

SECTION IV

RELIGION



# HILL TRIBES AND CATHOLICS

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*Ban* (village) Hooeemong is approximately sixty kilometres from the busy city of Lampang in northern Thailand. Hooeemong is situated in a beautiful valley surrounded by a few remaining vestiges of the "old" forest, and a great deal of substantial secondary growth, although it will still be some years before the effects of swidden agriculture will be hidden entirely.<sup>1</sup>

The scenery is dramatic: misty blue-grey hills in blanket-like folds surround the area. But the soil is harsh and poor and the rain precipitation is not enough by itself to sustain varied agriculture or horticulture. The people here are Karens who came over the border from Burma about forty years ago.<sup>2</sup> Unlike many, if not most Hill Tribes (*chao khao*), all these villagers have Thai citizenship—which in itself ought to, but does not, save them from the chauvinist attitude of many of the Thais in the surrounding region, who continue to view them as something akin to second class citizens (*Catholic Life* 1990).

Like the land on which they live, these villagers are poor. The soil sucks up every drop of rain, even that channelled down from the local creek. "The Royal Department for the Development of Tribal People has spent many years, it is said, trying to teach and help villagers find a viable way of making a living." Perhaps as a result of this there is here the genesis of small, rather sad coffee *robusta* plantations. Coffee being a crop which takes careful tending, it is estimated that only in another four or five years will the bushes bear enough berries to dry and sell in the local market.<sup>3</sup>

Malnutrition seems to have been so long established here, so often a way of accepted living, that it appears to have dulled the senses and sapped the will of the people to try to change their life-styles, or even to take advantage of some kind of agricultural diversity.<sup>4</sup> Their basic diet appears to be mountain rice (dry-land rice) mixed with edible weeds and leaves. Sometimes they prepare a weak millet soup, and like their Thai counterparts, these villagers often disguise the lack of nutrients in their food by using strong chilis and brine.<sup>5</sup>

In June 1990 there were only a few *padi* fields showing a few shoots and these belonged to a more progressive Thai married to a Karen woman (*Catholic Life* 1990). In January 1991 after the

previous Wet Season the *padi* fields still appeared to be rather meagre, yet this Thai "stranger" seems to be the only one at present who has halfway successful crops. The Karens are unused to irrigated farming and appear slow to adapt, thus allowing malnutrition to continue to erode the health of the community.<sup>6</sup>

Providing the basic materials and the means which will help prevent further undernourishment and vitamin deficiency is the work of the PIME priests. The Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) is a Catholic Congregation founded in 1926 in Rome. Its secular priests work in missionary areas throughout the world<sup>7</sup> and here in Lampang, over the past twelve or thirteen years, the Institute has established a Pastoral Development Centre.<sup>8</sup> This is a part of the Catholic Church compound in Lampang city, which also houses the Assumption school for girls, under the auspices of Thai Sisters, and a boarding school for boys run by the St. Gabriel Brothers.<sup>9</sup> The three Italian PIME priests in Lampang have specific tasks: parish administration and caring for the local congregation and the schools; a ministry to small Catholic congregations in scattered communities within, say, a radius of 60–70 kilometres of Lampang; and visiting more isolated mountain villages up to 200 kilometres distant, where there may or may not be Catholics or even catechumens. The pastoral and socioeconomic work is supported by funds from Rome and by the Thai Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup>

In the Karen village of Hooeemong the PIME mission has had the shoulders of a hill facing the river levelled to provide a larger area for *padi*. An irrigation system has been installed using four-inch metal and PVC pipes. The humus-rich soil dissipates the water rapidly, leaving it parched and bare, but by planting and replanting two crops a year and digging them into the soil as "green manure" it is possible to grow rice and also soya beans. Although so far it is the "Thai stranger" who has had the most success with these crops, since the Karens appear slow to adapt or to understand these "new" ways, gradually they have begun to follow the lead of their Thai fellow-villager in working the land for two years and then planting a crop. The

PIME mission pays them in kind for this work in order to encourage them in their endeavours; perhaps with more food available through their own efforts, their collective will (previously dissipated by hunger and disease) will be rekindled. At the same time a new dam has been built with PIME funds and there is the likelihood that more land, currently under the control of the Royal Thai Forestry Department, may become available for use as *padi* fields.<sup>11</sup>

In this village the people are baptised Catholics. The village head is a catechist from Lampang, who after some initial difficulties has won the villagers' confidence. Each morning there are prayers before work in the very simple bamboo chapel, with a Prayer Service conducted by the catechist on Sundays. Once a month one of the PIME priests comes to celebrate Mass.

Like so many of the Hill Tribe people the Karens are gentle and self-effacing. The thirty or so children who live in the village are dirty but full of life. Their bright eyes and mischievous smiles may tug at the heartstrings, but nevertheless the harsh reality of the question has to be faced: What will be their future?<sup>12</sup> Will they be content to continue with a simple traditional life-style—with having to walk ten kilometres before they can get a pick-up truck which for a few baht will take them into Lampang for medical treatment? Will they be content, or will they do what so many others from the North have done and are still doing—abandon their tribal base and/or their communities which are familiar to them, for the noise and glitter of Bangkok, where an initial luminous optimism fades all too soon into a resignation born of desperation, when they can find no work and are bereft of their local and family ties (see Webb 1992). To help retard this migration both Protestant and Catholic agencies and missions (together with government agencies) are striving to improve socioeconomic conditions in these isolated regions of North (and Northeast [Webb 1990, 54–62]) Thailand, amongst Northern Thais as well as members of the various Hill Tribes (Webb 1992).

## The Akha<sup>13</sup>

The Akha Hill Tribe village of Ban Mae–Mae lies some 135 kilometres to the north of Lampang.<sup>14</sup> From the bitumen highway a track bulldozed out of the mountains by the Royal Forestry Department winds its way upwards for some eighty kilometres. In January 1991 the road was badly eroded from the Wet Season of the previous June and July. Even a four-wheel-drive vehicle found the way hard despite its low-range gears, crawling along at an average speed of ten kilometres an hour. All around were the usual scars of previous swidden agriculture, with secondary growth making a belated comeback.

Ban Mae–Mae is no more than a year old as of this writing; the dozen or so families who now live here moved from their former village lower down the mountain because they believed that the local Officer in Charge of the Royal Thai Forestry

Department who employed the Akha men as labourers in that section was keeping some of their pay for his own use.

So, over a period of two or three months they built simple traditional houses of bamboo, about three feet off the ground, with split bamboo floors, some twenty kilometres further up the mountain in a forestry area of a Thai manager whom they believed to be more honest and more congenial to them. It so happened that this manager, a young graduate from Bangkok and his wife, had also recently moved into this sector. He spoke highly of the Akha's capacity for hard work<sup>15</sup> and both parties seem to have a good rapport one with the other. Yet this is by no means always the case. Some tribesmen who contract as day labourers are exploited by those who are supposed to assist them. It is not unknown for a bureaucrat in, say, the Forestry Department to put the money received from the central government with which to pay his tribal workers the regulatory Baht 50 per day (US\$ 2), into a private bank account, and then only to pay the workers twice a year: when they begin planting their rice, because then they will obviously stay until harvest time, when the second payment is made. The final rate of pay often works out at perhaps only Baht 30 per day. With no citizenship papers, with corruption dogging them, many of these tribal workers in such a situation are apparently little better than government slaves. Yet since few can or dare to speak out against this and other injustices, the Thai government seldom gets to know how those whom they want to help and protect are exploited and cheated.<sup>16</sup>

In this village there is only one Catholic family. Other families and individuals are catechumens, undergoing instruction for baptism at some future date, and the remainder are animists. None have Thai citizenship and a good few can speak only "rough" Northern Thai. The nearest school is fifteen kilometres down the mountainside, where two teachers supplied by the Thai Education Department endeavour to teach in a small inadequate bamboo building. The Akha children and those from other tribal groups are taught in Thai. The *raison d'être* for this is much the same as the Australian government's former edict that all Aboriginal children must be taught in English: that this is the language of the majority and that if Thai/English was not spoken or understood then the children would never become "real" Thais/Australians. The results often appear to be similar: poor speaking and writing skills and a disinclination to attend school because of an inability to understand the teacher sufficiently, together with a general lack of comprehension, to be motivated to learn. Thus it is not surprising that few of these Akha children in this village appear to attend school.<sup>17</sup>

All the village came to the evening Mass, which was in Thai, with the catechist who was brought from Lampang translating the sermon and the Gospel into the Akha language. The children sat on the ground enthralled—one suspects not so much at the unfamiliar ceremony and liturgical vestments of Fr. Sandro as at the generator he had brought with him, which gave light and also allowed a video cassette recorder to be used together with a TV monitor (also loaded on to the truck), through which the whole village later watched the video film, "The Bible". Even though this was in English it was nevertheless

watched and commented upon with great enthusiasm—as much for the sake of novelty as for understanding the theme.

Those not catechumens or not interested sat around smoking and talking yet keeping an eye on what was going on. Many of the women wore traditional Akha dress: coloured leggings with a black skirt and jacket edged with embroidery and with their distinctive close fitting “bonnets”. These were decorated with silver balls, coloured ribbons and old Thai coins. The writer noticed that one elderly Akha woman had several heavy silver Burmese rupees from the reign of King–Emperor Edward the Seventh. Because of the high silver content, these coins from the days of the Raj were real wealth. Since the wearer could only speak Akha, and not even a smattering of the language of the Northern Thai or *khon muang*, it can probably be assumed that she had arrived from Burma fairly recently, and had brought her wealth with her.

Like most other Hill Tribes, fear of spirits permeates the beliefs of Catholics, catechumens and non–Christians alike.<sup>18</sup> A young man, his wife and small child in this Akha village, stood anxiously around the priest, who agreed to their request to bless their house, and through exorcism to rid their house of the spirit which was inhabiting it. The habitat of this undesirable spirit which was making their lives hazardous and miserable (in ways unspecified) was a dusty and crumbling bamboo container with a frayed lid. Inside was a stick, a dish and general detritus. Prayers in Thai were said, the family blessed with the Oil of Exorcism, and holy water splashed enthusiastically around the small two–roomed house. The wife poured some rice into the container to feed the spirit—or perhaps to allay its suspicions—and then the container was taken outside and burned. Now, it was said, the family and house were free. According to the PIME missionaries, once a family asks for their spirit container to be burned then it can be safely assumed that they are genuine in their Christian commitment (in this case to become catechumens). As with most animist communities, fear of spirits is all–consuming. They are automatically taken to be evil, or, at best, simply a nuisance. Domiciled in trees, rocks or even human beings these spirits have the ability to make peoples’ lives miserable. Spirits are usually greedy, having to be continually soothed by expensive presents and sacrifices. More than one former animist has expressed satisfaction at becoming a Christian with the words “Now I do not have to sacrifice any more pigs”—pigs of course representing a not inconsiderable sum of money.<sup>19</sup> Which is why missionaries take great pains to tell their people that only the “truth will make you free”.<sup>20</sup>

In another hut lit only by the flickering glow of two small and smoky oil lamps, two men in their early twenties lay opposite each other, preparing small balls of opium on skewers, and heating them in the flames. Some Akha visit Yao Tribesmen and buy their opium from them. Some, it is said, are so addicted that they even smoke the residue from their pipes if they can buy no fresh opium (Chaturabhand 1988, 85).<sup>21</sup> Those tribesmen who smoke opium regularly enough to be classified as addicts can often, so it is said, be marked by their yellowy parchment–like skin and slightly withdrawn expression.<sup>22</sup>

Yet lest it should be thought that Hill Tribes and opium are synonymous it ought to be made clear that the various efforts by government and non–government agencies to suppress the cultivation of the opium poppy have overall been successful. From a high of 150 tons in the late sixties, production in Thailand was down to just under twenty–six tons in the season 1986/87, and at the same time the proportion of highlanders growing opium dropped from 45% to 20–25%. Where the tribes were blamed indiscriminately for the illegal growing of opium, now it is the Northern Thais who are the culprits, with the centre of the trade in Mae Chaem district in Chiang Mai province (McKinnon 1989, 313).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, according to a report by Dick Mann in the *Bangkok Post* in November 1987, Thailand was then importing opium and heroin because there were 40,000 addicts in the kingdom at that time, each one consuming about one kilogram of opium a year, or a total of forty–four tons.

Having said this, it should be noted that as a general rule those who become Christians, Catholic or Protestant, do not smoke opium or do make a real effort through various withdrawal programmes to give up their addiction. The reason is clear enough: a new way of life, which is what Christianity—and Buddhism—offer, necessitates a fresh outlook or approach to living, untrammelled either by dependence on hard drugs which vitiate the will, or even by a continual obligation to make sacrifices to the vagaries of the spirit world.

## The Yao<sup>24</sup>

In the province of Chiang Rai, fifty kilometres from the city of Chiang Rai, is the Yao village of Ban Takrai, through which the dirt road leads on to other *ban* higher up the mountain. Thus in a sense this village is at a cross–roads of intra–mountain trade. From an estimated population of perhaps six hundred or so only ten families are classed as catechumens.

January 1991 saw the first visit by a PIME Father, although there had been communications between this village and Lampang inasmuch as a Yao–speaking catechist worked there. The Yao families had asked for a church; the mission supplied the materials and the people built the simple but impressive building on a piece of rising ground at the entrance to the village. Thus the symbol of the Cross on the church was (and still is) the first thing seen as travellers entered Ban Takrai.<sup>25</sup>

The people, through their sub–headman, had asked for the church to be built so that the fear of spirits would be assuaged. This sub–headman was very much to the fore, organising the working group which fixed the Cross on to the Church gable, rushing here and there, making a great deal of self–important noise, ordering people around and making sure that the feast which would follow the blessing of the church was being properly arranged and prepared.

The Yao women wore black trousers with black embroidered tunics, the neck of which was edged with pink. Some wore a coloured sash around their waists. On their heads the

married women or those with children wore black close-fitting turbans. The traditional Yao dress for men is black trousers and a black jacket (Chaturabhand 1988, 9–38), although at this ceremony only one old man wore this garb, the majority of the men being content with short-sleeved shirts and jeans or sarongs.

At the conclusion of this service the whole congregation of some sixty or more people came forward for a personal blessing, as much for added protection against spirit forces as for an acknowledgement of their new status as formal catechumens.

Both Fr. Sandro, the missionary, and the writer stayed in the sub-headman's house and ate some meals there also. People seemed to drift in and out in a casual way yet in reality wanting to have another look at these two strangers. Hospitality was given unstintingly; homemade rice wine kept arriving at the men's table in never-flagging quantities at the imperious beckoning of the sub-headman, who, it is suspected, was receiving great kudos at having two foreigners staying in his house.<sup>26</sup>

Here the question might be asked: Why did these Yao want to become Christians? Part of the answer is probably that when the burden of propitiating the spirits becomes excessive—when the sacrifice of pigs means a constant drain on finances—then Christianity is often seen as a viable religious alternative. On the other hand, if the clan or tribe decides to become Buddhist, they then have to take upon themselves the obligation of feeding the monks instead of the spirits. Yet often this small amount of regular daily food is an imposition on a poor family or community which they feel they can ill afford. Thus Christianity, which asks neither an animal sacrifice nor regular gifts of food to make merit, appears to many Hill Tribes as a better economic proposition.<sup>27</sup>

In the "old" days the Yao people were better off as swidden farmers, when there were no roads driven through by the Forestry Department. Now they seem to be poorer since swidden is either forbidden or strenuously discouraged by the authorities. It is often said by missionaries, environmental groups and academics that once commerce came to the Hill Tribes area, so did illegal logging. For irresponsible and illegal logging, together with the subsequent degradation of the environment, the Hill Tribes are automatically blamed by government and business. Shalardchai Ramitanandh has written that "...many tribal minorities have inhabited their areas long before the emergence of the Royal Forests Department and are always blamed for the loss of forests in Thailand" (Ramitanandh 1989, 43). This writer goes on to suggest that in Northeast, Central and South Thailand, where there have never been any Hill Tribes, forests are still being rapidly destroyed. The question remains hanging: Who then are the culprits?

Rumour suggests that some Forestry Department officials as well as military are involved in granting illegal licences to agencies, or are even involved in this trade themselves. Proof of course is difficult to come by, yet rumours persist. One Thai has told the writer that if there was no Forestry Department, there would be no "problem" of logging. This is a controversial statement but it finds an echo in a paper by Dhira Phantumvanit in which the author writes that between 1961 and 1985 Thailand had lost about 45% of its forests.

We have heard so much about the three main causes: the slash-and-burn agricultural practice of the hilltribes, a lack of land for subsistence farming and the illegal logging supported by "influentials" at local and national levels... Depletion of our forest resources can be attributed to two main factors. Survival is the predominant factor—the survival of our poor farmers. The second factor, the greed of influential entrepreneurs, plays a supporting role. These two factors have led to deforestation. (Phantumvanit 1992, 531–535)

Meanwhile these Akha and Yao Hill Tribes continue as best they can to wrest a living from swidden, from their gardens, and look toward the Church for socioeconomic as well as spiritual help.

## Mount Carmel Development Centre

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Development Centre was established about five years ago by Fr. Sandro PIME. It is essentially what Indonesians would call an *asrama*—a boarding house for sixty boys and girls who attend the Junior High School in the nearby village.<sup>28</sup> The students, who are mostly though not solely Catholic, come from scattered villages round about where secondary education is not available or where their parents are unable to afford the school fees.

The garden comprises 40 *rai* and grows aubergines, cabbages, and cauliflowers, most of which are used in the kitchen. A rough and ready small chicken battery system provides eggs; there are turkeys, pigs and ducks and one or two sleek Thai cattle which once having been fattened up will be sold. It is hoped that this boarding house will eventually become self-sufficient. At present *Misereor*, the overseas development arm of the German Bishops' Conference, funds this project (Webb 1986, 166–168).

There is a practical side as well: the children have to work in the garden and tend the animals, which equips them with some agricultural and horticultural training, and perhaps provides them with some new ideas to take home with them.



The Pontifical Institute in Lampang with its limited resources endeavours to provide for these Hill Tribes not only through the message of the Christian Gospel but, where it can, through economic comfort and sustenance. It follows in the vein of Schumacher's observation:

Why care for people? Because people are the primary and ultimate source of any wealth whatsoever. If they are left out, if they are pushed around by self-styled experts and high-handed planners, then nothing can ever yield real fruit. (1977, 141)

## NOTES

1. Personal visit to this village January 1991.
2. For further information on Hill Tribes see McKinnon and Vienne (1989). Those who speak Karen (one of the two linguistic branches of Sino-Tibetan) are called *yang* by the Northern Thai.
3. Discussion through an interpreter with the village Headman.
4. The same lack of *will* due to malnutrition over a long period may be found also in some of the isolated *desa* (villages) on the island of Flores, Indonesia, behind the central north-coast city of Maumere. Personal visits in 1979 and 1990.
5. Discussions with Fr. Dino. He said that once when offered some soup it was so heavily laced with chili and brine that it took on the effects of novocaine!
6. There is a parallel here with the isolated mountain village of Watublapi, Maumere, Flores, Indonesia. Malnutrition and disease is rife through ignorance of hygiene, even though many of the village girls and wives have had training in the Sisters' schools. But traditions and adherence to "the old ways" die hard.
7. The society was formed in 1926 from a merger between the Institute for Foreign Missions of Milan and the Pontifical Seminary of SS. Peter & Paul for Foreign Missions of Rome. The priests and Brothers are under an oath of stability and work under the jurisdiction of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.
8. Personal visit January 1991.
9. This teaching order was founded in the Vendée Arrondissement in France in 1821 and until 1853 was known as the Brothers of the Holy Ghost. (See also Webb 1990, 60.)
10. Discussions with Fr. Alessandro Bordignon, PIME, January 1990 and January 1991.
11. Discussions with Fr. Dino, PIME.
12. The same may be said of the Anglican Karens in Sho Klo refugee camp, about 120 kilometres from Mae Sot on the Thai-Burma border. These Karens and their Buddhist and animist tribal members numbering about seven thousand have, since the 1988 Rangoon riots were put down by the Ne Win regime in Burma, fled across the border into Thailand. Their existence is tolerated by the Thais but outside agencies have to provide most of the food. The future for them is to say the least extremely uncertain. Personal visit to Sho Klo June/July 1991.
13. The Akha are classified as a recently arrived tribal group, having entered Northern Thailand from Burma about 1915. The Thai government considers the Akha (and Hmong, Mien, Lisu and Lahu) as immigrants with no legal or historical claim to the land on which they live (Cf. Kammerer 1989, 282).
14. Personal visit January 1991.
15. Conversation through an interpreter with this Forestry manager, January 1991.
16. Discussions with a tribesman in Lampang, January 1991; name suppressed.
17. Many of them seem to spend a lot of time playing a game like marbles but using elastic bands, of which they seem to have hundreds. The excitement generated is intense and as always there always seems to be one eight-year-old budding capitalist who corners the market in elastic bands! This game appears to be played throughout the Hill Tribe area as well as in some parts of Indonesia.
18. There is again a parallel from Indonesia: Balinese priests and ministers of the small Catholic and Protestant churches in the island have stated that fear of spirits, fear of offending the gods, make the lives miserable of those who are Bali-Hindu in religion (Webb 1986, 39).
19. Discussions with Fr. Nipote Thienviharn, Chiang Mai January 1990; Fr. Alessandro Bordignon PIME at Amphur Muang, Lampang, February 1990; and with *Pendeta* Thoby Messakh, Synod Chairman of the *Gereja Masehi Injili Timor* (Timor Evangelical Christian Church) Kupang, Timor, Indonesia 1986/87.
20. On the island of Sumba in Eastern Indonesia, *marapu*, the spirit of the ancestors, lives in the chimney-like thatched roof. *Marapu* can be beneficent, in which case the family has nothing to fear, or it can be capricious and bring misfortune. Dependency on whether the signs are read aright or not influences the family's conversion to Christianity. Discussions with *Pendeta* Nicolas He February 1980. See also Lambooy (1927, 175-180).
21. Vienne (1989, 76) shows that from a sample of ninety-one Akha villages only fourteen percent in 1983 actually grew opium; it is suggested that the proportion of growers is lower now than twenty years ago.
22. Discussions with Fr. Sandro as above.
23. See also *The Nation* (Bangkok) 4 April 1988 p. 3.
24. The Yao call themselves *Iu Mien* or *Mien*; these are classed also as fairly recent arrivals since it is believed that they came to North Thailand from southern China in the 1890s (McKinnon and Vienne 1989, 110).
25. Personal visit to this village for the blessing of the new church, February 1991.
26. Fr. Sandro confessed to some misgivings about the wisdom of allowing a church to be built at this time, especially when there were no baptised Christians in the village. He had, he said, a feeling of having been manipulated by a smooth-talking operator! The Yao people were traders by tradition and had a reputation as sharp business people; whether the priest's suspicions had any basis to them, only time will tell.
27. Discussions with Fr. Sandro.
28. Personal visit January 1991.

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