

In a world(view) where string is not just string, the emerging Ethnic Thai faith communities are answering the question of what in their culture can they accept, modify or need to reject in order to follow Jesus. Cross-cultural worker Luke shows us the workings.

String Theory



String has a seemingly unlimited amount of uses. You can tie things, bind things, hang things. You can even tie it to a lightweight frame with fabric pulled over it and make a kite that flies. However, despite the many potential uses of string, for the average Australian it doesn't hold any special meaning or value. String is just string.

This is very different in Thailand. For most Thais, a short piece of white string holds significant meaning. String tying is one of the most common spiritual practices amongst Thai Buddhists even though the practice actually predates Buddhism in Thailand. It is used for weddings, travel, arrival, house warmings, dedications and many more occasions. The string is tied around a person's wrist and is accompanied by prayers or chants for luck, protection or blessing. Usually once tied the strings remain on the wrist for up to three days unless, in the case of a wedding, two people have been tied together.

For many Ethnic Thai followers of Jesus string tying remains an important part of their spirituality and to ask a Thai to give this up would be akin to asking Baptist baby boomers to give up post service morning tea. String tying hardly sounds biblical, I hear you say. Well neither is tea and biscuits.

For the Ethnic Thai followers of Jesus, remaining deeply connected to their culture and community is vitally important to the spreading of the Gospel, as it is for all the people groups Global Interaction works among. This however poses a problem. While there is much about the Thai culture that is admirable and even Godly there is also much that is far from it.

For an Ethnic Thai person seeking to be faithful to a new Lord but remain a part of their local community there is a need to accept, modify or reject aspects of their own culture. Some aspects are acceptable for a believer to retain just as they are, some require modification

in their meaning or practice and other aspects must be rejected as they are simply not compatible with a life lived for Jesus.

String tying is a great example of how the Ethnic Thai believers have modified a cultural practice to fit within their new faith. Whenever they tie string together they explain, for the benefit of anyone present who may not know Jesus, that the string has no power to protect or bring luck, but is a representation of God's love and their prayers for one another.

For them it is a significant and meaningful spiritual practice that cannot simply be done away with but instead can be adapted to their new faith. It is not up to the cross-cultural worker to dictate what aspects of culture are accepted, modified or rejected but rather the Holy Spirit's work to lead people to the truth. The cross-cultural worker's job is to point them to Jesus.

So... what can this theory look like in practice?

Location

Accept

Modify

Reject

Thailand

Language - The use of the word satu instead of amen. Christians of the traditional church in Thailand reject this because they see it as a Buddhist word, rather than simply a Thai translation of amen.

Festival - Loy Krathong is a Thai holiday where families come together and release small floats down the river to carry away bad luck and bad karma. Believers participate in this community event but place a cross on their floats in place of incense sticks, signifying that Jesus is the one who has paid for their wrongdoings.

Infidelity - The acceptance of unfaithfulness in romantic relationships. Unfaithfulness is common and even expected in Thailand. This is incompatible with a God-honouring marriage.

Thailand

Honour - The honouring of elders and people in authority is very important in Ethnic Thai culture. The believers retain this part of their culture by honouring church leaders and others older than them in distinctly Thai ways.

Funerals - While the broader community continues to hold traditional funerals, even for believers, the faith communities conduct a modified ceremony without the usual Buddhist elements but with a bible passage and prayer.

Powers - Animistic practices such as making offerings to territorial spirits and divination. Believers must not engage with other spiritual powers.

Australia

Sport - Watching and talking about sport is an important part of Australian culture and many believers enjoy watching sport as a fun and relational activity.

Socialising - Spending time with family and friends is highly valued in Australian culture, however this often revolves around alcohol. While investing in relationships is upheld by believers, the prominence of alcohol and drinking to excess is not God-honouring.

Oversexualisation
Followers of Jesus must reject both the trivialisation of sex (casual sex) and the glorification of sex (prevalence of porn and sexual content in pop culture). We have a completely different story to share.

Your community!

Consider what aspects of your culture you should accept, modify or reject in order to follow Jesus.