ANCESTORS AND CHRISTIANS IN RURAL NORTHERN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a Christian ancestor cult amongst the descendants of some of the first Northern Thai converts to Protestant Christianity. I firstly describe the yearly ancestor ritual, which Christians say is performed to pay homage to their ancestors, and discuss the significance of Christian ancestors for group organisation. I then suggest that the Christian ancestor cult originated in a late nineteenth–century transformation of ideas relating to Buddhist mortuary practices and ritual practices concerned with the matrilineal spirits (*phii buu njaa*), synthesised with rudimentary Christian understandings about death and the person of the deceased. Finally, I argue that Northern Thai Christian beliefs and ritual practices are not the result of assimilation into Thai cultural patterns, but constitute creative cultural responses to the broader social context.[1]

The Ethnographic Context

The congregation of *Khriscag Bohin* is located in the village of *Baan Bohin*, some fourteen kilometres to the northeast of Chiang Mai city in Northern Thailand.[2] A member congregation of the Church of Christ in Thailand (*Saphaa Khriscag naj Pratheed Thai*), it was founded in 1953 when its members separated from the congregation of *Khriscag Sansai* (formed in 1894), several kilometres distant. Its founders were descendants of the first Christian convert in the village, *Gaaw* (1848–1938), who was converted to Christianity in approximately 1880 by the Presbyterian missionary Dr. Daniel McGilvary.

The 124 members of *Khriscag Bohin* are primarily drawn from *Baan Bohin* and the adjacent village of *Baan Chiangseen*. A religious minority, the people are highly conscious of *Gaaw's* position as the first Christian, and of the fact that they, as a group, share cultural patterns which originated during his lifetime. They claim that these patterns demarcate them as a distinctively Christian group. These concern several areas. Many of the Christians share the surname *Rangsan* (which means founder).[3] The Christians also have a distinctive usage of

Northern Thai kin terminology, whereby all Christians claim to belong to the one family (*khrobkhrua*) as they are able to trace descent from *Gaaw*. Although they are not particularly closely related by any consistent model of descent, by tracing descent through any combination of descent and affinal links, almost all Christians can trace some genealogical connection with *Gaaw*.[4] Christian patterns of marriage and post–marital residence are also distinctive. Marriages almost always involve marriage with non–Christians from outside the village and Christians of both sexes usually express a desire for post–marital residence in the village with the Christian group (as they put it, they aim to "live with our family").

Most importantly, the role of *Gaaw* (and other deceased Christians) in the constitution of Christian identity is made explicit through the performance of a yearly ritual to pay homage to Christian ancestors. This ritual, the *Phithii Buuchaa Banphaburut* (the ritual to pay homage to the ancestors, hereafter the homage ritual) is performed in the cemetery each Easter Sunday morning. It is a non–Church ritual in that it does not form part of the ritual cycle of the Church of Christ in Thailand and, as such, it meets the disapproval of Church officials. However, Christians claim such criticism is not important as the

rite concerns only the family and is an occasion when all members of the family, Christian and non–Christian, come together to pay homage (*buuchaa*) to Christian ancestors.

Ancestor Worship and Christianity

Beliefs and ritual activities directed towards deceased ancestors are usually termed ancestor worship or ancestor veneration.[5] As Fortes (1987, 68) puts it, in "ancestor worship ... an ancestor receives ritual service and tendance directed specially to him by the proper class of his descendants." Ancestors are generally believed to have the ability to exert benevolent and / or punitive influences over the lives of the living (Beidelman 1986; Fortes 1949, 1959, 1961, 1965, 1987; Goody 1962; Gluckman 1937; Kopytoff 1971; Middleton 1971; West 1975). The attitude of the living towards them has been variously defined as *pietas*, one of filial piety (Fortes 1961); respect for age (Kopytoff 1971); respect and fear (Mendonsa 1976); and, as concerning acts of "propitiation" and "conciliation" directed to the deceased (Goody 1962). Most importantly, ancestor worship is part of the wider social system. Ancestors derive their authority from parental authority and their worship is related to descent and succession within the living generation.

Since the early years of the Christian Church, practices reminiscent of paganism, such as offerings to the dead, have been forbidden by the official Church (Ariès 1987, 147). Until recently (Smith 1989, 30) Christian missionaries have been antagonistic to ancestor cults and have aimed at their eradication (Pauw 1963). However, ethnographic evidence suggests that ancestor cults are frequently retained following conversion to Christianity. Beidelman (1982) notes that among the Kaguru, converts retain a belief in ancestral spirits and that some draw parallels between their ancestor beliefs and Catholic beliefs regarding saints. Bond (1987) also claims that among the Yombe of Northern Zambia an ancestor cult coexists with Protestant Christianity as part of a wider ritual field. Comaroff (1985) describes an analogous situation among Tshidi Zionist churches where, in a synthesis of African and Christian beliefs, ancestors play a role of mediation between God and man. Many ethnographers have made similar claims regarding the continuing significance of ancestor worship for other African groups (Middleton 1971; Pauw 1975; Sanneh 1983; Schutte 1974; West 1975; Wilson and Mafeje 1963).

Ethnographers also report instances where indigenous conceptions of ancestors not only persist among groups who convert to Christianity, but where they have been combined in a creative synthesis with Christian teachings to create a new basis for group organisation. Clark (1985, 1989) discusses the Wiru in the Southern Highlands of New Guinea, who converted to Christianity in the early 1960s. Prior to contact and the entry of missionaries, identity was constituted in relation to a cult centered about the propitiation of paternal ancestors. However, Clark (1989, 181) claims that the Wiru, who today belong to the

Wesleyan mission in Takuru, now use church membership as a means of making statements about group identity. He writes, "Adam and Eve are envisaged as the ultimate apical agnates" and argues that this allows a notion of a much wider group membership than the previous model. Instead of groups belonging to cult houses, they now belong to various Christian denominations and are defined through denominational affiliation.

Similarly, deceased ancestors play a significant role in the lives of the Merina of Madagascar (Bloch 1971, 1986). The largely Protestant Merina were first contacted by missionaries from the London Missionary Society in 1820 and later came under the influence of Catholicism. However, Block claims that deceased ancestors remain significant for the control of land and as representatives of the moral values of the community. Further, he argues that relationships amongst the living are constituted within terms of relationships constituted with deceased ancestors: "There are no descent groups of the living, but there is a notion of descent groups in relation to the dead in the tomb" (1971, 165).

Ancestors and Northern Thai Belief

In comparison with many other societies, ancestors play a relatively insignificant role in Northern Thailand. The Northern Thai have little interest in specific ancestors more than a few generations remote and genealogical data is rarely more than five generations deep (Potter 1976). There are, however, some general beliefs and practices relating to ancestors. These can be classified into two categories: those relating to Buddhism and those relating to the matrilineal spirits and their associated ritual complexes. In both cases these beliefs are poorly elaborated and are often internally contradictory.

In respect to Buddhism, Keyes claims Buddhist teachings have left the Northern Thai little scope for the elaboration of beliefs about ancestors: "Belief in rebirth aborts a tendency on the part of Northern Thai to think of the dead as ancestors having persistent interest in the world of the living" (Keyes 1987b, 185). For Buddhists, following death and the appropriate performance of the mortuary rites, the spirit (*winjaan*) of the deceased is consigned to one of the many Buddhist heavens and hells. Here it is uncontactable by the living, although merit made on ritual occasions such as the mortuary rite may be transferred to it in order to ameliorate its position (Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes 1980; Keyes 1975, 1982, 1987b; Tambiah 1977; Trankell 1987). However, the merit is transferred to the spirit, Keyes's (1987b, 198) "liminal essence", which is without an enduring human identity. Following a time in heaven or hell, depending on the *karma* of the individual, the spirit is eventually reborn into a new body and possesses a new identity and personality. The only link with previous existences is *karma* and the spirit, the essence or consciousness of the individual.

Nevertheless, some practices within Northern Thai Buddhism are concerned with the transference of merit and / or

goods to the deceased. These practices, which, as Keyes (1987b, 199) points out, constitute a form of ancestor worship, suggest that there are some minimal conceptions of the survival of the individual after death. Terwiel (1979, 414–415) notes that the erection of "mortuary huts" over the grave to provide provisions for the *khwan* (or more likely the *winjaan*) is characteristic of archaic–Tai burial practices. Indeed, they are also characteristic of relatively contemporary mortuary practices. Cort (1886, 365) notes a report of a Lao funeral practice where "Over the grave they erect a small bamboo house, and in it lay gifts for the dead" including cloths, food items, betel and tobacco. Curtis (1903, 154) also reports the provision of food and clothing in the mortuary rite for the use of the spirit. A Northern Thai funeral rite witnessed by Pelmer (1907) included offerings of betel, fermented tea and personal goods for the deceased. Other mortuary practices such as the putting of a coin in the mouth of the corpse for the use of the deceased in the spirit world (Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes 1980, 7; Kickert 1960, 73; Sanguan 1966, 163; Tambiah 1977, 180) also suggest some form of enduring human identity after death.

Writing of contemporary Buddhist practices in the Mae Sariang district, Keyes discusses the ritual of giving rice offerings to the Sangha (*phithii poj khaaw sang*). In this rite a "miniature house filled with utensils and clothing" is offered to the monks with the intention that the essence (the merit) of the goods accrue to the deceased (1987b, 193–194; see also Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes 1980, 18). Keyes points out the ambiguity of the status of the deceased in popular Buddhist belief and the clear symbolism in this rite that the surviving essence of the deceased can utilise the goods (1987b, 194). Similar descriptions of this ritual are also found in Kingshill (1976, 228–229), Sanguan (1966, 241–243), Tambiah (1977, 186–188) and Trankell (1987, 642). This rite, and practices which focus upon the provision of goods for the deceased, suggest that in popular Buddhist thought there is a conception of the survival of some form of individual identity, at least for a short time following death. They also suggest the possibility of contact between the living and the deceased during this period.

An alternative, if more controversial, group of practices relating to ancestors consists of the beliefs and ritual activities concerning the matrilineal spirits (*phii buu njaa*). Turton (1972, 237; 1975, 233) claims these spirits represent a type of ancestor spirit. However, as Cohen and Wijeyewardene (1984, 249), Davis (1974, 60) and Wijeyewardene (1977, 19) have pointed out, the *phii buu njaa* are not true ancestral spirits. They are spirits inherited from ancestors, rather than the spirits of specific deceased ancestors, a distinction also made by Buddhist informants in *Baan Bohin* and *Baan Chiangseen*. Yet, in their concern with reinforcing the authority of senior generations, the constitution of the domestic group and matters such as gender, sexuality and property, the *phii buu njaa* fulfil the same function as an ancestor cult. Also, as Turton (1972, 241–242; 1975, 237–238) points out, as an inheritance from senior generations, in a sense they do represent the jural authority of those generations. Thus, although the *phii buu njaa* are not ancestral spirits, they are related to deceased ancestors. I later argue the idea of the consti-

tution of the matrilineal group through the performance of corporate ritual directed to the matrilineal spirits; the ritual practices themselves and their timing were particularly important in the constitution of contemporary Christian ancestor beliefs.

Christian Beliefs about Ancestors

According to the formal teachings of the Church of Christ in Thailand, Christians believe that following death the spirit of the deceased goes directly to heaven (*sawan*) or hell (*narog*). Here it may not be contacted by the living. For most informants, there was some ambiguity regarding the exact nature and location of the spirit following death. Some claimed that it immediately enters heaven or hell, while others suggested that it goes to a waiting place where it (the deceased person) has an opportunity to repent of unbelief. However, all conceptualised the deceased as retaining their individual identity and personality and, to some extent, their corporal identity. At the resurrection they expected to see people looking as they do in this life, only younger and in full health.

By contrast with these formal teachings, the Christians in *Baan Bohin* and *Baan Chiangseen* hold a number of other beliefs about ancestors. The deceased are not only remembered as genealogical ancestors; they are remembered as ancestors who, while not bodily present, are sentient ancestors who retain a benevolent interest in life on earth and whom their descendants expect to meet in heaven. Accordingly, as they believe their ancestors are still interested in the world of the living, the Christians feel a responsibility for continuing their traditions and practices. Most importantly, members of the family said that they must perform the homage ritual each year to pay homage to Christian ancestors.

However, the homage ritual incurs active opposition from *Khriscag Bohin's* minister *Aacaan Tongkham* and other ministers of the official Church. They explained their opposition to this extra–Church ritual to the deceased on the basis of the theological error in the practice. They claimed that, while not exactly anti–Christian, the homage ritual was theologically incorrect (*majthuug*) and had to be opposed. *Aacaan Tongkham*, for example, interpreted the homage ritual as a corruption of Christian practice, rather than one directed to family unification. He opposed it through his refusal to participate and through his active private discouragement of elders from holding the ritual. He has also attempted to incorporate it into the wider structure of *Khriscag Bohin's* Easter celebrations and has attempted to correct the Christian's ideas about ancestors through his preaching during the main Easter Sunday service. The Christians considered such opposition to be irrelevant, the result of a failure to appreciate the ritual's significance. As one informant put it, "*Aacaan Tongkham* says it's wrong; he does not understand as he does not belong; he is not necessary … we cannot change it [the ritual]."

The Homage Ritual

The homage ritual is performed once each year, in the cemetery in the early hours of Easter Sunday morning. I designate it the homage ritual as the Christians, when questioned about its performance, say they go to the cemetery to "*buuchaa banphaburut*" (to honour or pay homage to the ancestors).[6] Chronologically, at least, it has been incorporated in the ritual cycle of the Church, as it is encapsulated between an early morning Easter Sunday service and the normal mid–morning Easter Sunday service of worship. By holding a short church service prior to the ritual's performance *Aacaan Tongkham* has attempted to give it a Christian emphasis.

Although I have not witnessed it, informants reported that Christians in some other centres also made offerings to their ancestors. However, they emphasised that the *Baan Bohin* homage ritual was unique, as only there did Christians and non–Christians, direct blood relatives and others, come together as a group to pay "*buuchaa*" (homage) and "*khawrob*" (respect/esteem) to their ancestors, to show that they belonged to the one family. They said that in other centres people merely made an offering of a garland (*phuangmaalaj*) to the deceased.

Khriscag Bohin's Easter celebrations typically follow a pattern of between one and four nights of services prior to a major preaching service on the evening of Good Friday. Easter Saturday is reserved for private prayer and meditation. An early morning service is held on Easter Sunday prior to the performance of the homage ritual, followed by the normal 10 a.m. Sunday service of worship. Although the Good Friday and Easter Sunday services are important in terms of formal Christian theology, for the Christians the homage ritual is the most significant part of Easter.

Preparations for the 1987 homage ritual began on Easter Saturday afternoon when adult male members of the congregation gathered at the cemetery to tidy it up. The cemetery clean–up comprised cutting the grass and the collecting and burning of dead tree branches and the leftover debris from funerals (coffin lids and foam wreaths). This is viewed by Christians as the fulfilment of a responsibility toward ancestors, rather than a mundane process of cleaning. Later, as darkness fell, small groups of Christians went to the cemetery and marked the commencement of the ritual period by placing a lighted candle (or candles) on crosses marking the graves of relatives. On this evening, also, families made their preparations for the ritual, the purchase of flowers and candles, incense, and plastic bags containing the mix of perfumed herbs and flower petals used to make lustral water (*naam sompauy*).

On Easter Sunday, villagers were woken up at 4 a.m. for an open air service of worship, held by *Aacaan Tongkham* in the church compound, prior to the performance of the homage ritual. This service commenced at 5:15 a.m. following the format of the normal Sunday service of worship, although incorporating a short dramatic presentation of the Easter story by the youth group. The accompanying sermon retold the Easter story and drew out the Christian message of the death and resurrection

of Christ. It explained that those who have faith in Christ, like him will not die, but following death will have a rebirth and eternal life with God in heaven. People were then invited to pray for their deceased ancestors, Buddhist or Christian, that they might be in heaven. Then, at the conclusion of the service, *Aacaan Tongkham* retired into his house as a mark of opposition to the ritual.

At this point, about 5:45 a.m., the homage ritual proper commenced. People gathered their ritual implements from where they had been placed and started to walk in an informal procession to the cemetery, about a kilometre beyond the north-eastern edge of the village. Some walked in household group-ings, some walked with friends, while a few walked alone. In total, the procession and subsequent ritual involved about 120 people, including a number of children and most of the old people of the congregation.

The informal procession from the village to the cemetery is important as it physically marks the transition from the thresh-old to the liminal period of the rite. This is a transition from the sphere of the living to the sphere of the dead and to a place and time where contact can be made with the dead, who normally cannot be contacted. The possibility of this is, I suggest, inherent in the characteristics of the liminal period itself. Liminality is, as Turner (1987, 96) puts it, a "moment in and out of time." It is here where the normal social classifications such as the separation between the living and the dead do not apply and are able to be transcended. Moreover, places such as cemeteries, churches and shrines are permanent liminal zones (Leach 1976, 82) and possess the qualities of both this and the other world. To move to the cemetery is to move toward the deceased.

The passage by the living to the cemetery is also a replica-tion of the passage of the corpse of all ancestors who, on their death, were taken out of the village to the cemetery. As in that procession, the passage of the living to the cemetery is only temporary and it is the living who control the process. It is the living who go to contact and pay homage to their ancestors; the deceased cannot contact the living. However, in this case it is a procession of family members, not a procession led by *Aacaan Tongkham* and other representatives of the official Church. Also, the nature of the procession is different. The procession in the mortuary rite is orderly and structured as people pull the corpse on its carriage to the cemetery. In the homage ritual the procession is disorderly and unstructured as people wander to the cemetery. The disorder of life contrasts with the order of death and emphasizes the liminality of the occasion.

When the procession reached the cemetery people filed into the cemetery grounds. A few moved to specific grave sites, but most stood inside the western gate and waited for a Chris-tian elder to commence the first act of homage at the grave site of *Gaaw*. Concomitantly, *Gaaw's* youngest son, *Khambuan*, be-gan such an act at the adjacent grave of his mother. As they started these initial acts, there was a general move by the waiting group to begin their own at the graves of their immedi-ate ancestors. Due to the number of people wanting to com-mence acts of homage, at this stage of the ritual it is common for such acts of homage to be performed simultaneously at the same grave.

The homage act itself involves the individual approaching the selected grave and kneeling down either behind or in front of the cross. Several flowers are selected from the individual's bunch of flowers and the ritual performer then sprinkles lustral water on the cross using a brush made from flowers (or, sometimes, it is sprinkled from the fingers or tipped from the bowl). At this point, those few who use incense light one stick and place it in the ground near the cross. A *waaj* (a gesture of respect made by placing the palms of the hands together and bringing the hands up towards the head) is then made. Then the ritual performer prays silently (sometimes for two or three minutes) with the flowers held between his or her hands, in a position reminiscent of that used by Buddhists at the temple. When the prayer is finished, the flowers are placed on the grave and one or more candles are lit and placed on the cross. Prior to leaving the grave the deceased is usually given a final *waaj*.

That the rite is not Christian in derivation is apparent in the implements used in performing the act of homage. In contrast to the emphasis placed on the manipulation of Christian symbols (such as the Bible, the cross and a replica of Jesus's crown of thorns) in the formal Church service preceding the homage ritual, the ritual itself uses no symbols that are specifically Christian. The ritual implements described above are those normally used in Northern Thai Buddhist ritual to demonstrate respect/homage (*khryang buuchaa*) (Singkha 1978, 92). However, in the homage ritual, performers who use incense use only one stick to pay respect to ancestors.[7] Informants claimed that these sticks are used because they are the traditional implements employed in Northern Thailand to demonstrate respect and are the only ones that the ancestors would recognise.

During the homage ritual people move about the cemetery either as individuals or in small family groups, performing acts of homage for deceased siblings, parents, or grandparents. Children accompany either one of their parents or another close relative. At each grave site they are told about their descent relation from the ancestor for whom the ritual is to be performed and are encouraged to make their own act of homage and prayer. They, in turn, teach these models of descent to others. In one instance I witnessed a group of children of about twelve years old guiding a group of younger siblings and friends about the graves and teaching them about descent relations. Similar explanations of descent relations are given to in-marrying spouses who participate in the ritual for the first time.

Each act of homage takes approximately two to five minutes. There is a great deal of variation between individual acts of homage and no sense in which the efficacy of the act is dependent upon a specific invariant format. Participants, both male and female, may act autonomously, performing acts of homage at each selected grave site. For onlookers, there is no specific sense of sacredness when the act of homage is being performed; people mill about talking as they wait their turn, and some stand or kneel on graves to get a good position.

Although the order may vary according to congestion in the cemetery and the layout of the graves, in most cases people perform the homage ritual first for deceased spouses, followed by parents and more remote relatives (including *Gaaw*). The rite is then performed at the graves of less well known ancestors. At this point the orientation of acts of homage have a high degree of randomness and people merely pay homage at convenient graves until their ritual implements are exhausted. In one case I observed a woman who was about to commence the ritual at a grave site without a cross ask another women who had just completed her act of homage "Who is this?" She received the answer "[I] don't know." This suggests that while one aspect of the homage ritual is the constitution of links to named ancestors, ancestors as undifferentiated members of an ancestral group are also significant for the construction of links between the present and the past. This conforms to the logic of the ritual which, in an overall sense, constitutes a corporate act of homage, paid by the members of the family to their ancestors.

Interaction with ancestors during the homage ritual is of two types. Firstly, there is the payment of homage. Secondly, the ritual performer prays to God and to the deceased, and talks with the deceased. However, there is no sense in which deceased ancestors act as intermediaries with God as is the case in some African Christian groups (cf. West 1975).

I have already introduced the question of the attitude of the living toward ancestors. In the case of Northern Thai Christians the attitude toward ancestors is one of homage (*buuchaa*) or, as it is sometimes put, homage and respect/esteem (*khawrob buuchaa*). Homage and a demonstration of respect is paid to the deceased by the *waaj* given them at their grave and the pouring of lustral water over the cross, in the presentation of flowers, in the lighting of the candles and, for those who use it, in the lighting of incense. It is paid to ancestors partly in memory of the good they did during their lives, but it is primarily respect due to them by virtue of their senior structural position, which is normally that of parents or grandparents, or their collateral relatives.

However, the term *buuchaa*, which is normally reserved for those of high status such as monks, is used for all ancestors. This suggests that all deceased ancestors are accorded the higher status of senior structural position, regardless of their age or status at death.[8] The pouring of lustral water over the cross or at its base also suggests that ancestors are conceptualised as being structurally senior to the living. This is normally used in rituals such as the *dam hua* ritual to show respect to structurally senior figures such as parents, elders, authority figures and monks. Thus, the value of hierarchy between seniors and juniors, a fundamental axis of interpersonal relations in Northern Thailand, is preserved in the relationship between the living and the dead.

The use of water in this ritual has other important symbolic connotations. Danforth (1982, 33, 106–112) points out that there is an association between water and rituals intended to close the gap between the living and the dead. Its inherent qualities oppose desiccation and its flow is symbolic both of a passing of time and of a bridging of the gulf between the living and the dead. In Northern Thailand water is used in rites of transition such as marriage and in the rituals concerned with death, where it symbolises the transferring of a gift (merit) to the deceased

(Wells 1975, 219–220). The corpse is washed following death (*aab naam sob*), monks pour water (*jaad naam*) as they make merit while the corpse is being put in its coffin and, later, this is repeated in the *bangsukun* ceremony. Also, prior to the cremation, guests and relatives pour water on the corpse to make merit (*laang naa sob*) (Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes 1980; Nantajar n. d.; Sanguan 1966; Tambiah 1977). Thus, the use of water in Christian ancestor ritual conforms to the logic of the Northern Thai cosmology. Its symbolism aims at bridging the gulf between the living and the dead in order that homage may be paid to deceased ancestors.

The other aspect of interaction with ancestors in the homage ritual is prayer to God and, if the deceased is a close relative, the ritual performer may talk with him or her. Prayers to God were silent, but informants subsequently disclosed that they usually asked that the spirit of the deceased be in heaven, that its time there be untroubled and that the deceased be given new life at the resurrection. They asked God's blessing on the congregation and that the supplicant and his or her descendants might have a long life and be preserved from danger.

Like the prayers to God, conversations with the deceased were silent and, as they concerned private matters, some ritual performers were loath to divulge precise details. Generally requests were made that the spirit of the deceased be with the living, that it give them happiness and peace and that they be guided from error. In the case of spouses separated by death, or of young children with a deceased parent, conversations with the deceased were more personal, as the living told their loved ones of their trials and achievements over the past year. Not every act of homage included this form of communication with the deceased. The random pattern of homage included only a brief prayer to God.

It is significant that communication with ancestors in this ritual is conceptualised as direct communication with the deceased that is not possible outside of the ritual context. *Aacaan Tongkham* and other representatives of the Church have striven to interpret the rite as a memorial to the deceased and as an occasion to offer respect to them. However, ritual performers clearly distinguished their communication with deceased ancestors from such interpretations. The term *ralyg*, meaning to remember or think of, was never used in any context dealing with the homage ritual. Also, when discussing their conversations with the deceased, ritual performers used the terms *borg* (meaning to tell) or *khor* (meaning to ask for), which suggest acts in the contemporaneous present and a relationship with sentinent ancestors.

The homage ritual commences just before 6:00 a.m. in darkness as the sky is about to lighten. It is complete half an hour later when the sky is light and the sun almost up. Thus the rite is performed at a time of chronological liminality, when it is neither light nor dark. As I have pointed out, it is at such liminal periods when the boundary between life and death is most likely to be rendered permeable. Thus, the ritual is not only held in a context that is socially and geographically (due to its location just beyond the outskirts of the northeastern edge of the village) constituted as a liminal space, but it is also held during a period of chronological liminality.[9] It is also significant that this is an inversion of normal Northern Thai ritual practices, where taboos normally forbid the crossing of temporal boundaries. As Davis points out with respect to the Northern Thai Buddhist mortuary rite, neither cremations nor burials may be held at dawn or dusk (1974, 16).

By 6:30 a.m., as the sun comes up, almost everyone has completed his or her act of homage. By this time people have discarded any remaining ritual implements and are moving back to the village, physically symbolising the transition back to normal society. In contrast to the more corporate procession by which they came to the cemetery, on their return to the village they leave individually and walk home alone or with only one or two companions. However, once again the random nature of the ritual participant's return to the village emphasises the liminality of the occasion, and contrasts with the relatively ordered groups who return from the cemetery following the mortuary ritual. Over the following three hours, stragglers, those who have slept late and those detained by work, go to the cemetery to perform solitary and more perfunctory acts of homage.

The Role of the Homage Ritual

For the members of *Khriscag Bohin*, participation in the homage ritual functions as a means of constituting descent links with *Gaaw*, the first Christian and, *ipso facto*, as a statement of membership in the family. Through paying homage to ancestors in this way Christians legitimate their tracing of descent along particular descent paths from *Gaaw* and other ancestral Christians and show that they belong to the family. As one informant put it when discussing the ritual, "This is important, this is about the family [*khrobkhrua*] " and, later:

> People from remote areas come, even though they
> are Buddhist, to pay homage to the descent line
> [*khawrob trakuun*]; [they] do this to prevent the de
> scent line [*trakuun*] being scattered, or people fall
> ing out.

Moreover, through constituting kin relations with reference to *Gaaw* and other ancestral Christians, members of the family extend the network of people considered as kin far more widely than what is encompassed by the kindred or the Buddhist matrilineal spirit clan grouping. Participation in the rite is particularly important for people such as Buddhist spouses and those whose structural position or religion makes their social affiliation ambiguous.

The ritual also functions as an arena which allows individuals to make symbolic statements regarding the legitimacy of their descent from ancestral Christians. Further, it allows people to legitimate their position within the family by appeal to the authority of Christian ancestors. This is most noticeable in

the case of some Christians who make the initial acts of homage at *Gaaw*'s grave. The first act of homage, at each ritual I witnessed, was made by a descendant of *Gaaw* via a matrilineal link, a link which direct patrilineal descendants consider illegitimate. However, through making the first public acts of homage, the ritual performers laid claim to legitimate descent status and to *Gaaw*'s ancestral authority.

Most importantly, the homage ritual is the primary locus for the generation and teaching of the Christian version of descent relations from *Gaaw*. I have pointed out that the Christians consider they are closely related and say they are of one family. Yet by the conventions of the Northern Thai kinship system, or by the standards of any consistent model of kinship, most of the Christians are, at best, only distantly related (Fordham 1991). Thus, the teaching of children and spouses about descent relations during the performance of the ritual comprises more than mere didacticism. It is a process which comprises the selection and emphasising of specific kin links and the omission or de-emphasising of others, in order to portray Christians as a group which, like a family, shares close kin relations.

The physical layout of the cemetery and the marking of graves, or the failure to do so, are significant in this respect. The grave layout and patterns of placement and naming constitute statements about descent and affiliation to the family, rather than statements about genealogy or religious affiliation (cf. Young 1960, who claims that cemeteries provide concrete quantifiable data about familism). By virtue of the pattern of grave placement and naming, particular descent paths to *Gaaw* are emphasised over others. Some graves have no cross and no identifying surname; others are identified by surnames that are misleading in that they do not reflect the person's use of the surname during his or her lifetime, or the way in which it was passed on to their descendants. The graves of ambiguous persons, such as those women who passed the surname *Rangsan* to their children or those of *Gaaw*'s servant and his wife who, although not descendants of *Gaaw* gave the surname *Rangsan* to their children, are not marked and do not feature in the ritual.

The graves of Christian ancestors are used, then, to construct an ideal model of Christian descent from *Gaaw* (see Bloch and Parry [1982, 32–36] regarding the use of tombs in the constitution of an ideal model of Merina descent). In turn, this model of descent is used in the constitution of the family. As one informant put it in regard to the ideal order of the rite and, by analogy, in regard to the composition of the family, "You must start with *Nai Gaaw* first, as he is the beginning."

Genesis of the Homage Ritual

Christian interpretations of the homage ritual and its mode of performance and, as well, their understandings about death and the nature of the person, give strong indications regarding the likely origins of this rite. In origin it is most likely a transfor-

mation of the rituals performed to the matrilineal spirits synthesised with rudimentary Christian understandings about death and the person of the deceased.

Burridge (1985, 159) claims that missionaries in the field generally apprehend evil as being directly located in particular institutions. In nineteenth–century Northern Thailand the Presbyterian missionaries viewed Buddhism and all spirit–related activities as both evil and irrational. Converts were expected to cease the propitiation of spirits and, as many broke this rule, suspension from the membership of the Church was common (Hughes 1984a, 325; Swanson 1984, 22). In *Baan Bohin*, in accord with missionary pressure, Christians ceased practices associated with the matrilineal spirits. However, informants' accounts suggest that from the time of the first Christian burials, *Gaaw* made an offering (in the cemetery) to deceased ancestors at Easter. The first confirmed report of such offerings is in respect to a ritual performed at the grave of *Gaaw*'s father (*Pau Tib*) about 1940.[10] However, informants' accounts suggest that ancestor rites were performed much earlier than this.

The timing of these Christian offerings to the deceased is highly significant. Easter occurs at the same general time as the Northern Thai New Year, a time when offerings are normally made to the matrilineal spirits (Cohen n. d.; Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984; Davis 1973, 1974; Turton 1972, 1975) and when offerings are made to the living senior members of the community in the *dam hua* ritual. This suggests an association between the demise of rituals concerning the matrilineal spirits and the rise of Christian ancestor ritual.

Also, in the present day, Christian informants draw a direct link between the homage ritual and the rites previously performed for the matrilineal spirits. Following the 1987 performance of the homage ritual, *Khambuan* explained that just as people once made offerings in their houses to pay homage to the matrilineal spirits, offerings are now made to ancestors in the cemetery by the whole family. Moreover, when discussing relationships amongst the members of the family, he said: "We cannot quarrel, we are relatives; people in the North say we are of the same spirit [*phii diawkan*]." This is more than a description of the relations existing amongst family members. It is also the term normally used to describe the relationship between people sharing matrilineal links (Davis 1973, 57; 1974, 59; Turton 1972, 220; 1975, 216). Again, this suggests a relation between those rituals performed for the matrilineal spirits and those performed for Christian ancestors. Through the performance of matrilineal spirit ritual, people "of the same spirit" were constituted as a particular category in relation to the matrilineal spirits. In the same way, the group that the Christians call family is constituted through the performance of rituals directed to Christian ancestors.

I have already pointed out that in Northern Thai Buddhist thought there are beliefs and practices which suggest a continuation of individual identity after death. I suggest, then, that the practice of making offerings to deceased ancestors developed following acceptance of the Christian idea of the continuation of individual identity after death and the suppression of activities directed to the matrilineal spirits. The former led to the devel-

opment of ideas about Christian ancestors and, when ritual practices concerning the matrilineal spirits were abandoned, "new" ritual practices developed, which were directed to ancestral Christians. Originally an occasion for only modest offerings to the deceased, I suggest that the homage ritual initially functioned as a rite of communication with Christian ancestors, prior to acquiring its present significance as a means of constituting descent relations and of symbolising incorporation in the family.

The adoption of Christian mortuary practices has also played an important part in the development of ideas about deceased ancestors and the institution of the homage ritual. Unlike the normal Buddhist mortuary practice of burial of a pot of bone fragments in an unmarked position, the Christian practice of burial in marked graves leaves a permanent record of deceased ancestors as a focus for ritual practice. Significantly, although this appears to be a permanent genealogical record, it is malleable and allows for the incorporation of affines and other affiliates of the family. The homage ritual, I suggest, developed concomitantly with the Christian funeral rite during the early years of the twentieth century.[11] Later, like the funeral rite, it was elaborated following the foundation of *Khriscag Bohin* in the 1950s. In the present day it has been further elaborated, concomitant with its role in the unification and manipulation of relationships within the family.

Conclusions

I have argued here that the primary function of the Christian ancestor beliefs and their associated ritual practices is the unification of a broad category of people into a group the Christians call family. Regardless of their religion or genealogical relationship to *Gaaw*, those who participate in the homage ritual signify their membership of and commitment to the family. The significance of this practice for the incorporation of outsiders is apparent from a brief examination of marriage statistics over the past five generations. Of 123 marriages concerning Christians in *Baan Bohin* and *Baan Chiangseen* during the period 1880 to 1985, only fifteen marriages (12%) were with other Christians, and only a minority of these were with other members of the family. Apart from natural fertility, almost all growth in the congregation over this period stems from the conversion of in-marrying spouses and their relatives, rather than the conversion of unconnected families. Thus from this perspective the family might be viewed as a largely exogamous group, which recruits through marriage.

As a type of ancestor cult, the Christian one appears to be fairly typical. Ancestors are the deceased members of senior generations. As such, they represent the authority of those senior generations over the living, just as the living members of senior generations have authority over their juniors. Offerings and homage are given them in the homage ritual in recognition of that position and so that they will assist the living in their life projects. However, the concept of benevolent ancestors held by the members of *Khriscag Bohin* is at variance with the concept of punitive ancestors found in many other ethnographic contexts.

That this is the case is, I suggest, a reflection of the nature of Thai society itself. Ancestor cults model their image of deceased ancestors on the world of the living. As Beidelman (1986, 118–119) puts it in regard to Kaguru ancestors, "The dead embody another mode of the same contradictions and conflicts that disturb the living." Similarly, Fortes notes that amongst the Tallensi the parent–child relation is characterised by tension, and accordingly "Ancestors are apt to be demanding, persecutory, and interfering for one reason because parents appear thus to their children when they are exercising authority over them" (Fortes 1949, 222–231, 140).

While Thai Christian ancestors represent the authority of senior generations, this authority is perceived as being relatively benevolent. In contrast to the situation amongst the Tallensi, parent–child relations and child–rearing practices among the Thai are fairly relaxed. According to Mulder, the world of the Thai child is one where:

> The inner world of family and community, as it is initially presented, is a good and gentle world, indulgent and reliable, stimulating attitudes of dependence most of all. One learns to trust the goodness and the guidance of the mother, of parents, of the Buddha, and of old and wise persons (1985, 91).

Failure to fulfil responsibilities towards parents is met with discouragement rather than direct punishment. Such discouragement takes the form of parental and community disapproval, with the threat of disinheritance being the ultimate sanction of senior generations (Cohen n. d., 4–5). Given these generally benevolent attitudes toward children and the Thai emphasis on the maintenance of *cajjen* (cool heart) and a smooth veneer over all social transactions (Mulder 1985, 57–108), one would not expect ancestors in a Thai ancestral cult to exhibit the punitive qualities typical of African ancestors. Although the image of Thai Christian ancestors differs from that found in the typical African ancestor cult, it conforms to the logic of the Thai cultural system and reflects the generally lenient relations between children and their parents.

However, this ancestor rite performed by Northern Thai Christians has a significance beyond its role in the constitution of the Christian group. It has been claimed that Northern Thai Christianity has "taken on characteristics of Thai religious culture" (Hughes 1984b, 227) and that it has been assimilated (Hughes 1984a, 1985) into Thai Buddhist cultural patterns. My analysis here demonstrates that this is not the case. The development of a Christian ancestor cult and its use in the constitution of the group called family are innovative cultural solutions to the political and organisational problems facing a religious minority group. Moreover, the beliefs and practices of the Christian group discussed here suggest not an assimilation into Thai Buddhist cultural patterns but fundamental transforma-

tions of both Buddhist and Presbyterian Christian beliefs and ritual practices.

Significantly, the homage ritual has not been static but has been elaborated through time, suggesting its elaboration is consonant with the need for the unification of the family. Given the continuing transformation of rural villages as they become more closely incorporated in national and international economic and political structures (Fordham 1991; Moerman 1987), it might be expected that the homage ritual will undergo signifi-

cant transformations in the future. As increasing numbers of Christians gain post–secondary qualifications or other formal job training, an increasing number of young people will find employment in Bangkok or other major urban centres. For them, full–time residence in the village will not be possible. I suggest that for these individuals, the homage ritual, rather than a particular parochial life–style, will be increasingly significant as a means of demonstrating their membership in the family.

NOTES

1. The research on which this paper is based was conducted in the Sansai district of Chiang Mai during the period 1985–1987.

2. My transliteration of Thai is based on Haas (1985), but I do not indicate tones and have adapted Haas for special characters as necessary.

3. That many share this surname is due to the manipulation of naming patterns whereby this surname was transmitted through females and other affiliates of the family in the years following the 1913 introduction of surnames (cf. Wijeyewardene's claim that lack of evidence regarding the acquisition of surnames along matrilineal lines is proof for the relative insignificance of the matrilineal spirit cult [1977, 23]). Significantly, this pattern of transmission of surnames strongly resembles the normal practice in the matrilineal spirit cult where, as Turton (1972, 222) points out, if necessary (if there is no daughter in one generation) "descent may be reckoned through a male, the descent principle jumping a gap so to speak." The matrilineal spirit cult remains strong amongst Buddhists in this area, suggesting that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was even more significant.

4 In this the congregation is typical of many rural Protestant congregations in Northern Thailand, where the foundations of the church were laid in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. While

there have been several periods of growth since that time (cf. Swanson 1984), almost all sustained growth has come from the in–marriage of spouses and from natural increase through birth.

5. Wilson (1963) uses the term "shades" with respect to the effect of the dead upon the living and reserves the term "ancestors" for deceased relatives. In the context of Thailand, I prefer the term ancestors, which is closer to the Thai concept of *banphaburut*.

6. Although Haas (1985) glosses *buuchaa* as sacrifice, this does not accord with the anthropological use of the term. The terms offering and sacrifice are not interchangeable. Unlike an offering, a sacrifice requires the killing of a victim (Beattie 1980, 31) or its symbolic equivalent (Evans–Pritchard 1977, 197). Thus, as de Heusch (1985, 69) points out, "A sacrifice may be an offering, but not all offerings are the object of a sacrifice." More importantly, it does not accord with my experience of the homage ritual, which is conceptualised as an offering of homage and respect to ancestors and not a sacrifice.

7. The use of a single stick of incense as a gesture of respect for the dead is also found in the Buddhist mortuary rite. People attending a mortuary rite light a single stick of incense and place it (in a container) near the head of the corpse.

8. Homage is not paid to infants or young children. Genealogical data indicates that

over the last fifty years at least fourteen deaths of infants and young children have taken place. In all cases the corpse was given an unmarked burial in the cemetery with little in the way of mortuary rites, as we expect in the case of pre–social beings with minimal social status (Hertz 1960, 84). None of these unmarked infant and child graves featured in the homage ritual.

9. Although this point was not directly made by informants, for Christians the Easter period between Good Friday and Easter Sunday is also one of liminality. This is the period between Christ's death and subsequent resurrection and, according to some accounts, a time when he descended to hell to preach to those imprisoned there. Parallels might be drawn between this and the passage of Christians to the *Baan Bohin* cemetery to communicate with their deceased ancestors, from whom they are separated by death.

10. Prior to his death *Gaaw's* father also became a Christian and was buried in an unmarked grave in the *Baan Bohin* cemetery. This first confirmed report of the homage ritual refers to a rite performed by *Gaaw's* eldest son.

11. Burials of first generation adult Christians commenced in the first decades of this century. See Fordham (1991) for a comprehensive analysis of the Thai Christian mortuary rite.

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