, Lao Catholic women and men will be able to tap into a powerful symbolic tradition,

[51]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 301.

albeit countercultural, of rendering the selfless, giving to others at the horizontal level.[52]

The Inculturation has to Address the Issues that Lao People Face in the Present

Hiebert remarks that many people turn to the Christian faith through ministries on an existential level. They are often in crisis, face everyday life problems, and are open to hearing new answers. We know that the *Baci-Soukhwan* ritual is held in almost any important event in the life of a Lao person. This ritual becomes a necessary part of Lao culture. Therefore, the inculturation of the Lao Catholic Church should deal with all issues that the Lao Catholics may encounter in their lives as citizens.

According to Hiebert, one measure of the godliness of a church is the way it treats the marginalized. The world takes care of the successful, the powerful, and the wealthy. The Church exists for others. It is entrusted with the care of those lost on the margins.[53] Actually, inculturation can be considered as a manifestation of the mystery of incarnation of Jesus in a specific culture. Therefore, the poverty of Christ and his Gospel for the poor need to be addressed to the Lao people who are poor and facing various kinds of difficulty.

Inculturation Must Be Integrated with the Teaching Ministry of the Church

Undoubtedly, the local people know the deep, hidden meanings of their old customs and their significance in the Lao cultures. On the other hand, as Hiebert suggests, missionaries

[52]Stephen K. Bailey, "Worldview Themes in Lao Khwan Rituals" (PhD diss., School of World Mission, 2000), 75.

[53]Ibid.

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may need to raise questions that the people have overlooked at some points, for they often fail to see their own cultural assumptions with a critical eye.[54] Consequently, the Christian communities will gradually purify traditional beliefs and practices and enrich them with explicit Christian meanings. The traditional rites and practices will thus become truly Christian for the Catholic Church that is seeking explicitly to proclaim and celebrate the Good News. At the same time, they will also remain authentically indigenous, for as long as the congregation has creatively generated the enriched meaning of *Baci-Soukhwan*, using traditional concepts and forms the people are familiar with in their own cultures.

[54]Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 28.