

**The local parishioners, the Italian missionaries and 'Thainess':  
the everyday practice and conflicts of inculturation in a Catholic Parish in  
Northern Thailand**

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*Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by Research*

The University of Leeds

School of Languages, Cultures and Societies

December 2020

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## Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors: Dr. Caroline Fielder and Professor Martin Seeger. Thank you for your precious advice and academic support. Thank you for trusting me and pushing me throughout this year, and for being there even when things got complicated. Looking back at when I started this project, I realise how much I have grown, both as a person and as a researcher. You helped me throughout this path, teaching me not to feel like a ‘blind wanderer’ but a bias-aware researcher.

Secondly, I would like to thank the Royal Thai Embassy of London for granting me the scholarship that made all of this possible. The knowledge, the friendship, the skills that I have acquired throughout this year are the results of your generosity.

Thirdly, I want to thank the real ‘protagonists’ of this thesis: the interviewees and all the people that I met in the BanCho Parish. Thank you for your kindness, for your patience and – most of all – for sharing your life and your stories with me. Although lots of them did not make it into the thesis, I bring them all with me, along the way. Thank you for all the meals, the movies, the runs, the coffee we shared together. Thank you for making me feel safe and at home during the dim weeks that preceded my return home.

At last, I would like to thank my friends in Leeds and back home. Thank you for keeping me socially engaged in ‘worldly’ matters, may that be a Sunday afternoon at the Brudenell or a walk around the Torbiere. Thank you to Arianna for being my warm sunshine in Leeds; thank you to Ben for teaching me about theodicy and for reading all the drafts for this thesis; thank you to Francesca and Marta for being the most fun, caring, supportive and understanding friends I could have asked for. Thank you to my family, who welcomed me back home. Thanks to my brother for being my cook during quarantine, to my mother for the thousand incentives to stand up taller, and to my father who always listens. Thank you to my grandma, who has taught me what real love, real grief, and great cooking is. I owe her my legendary window-cleaning skills.

## Abstract

Inculturation is the process through which the Gospel incarnates into a given culture, purifying the ‘evil’ elements of the culture and ‘ennobling’ the pure ones. This thesis analyses the creative tension generated by inculturation in a Catholic Parish in Northern Thailand. In this Parish, inculturation entangles together the Gospel, Thai national culture (‘Thainess’) and the enculturated worldviews of the Italian missionaries and the local parishioners - who are mainly converts from animism.

Following a grounded-theory methodology, unstructured interviews and participant observation were conducted. The data reveal that the Catholic ‘organic cosmos’ of the local parishioners derives from their enculturated animistic worldview: the parishioners *know* that God exists by ‘experiencing’ Him daily. God often intervenes in the parishioners’ lives because He inhabits the finite cosmos, along with other religious entities. The ‘irrelevance of belief’ means that conversion to God is perceived as a change in behaviours: ‘to have faith’ means to abide by the Catholic rules. The thesis concludes that in the religious sphere the Gospel does incarnate into the local enculturated worldviews.

However, Cuturi (2004) affirms that incarnating the Gospel only into the religious sphere of a culture provides a Catholic façade for a non-Catholic culture. The “counter-cultural” Gospel must also incarnate in the wider social system: it must turn the “sinful” structures of society into moral ones (Mattam, 2002). However, the data reveal that the missionaries and the parishioners do not agree on what is ‘sinful’ in Thai culture: the missionaries criticise three aspects of ‘Thainess’ that the parishioners and the Thai Catholic Church uphold as necessary to be Catholics integrated in Thai society. I frame this conflict as a misunderstanding between an honour-shame culture (Thailand) and an innocence-guilt one (Italy).

An unanswered question remains: how to decide which cultural elements need to be regarded as ‘sinful’ in inculturation?

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### Glossary for the main Thai words/phrases discussed in the Thesis

Word transliteration	Word in Thai	Translation	Notes
<i>Bida</i>	บิดา	Father (formal)	It is the formal term used to indicate one's 'father'. During the interview, an Italian missionary referred to God as ' <i>bida</i> '. This might be because God is referred to as ' <i>Padre</i> ' (Father) in Italian. On the contrary, my Thai informants use a more informal term in their individual prayers to refer to God: พ่อ, ' <i>pho</i> ', which means 'dad'.
<i>Chuea</i>	เชื่อ	To believe / to trust / to rely on	For my informants, it means to believe that something exists. It does not entail any commitment or loyalty towards the entity that is believed to exist.
<i>Kan-nam-phrawarasan-khao-su-watthanatham</i>	การนำพระวรสารเข้าสู่วัฒนธรรม	Inculturation	Literal meaning: 'importing the Gospel into the culture'.
<i>Khao Sangkhom</i>	เข้าสังคม	To 'enter society'	An educator in the Catholic Centre used this term to describe the aim of the education given to the 'kids' in the Centre. She means that the pupils staying at the centre should learn how to behave according to the social and cultural norms of 'Thainess'.
<i>Kreng-jai</i>	เกรงใจ	Being considerate of another's feelings	<i>Kreng-jai</i> tends to be interpreted as a positive attitude by my Thai informants, who are <i>kreng-jai</i> in order to preserve harmony and 'face' in interpersonal relations. The missionaries perceive it as an obstacle to direct communication and friendship, and as a way to preserve one's own 'face'. One of the missionaries translated it as 'human respect'.
<i>Naa</i>	หน้า	Face	'Face' is one of the basic 'social brick' that builds the hierarchical structure of Thai society. Related to 'face' are the concepts of honour and shame. There are various Thai terms related to 'face', among them: <i>sia naa</i> (lose 'face'), <i>khai naa</i> (to feel embarrassed, literally 'to sell one's face'), <i>raksaa naa</i> (to preserve

			one's 'face'), <i>hai naa</i> (to give 'face' to someone, usually on an inferior social position).
<i>Phi</i>	ผี	Ghost, Spirit	In this thesis it is mainly used to refer to spirits belonging to my informants' old animistic religions. My Catholic informants may believe in the existence of <i>phi</i> , but they are safe from the <i>phi</i> negative influence because of their Catholic faith. In the New Testament of the 2014 Thai Catholic Bible (Catholic Commission for the Bible of Thailand, 2014) the term is used when Jesus is misunderstood for a ghost.
<i>Pho</i>	พ่อ	Dad (informal)	This term is used as a personal pronoun in Thai. It is mainly used to address one's father. However, Chapter 4 discusses the use of this term to refer to the late King of Thailand (Rama IX) and to the 'Thai' Catholic God. The term brings "psychological closeness" (Iwasaki and Horie, 2000, p.531) into the relationship, but it also states a patron-client relationship: the dad is the patron and the child is the deferent client.
<i>Pisat</i>	ปีศาจ	Satan, Evil spirits	My informants refer to <i>pisat</i> as 'psychological negative influences' that cause them to sin (for example, the <i>pisat</i> of laziness or greed). Their views is in line with the use of ' <i>pisat</i> ' in the 2014 Thai Catholic Bible (Catholic Commission for the Bible of Thailand, 2014), which uses the term mainly in the New Testament to refer to Satan tempting Jesus in the desert.
<i>Satsana</i>	ศาสนา	Religion	It derives from Pali and Sanskrit. Thongchai (2015, p.87) explains how the term <i>satsana</i> "connotes the teachings of great spiritual teacher like Gotama Buddha, and was originally used because there is no 'God' in Buddhism". Thus, it contrasts with the term 'religion' as 'a binding contract between man and God' (King, 1999, p.36). However, the term <i>satsana</i> in Thailand is used for all the major belief-systems and faiths – with or without God.
<i>Satthaa</i>	ศรัทธา	To have faith	For my informants, it means to believe that something exists and to respect and commit to the entity that is



			believed to exist. It results in the adoption of the rules laid down by this entity or by this entity's representatives.
<i>Thue-tua</i>	ถือตัว	To be conceited	Attitude that my informants attribute to the Thai priests. It is described by Persons (2016, no pagination) as "acting aloof or priggish, [...] acting as you are better than others". This 'being better than others' derives automatically from ones' social status.
<i>Wai</i>	ไหว้	Wai	It refers to the respectful Thai gesture to thank, apologise, or greet. It is also used in the Mass to express 'Amen'.
<i>Wang-Tua</i>	วางตัว	To conduct oneself, to mind one's manners	<i>Wang-tua</i> is identified by one educator in the Catholic Centre as one of the aims of the Centre's education. The 'kids' must learn how to position ( <i>wang</i> - วาง) themselves (their bodies, <i>tua</i> - ตัว) into Thai society.

## Introduction

When I submitted my research proposal for a Master of Arts by Research, I had a different project in mind. At the end of this program, I realise how much my project has changed. My research proposal was full of pre-conceptions and doctrine-based, monolithic formulations of religion. This thesis demonstrates that religion is rarely monolithic and doctrine-based: in this thesis, religion is mainly lived. In this year I have also learnt how to be a critical listener, refraining from relying on my pre-conceived understandings of the phenomena surrounding me. One of the few things that has remained the same as in the proposal is the ‘object’ of my research: the BanCho Catholic Parish<sup>1</sup> in Northern Thailand. I do not like the term ‘object’, because the BanCho Parish is filled up with lives, stories and emotions. It is a living and vibrant subject, and I only had to stimulate it with some questions in order to receive back all this liveliness. I first came to know the Parish in 2015, when I volunteered there for a month. Throughout the years, I visited and kept in touch with the people living and working there. They are my colleagues, teachers but mainly friends. And they trusted me enough to have me ‘sniffing around’, constantly asking questions. I need to thank them all for their honesty, intelligence and generosity.

The Parish is currently run by two Italian Catholic missionaries; the parishioners belong to ethnic minority groups and are mainly converts from animism. My research looks at the complex interaction between four main entities in this Parish: the Gospel, the Italian Catholic missionaries, the local parishioners and the Thai national culture, identified as ‘Thainess’. The result of this complex interaction is what I refer to as the BanCho Catholicism: an entity in which the enculturated worldviews of the local parishioners and the missionaries, ‘Thainess’ and the Gospel tangle together. Chapter 1 is a literature review, it introduces the linking concept of the thesis: inculturation. Inculturation is the process that brings to the ‘creation’ of a local expression of Catholicism: the Gospel becomes ‘incarnated’ into a given culture (Aram, 1999). However, Chapter 1 also shows how the Gospel is rarely just ‘the’ Gospel: the Gospel spread by the missionaries is usually intrinsically permeated by the cultural meanings, values and behaviours of the missionaries and their home culture (Dotolo, 2011). Thus, the term interculturalism is coined: interculturalism is a process in which the Gospel is actually the expression of one culture, which collides, adapts and incarnates into another culture (Roy, 2009). The encounter of two cultures usually creates tension and conflict: this thesis describes and analyses some of this creative tension as it arises in the BanCho Parish.

Chapter 3 discusses the interaction between two enculturated worldviews: the missionaries’ and the parishioners’. This interaction leads to the creation of a locally-informed Catholicism, in which God is known – rather than believed in. The chapter analyses four characteristics deriving from this ‘knowing’ of God. Chapter 3 focuses on the religious sphere of inculturation, looking at how the parishioners conceptualise their Catholic cosmos, their rituals and their conversions. I affirm that the BanCho Catholicism does reflect the parishioners’ spiritual needs and enculturated worldview. Thus, in BanCho the Gospel successfully incarnates in the religious sphere. However, as Mattam (2002) and Cuturi (2004) reveal in

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<sup>1</sup> I use pseudonyms for my fieldwork site and all personal names throughout the thesis in order to protect the identity of my informants.

Chapter 1, inculturation must happen also in the social and political spheres: the Gospel truly inculturates when the perceived ‘sinful’ aspects of a culture are purified and corrected (Mattam, 2002; Cuturi, 2004). Thus, Chapter 4 looks at inculturation as the encounter between two different cultures: the missionaries’ and the Thais. In this encounter, the Italian missionaries perceive as ‘non-Catholic’ some aspects of Thai society and culture, such as ‘face’. For the missionaries, ‘face’ is a ‘sinful’ element of ‘Thainess’, and it should be removed. In contrast, my informants, Aulino (2017) and Bilmes (2001) identify ‘face’ as necessary for maintaining harmony in Thai society. I analyse the critiques made by the missionaries using the framework of honour-shame and innocence-guilt cultures proposed by Georges and Baker (2016). The missionaries are exponents of an innocence-guilt culture: a culture in which rules and laws dictate what is good and what is bad. In contrast, Thai culture is an honour-shame culture: good is what maintains harmony and ‘face’ in society, even if it is against the rules. Chapter 4 focuses on three main critiques made by the missionaries, reflecting on how a virtue for the Thais is a ‘sin’ for the missionaries. In conclusion, the thesis does not seek to prove whether BanCho’s inculturation process in the social sphere is successful. This thesis rather seeks to provide useful insights into a small Catholic community of Northern Thailand, whose members practice inculturation every day.

As the methodology section explains (Chapter 2), this thesis is a co-construction made by me and my informants about the inculturation process happening in the BanCho Catholic Parish. When I started my fieldwork, in mid February 2020, I did not know exactly what direction my thesis would take. I aimed at entering the fieldwork with the *tabula rasa* mindset needed for grounded-theory methodology. I knew that I wanted to explore how the Gospel was being ‘translated’ and ‘applied’ into the local community. I was also interested in how the missionaries judge the ‘product’ of this process, and in the challenges they face. Through unstructured interviews and participant observation, I fully immersed myself into the reality of the Parish for 35 days. The themes discussed in this thesis emerged slowly, interview after interview, coffee after coffee. This is the result.

## **Chapter 1: Mission, Inculturation and ‘Thainess’**

This chapter shows the process that has led the Vatican to understand the need for the adaptation of the Gospel to local cultures. Especially with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Vatican has acknowledged the necessity to establish authentic local theologies and local churches. Inculturation is the process that leads to the formation of these genuine forms of local Catholicism. The term inculturation describes the process through which Catholicism becomes “embedded in the local context so that it can speak out of and to that context” (Fleming, 2014, p.158). However, the process of inculturation is a complex and ever-changing one, which needs to keep up with dynamic, always-changing cultures. Thus, the chapter firstly illustrates the introduction of inculturation in the official discourse of the Catholic Church. Secondly, two main challenges related to the process of inculturation are analysed, showing the fourfold tension that inculturation creates among the enculturated worldviews of the missionaries and the local parishioners, the Gospel and the local culture. Then, the process of inculturation in Thailand is discussed, illustrating how Catholicism in Thailand has been a means for the Bangkok court to firstly build its own ‘national’ identity, and secondly to assert its power over Thailand. According to Bolotta (2018), inculturation in Thailand has adapted the Gospel to the elite culture of the Bangkok court, contributing to the formation and the spread of this culture as the hegemonic one throughout the country. This overview on inculturation helps to understand the themes of the following chapters: why and how is the religiosity of the BanCho Catholics different from the missionaries’ (Chapter 3)? What are the cultural conflicts that the Catholic missionaries face in their everyday practice of inculturation (Chapter 4)?

### **From a Supra-cultural Western Theology to Inculturation**

The Holy See has been the recognised legal authority over Catholicism since the fourth century. Until the 1950s, the theology proclaimed by the Holy See was considered by the Catholic Church itself ‘*The theology*’, with universal validity. The Holy See did not accept any other interpretation or adaptation of the Scriptures, labelling as heresy any attempt to read the Gospel in the light of different cultural contexts. The theology of Rome was taken as the foundation for the Catholic faith, enshrined in ecclesiastical confessions and policies of the Holy See as an “eternal, unalterable truth” (Bosch, 1991, p.427). Schreiter (1985, p.88) categorises the Holy See’s theology as a scientific subject: it is a *scientia*, compiled as a systematic knowledge which exhaustively addresses and analyses academic issues such as secularisation, the science-religion relation, faith and the Scriptures. Prince and Kikon (2018) argue that the perception of theology as *scientia* derives from the concept of knowledge upheld in the West: the enlightenment rationality dictates the understanding of knowledge as “universal truths [...] which transcend history and culture” (Prince and Kikon, 2018, p.253). Thus, the Holy See’s theology was “suprahistorical and supracultural” (Bosch, 1991, p.421). This understanding of knowledge did not only apply to theology, but to the Gospel as well. Therefore, the message of the Gospel became a “set of universal propositions detached from history” (Prince and Kikon, 2018, p.253) and the situatedness of a people.

The Catholic faith was seen in the West as a fundamental part of Western culture and civilisation. The Holy See, as the legal authority over Catholicism, was “the bearer of culture” (Bosch, 1991, p.448), on a self-assumed superior position over other cultures. However, because of the Western conception of knowledge mentioned above, the theology of Rome was not perceived as culturally conditioned. Scherer and Bevans (1999, p.3) define the theology of Rome as a “cultural captivity of the gospel to Eurocentric culture”, in which the Gospel is a “part of a monolithic western cultural package embedded in one of the competing forms of western civilisation, and seldom apart from this total package”. In the first century, the Church had made the Gospel free of the Jewish legalism to contextualise it to the historical situatedness of early Catholics. However, in the colonial period the Church made the Gospel the slave of Western culture: especially during the colonial period, evangelisation was perceived by missiologists as “the dual task of Christianising and civilising” (Scherer and Bevans, 1999, p.3). The Church’s missionary expansion “meant a movement from the civilised to ‘savages’ and from a ‘superior’ culture to ‘inferior’ cultures – a process in which the latter had to be subdued, if not eradicated” (Bosch, 1991, p.448). The perception of Catholicism as part of a superior culture led the mission fields and the younger churches to be judged as culturally inferior by/to the Holy See. Cultural pluralism was not considered *imago Dei*, but an obstacle to the internalisation of Catholicism, perceived as a fundamental part of the Western civilisation. Thus, the local culture of the mission field was not studied by missiologists, nor it was considered important for the effective transmission of the Gospel. Conversely, a mission was considered only a limited success if it was not able to disintegrate the indigenous culture, as “to ‘civilise’ was seen as an indispensable part of evangelisation” (Kirk, 1999, p.81). The churches established during the colonial period in the mission fields were ‘copies’ of the sending churches, they were “subcultures alienated from the living traditions of the peoples” (Kirk, 1999, p.81).

However, the perception of Rome’s theology as ‘suprahistorical and supracultural’ came officially to an end during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, replaced by the principle of environmentally-conditioned, authentic theologies. Wessman (2018) explains how the changing attitudes of the Catholic Church towards the cultures of the so-called ‘heathens’ can be seen developing in pre-conciliar encyclicals. However, it was the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) which became to be described as a “watershed moment of reform and renewal” (Bevans, 2013a, p.101). Vatican II was an *aggiornamento*, a renewal of the Church ordered by John XXIII in order to make her read “the signs of the times” (Mt 16:3): by considering the current cultural and political context, the Church would have been able to teach the doctrine in a more up-to-date and effective way (Bevans, 2013a, p.102). Relevant for this thesis is the new understanding of cultural pluralism proposed since Vatican II. With Vatican II, the Church acknowledges “the movement of God’s Spirit outside the Catholic Church” as present in “other churches, religions, non-Western cultures and society in general” (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004, p.243). The Council comes to see cultural pluralism as “the unity in diversity of the Trinity” (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004, p.298). The Council also sees the universal Church as unity in diversity of the various local churches, just as the Trinity is unity in diversity (Hunt, 2013). This allows the Church to perceive “the universality of the Church and the diversity of the world's nations” (Second Vatican Council, 1965a, no.26). The Council affirms that in each culture there is “a sort of secret presence of God”

(Second Vatican Council, 1965a, no.9), derived from the work of the Holy Spirit “at work in the world before Christ was glorified” (Second Vatican Council, 1965a, no.4). The missionaries must study the local culture in order to be able to see “elements of truth and grace” (Second Vatican Council, 1965a, no.9) in it, reinterpret them and make them manifest. However, those elements which are not in line with the Gospel must be purified. Thus, the local culture is ‘healed and ennobled’ in order to better communicate the Gospel to the local community (Bevans, 2013a, p.106). Therefore, the Council sees the local churches “as emerging from the encounter of God’s Word with the culture and traditions of peoples” (Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, 1999, p.92). This results in a rediscovery of local cultures as necessary for the establishment of local churches. The Universal Church becomes a unity of the various and diverse local churches. This is in contrast to the colonial missions that saw the destruction of local cultures as the only way to create the Universal Church.

The conceptualisation of cultural pluralism as a “trinitarian unity in diversity” (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004, p.299) dictated the imperative of formulating a theology of adaptation and inculturation over the traditional theology of *plantatio ecclesiae* and the salvation of souls (Wessman, 2018, p.137). The aims of the traditional theology are still relevant to the mission, but they are juxtaposed by the necessity to create local theologies and autonomous local churches. In line with the pneumatological essence of the Council, Aram (1999) provides a definition of inculturation that relates to the Trinitarian locus of the Church: inculturation is the ongoing process through which the Gospel is incarnated into local cultures (Aram, 1999, p.32). Inculturation is the process that leads to the formulation of local theologies, in which Gospel, Church and culture are in a continuous dynamic interaction (Schreier, 1985, p.22). Although the term inculturation is not used in the documents of Vatican II,<sup>2</sup> the concept of inculturation – referred to as adaptation - is central in *Ad Gentes* (Second Vatican Council, 1965a). The introduction of the concept of inculturation into the official discourse of the Church shows two important changes in the Vatican’s attitude towards mission: 1) the Vatican’s awareness of its being a local expression of Catholicism; 2) the recognition of other expressions of Catholicism as authentic and equally faithful to the Gospel. As a result of Vatican II, African and Asian theologies started to arise, challenging “the overly Westernized formulations of the faith that were first brought to their continents” (Yuen, 2010, p.129). For example, in Asia the newly formed Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) first used the term inculturation in 1970 (Yun-Ka Tan, no date). The FABC linked the concept of a successful inculturation in Asia with the need of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The Asian theology proposed by the FABC has since then developed into the “threefold dialogue” with the cultures, the religions and the poor of Asia (Tan, 2005).

However – to put it simply - “inculturation is not easy” (Mattam, 2002, p.310). Thus, the next section shortly analyses two major debates that focus on the concept of inculturation.

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<sup>2</sup> The term inculturation was coined by a French theologian, J. Masson, in 1962. The term entered the official Church documents in 1979 (Prince and Kikon, 2018). However, the term inculturation does not represent a new concept, since Mattam (2002) and Menampampil (1995) identify the rising of Roman Catholicism as the result of an incarnation of the Gospel in the Roman social and cultural context. Moreover, the Catholic missionaries Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto de Nobili in India and Alexandre de Rhodes in Vietnam are also considered to have performed an *ante-litteram* inculturation (Scherer and Bevans, 1999).

## **Doing inculturation: tensions and conflicts between cultures**

There are two main challenges of/to inculturation relevant for this thesis. The first one is summarised by Eaton (1997, p.244) in the questions: “Who, in the meeting of two cultures, is actually changing whom? And what, in the end, is actually changing?”. By using Eaton’s questions I want to propose an understanding of inculturation as the encounter between two cultures – rather than an encounter between the ‘suprahistorical’ Gospel and the local culture. Moreover, the questions pose the issue of what changes in the encounter: Is it the Gospel that changes the culture, or is it the culture that changes the Gospel? Regarding the changes in either the Gospel or the local culture, another question posed by Cuturi (2004, p.30) is relevant: “How to choose what to keep and what to exclude [in the local culture]?”. I would also ask: Who has the authority to decide what has to be changed in this process? This thesis does not seek to provide any answer to these complex issues. However, by further elucidating the problems rooted in these questions, it will be easier to understand the challenges faced by my informants in their inculturating experience. Thus, I here illustrate two main challenges to inculturation.

### **1) Complex interactions: culture, Gospel and religion**

The first, major challenge in inculturation is to define what is the relation between culture and religion, and how Catholicism can be incarnated into a local culture without despotically imposing over the culture and without syncretically resembling the local religion. As Menampampil (1995, p.11) explains, culture is an “organic whole”: it is not possible to eradicate the religion without changing the entire culture. Religion and culture are intrinsically inter-related: “The faith has become so enfleshed in a specific culture for many centuries that it is difficult to say what is of the culture and what is of the faith” (Mattam, 2002, p.310). Roy (2009, p.100) goes as far as saying that “religion is not culture but it cannot exist outside culture”, because the Gospel needs a specific cultural context in order to root itself and ‘reach’ the people. Concurrently, people truly understand the Gospel when they are able to relate it to their lived experiences. However, the local Catholicism that emerges in this encounter between Gospel and local culture must be part of the Universal Church, because of the “diversity in unity” wanted by Vatican II (Cuturi, 2004). If the inculturated Catholicism assumes aspects of the local culture or religion which do not conform to the integrity and specificity of the Catholic faith, it is labelled as syncretic. It is this necessary condition to be “diversity in unity” that leads Roy (2009) to the conclusion that inculturation is more about transforming the cultures according to the Gospel, rather than adapting the Gospel to/for the cultures. Prince and Kikon (2018) uphold a similar view, affirming that contextualisation – prioritising the local context over the Gospel in the adaptation process – leads to more authentic theologies than inculturation, which prioritises the Gospel over the context in the adaptation process. The Thai term used for inculturation (การนำพระวรสารเข้าสู่วัฒนธรรม, literally ‘importing the Gospel into the culture’) also implies that the local context should be prioritised over the Gospel.

As Fleming (2014) points out, Catholicism in Thailand has to continually interact with the local religiosity embedded in the culture, which is mainly interlaced with Buddhism. Among my informants, the ‘embedded religiosity’ is the one related to animism, rather than Buddhism. A term that better describes the ‘embedded religiosity’ of my informants is ‘enculturated worldview’. In fact, the term ‘enculturation’ refers to the process through which people unconsciously acquire and uphold the beliefs, values and practices of their social group, enabling them to become members of the same group (Culbertston, no date). This thesis focuses on the encounter between the enculturated worldview of the Italian missionaries and the enculturated worldview of the parishioners, looking at how they differ and how they interact. The Italian missionaries have acquired through enculturation an understanding of the Gospel and of social behaviours that is in line with their cultural context, mainly related to their Italian origins. Contrarily, the local parishioners in BanCho approach the Gospel with a different enculturated worldview from the missionaries’. The missionaries, belonging to one cultural context, judge the Other’s expression of Catholicism according to their own encultured cultural background. The parishioners relate to the Gospel with a matrix that reflects their animistic religious background and ‘Thainess’. This inevitably leads to misunderstandings and conflicts. Chapter 3 focuses on the encounter between these two different ‘enculturated worldviews’. Chapter 4 looks at the cultural conflicts deriving from different enculturated cultural matrixes: the missionaries with an innocence-guilt cultural background and the parishioners with an honour-shame one.

Thus, in the encounter with a culture, the Gospel is never an ‘uncontaminated’ Gospel: “Gospel is always found in inculturated forms” (Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, 1999, p.94). This means that the meeting between the Gospel and a culture is always a meeting between two different cultures, e.g. the culture of the missionary and the culture of the local community. This is why Mattam (2002) and Roy (2009) affirm that the process of inculturation should be better defined as a process of ‘interculturalisation’: an interaction between two cultures. In interculturalisation, both parties must be aware that their understanding of Catholicism is dictated by their enculturated cultural background, so that misunderstanding and misjudgement can be avoided. Schreiter (1999) points out that missionaries exploring new contexts need to start from the local context in order to achieve a genuine inculturation. Only through dialogue missionaries will be able to disengage their Gospel from “its previous cultural embeddedness” (Schreiter, 1999, p.69). Dotolo (2011, p.11) defines this process of disengagement as ‘deculturation’: through deculturation, a religion becomes “charismatic pureness (*purezza carismatica*)”, disentangled from a specific cultural context and finally able to legitimately inhabit foreign cultures. Menampampil (1995, p.14) affirms that it is the missionaries who need to undergo a process of ‘exculturation’, through which they empty themselves of their enculturated background: an ‘excultured’ missionary is able to effectively transmit the Gospel. The complexity of interculturalisation still remains, mainly because of the positionality of the people involved in the process and the pressure to conform to the ‘diverse Universal Church’.



## **2) Inculturation as imposing a ‘sinful’ hegemonic culture on minorities**

Another problem identified by Mattam (2002) and Amaladoss (cited in Dotolo, 2011, p.46) is the use of inculturation as a means to impose a national hegemonic culture over minority cultures – either consciously or unconsciously. Mattam (2002, p.307) describes how the concept of culture usually does not reflect the “little tradition” of human life, that is “the culture of the poor and the deprived and their struggle for life”. Thus, inculturation usually incarnates the Gospel into the “greater tradition”, leaving behind the “little tradition”. In this way, inculturation imposes – through Catholicism - the specific culture of the hegemonic group as the norm on other ethnic minorities. This happened in India, where the Sanskrit tradition and symbols were imposed as ‘Indian culture’, leaving behind the cultures of the tribals, the Dalits and other marginalised groups (Mattam, 2002). The process of inculturating the hegemonic culture is referred to as ‘acculturation’ by Dotolo (2011). Acculturation resembles the process operating in the colonial period, when it was the ‘Western’ Catholicism (and culture) to be imposed on the colonised. Moreover, elements in the popular culture of the hegemonic and powerful groups are usually “sinful” (Mattam, 2002, p.313): they generate injustice and poverty. Thus, “inculturation should not be identified with the culture of the dominant and powerful groups but must become a process through which the local Church lives in solidarity with the poor, their traditions, customs, ways of life, patterns of thought” (Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, 1999, p.99).

However, it was not always possible for the missionaries to embrace the minority cultures. Cuturi (2004) explains how the missionaries in China and Japan in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries had to conform to the culture of the social élites (taking part in the tea ceremony and in rituals for ancestors). This was done because ideas such as poverty and humility - originally embraced by the missionaries - were not appreciated by the Chinese and Japanese élites. This Catholicism was a Catholicism of the highest social classes, it excluded the lower social classes. Amaladoss (cited in Dotolo, 2011, p.46) would not consider an ‘élite Catholicism’ a truly inculturated one, since “the encounter between the Gospel and the culture aims to change not only the culture, but also society as a whole, through a process that gradually transforms society into the Kingdom of God”. A Catholicism that embraces the local culture of the élites and adheres to the unjust social system embedded in that culture is not a ‘true’ Catholicism. Mattam (2002) defines the Gospel as “counter-cultural”: it goes against the dominant cultures, in order to transform society and bring justice to the minorities. A Gospel that does not transform the social context and merely incarnates in the liturgy is an “empty inculturation” (Cuturi, 2004, p.31), a Catholic façade for a non-Catholic culture. Thus, inculturation cannot be the mere adoption of external forms and symbols of a culture – being it the hegemonic or the minority one. Inculturation must reach deeply into a culture, transforming the social context. An inculturation that adopts a façade of Catholicism but does not have the Catholic ethical values creates a “dissociation” in a culture (Cuturi, 2004, p.31). Inculturation must create cohesion between the Catholic external forms of the culture and the ‘internal’ values of that culture.

In conclusion, inculturation brings along challenges regarding the authority in the decision-making process and the cultural model taken as yardstick in the inculturation process. The risk is that the young local

churches assume characteristics that are either a reproduction of a European Catholicism or syncretistic, against the “unity in diversity” of the Universal Church. Concurrently, the local church cannot embrace the dominant culture with its perceived ‘sinful’ elements, but it must be aware of non-Catholic elements in the culture, so that through inculturation those elements are ‘purified’ and ‘corrected’. However, the problem lies in who has the capable authority to be an unbiased (excluded) judge in this adaptation process, since: 1) the Gospel is always presented in an inculturated form; 2) the Universal Church is more likely to be seen in a Western-like church fashion.

### **Catholicism in Thailand: an Inculturation of ‘Thainess’**

This section analyses how Christianity<sup>3</sup> was essential in the process of nation-building that led the Siamese court to impose its rule and culture over the territory that was identified as Siam first and – after the 1939 - as Thailand. Moreover, Bolotta (2015; 2018) illustrates how Catholicism was not only instrumental in ‘creating’ the Thai national identity (‘Thainess’), but also in inculcating and legitimising this principle throughout the education system and the Thai Catholic Church. At last, some critiques by Buddhist monks and high-rank officials to the attempt of inculturation are discussed, showing how inculturation is perceived by some Buddhists as a threat to national security.

Rama V (r.1868-1910) and Rama VI (r.1910-1925) greatly pushed forward a process of nation-building aimed at creating a shared cultural identity and historical past for the people who inhabited the central, Northern, Northern-east and Southern territories of the Siamese peninsula. The process of nation-building was juxtaposed with various reforms aiming at modernisation and centralisation (in the administrative, religious and education systems), which had already begun under the reign of Rama IV (r.1851-1868) (Baker and Pasuk, 2014). It was with Rama VI that Thai national identity started to be represented as composed by ‘The three pillars’: the monarchy, the national religion (Buddhism) and the Thai nation. This is why Thongchai (2015, p.90) refers to Rama VI’s construction of nationalism as a “royalist-nationalist project”. These three pillars are still currently perceived as the main elements of ‘Thainess’, and Thai royalist historians have carefully sewed them up together in a royalist-national history (Jory, 2001; Thongchai, 1997). Thus, the constructed past of Thailand legitimates the three pillars as the foundation for ‘Thainess’. Among the three pillars, Buddhism plays an important role in legitimising the monarchy: Buddhism has been used by the political élites to legitimise their right to rule, through what Jackson (1989) labels as a “sociological view” of Buddhism. The “sociological view” of Buddhism means that the religious principles of Buddhism are not confined to the religious realm, but they influence all aspects of Thais’ social lives. In fact, the ruling élites manipulated the teachings about the karmic law: they legitimised their power as deriving from merits accumulated in their previous lives. Having Buddhism as the legitimising instrument of the Thai hierarchical social structure, adhesion to Christianity was seen by the élites as a threat to the

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the thesis, ‘Christianity’ and ‘Christian’ indicate more generally both Catholic/Catholicism and Protestant/Protestantism. Whereas I use the terms ‘Catholic’ or ‘Catholicism’ to refer only to Catholicism.

status quo and national security. Moreover, Catholicism was twice related by the élites to French foreignness and expansionism,<sup>4</sup> leading to the idea that converting to Catholicism would have meant adhesion to a French nationalism. As Strate (2015, p.73) illustrates: “in a country without separation between church and state, nationalists reasoned that an individual’s religious devotion to a French church would naturally translate into political loyalty to France”. This is also implied in the Thai idiom: “To be Thai is to be Buddhist”, which is often cited by the literature about Christianity or Islam in Thailand to highlight the ‘foreignness’ of non-Buddhist religions (Fleming, 2014; Whiteman, 1999; Keyes, 1993). Thus, ‘Thainess’ requires adhesion to Buddhism in order to accept the monarchy as the rightful ruler over the nation. However, Thai Catholicism has found its own way to legitimise the monarchy and ‘Thainess’ through Catholicism.

Thongchai (2015), Fleming (2014) and Barry (2015) identify the role of Christian missionaries as essential in engendering the modernisation process and the construction of ‘Thainess’. As Barry (2015, p.145) affirms: “Christianity was integral to the formation of a Thai national and Buddhist identity which took shape by the early 20th century. [...] Christianity was an influence against which Thai Buddhism and Thai culture more generally measures itself”. Fleming (2014, p.17) refers to this relationship between Christianity, Buddhism and Thai national identity as “entanglement”, saying that there was a “multidirectional interplay of ideas and actions” that took place in the encounter between these three concepts. These three concepts were not fixed concepts, but they were constructed through interactions between different groups – such as the monks, the royalty and the Western missionaries. In these interactions, the Western Catholic and Protestant missionaries – with their modern, scientific, medical and technological knowledge - were the Other that the “Thai intellectual history” (Thongchai, 2015, p.79) had to confront. Fleming (2014) affirms that the modernisation process undertaken by Rama IV was greatly influenced by the missionaries. This process of modernisation included the ‘rationalisation’ of Buddhism, with the establishment of the Thammayut sect. The reformed Buddhism abandoned the previous Buddhist cosmology, adopting the modern scientific knowledge as explanation of the universe (Thongchai, 2015). The Christian-induced rationalised Buddhism was then – ironically - considered by the Siamese court as offering a more rationalised worldview than Christianity (Keyes, 1993).

Bolotta (2018, p.141) also points out that the Catholic missionaries had a significant role in promoting the “modernisation and Westernisation of the ‘civilised’ (*siwilai*) modern Thai state”. For example, the educational reforms under Rama V and Rama VI took as models the Catholic schools run by the missionaries. It was through the education system that the Thai state could then inculcate the “Buddhist ethno-nationalism of the Thai monarchy” (Bolotta, 2018, p.143). Thus, the encounter with the missionaries was not only essential in shaping ‘Thainess’, but it contributed to the inculcation of ‘Thainess’, transforming

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<sup>4</sup> Catholicism was first linked to French expansion during the reign of King Narai (r.1656-1688), when the French missionaries at court almost succeeded in converting the King to Catholicism (Fleming, 2014). The second time was during the 1940s, when Phibun was prime minister and was fostering an irredentist nationalism. At the core of Phibun’s propaganda was the use of the Thai Catholics – led by the French missionaries - as “the scapegoat for the territorial loss” of the Northern Eastern provinces to the French Indochina (Strate, 2015, p.7).

the people under the Siamese rule into ‘Thai subjects’. Catholicism as a tool to inculcate ‘Thainess’ derives also from its collaboration with the Siamese court in ‘secular’ development projects. It is through its secular development projects that Catholicism has sided itself with the Siamese court’s mission to inculcate ‘Thainess’ and build the Thai nation (Bolotta, 2018). They still collaborate: for example, Tan Su Aie (2007) explains how a Catholic hostel in Chiang Mai aims at teaching ethnic minority girls the ‘Thai’ skills necessary to belong to Thai society. This thesis also illustrates how the Catholic Parish in BanCho is promoting ‘Thainess’ among the pupils in the Centre. Bolotta (2018, p.142) affirms that this secular role of Thai Catholicism means that Thai Catholicism has been “accommodating to the national concept of ‘Thainess’”. Thus, the historical collaboration between the Siamese court and the Catholic missionaries is the salient characteristic of an inculturated Catholicism according to the principles of ‘Thainess’.

Bolotta (2018) affirms that ‘Thainess’ is not only reproduced in ‘secular’ projects, but also in more ‘religious’ matters of Catholicism:

1) “‘Thainess’ is in the ‘embodied rules’ governing the relationship between clergy and laity” – which resembles the relationship between Buddhist monks and laymen (Bolotta, 2018, p.148). This is in line with the critiques made by the missionaries in Chapter 4: the laymen have to pay respect to the priests, who are identified as people with a higher socio-moral status. This implies an understanding of Catholic hierarchy as governed by Jackson’s “sociological view” of Buddhism, in which karma and merit determine one’s position in the social hierarchy.

2) Secondly, ‘Thainess’ is inculturated in the liturgy. For example, the Thai way of paying respect (*wai*) is used as the gesture corresponding to ‘amen’. Moreover, the mass includes prayers for the well-being of the King, and Catholic buildings display images of the King.

These are the reasons why Bolotta refers to the Thai Catholicism as a “Thaified Catholicism”. The ‘Thaified Catholicism’ is the result of the inculturation of Catholicism into ‘Thainess’. During this process of inculturation, Catholicism has to continually interact with a Thai – mainly Buddhist – religiosity, and with the concept of Kingship shaping the notion of God and Jesus (Fleming, 2014). The interaction between Catholicism and local religiosity is analysed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 examines the relationship between the Catholic God and the concept of Kingship.

Although Catholicism has been an ally of the Siamese court for the development of the modern Thai nation, it was also considered a threat to national security by some conservative Buddhist intellectuals. Until the 1950s, the writings by Catholic missionaries depicted Catholicism as a superior religion to Buddhism (Keyes, 1993). Thongchai (2015) explains how tension between the Catholics and the Buddhists also arose from the use of language: the Catholic catechism adopted the same Thai word used exclusively for the Buddha (พระพุทธรูปเจ้า, the ‘Awakening One’) to refer to God. However, even before Vatican II, the missionaries started to emphasise the good message embodied in Buddhism, removing from their catechism expressions or ideas that would demean Buddhism and Buddhists. For example, the Catholics coined a Thai expression for God (พระเป็นเจ้า, the ‘Divine who is the Lord’) and abstained from using the exclusive term for

the Buddha to refer to God. Vatican II imposed a more respectful attitude of the Thai Catholic Church toward the local culture and religion. Thai translations of Vatican II's documents started to circulate in Thailand in the 1980s. The Catholics' change of attitude towards Buddhism and the documents of Vatican II were seen by Buddhist apologetics as "a conspiracy to infiltrate Buddhist Thailand with a benign face in order to destroy it later" (Thongchai, 2015, p.85).

The fear of the Buddhist apologetics contrasts with the depiction of the 'Thaified Catholicism' provided by Bolotta (2018, p.147). In fact, Bolotta affirms that this kind of 'Thaified Catholicism' is unable to gain converts because of its adhesion and accommodation to 'Thainess'. The statistics about the number of Catholics in Thailand also seem to prove Bolotta's theory: in 2017 – 348 years after the foundation of the Mission of Siam<sup>5</sup> - there were only 389 thousand Thai Catholics, about 0.59% of the entire population (Zenit Staff, 2019). Moreover, the new converts to Catholicism in Thailand mainly belong to ethnic minorities of the Hill Peoples in the Northern and Northern-West regions of Thailand. The Hill Peoples usually convert to Catholicism from animism, not from Buddhism. Scott (2009) and Rossi (2017) affirm that the animist ethnic minorities inhabiting the hills of Thailand are more likely to convert to Christianity rather than Buddhism because of their "anti-state nationalism" (Scott, 2009, p.9). To embrace Christianity, rather than Buddhism, is a way for these minorities to reject the 'foreign' and 'oppressive' political and religious systems centred in Bangkok: to refuse Buddhism is "a self-selected boundary-making device designed to emphasize political and social difference" between themselves and the lowlander Thais (Scott, 2009, p.158). Rossi (2017, p.124) also sees the conversion to Christianity of the Hill Peoples as a "subjective resistance to traditional hierarchies and Buddhism", and a way to be "part of a globalised (and Westernised) world", represented by the Western missionaries. By looking at the number and at the religious background of the new converts, Catholicism does not seem a threat to Thai Buddhism.

In conclusion, this first chapter has introduced some of the themes that the following chapters further analyse. At first, the change of attitude of the Vatican towards the cultures of the so-called 'heathens' was illustrated. Vatican II denied the view of Rome's culture and theology as the only suitable expressions of the Gospel, encouraging an 'incarnation' of the Gospel into the local cultures of the mission fields. This process of incarnation would be later named inculturation. In inculturation, the good and pure elements of the local culture are considered an expression of the spirit of God; whereas those cultural elements perceived as 'sinful' have to be removed. The aim of inculturation is to create a Universal Church that is "diversity in unity": united in the faith, but diverse in the religious expressions. I illustrated two main challenges to inculturation. The first one is the problem of 'deculturating' the Gospel from the missionaries' enculturated constructions, so that the Gospel can be the "charismatic pureness" (Dotolo, 2011, p.11) necessary to inculturate into the local community's enculturated worldview. The second challenge is the risk of inculturating the Gospel into a hegemonic culture, imposing that culture through Catholicism over ethnic

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<sup>5</sup> In 1669 Rome officially gave jurisdiction over the territory of Siam to the missionaries of Missions Etrangères de Paris (M.E.P.), thus establishing the Mission of Siam – which will be renamed the Church of Thailand in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Missions Etrangères De Paris, 2020).

minorities. A consequence of inculturating into the hegemonic culture is the adhesion to the apparent 'sinful' elements of that culture, perpetrating and legitimising the unjust systems derived from it. As the next chapters illustrate, my informants face these challenges in their everyday practice of inculturation. Last, this chapter analysed the 'Thaified Catholicism' constructed through the secular collaboration between the Catholic Church of Thailand and the Siamese court. The Catholic Church in Thailand has been instrumental in shaping and inculcating the national identity ('Thainess'), although 'Thainess' is rooted in Buddhism. It is this accommodating and helping attitude towards 'Thainess' that Bolotta (2018) identifies as the result of inculturation of Catholicism in Thailand. Catholicism has become a "vector for Thainess" (Bolotta, 2019) also over ethnic minorities. Thus, Buddhist apologetics should not fear inculturation as a threat to national security.

The next chapter introduces the Parish where the fieldwork took place, moving then to the methodology used to gather primary data. From the presentation of the 'secular' development projects run by the Parish, it will become clearer how the Thai Catholic Church is helping the inculcation of 'Thainess' among the people living at the margins of the 'conquering institutions' of 'Thainess'.

## Chapter 2: Fieldwork and Methodology

This chapter aims firstly at introducing the BanCho Catholic Parish, its project and its people. They are the ‘protagonists’ of my thesis: they provided the primary data for this thesis. Secondly, I explain what methodology I decided to adopt in order to collect primary data, and how I have then analysed the data collected. Finally, I reflect on my position as a researcher.

### BanCho Catholic Parish

The heart of the BanCho Catholic Parish is located in the BanCho ‘Anima Christi’ Catholic Centre. This Centre is located in Northern Thailand. BanCho is also the name of the main town near the Centre. The Centre is five kilometres from BanCho town, and it is only 500 metres away from the BanCho high school. The BanCho Centre was founded in 1997 by Italian missionaries of the PIME (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions). The aim of the Centre was to provide access to public school to those pupils whose villages were too far away from schools, or whose families could not afford the costs of education. These pupils – Catholic and not Catholic – were hosted in the Centre during the school terms and could walk every morning to school. After school, they helped the employees of the Centre to look after the rice fields, the animals or the buildings. The PIME missionaries used to come once a week – on Thursday – to celebrate the mass and check on the pupils and the local employees.

The territory covered by the PIME missionaries was too vast, thus the Bishop responsible for the parishes in Northern Thailand asked for more missionaries to come and support the PIME. In 1999 two new Italian missionaries started to dwell in the Catholic Centre in BanCho. In 2000 the BanCho Centre officially became the centre of a new Parish: the BanCho Parish. The missionaries in charge of the BanCho Parish are not from a missionary religious order. They are *fidei donum* priests,<sup>6</sup> i.e. diocesan priests who decide to undertake a short-term missionary mandate in another country. The missionary mandate usually lasts between three to fifteen years, after that they are called back to their home country to resume their duties as diocesan priests. In its 20-year lifespan, the BanCho Parish has been home to seven *fidei donum* priests from Italy. Currently there are two *fidei donum* priests in charge of the Parish: the vicar and the chaplain.

The BanCho Parish consists of three districts. It supports spiritually and economically 43 villages. These villages are mainly inhabited by the ethnic minorities of the Hill Peoples (or Hill Tribes),<sup>7</sup> Khon

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<sup>6</sup> Pius XII with his encyclical *Fidei Donum* (1957) paved the way for this exchange of diocesan priests between churches. He refers to it as a collaboration between local churches: a “missionary union of the clergy”.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Hill Peoples’ and ‘Hill tribes’ are terms used to refer to heterogeneous ethnic groups who inhabit the mountains and forests in Northern and Western Thailand. Although these groups differ in origins, language, culture, practices and beliefs, they were grouped together under the label ‘*chao khao*’ (ชนกลุ่มน้อย). The term ‘*chao khao*’ is ambiguous: ‘*chao*’ means people, while ‘*khao*’ could be both intended as ‘hill’ or as a third person pronoun, connoting the ‘Other’ (Pinkaw, 2003). Therefore, ‘*chao khao*’ could be seen as directly in contrast with ‘*chao rao*’, ‘us’, referring to the Central Thais. The BanCho Parish works with five different ‘tribes’: Karen, Lahu, Akha, Mong, Yao.

Muang (Northern Thais)<sup>8</sup> and Isan people (North-eastern Thais).<sup>9</sup> The Parish supports various projects throughout its territory. Among these projects, there are four hostels that guarantee access to public schools to more than 100 pupils; long-distance sponsorships provide more than 400 pupils with the funds to buy the necessary tools for school; every year the Parish also provides scholarships for the talented pupils who cannot afford to further their studies after high school. Besides, the Parish runs a small business to support local farmers. The profit from this business is used to pay the Centre's employees and to cover the costs of the hostels.

The fieldwork took place in the BanCho 'Anima Christi' Catholic Centre. This Centre consists of one hostel, the Parish Church, the missionaries' house, rice fields, organic vegetable gardens, a small factory and a café. During the fieldwork, the hostel was hosting about 50 pupils and employing full-time seventeen people as educators, farmers, catechists, housekeepers, factory workers and baristas. Both of the Italian missionaries dwelling in the Centre were interviewed. The lay interviewees are six final year students and twelve employees of this Centre – two of whom are catechists. The only two interviewees who were not working/living full-time in the Centre are the part-time Lahu catechist and a Thai bishop who visited the Centre. I decided to interview mostly people who were living and working full-time in the Catholic Centre, rather than parishioners inhabiting the Parish villages. This decision was based on two reasons:

1) The BanCho Parish is a multi-ethnic Parish, with seven different ethnic groups and – thus - seven different languages. To interview parishioners in the Parish villages would have required a deep understanding of the cultural background of each of the seven ethnic groups – including their languages. On the contrary, by interviewing mainly people living/working in the Catholic Centre I could focus more on 'Thainess' using the *lingua franca* of the Centre - i.e. Standard Thai – without mediators;

2) The outbreak of Covid-19 in the North of Italy at the beginning of February 2020 meant that the parishioners in the villages looked at me with suspicion, knowing me as a Northern Italian person who had recently arrived from abroad. To ask parishioners living in the villages to be interviewed would have caused them anxiety.

Thus, the interview data and the findings from my informants tend to focus on hierarchical relationships within the Centre and 'Thainess'. Rather than interviews with the village parishioners, interviews with the catechists and participant observations were used instead to understand the village parishioners' local understanding of Catholicism.

I interviewed 22 people in total.<sup>10</sup> Two-thirds of my informants are women. This is mainly due to two factors: 1) The majority of students and employees in the Catholic Centre are women; 2) I – as a female

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<sup>8</sup> The Khon Muang are historically related to the Lanna Kingdom, centred in Chiang Mai. They were only assimilated into the Bangkok social and political context in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their cultural identity differs from the Central Thais', e.g. the Khon Muang Language is widely spoken in the seven northern provinces of Thailand – although the Central Thais refer to it as 'Northern Dialect' (Bohnert, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Similarly to the Khon Muang, the Isan people were a late assimilation to the Bangkok domain. In 1893 the French created the political space of Laos, with the Mekong River as the frontier. This divided the Lao population into two: the Lao people in the Laos territory; and the Lao people in Isan, a territory that the Siamese court claimed under its domain (Hesse-Swain, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed list of my interviewees, see Appendix A.



researcher – had more easily access to female informants, as we were working closely together during the day. My male informants are either married men or priests, and most of them hold a position of power in the centre. The informant group is a representative sample of how power and gender are organised in the Catholic Centre: there are less men than women, but it is men who are more likely to hold positions of power in the Centre.

## **Methodology**

When I left for Thailand in mid February 2020, the broad objective of my research was to understand how the Gospel was ‘translated’ and ‘lived’ by the people in the BanCho Parish. I was also interested in the role of the Italian missionaries in this ‘translating process’, and how they positioned themselves in relation to the ‘output’ of this translation process. Modern ethnographic studies about Christianity in Thailand mainly refer to Protestant Churches, whose leaders are local people rather than foreign missionaries (Aulino, 2020; Cassaniti, 2015). The Catholic Parish analysed in this thesis was a new, specific context, which had never been explored before in academic research. Thus, there was no literature on this specific mission from which the analysis could depart. I decided to conduct qualitative research through grounded theory (GT). This methodology suited the aim and the features of my broad research questions and of my research location. In fact, the qualitative research method provides a way for the researcher to engage in in-depth interviews, with the intention to “expose the researcher to unanticipated themes and to help him or her to develop a better understanding of the interviewees’ social reality from the interviewees’ perspectives” (Zhang and Wildemuh, no date, p.2). On the other hand, GT refrains the researcher’s pre-conceptions from imposing themselves on the interviewee’s narration, theorising from empirical evidence rather than from a-priori assumptions. Thus, unstructured interviews with the missionaries and the employees of the Centre were conducted, along with participant observation. In this way, I aimed at collecting data which reflected the meanings and understandings of my interviewees, relegating me to the role of critical listener.

## **Constructivist Grounded Theory**

In order to decide on an appropriate research methodology, Ward et al. (2015) advise the researchers to firstly reflect on their conceptions of ontology and epistemology. Ontology is what is known to be real, while epistemology is the relationship between the researcher and the known. Since methodology is the lens through which researchers look at the phenomenon of their study, methodology must be in line with the researchers’ perception of both ontology and epistemology. As Arksey and Knight (1999, p.15) affirm, different methodologies “represent different understandings of the social world and of fair ways of portraying that world”. Following the advice of Ward et al. (2015), I explored possible epistemological approaches, reflecting on which one depicted more closely my own understanding and ‘creation-process’ of knowledge.

Clarke (2005) identifies two main epistemological approaches: the positivist and the post-positivist approaches. The positivist approach is more likely to utilise quantitative data to analyse reality, which is perceived as an objective truth, an “ultimately shared reality” (Clarke, 2005, p.2). Positivists reject interpreting meaning or intuitive realisations as a way to know reality. Charmaz (2006, p.6) defines the positivists’ way of theorising an “armchair and logico-deductive theorizing”, which departs from ‘grand theories’ and verifies them on reality, rather than generating theory from data. It was against this “objectively observable, fixed, predictable and generalizable” (Ward et al., 2015, p.452) positivist reality that Glaser and Strauss formulated grounded theory: a theorising which is “‘grounded’ in empirical reality” (Denscombe, 2014, p.114). They established a post-positivist methodology: GT rejects the positivist notion “of theory deduced from a-priori assumption” (Ward et al., 2015, p.453), while it believes that the theorising process must start from “a blank theoretical slate (*tabula rasa*)” (Ward et al., 2015, p.453). Strauss also began to interpret reality as a reflection of personal and social perspectives, leading to a constructionist-informed GT.

I believe that a constructivist epistemology suits the aim of my study, wanting to analyse the inculturation process in a Catholic Parish from the points of view of the people who live and work in it. The ‘reality’ of the Catholic Parish varies in every single individual connected to it; the qualitative data collected during the fieldwork then represent a ‘plurality of realities’ regarding the Catholic community. Thus, the epistemological underpinning methodology of this research is constructivism. Or, as it will be illustrated below, social constructivism. Moreover, the *tabula rasa* mind-set of GT provided an appropriate starting point for this study. Since there was no previous research on the Catholic Parish, I was approaching investigation as I was – idealistically - supposed to do in GT, “without being blinkered by the concepts and theories of previous research” (Denscombe, 2014, p.109).

## **Methods**

The qualitative data were collected in two ways: 1) unstructured or focused interviews; 2) participant observation.

### ***1) Unstructured interviews***

Unstructured interviews are in line with the GT requirements of refraining from pre-conceived theories when articulating the questions. This is well illustrated by Zhang and Wildemuh (no date, p.2) when they say: “the researcher comes to the interview with no predefined theoretical framework, and thus no hypotheses and questions about the social realities under investigation”. Unstructured interviews are informal conversations, in which the interviewee guides the interviewer in his/her world of meanings and values. Trying to suppress any pre-concepts, the unstructured interviews “desire to *understand* rather than to *explain*” (Fontana and Prokos, 2007, p.41) the social context of the interviewee.

I usually started the interviews with a broad, open-ended question: “How have you come to know the Catholic Centre?”. This question usually led the interviewees to speak about their encounter with Catholicism, encouraging them to talk about the issue “using language and ideas of their own” (Arksey and

Knight, 1999, p.6), not imposed by the researcher. Unstructured interviews are un-scripted, “improvised performance” (Berg and Lune, 2014, p.111), with the researcher only planning some main themes to explore during the interview. The main themes that I explore with my Catholic informants were their first experiences with Catholicism, their main motivations for conversion, their work and inter-personal relationships in the Centre/Parish.<sup>11</sup> However, the flow of the conversation tended to vary in accordance to the interviewee’s responses and responsibilities in the Parish. For example, I asked more specific questions about the methods of doing catechism to the catechists, or the education proposed to the children in the hostel to the educators.

In 35 days of fieldwork, I conducted 19 interviews (and one follow-up interview) with 22 interviewees (Appendix A). Seventeen interviews were one-to-one interviews, three were with two interviewees each. The two-informant interviews were the ones with the teenagers hosted in the Centre. At first, I wanted to interview them separately, but they told me that they would have preferred to be interviewed with a friend. Thus, six interviewees were the final-year high schoolers hosted in the Centre; three were catechists; two were the Italian missionary priests; one was a Thai bishop; ten were employees of the Centre. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. I transcribed the two interviews conducted in Italian (with the missionaries) into Italian; whereas I firstly translated into English and then transcribed into English the other 17 interviews conducted in Thai.

The role of the interviewer is to merely facilitate the articulation of the interviewee’s intentions and meanings (Charmaz, 2006, p.26). Thus, the questions were mainly open-ended, without directing the interview towards a direction that the interviewee would have not taken if not ‘stimulated’ by the question. In order to deepen the understanding of an interviewee’s meanings, the literature suggests the use of various types of questions, such as essential, extra, throwaway or probing questions (in Berg and Lune, 2014) or descriptive, structural and contrast questions (in Zhang and Wildemuh, no date). In all the interviews conducted, I asked at least once: “What do you mean with...?”, to let the informant deepens his/her perspective. I also tried to avoid directive questions, because they could bias the data by leading the interviewee to respond in a way that would please me. The use of “uncomfortable silence” (Berg and Lune, 2014) to allow the interviewee to further reflect and elaborate on a given question was used multiple times. Berg and Lune (2014, p.137) also stress the importance of rapport between interviewer and interviewee, they describe rapport as “the positive feelings that develop between the interviewer and the subject”. Only by establishing a rapport, the researcher can visualise the ‘reality’ of the interviewees, “rather than superimpose his or her world of academia and preconceptions upon them” (Fontana and Prokos, 2007, p.46). In establishing a rapport, participant observation can help, by bridging barriers and “building trust between the researcher and community members” (The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research methods, 2017). Moreover, I already knew 15 out of 22 informants because of my previous visits to the Catholic

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix B for a list of the themes discussed in the interviews.

Centre. Thus, I already had a relationship of trust with most of my informants, which led to a more relaxed and informal atmosphere during the interviews.

## ***2) Participant Observation***

Qualitative data was also collected through participant observation (PO), in order to gain more objective results and establish a deeper rapport with the informants (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, p.14). For this study, I decided to undertake a not-completely-covert participation: the missionaries were informed about my role as participant observer, but other participants in the activities were not aware that I was studying their behaviour. I was involved in various activities as participant observer, as I lived in the Catholic Centre 24/7 for the 35 days of my stay in Thailand. These activities include meals, manual works in the centre, Sunday classes, trips to the Parish villages, masses, prayers, sports, cigarette and coffee breaks, movie nights.

Jorgensen (1989, p.2) affirms that PO is appropriate to study phenomena which have not been previously studied and are “obscured from the view of outsiders”. PO allows the researcher to conduct “fairly unobtrusive observations” (Jorgensen, 1989, p.5): the researcher takes part in everyday life activities of a community, s/he explores the viewpoint of insiders “to uncover, make accessible, and reveal the meanings (realities) people use to make sense out of their daily lives” (Jorgensen, 1989, p.4). The researcher observes what is happening, listens to what is said, and investigates the reasons, aims or thoughts of the people by engaging with them in “informal conversational interviews” or “ethnographic interviews” (The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research methods, 2017). These informal conversational interviews are unique because “they take place within the context of ongoing relationships between researchers and interviewees” (The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research methods, 2017), and are usually continually shifting between conversation and observation. PO with its informal conversational interviews undoubtedly introduced me to new themes and key terms that were essential in formulating the final theories. As DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, p.14) notice, PO is a suitable method to formulate new research questions, because it “encourages the continual reassessment of initial research questions and hypotheses, and facilitates the development of new hypotheses and questions as new insights occur as a result of increasing familiarity with the context”. In this way I used PO as a means to direct further interviews and observation, which focused on a specific, relevant aspect observed in the fieldwork, e.g. the importance of rituals and behaviours, the ‘wall’ of indirect communication, the ‘crowded’ cosmos.

PO is identified by Denscombe (2014) and Stewart (1998) as the fundamental research tool in ethnography. However, Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) argue that a grounded-theory-based PO is more efficient. Fathi Najafi et al. (2016) identify the differences between ethnography and grounded theory (GT), saying that GT tends to focus only on one aspect of the phenomenon studied, while ethnography aims at providing “holistic views”. Moreover, a second difference is on the object of observation: GT focuses on the “social processes in human interactions, the structure, and the process that led to it” (Fathi Najafi et al., 2016), whereas ethnography focuses on discovering the tacit characteristic of a culture. Both the aim of my

research and the limitation of time led me to adopt the GT approach. By narrowing the lens of my research on the most relevant aspects of the phenomenon studied, I was able to limit the amount of data collected. Furthermore, by constantly comparing and analysing the new collected data with the phenomenon unfolding in front of me, I gained a “more complete picture of the whole setting” (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001, p.4), drawing relationships between events and categories. In fact, the simultaneous process of data collection and data analysis of GT allows the researcher to: 1) avoid “lengthy unfocused forays into the field setting” (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001, p.6); 2) avoid the reliance on pre-existing theoretical framework and pre-conceived ideas, because there is a “a continuous movement between emerging conceptualisations of reality and empirical observation” (Denzin, 2017, p.186); 3) avoid the risk of ‘going native’ for the researcher, who realises his/her own biases and position in the research (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001).

## **Data Analysis**

### ***1) Unstructured Interviews***

The analysis of the transcripts of the unstructured interviews followed the GT analytical method. The GT analytical method is a process in which “data collection, coding, and analysis are simultaneous” (Fontana and Prokos, 2007, p.56). Through inductive analysis, a theory is then formulated.

The analytical process is articulated by Denscombe (2014, pp.112-3) in four stages:

- a. Coding and categorising of data: the researcher assigns parts of the ‘raw data’ to particular categories. Through an attentive comparative analysis of the interview transcripts, the researcher starts seeing similarities between common themes or common understanding in different interviews. These will be coded together in the same category. These codes are open to change, they are “open coding”. I used OneNote to group extracts of interviews and PO under the same code, e.g. ‘priest as a boss’, ‘wall of *kreng-jai*’, ‘is it possible to be a serving boss?’, ‘miracles’, ‘polytheism?’.
- b. At the beginning, the codes are quite descriptive, but the more transcripts are analysed, the more links are identified between different codes. Thus, linked codes are then put under common headings, in a process called “axial coding”. The axial coding identifies key, axial components. The more interviews the researcher conducts, the more s/he needs to be aware of the emerging categories, so that s/he can address these categories, exploring them further. The categories that emerged first were: 1) hierarchical relation within the Centre; 2) influence of local religions on Catholicism; 3) the role of the missionary as a ‘loving boss’; 4) the ritualistic aspect of Catholicism; 5) the intrusion of God in everyday life as fundamental for conversion.
- c. The third stage is “selective coding”: the researcher focuses only on the core codes, the ones derived from axial and open coding. Around these codes, s/he develops concepts which help to explain the phenomenon examined. Concepts are “basic ideas that encapsulate the way that the categories relate to each other in a single notion” (Denscombe, 2014, p.113). I divided the data – thus the codes - into two broad categories: the temporal aspects of the mission and the religious ones. The temporal

aspects of the mission (discussed in Chapter 4) grouped together the codes related to the hierarchical relationships within the Centre and – more generally – between clergy and laymen. The broad concept deriving from this ‘selective coding’ was the cultural conflict between the missionary’s understanding of ‘Catholic relationships’ and the locals’ preference for a strict hierarchical structure. Regarding the religious aspect of the mission (Chapter 3), I looked at the motivations for conversions, the understanding of miracles, the teaching of catechism and the importance of rituals. The concept emerging was a local understanding of Catholicism as ritual- and behaviour-based, in which conversion is intended as a behavioural change rather than a belief-change.

- d. The fourth stage is the elaboration of theories, taking the concepts as the point of departure. Theories explain the reason behind the phenomenon, and are “grounded, rooted empirically in the data and conceptually in the research issues” (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.164). The result of this fourth stage can be read in the following chapters. Literature was also used as a way to support and analyse the primary data.

## ***2) Participant Observation***

Emerson et al. (2001) describe the process of creating data from participant observation through the writing of fieldnotes. They advise the researcher to jot down anything relevant in the fieldwork, possibly as soon as it happens, so that the memory will not fade away. I did so every day after lunch. My PO fieldnotes are the transformation of “remembered and jotted scenes into text, taming and reducing complex, lived experience to more concise, stylized, re-examinable written accounts” (Emerson et al., 2001, p.10). Because of the difficulty of the researcher to become estranged from the fieldnotes, Emerson et al. (2001) recommend the researcher to divide the fieldnotes into three different documents: 1) the descriptive observational notes; 2) the methodological notes; 3) the theoretical notes, in which the researcher starts to reflect and analyse the phenomenon studied. In my fieldwork I tried to divide the fieldnotes into descriptive and theoretical, although sometimes they overlapped. What I also did was to write a more personal diary, in which I recorded feelings and emotions. It helped me to understand my personal biases and prejudices, and to deal with stress.

The data collected through PO – about 30 thousand words - were then analysed following the procedure explained in the section above.

## **The researcher’s position in constructivist research**

The shift that ontology made from objectivism to constructionism brought along, in GT, the issue of the researcher’s position and influence on the research. In constructionism, reality is constructed, i.e. built by the individual through his personal and social experiences. Thus, constructivist researchers bring their own individual ‘reality’ into the research. Concomitantly, the interviewees also bring their ‘realities’ into the narrative. The reality that emerges through the research is thus a reality which is “constructed and reconstructed both individually from the sum of experience and in relationship and conversation with others”

(Ward et al., 2015, p.454). This means that both the interviewee and the researcher influence the narration and perception of reality, and thus the findings of the research. Even the formulation of a research design leads the researcher's reality to influence the findings. This is the reason why Ward et al. (2015, p.456) propose the use of the term 'co-construction' of a GT: the researcher is seen as a co-constructer of reality in both the research design, data collection, and the analytical process. They then opt for the term "social constructionism" to identify this epistemology underlying constructionist GT. By researching within a community, the interviewer describes the 'reality' of the community from within. He combines the perceptions of the members themselves (emic perspective) with his own "sense-making of what is happening" (etic perspective) (The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research methods, 2017).

The problem of the researcher's bias and position is more prominent in PO rather than in unstructured interviewing. This is because in PO "the observer is the research tool" (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011, p.111): he observes, remembers and records the phenomenon as it interacts with the researcher himself. Emerson et al. (2001) notice how the researcher is not 'entering' the fieldwork, but he is creating one through his research. Denscombe (2014) explains how the mind of the researcher operates and perceives only selected aspects of the phenomenon, applying filters which might direct the attention of the researcher towards some findings rather than others. He affirms that the researcher, rather than discovering reality, is interpreting it. Charmaz (2006, p.129) also highlights how a constructivist GT sees theorising as having an interpretative inclination: "We [researchers] interact with data and create theories about it. But we do not exist in a social vacuum". Thus, the processes of research design, data collection and analysis are all influenced by the researcher's reality, which includes his prior knowledge. Denscombe (2014) recognises that a researcher is unlikely to conduct research without having prior knowledge or personal experience influencing the research. Besides, Charmaz (2006, p.21) affirms that it is impossible for ethnographers not to influence the research, since "the research problems they address, the participants they meet, and the constraints they encounter all shape their involvement".

However, Arksey and Knight (1999) delineate the advantages of having preconceptions or previous experiences related to the topic of research. They affirm that by knowing the area, the researcher can better connect with the interviewee and become an insider in the context studied. I would like to linger on this positive note to reflect on my own position as researcher in this project. I am aware that the findings are an interpretation of an interaction between my reality and the ones of my interviewees. On the other hand, I am also aware that it is partly because of 'my reality' that I got access to the specific social context of this Parish. It was because of my sex, my age, my nationality and my educational background in Thai that the missionaries agreed on having me volunteering in the Centre in 2015. Because of mainly these four characteristics, I was also able to integrate in the daily life of the Centre, interacting with the employees and building up a relationship with them. It was my initial curiosity towards Catholic missions which led me to analyse critically the aims of the Parish. Thus, my position as an Italian, female, relatively young, Thai speaker, and atheist researcher certainly did influence the findings of this study. At the same time, it was because of my position that I was welcomed to explore and question the social context of the Parish.

Nevertheless, the researcher must be as objective as possible. Objectivity is described by DeWalt and DeWalt (2011, p.111) not as the truth, but as “a continuum of closeness to an accurate description and understanding of observable phenomena”. In order to be objective, the researcher must firstly record precisely how s/he proceeds in observing, recording and analysing the data; secondly, s/he must collect different perspectives on the same phenomenon, so that the findings can be considered reliable. While conducting the fieldwork, I constantly reminded myself of the need to understand my own biases and my own position in the research, trying to achieve objectivity through multiple consultations and transparent methodology. My supervisors also helped me in this ‘exculturating process’, by pointing out the biases that I was upholding.

This chapter has illustrated why I decided to adopt a constructivist GT in the study. The main reasons are: 1) the desire to understand the plurality of realities that constitute the Parish, by adopting the own terms of the people involved in this social context; 2) the lack of previous academic work related to the specific social context of the BanCho Parish provided the *tabula rasa* mind-set required by GT to approach the object of the study. I argued how unstructured interviews and PO are high compatible with constructivist GT, explaining the analytical process through which qualitative data generate theories. However, because of my understanding of reality as constructed (or, better, co-constructed), I am aware of my influence on the findings of the research, even by deciding upon this same methodology.



### Chapter 3: The missionary's belief in God vs. BanCho's knowledge of God

This chapter departs from my fieldwork data and builds on the observations about the religious practices of animist traditions by Lindquist and Coleman (2008), Handelman (2008) and Kirsch (2008). The chapter aims at presenting how the BanCho parishioners 'believe' in God and how they practice their faith in their everyday life. By doing so, the chapter contributes to the academic discourse on lived religion, offering an insight on a new, unexplored community with its own lived Catholicism. This lived Catholicism is permeated and structured by the parishioners' previous/surrounding animistic background. The resulting Catholicism differs from the missionaries' Catholicism, defined by the missionaries as a product of Western cultural and historical development. This chapter shows how in the BanCho inculturation process, the missionaries deculturalise: they strip their understanding of the Gospel from their own cultural context. Deculturation is possible only when one is aware of one's understanding of the Gospel – and indeed of religion – as deriving from a specific cultural context. During the interviews, one of the priests reflected on how different cultures can bring to different understandings of Faith:

The allure of the first generation [of Catholics] is to see how Faith grows in a simple and humble context, among poor people. And the allure also lies in how this faith is understood, which is very different from how it is understood in the West. A Western person that comes here might at first think that the people here live the faith as a kind of superstition, with a magical understanding. [...] Their faith [of the people in BanCho] is not like ours, it is not a thought-elaborated faith (*fede elaborata a livello di pensiero*). [...] Their approach to religion is very different from ours. I don't judge it as simpler or more naïve. It is a different approach that still brings benefits to their life. I'm sure that they nurture a relationship with God. We have greatly rationalised religion, here in BanCho religion is more like an emotive and natural element, it is part of the daily life. There is not a complex reasoning on the religious structure. They live religion as an experience. It's an experiential approach rather than a rational one.

[Don Paolo]<sup>12</sup>

First of all, I would like to distance myself from the priest's drastic 'West-BanCho' categorisation of faiths. The thought-elaborated approach to religion may be less common in BanCho, but it does exist. For example, Khru Jan and P Keaw's paths to become Catholics entailed "complex reasoning" and internal conflicts, along with a direct experience of God. Direct or mediated experiences of God are fundamental in the majority of conversions, as Lofland and Skonovd (1981) illustrate with their conversion motifs; while a pure "intellectual motif" for conversion is "relatively uncommon" (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981, p.376). Concurrently, describing the whole Western approach to religion as 'thought-elaborated' is a misrepresentation of the great variety of understandings and representations of faiths in the West: even within the same Catholic religious movement, people have different approaches to faith, e.g. the differences

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<sup>12</sup> The complete reference for all the interviews is in Appendix A.

between the official and actual or vernacular religions (Bowman and Valk, 2012). Don Paolo is aware of the various nuances that Catholic faith can take - either in the West or in BanCho – as this emerged during our conversations.<sup>13</sup> Rather than indicating all the Western people, the ‘we’ he used might consider himself and me as mainly upholders of this thought-elaborated approach to faith, since he knows my tendency towards thinking religion, rather than ‘feeling’ it.

Secondly, although Don Paolo is over-simplifying the perceptions of faith in the West and in BanCho, this extract shows that he understands his own approach to faith as enculturated. Don Paolo realises that his tendency towards a thought-elaborated understanding of faith is itself an expression of his own “rationalising attitude”. This approach derives from enculturation, a “learning experience by which an individual is initiated and grows into his culture” (Crollius, cited in Byrne, 1990, p.112). At the same time, this enculturated approach to religion is the result of a previous inculturation of the Gospel into the Latin Church. In fact, Francis (2014, p.30) argues that the early Church which developed in West Asia and Africa did not use philosophy to express its theology, but poetry instead. It was the Latin Church which espoused the Greek rationalism, leading to an understanding of faith based on thought – at least in the official religion. This understanding of religion is different from how my interviewees in BanCho understand and live ‘their’ Catholicism. What I found out through the interviews and participant observation in BanCho is mainly in line with what Mattam (2002, p.321) says: “one of the most outstanding characteristics of the Asian mind is its preference for a direct personal experience of Truth, rather than through discursive and objectivist reasoning”. This chapter illustrates four aspects of the Catholicism ‘practiced’ by the majority of the BanCho parishioners, showing how it differs from the missionary’s preference for a thought-elaborated faith.

### **Belief vs knowledge of God**

Firstly, it is necessary to delineate an aspect of the BanCho Catholicism which is at the foundation of the religious approach of the parishioners. The interviews with the first-generation Catholic informants show that ‘belief in the existence of God’ is not something that they have acquired throughout a period of time. The parishioners do not doubt the existence of God, they *know* that God exists – they probably have known it since the first time they heard someone mentioning him. This is an extract from an interview with a convert from Buddhism. She first came into contact with Catholicism when she moved to the Catholic hostel as a student.

#### **How did you feel about the Catholic religion when you first arrived here?<sup>14</sup>**

I was very afraid of Jesus. Really. They had me go to church. I was learning catechism with P Bum. He told me that Jesus is a human being (มนุษย์). And that when they lift the

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<sup>13</sup> Don Paolo does not conceptualise and ‘live’ his faith only through a thought-elaborated approach, as I explain in Footnote 32.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the entire thesis, whenever there is an extract of an interview, the text written in bold is a transcription of what I – the researcher – say. The non-bold text is the transcription of what my informants say.

eucharist they say this is the body of Christ. I felt scared. But they said that we all had to go to church. And they made us *wai* [pay respect to] Jesus. I didn't want to. Because I was afraid. I was Buddhist, I was like: 'if I *wai* Him, what Jesus will do to me?'. I was afraid He would make something bad happen to me. [...]

**At that time you were Buddhist, but you were afraid to *wai* Christ?**

Yes, I was afraid. Because if we do the ritual, it is a ritual right (เพราะเราทำพิธี มันเป็นพิธีใช่ ไหม)? Wouldn't you be afraid if a friend invites you to *wai* the spirits during a spirit ritual? (เหมือนแบบเพื่อนขอพื่อนำไปทำศาสนาผี ให้พี่ไหวพื่อนักกลัวไหม)

**If I am Christian, I don't think that spirits exist. So, I wouldn't be afraid of them...?**

Oh I see. But I was afraid even if I was Buddhist.

[N Poog]

What emerges from the extract is that the interviewee was afraid of Jesus making something 'bad' happen to her. This implies that she conceptualised Jesus as a powerful, supernatural entity, who is able to punish non-Christians who pay respect to him. Her fear of Jesus shows that she 'believed' in Jesus existing as the supernatural entity presented in the Gospel. Thus, this extract demonstrates how N Poog believed in the existence of a 'divine' Jesus before the beginning of her journey to conversion. In other two interviews with two non-first-Catholic-generation catechists, I asked whether they ever doubted the existence of God:

**What challenges does your faith face?**

I don't have many challenges in my faith (การท้าทายในความเชื่อ). But I had some challenges in my trust to God (การท้าทายในไว้ใจในพระเจ้า). For example, when I didn't have enough food, or I didn't have a job. In the end, I did receive help.

[Khru Neung]

**Have you ever wondered if God existed?**

Yes, I did wonder sometimes. But I do believe in Him. But sometimes I was weak. I asked myself: 'is God still with me? Or am I with God? Have I forgotten God?'. But I still believed that he existed.

[P Bum]

From the extracts we can see how there is no doubt in the existence of God, but there is doubt about God being the loving and caring Father. This doubt is not resolved through theological speculation, but through the direct experience of his love. In other cases, the decisive factor that led to conversion was the intervention of God – through miracles (อัศจรรย์) or blessing (พระพร) – in the informants' life. Thus, my informants converted not because they started to believe in God – most of them did never not believe in him – but they converted when they *experienced* that God was bringing them material or spiritual benefit.

Thongchai (2015) explains how the ‘irrelevance of belief’ is implicit in the Thai term ‘*satsana*’ (ศาสนา), usually translated as ‘religion’. In fact, *satsana* “connotes the teachings of a great spiritual teacher like Gotama Buddha, and was originally used because there is no ‘God’ in Buddhism. This is in contrast with the term ‘religion’, whose meaning is originally inseparable from the belief in ‘God’” (Thongchai, 2015, p.87). *Satsana* entails a set of teachings. On the contrary, a possible etymology for *religio* is the Latin verb *re-ligare*, ‘to bind together or to link’. Thus, religion is “a binding contract between man and God” (King, 1999, p.36), in which ‘belief’ has a predominant role. Don Paolo would probably agree with Thongchai (2015), as this is what he told me during the interview:

The first thing that they [the Thais] asked me and that wrong-footed me was: ‘who is Jesus and what does he teach?’. Especially the Buddhists, they go straight into the teachings. Because they’re used to the Buddhist *tham* (ธรรม, dharma), to the Buddha’s teachings. For them it’s more important what Jesus teaches, rather than who Jesus is. They look for a path, not a person. But in Catholicism it’s very different: we rely on Jesus (*ci affidiamo a Gesù*), he is the path - not his teachings.  
[Don Paolo]

“To rely on Jesus” means to believe in him, to trust him. Belief is a fundamental element in the monotheistic cosmos. Handelman (2008, p.188) affirms that he “came to see belief as an outcome of monotheistic cosmic logic, as the outcome of cosmos organized in terms of absolute hierarchy through the gaping, impassable rupture between finite and infinite”. In fact, the dualistic monotheistic cosmos entails a fracture between the natural and supernatural worlds: the divine upholds the cosmos from outside itself, while the human being is relegated to the finite part of the cosmos, i.e. the earth. On the contrary, in an animistic cosmos all the elements are sentient elements interconnected within themselves, holding the cosmos together from within (Handelman, 2008). Watt (2008) explains how each worldview is better described through either a modern or premodern language. The dualistic cosmology can be described through English. However, the American Hmong community struggles to use English to describe their animistic worldview: “In animism, the sacred and the profane are indistinctly separated, making English a poor language for expressing animist beliefs” (Watt, 2008, p.20).

In an animistic ‘organic cosmos’, belief supports the experiential and direct knowledge of the cosmos. On the contrary, in a dualistic monotheistic cosmos, belief is prominent because it has to bridge the rupture and reach beyond the sensory experience. Stroeken (2008, p.144) notices that the institutional religions present their beliefs as “something akin to knowledge, albeit it an ‘inner’ knowledge that defies empirical verification”. These are ‘believed beliefs’: “beliefs that carry within themselves awareness of not being knowledge but that are nevertheless embraced as such” (Stroeken, 2008, p.152). ‘To believe’ refers to the leap of faith to embrace the ‘believed beliefs’: belief is essential to explain the separated sphere in the dualistic cosmos. However, for the ones not upholding a dualistic cosmos, the spiritual world is part of the natural one: they *know* the spiritual reality, they do not believe in it. Pouillon (2016) describes how the

Hadjarai people ‘believe’ in the margai spirits: “they [the people] do not believe in [*croire à*] it [spirits]: this existence is simply a fact of experience: there is no more need to believe in [*croire à*] the margai than to believe that if you throw a stone it will fall” (Pouillon, 2016, p.490). The experiences through which people know about the spirits are labelled as ‘mystical’. Mystical experiences tend to be considered by the dualistic-cosmos logic an inefficient tool to know the spiritual world in the natural sphere: the natural world has to be known through “calculations, predictions, or experiments that can prove to be wrong and are open to revision, following rules of logic and ratiocination” (Lindquist and Coleman, 2008, p.6). As a consequence, the animistic people’s empirical knowledge of their spiritual reality is declassified as a mere ‘belief’, while the ‘believed beliefs’ are seen as knowledge.

It is not appropriate to say that the informants quoted above ‘believe’ in God. This is because their belief is not a ‘believed belief’: they do not take a leap of faith, but they know that God exists, just as the spirits related to the animistic religions exist. This different understanding of the cosmos and God’s position leads the BanCho Catholicism to assume four inculturated characteristics, reflecting the enculturated organic-cosmos worldview of the BanCho parishioners. These characteristics are: 1) a personal experience of God; 2) a ‘crowded cosmos’; 3) conversion as a change of behaviours; 4) the importance of the rituals and the priest.

### **1) A personal experience of God through miracles, blessings and material goods**

In the previous section I explained how the animistic civilisations tend to know the supernatural reality through experiences. This contrasts with the non-empirical belief in a transcendent God of the dualistic cosmos, which puts more emphasis on doctrine and dogmas. At the beginning of the fieldwork, I unconsciously upheld this thought-elaborated understanding of faith. This was reflected in two of the questions that I asked during the first interviews (“Which teaching in the catechism do you like the most?” and “Which teaching attracted you to Catholicism?”). My informants had to think for a long time before answering these questions. Most of them provided short answers, without further explaining their choice. Some did not answer. My understanding of the catechism as at the core of religion and conversion was different from my informants’. My informants were more interested in talking about divine miracles as an essential part of their being – or becoming - Catholic. Eleven out of the sixteen BanCho Catholic informants spontaneously told me about miracles happening in their lives, through which God expressed his love and care. The miracles could be as little as timely sending a bus to the bus stop or providing in a dream the right numbers for the lottery. For some informants, miracles were life-changing events through which they or their relatives escaped rapes, got Thai citizenship, were admitted to university, recovered from illness, got declared innocent in a trial, reunited with a long-lost relative or met their future (and current) husband. Although this interviewee did not mention the term ‘miracle’, her answer reflects the importance of personal experience of God over the study of catechism.

**What do you like the most in the catechism?**

[Long silent]. I don't know. But what I know is that I love God. We see God through some symbols, like Jesus on the cross. We can't see him directly, but what we can do is to experience Him, and what we experience reaches our mind (ที่เราสามารถสัมผัสคือถึงจิตใจ). For example, if we're not well, we ask for blessings from God. You know, every time I ask for blessings from God I always feel I have more energy in my mind.

[N Poog]

Thus, at the core of my BanCho informants' Catholicism there is a direct and personal experience of God, rather than an analysis of the catechism. This is in line with what the missionary said about BanCho parishioners living religion with an "experiential approach" rather than a rational one. From the interviews, it emerges that the parishioners' experience of God can be also indirect, mediated through other agents. For example, some interviewees identified the missionaries as mediators of the love of God.<sup>15</sup> The missionaries are considered the representatives (ตัวแทน) or the faces (ใบหน้า) of God, and through them the people experience the love of God. This is what a Yao convert told me:

**Why did you decide to become Catholic?**

Because I think I got to know the love of God from the behaviours of other Catholics. There are both good and bad Catholics, but I've been lucky to meet good Catholics. And I've seen the love of God in the priests and sisters that were with me, and in my colleagues and other Catholics. I've been very lucky to meet people who really love God, and from their love I've seen the love of God. [...] Then I learnt more about Christ, and I spent more time with people who knew God. So I saw it and I slowly absorbed it (ซึมซับ) into my life.

[Khru Jan]

Moreover, the material help provided by the Parish is also perceived as deriving from God. As one of the missionaries said, the gratuitousness of the Parish generates questions in those who receive help, "they [the villagers] ask themselves: why have these foreigners come to help us?".<sup>16</sup> Most of the new converts are drawn to the church of their villages out of curiosity. Later they learn about the love of God and understand his presence in what they have received. This is how a catechist explains to the villagers how the love of God is mediated through the Catholic community:

**What is the main motivation for conversion?**

I think that at the beginning it's about help, such as scholarship and help to the ill. In the past they [the villagers] didn't have the National Health insurance (บัตรทอง) so they had to pay in cash. The Parish paid for them. After that the villagers knew what Catholicism is,

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<sup>15</sup> Interviews with Khru Jan, P Mint, P Bum, Khru Maen, P Kaew.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Don Paolo.

what is making merits and the help that is in line with the Gospel of Jesus (ตรงกับพระวาสารที่พระเยซูบอก). [...] At the beginning I explain them that Jesus came to help the ill, giving them medicine. Nowadays, there is no Jesus anymore. But his representatives (ตัวแทน) are the fathers and other Catholics.

[Khru Maen]

Thus, my informants experience God either directly or indirectly. This experience is crucial in their path towards conversion, and in keeping their faith alive during their Catholic life. If a parishioner does not experience the intervention of God in his life, he is likely to leave the Catholic community and resume his pre-Catholic life's rituals. However, my informants experience God in their daily life, e.g. waking up to a new day in the morning, the arrival of the right employee when needed. This is how the Buddhist-convert informant describes her growth of faith in God:

**What made you change your mind about Catholicism?**

I learnt the catechism often. P Bum told me that Jesus is not as scary as I thought. He told me that I had to ask for blessing (ขอพร), and had to ask for it quite often, so that I'll receive them. So I started asking for blessings in my study, and I started to pray every day. And it made my grades very good. One year I was the first of my class. And I felt very good. So that was the beginning, my faith grew more (มีความเชื่อมากขึ้น).

[N Poog]

Thus, blessings, miracles and material goods can all be seen as experiences of God and his love. Although even among Christians with a dualistic-cosmos worldview – especially Catholics – there are chronicles of miraculous events, in BanCho these chronicles are part of the daily life of my informants. They are constantly experiencing God, these experiences make the parishioners trust God. These frequent experiences reveal that there is not a rupture between the parishioners' finite cosmos and God's. As Don Paolo said: “here religion envelops everything (*avvolge tutto*)”.<sup>17</sup> God inhabits the ‘organic cosmos’, along with other supernatural beings. This leads us to the second characteristic of BanCho Catholicism: the ‘crowded cosmos’ of the parishioners.

## 2) The ‘crowded cosmos’ of the parishioners

As the interviews showed, the parishioners in BanCho know that God exists. However, they do not only know about the existence of God: the Catholic God is only one entity in the ‘crowded cosmos’ of the parishioners. I realised this during a casual conversation with a Catholic Karen educator of the hostel. She told me that she does not like to go to the forest: “every time I go to the forest I need to keep my voice low,

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Don Paolo.

because I'm afraid to bother/irritate the spirits (รบกวนผี)".<sup>18</sup> I started to ask my Catholic informants what their thoughts about spirits (*phi*, ผี) were. This is the answer that summarises well my informants' thought:

**What do you think about spirits (ผี)?**

I don't think much about them. I know that spirits do exist in reality (ผีที่มีจริง), but I don't pay respect to them (ไม่นับถือเขา). They mind their own business (เขาก็อยู่กับของเขา). I mind my own business, I let them be (ไม่ไปยุ่งกับเขา).

[Khru Maen]

The above extract underlies two main characteristics of BanCho Catholicism: 1) there is an "ontological pluralism" (Aulino, 2020, p.14) in which various supernatural agents coexist in the same cosmos; 2) the commitment to one religion means that agents from other religions will not hinder you – unless you 'bother' them.

Aulino (2020) argues that the bounded cosmos of monotheistic religions presents a singular sense of reality, which "can be known and mapped" (Aulino, 2020, p.13). In contrast, non-monotheistic traditions recognise "multiple natures - overlapping, contradictory, but not mutually exclusive planes of existence – rather than merely elaborating different epistemologies within a singular nature" (Aulino, 2020, p.13). This is in line with Stroeken's observation about the Sukuma healers. The Sukuma healers talk about their medical knowledge as 'belief' rather than certain science. In the Sukuma world "someone's else disbelief presents no threat" (Stroeken, 2008, p.149), because they are used to having different, contradictory systems of knowledge. This implies an acceptance of other knowledge systems, without claiming one's knowledge as 'absolute'. According to Aulino (2020), in the Thai Buddhist context<sup>19</sup> different truths may coexist, because everything that is able to manipulate and explain the perceived reality is accepted as truth. She refers to this phenomenon of 'different truths' as "ontological pluralism". She affirms that the ontological pluralism may lead people to "attest to one set of understandings fully, and at the same time conceive of another level of analysis [...] that renders their current understanding obsolete" (Aulino, 2020, p.14). Kirsch (2004, p.707) notices that the Gwembe villagers keep various religious options "up their sleeve", with belief being a precondition for the successful actualisation of a ritual in any religious option. Stroeken (2008, p.149) refers to this flexible attitude towards different religious system as "disjunctive capacity".

The "disjunctive capacity" of the BanCho parishioners was criticised in various interviews with the catechists and the missionaries. In fact, the parishioners may perform rituals to the spirits when they feel that God is not doing enough to prevent them from suffering. The parishioners might consult a shaman, asking

<sup>18</sup> Observative notes, 06/03/2020.

<sup>19</sup> The Buddhism practiced by the majority of the Thais has been defined as a syncretic and animistic Buddhism by Fleming (2014), a mixture of magic, astrology, spirit worship, sacred amulets, holy water, Hindu gods, Brahmin rituals and spirit mediums. Thus, the cosmos of Thai Buddhists is more similar to the animistic cosmos, rather than to the dualistic monotheistic one.



him what spirit they offended and how they should make amends. Amendment is made through rituals and sacrifices performed by either the shaman or the parishioners. Dahlfred (no date) also observes this ‘disjunctive capacity’ among ex-Buddhist Christians. He affirms that the ex-Buddhist Christians believe that there should be a “direct correspondence between their degree of faithfulness to God and the amount of blessings received” (Dahlfred, no date, p.10). Thus, when they feel that their faithfulness is not ‘payed back’ by God, they might appeal to other entities. The fact that the parishioners may still perform rituals to the spirit is perceived by the catechists and the missionaries as going against the exclusivity of Catholicism. Coming from a culture that perceives a singular sense of reality, the missionaries struggle in understanding the overlapping planes of existence in the cosmos of the BanCho parishioners. Vice versa, the parishioners struggle in exclusively committing to the Catholic God. This is how an ex-catechist in BanCho would explain the exclusivity of Catholicism to non-Catholics.

**How would you teach Catholicism to someone who doesn’t know anything about God?**

When people ask me about Catholicism, they usually believe in spirits (ผี). What I tell them is that we don’t have to believe (เชื่อ) in spirits or be afraid of God. Because God will not punish us. Even if we commit sins, God must forgive us (ให้อภัย). [...] Sometimes, even when they change their mind and convert to Catholicism, they don’t leave behind their original religion. That’s when I tell them: “If you believe in something, you believe in that. We cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds (เหยียบเรือสองแคม). If there are two boats, you cannot get into both boats. Because when the boats sail, you’ll just fall into the water, you’ll remain with nothing in your hands for your life.

[Pa Nee]

However, many parishioners still do not understand the exclusivity required by the Catholic Church. The condemnation by the missionaries and the catechists of the “disjunctive capacity” of the parishioners is required in order to build a local church that can be in communion with the Universal Church. However, the missionaries accept that the parishioners and catechists have a ‘crowded cosmos’ - as far as they fully and exclusively commit to the Catholic God.

In the crowded cosmos of the parishioners there is a strict distinction between the spirits belonging to the parishioners’ old animistic religions and the spirits of the newly embraced Catholic religion. The animistic religions’ spirits are called with the term that is normally used in Thai to identify spirits and ghosts: *phi* (ผี). On the other hand, the ‘Catholic spirits’ are called ‘*pisat*’ (ปีศาจ), which means devil or evil spirits. These evil spirits (*pisat*) lure people to sin and temptation, rather than directly causing sufferings and bad luck as the *phi* do. Khru Neung told me that the evil spirits (*pisat*) are like ‘mental spirits’, affecting people’s

behaviour from inside; whereas the *phi* are external entities.<sup>20</sup> The interviewees referred to *pisat* as responsible for someone's laziness and greediness, or for making people 'deviate' (ไขว้เขว) from God. The *pisat* were cited often during the sermons of the Lent, reminding the parishioners that even Jesus was tempted by the evil spirits while fasting in the desert. This strict distinction between *phi* and *pisat* may derive from how conversion to Catholicism is usually depicted by the missionaries and the parishioners. In fact, my informants<sup>21</sup> talked about conversion to Catholicism as a way to 'leave behind' the chaotic, unpredictable and scary *phi*. Once converted to Catholicism, *phi* continue to exist, but they are not a threat for converts anymore.

Pa Nee proposed an interesting theory: she affirmed that the spirits (*phi*) were actually the evil spirits (*pisat*), deviating people from Catholicism. In her opinion, the 'old religion' of the parishioners is a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the evil spirits as 'non-Catholic' entities:

Evil spirits (*pisat*) make people deviate from God (ไขว้เขวจากพระเจ้า). The evil spirits (*pisat*) make people believe that they are this kind or that kind of spirits (*phi*), and make people feed and take care of them. [...] But I explain to them [the villagers] that Catholics don't have *phi*. We only have one God. The spirits (*phi*) are under the power of God. We don't have to be afraid of them. If we are confused, then we fall, we forget God, and we commit sins towards others. This can make us return to our original religion (ศาสนาเดิม), the evil spirits (*pisat*) can make us return to our original religion.

[Pa Nee]

Her theory goes against the 'crowded cosmos' of most of the other parishioners, in which *phi* and *pisat* coexist. This might be because she comes from the North-East of Thailand and her family has been Catholic for several generations. However, the other informants affirm that there are two types of spirits: the *phi* and the *pisat*. The *phi* do not interfere with the converts to Catholicism, as long as the parishioners "let them [the spirits] be".<sup>22</sup> The Bible by the Catholic Commission for the Bible of Thailand (2014) also reflects what my informants say about the distinction between *phi* and *pisat*.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Observative Notes, 24/02/2020

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with Don Paolo, Pa Nee, P Bum, P Mint, P Mali, Khru Maen, Khru Neung.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Khru Maen.

<sup>23</sup> The 2014 Thai Catholic Bible (Catholic Commission for the Bible of Thailand, 2014) reflects this strict distinction between *phi* and *pisat*. In fact, the term '*phi*' (ผี) is only used four times in the New Testament when Jesus is misunderstood for a ghost (*phi*), e.g. Mark 6:49: "when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out" (บรรดาศิษย์เห็นพระองค์ทรงพระดำเนินอยู่บนทะเล ก็คิดว่า เป็นผี จึงส่งเสียงร้องอื้ออึง). In the Old Testament, the same term '*phi*' is used only twice (Isaiah 29:4 and 34:14) to refer to spirits such as Lilith. On the contrary, the term '*pisat*' (ปีศาจ) appears 179 times. In the New Testament, '*pisat*' is mainly used when Jesus is tempted by Satan in the desert (Mt 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13) and when Jesus performs exorcism (ขับไล่ปีศาจ) in people possessed by evil spirits (ถูกปีศาจสิง), such as Mt 8:15-21; Mark 1:23-27; 9:17-24; Luke 4:33-36; 8:26-34; 13:10-14.

In order to better understand the relationship between the people and the various supernatural entities inhabiting the ‘crowded cosmos’, the following extract is relevant. I asked one of the employees – one that I know is very meticulous about picking the right term - the differences between the Thai terms usually translated as ‘belief’: the first term is more commonly used to refer to belief or trust (ความเชื่อ), while the second term (ศรัทธา) refers more specifically to religious belief/faith. However, in the Parish the first term is used more often, e.g. faith in God is usually defined as ‘belief in God’ (ความเชื่อในพระเจ้า), rather than ‘faith in God’.

**What is the difference between belief (ความเชื่อ) and faith (ศรัทธา)?**

To have faith (ศรัทธา) means to respect something. For example, I believe (เชื่อ) that spirits (*phi*) exist, but I don’t have faith (ศรัทธา) in them. I believe that Buddha existed, but I don’t have faith in him. I believe, but I don’t feel close to it, I don’t behave following his rules. To have faith means to adhere to it, to make it your own religion (ยึดเป็นศาสนาของตนเอง).

[P Bum]

The definition provided by the employee depicts the ‘crowded’ cosmos of the BanCho parishioners. However, it also leads the discussion to another question: if there is not a change of beliefs in the people who come into contact with Catholicism, then what is conversion for them? What does it mean to convert if there is not a change in one’s understanding of the cosmos?

### **3) Conversion: a change of behaviours rather than beliefs**

The employee quoted above already provides a hint for the meaning of conversion: behaviours. To convert to Catholicism – for my informants - means to commit to a set of behaviours dictated by the catechists and the priests, rather than undergoing a change of beliefs. Kirsch (2004) notices the same attitude among the Zambian Gwembe Tonga. He reports that their changes of religious affiliation “can hardly be called conversions in the usual sense of the term - namely, a profound and systematic change in one's understanding of the ultimate conditions of existence” (Kirsch, 2004, p.707). Kirsch prefers to use the term ‘alteration’ instead of ‘conversion’. Alterations are “transitions to identities which are... permitted within the person's established universes of discourse” (Travisano, cited in Kirsch, 2004, p.707). An interviewee used some terms that depict conversion as a transition towards another available religious identity:

I decided to **‘leave behind’** (ทิ้ง) everything old, and to believe in Catholicism. [...] I got the Baptism in Year 6. I decided by myself to get it. My mum had told me many times to get baptised, but I refused. Because at that time I thought that I wasn’t old enough, that I

hadn't decided yet what to do. Because **'to transfer'** religion (ย้ายศาสนา) is not a good thing. And when I decide something, I never **'turn back'** (ย้อนกลับ), so I wanted to be sure to make the right choice.

[P Mali]

The 'transfer of religion' happens when the converts start to commit and adhere to a certain set of behaviours. Catechists described some BanCho parishioners as "people of great faith" (มีความเชื่อมาก). When I asked them how they knew about the 'level of faith' of a person, they replied saying that the said person never missed a mass, or that s/he did sing or pray very loudly during the mass:

Some of them [the old villagers] don't understand Thai, they don't understand the catechism. But they believe, you can see it from how they 'show it out' (การแสดงออก). We know that they have faith by looking at them: they come to church, they pray, they are very diligent about wanting to learn about Jesus.

[Khru Jan]

A behaviour-measured faith is in line with what Tooker (1992) says about the Akhas. She affirms that the concepts of 'belief' is not relevant for the cultural context of the Akhas, because belief presupposes interiorization. In the Akha village she analyses, the only evidence of upholding a religious belief is practice; conversion to Christianity does not entail a change of belief, but a change of habits and way of life. The emphasis on a behaviour-focused Catholicism in BanCho is perceived also through the catechism, which focuses on prescribing sets of behaviours to follow. In the weeks preceding Lent, the priests and the catechists emphasised greatly – through Sunday classes and sermons – the need to abide by the three Lent requirements: 1) to avoid meat on Fridays; 2) to donate to those in need; 3) to pray more. This 'Lent-behaviour set' was repeated over and over in all the villages where the priests went for the mass. These rules were firstly explained during the sermon by the priests. After the mass, the catechists would repeat these regulations in the language of the villagers. This is what happened in a Karen village during the Wednesday Ash mass. While the catechist was explaining the Lent-behaviour set, the villagers did indeed pay attention - an attention that was lacking throughout the entire mass. The catechist told me that the villagers were more interested in these rules than in the Gospel and the sermon.<sup>24</sup>

Behaviours and rules are very important to the parishioners because through these they express their religious affiliation. Since their belief in God does not change with conversion, they use behaviours to 'exteriorise' – "show out"<sup>25</sup> - their adherence and commitment to the new religion. By adhering to the Catholic religion, the parishioners 'leave behind' the fear in "chaotic, unpredictable power of beings which constitute part of the natural environment" (Cohen, 1991, p.130).

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<sup>24</sup> Observative notes, 28/02/2020.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Khru Jan.

**What was the main reason that made you get baptised?**

Because I thought it [Catholicism] was the best religion. Because if we compare it with the spirit religion (*satsana phi*), in the spirit religion we're constantly afraid of the spirits (*phi*). We have to do rites for them, we need to feed chickens and pigs. And if we can't do it, we'll get ill, we'll get all sorts of bad things, we'll be in hardship and in fear. But Catholicism is the religion of love, compassion, of confession (ไปน้กับาบ), of the holy sacraments, the eucharist. It's very good.

[P Mint]

The priests describe conversion as a liberation: liberation from the fear of the spirits and from the economic burden required by animistic sacrifices. Through conversion the villagers can become the 'protagonists' of their life, without depending on the spirits' unpredictable power.<sup>26</sup> However, the attitudes that the villagers had towards their 'old religion' are passed on to their Catholicism. Thus, rituals – with behaviour sets – are still at the core of BanCho Catholicism.

**4) A ritualistic Christianity and the role of the priest**

The parishioners' approach to their previous animistic religion is passed on into Catholicism. Thus, it is necessary to analyse some features of their previous animistic religion,<sup>27</sup> the one my informants refer to as the 'old religion' (ศาสนาเดิม). Being the BanCho Parish a multi-ethnic Parish, there are various 'old religions': each Hill People ethnic group has its own specific rituals. However, my informants from different ethnic groups – along with the literature<sup>28</sup> – all identified a common feature for the 'old religions': the complexity of the rituals. These rituals include the rituals of feeding the spirits (เลี้ยงผี) and honouring the ancestors. They are performed either by a shaman (หมอคู่) or by the villagers themselves. The aim of the rituals is to “manipulate the spirit world into doing what the animist wants it to do, whether that be warding off evil or giving blessing” (Dahlfred, no date, p.7). One of my informants describes the rituals of the old religion as dangerous: “if you believe in spirits (นับถือผี) there are many steps that you have to follow. If you do something wrong, it can have many bad consequences, even deadly consequences”.<sup>29</sup> If the rituals are not performed in the right way, the person, the family or even the entire village is in danger. This description of animistic rituals resembles the *religio* of the pagan Romans, whose well-being depended on the people's “right worship of the gods [...] in the 'correct' way” (Francis, 2014, p.38). The rituals had to be performed

<sup>26</sup> Observative notes, 5/3/2020.

<sup>27</sup> The Parish of BanCho interacts mainly with animistic Hill People villages, rather than Buddhist Northern Thai or Buddhist Isan ones. Thus, the majority of the parishioners have an animistic background. As a consequence, during the interviews the animistic background of the parishioners was discussed more than the Buddhist one.

<sup>28</sup> Regarding the Hmong religious tradition see Tapp (1989), Watt (2008) and the film *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America* by Siegel (1985); Tooker (1992) for the Akha; Walker (1970; 2010) for the Lahu; and Platz (2003) for the Karen.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with P Mali.

without any error in order to obtain the protection of the gods. This is why the *religio* was pragmatic: “it did not provoke much theological speculation. The rites, if duly conducted, guaranteed the security of the state and the family” (Francis, 2014, p.39). Dahlfred attributes to animism the characteristic of being pragmatic as well: it does not require an internal or ethical change, but it relies on rituals to obtain what is wanted. Mulder (2000, p.31) refers to the relationship between the Thai worshipper and the ‘sacred forces’ as a “businesslike” dealing, a “mechanical” transition through which the worshipper obtains what s/he needs.

This enculturated animistic utilitarian use of rites remains even when BanCho people convert to Catholicism: the mass and the blessings become the core of religion. I understood this only after an interchange of jokes between Don Paolo and the Karen catechist. During the fieldwork, I attended about fifteen masses. The masses celebrated in most of the villages are noisy and distracting, with people chatting throughout the mass and children running around. In the Hill Peoples’ villages, the masses are celebrated in Thai by the priests. However, the Gospel is read by the catechist in the local language, so are the prayers, the songs and the responses to the priests during the Mass. I was surprised by the fact that the sermon – done in Thai by the priest – is rarely translated by the catechist. After a mass in a Karen village, I asked the Karen catechist why he did not translate the sermon. He replied that the villagers are not interested in the sermon or learning about the catechism: “villagers are interested in going to church for the rites (พิธีกรรม). They feel contented (สบายใจ) just because they join the mass”. Don Paolo teased the catechist, saying that he was too lazy to translate the sermon. The catechist laughed and replied: “whatever you [Father] would say to them [the villagers], you will be unable to ‘reach’ the villagers through words (พอพูดอย่างไรยังพูดไม่ถึงชาวบ้าน)”.<sup>30</sup> At this point, the less theologically speculative approach of the BanCho parishioners has already been discussed. However, the explanation of the Karen catechist and his reply to the priest’s joke introduce another feature of BanCho Catholicism: the importance of rituals or the importance of “ritual correctness” - as Mulder (2000, p.104) calls it in regard to Thai Buddhism.

The feelings that the parishioners attribute to the mass are ‘contentedness’ (สบายใจ) and happiness (ความสุขใจ). They associate with the mass an ‘automatic protection’ deriving from God’s blessings and holiness.

I only ask to be able to go to church, in this way I’m already happy (มีความสุขใจแล้ว).

Because I can go and see God, so I’m very happy after every mass. I’m close to God. I’d feel distant from God if I do not go to church often. I’d feel very bad (แย่ ๆ). Bad things would happen in my life. Sometimes I’d feel stuck in here or in there (ติดขัด). Whatever I do, it wouldn’t go smoothly (ราบรื่น), I’d have many problems. But if I go to the mass every day, everything goes smoothly.

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<sup>30</sup> Observative notes, 28/02/2020.

[P Mali]

**What do you tell the villagers when they ask you why they have to go to church?**

To thank God, to ask for blessing from God (ขอพรพระ). It's like a car, you need to add fuel to it.

[Pa Nee]

**What is the most important part of the Mass for the villagers?**

They know that the mass is important. But deeply down, they don't understand. They know they have to come, they know that it's sacred (ต้องอยู่ ต้องศักดิ์สิทธิ์).

**Why do you think it's sacred?**

Because what we do comes from Jesus. It's not something we claim by ourselves (ข้ออ้าง), but it relies on God. The father preaches and everything else that he does is about God. Therefore, all the activities we do are sacred (งานศักดิ์สิทธิ์). That's what they believe.

**Why do we need sacredness?**

Because we humans are weak (อ่อนแอ). We want to receive something valuable (สิ่งที่คุณค่า) that will come to protect us, help us. It might be for me, or for other people around me. To protect, to take care of us. And this comes from God, who is sacred.

[Khru Maen]

The simile of petrol made by Pa Nee is curiously the same made by Doss (2015, p.108) when he says: “when an animist practitioner is paid, the remedy or intervention simply ‘must work’ because of its power - like gasoline”. Thus, we can see how the BanCho parishioners apply the same expectation of consequent results or “mechanical manipulation” to the mass. The sacredness of God is transmitted to the participants through the ritual, affecting their lives in a positive way. Khru Jan told me that the BanCho parishioners chat among themselves during the mass because they were used to have a passive role when the shaman performed animistic rituals.<sup>31</sup> In the animistic rituals, it is the shaman who has mainly the duty to conduct the rites correctly. In the BanCho Catholicism, it is the priest who has this duty. The need for “correct form and presentation” (Dahlfred, no date, p.11) of the Catholic rituals derives from the animistic background of the parishioners. In fact, Mulder (2000, p.28) affirms that the ‘sacred forces’ “respond to presentation, such as right ceremony, proper words, appropriate movements and formulae. [...] By knowing the proper method, such as the use of rituals, ceremonies, or incantations, these potencies can be induced to work for the needs of the human supplicants”. For the BanCho parishioners, the rightly performed mass and blessings are a

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<sup>31</sup> Observative Notes, 21/03/2020.

means to induce the intervention and protection of God. As the last extract above says, the parishioners just have to attend the mass celebrated by the priests for the sacredness to ‘descend’ on them.

The missionaries are aware of this:

In the last few years, we [in the West] have emphasised more on relationships, on thoughts, on sermons, not on the ritual itself.<sup>32</sup> But here [in BanCho], people are not interested in the sermon. It’s not the most important part of the mass. For them what matters is the ritual itself, the fact that there is a priest there, performing a ritual which is a propitiation for them, bringing them benefit. In the West we have lost this perception of rituals. Blessings are also very important [here]. For example, people come to me and say: ‘I slept very badly last night, I had weird dreams. Can you bless me please?’. In the West it doesn’t happen.  
[Don Paolo]

I saw the priests bless a house and several rosaries. During these rituals, the parishioners were eager to ‘suck in’ all the sacredness, by kneeling in silence in front of the priests. One of my informants always keeps her rosary in her pocket when she drives the motorcycle: “I put the rosary in my pocket: God is with me, so nothing matters, it’s not dangerous anymore”.<sup>33</sup> The attitudes towards rosaries is similar to the one Thai Buddhists have towards amulets (Taylor, 2015): they are sacred objects, filled with protective sacredness that aims at driving away evil forces. Don Paolo also explained how blessings are very important for conversion: the villagers who want to be baptised ask the priests to bless their house, their fields and the instruments used to sacrifice animals to the spirits. With these blessings, the priest aims at driving away the fear of spirits, allowing the villagers to live as “protagonists” their lives in the love of God.<sup>34</sup> The sacredness and protection of God can be ‘dispensed’ by the priests through rituals and blessings; just as the monks are “mediators of blessing, sacred power and auspiciousness” (Mulder, 2000, p.100). Thus, the role of the priest as ‘performer of rituals’ is essential. The Catholic priest, like the shamans or the Buddhist monks, mediates the supra-natural power. As Mulder (2000, p.31) says: “power is there to supplicate and to grasp. In this way of

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<sup>32</sup> Don Paolo here affirms that recently in the West there has been more emphasis on the sermons than on rituals. However, he does not believe in a completely thought-based approach to religion. In a conversation we had before this interview, he told me that men need rituals and mystery in religion to ‘leap’ towards the transcendental (*‘slanciarsi verso la trascendenza’*). He affirmed that the “finite nature” of men needs rituals as a way to feel close to the infinite God. This is in line with what Meyer and Verrips (2008, p.25) affirm: the aesthetics of rituals is an essential mediation in religion “for achieving a linkage between people and the realm of the invisible”. Meyer (2011) calls this mediation a “sensational form”. The sensational forms are “relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between believers in the context of particular religious regimes” (Meyer and Verrips, 2008, p.27). In this mediation, the ‘forms’ are “a necessary condition without which ‘content’ cannot be conveyed” (Meyer, 2011, p.29). Thus, the ‘forms’ of rituals are necessary to convey the religious ‘content’. Meyer affirms that disregarding the ‘form’ to favour the ‘content’ reproduces “a problematic, Protestant understanding of religion that dismisses form as an ‘outward’ matter, and privileges content and ‘inward’ belief instead” (Meyer, 2011, p.30). Thus, rituals as ‘sensational forms’ also play an important role in Don Paolo’s Catholicism, enhancing the ‘leap’ towards God. However, the correct forms of rituals do not entail – for Don Paolo - an automatic response by God. For Don Paolo, the forms of rituals simply “enchant human experience” (Morgan, 2014, p.40).

<sup>33</sup> Interview with P Mali.

<sup>34</sup> Observative notes, 5/3/2020.



thinking, man becomes a force in proportion to his ability to harness power”. Khru Maen depicts the position of the priest in the mass:

**Why do people go to Church?**

Some people will come to church so that the spirits (*phi*) will not disturb them anymore.

**Are the people interested in the sermon of the priests then?**

It's not that they are not interested. [...]. They simply don't understand. They only understand that the father is a sacred person (ผู้ศักดิ์สิทธิ์). And Catholics must have trust in the father. They have to pay respect to him.

[Khru Maen]

The fact that the villagers highly value blessings and rites positions the priest - as a performer and holy man - in a higher, respected position. The priest is able to mediate the power and love of God, making the parishioners feel protected through the performance of rituals. Don Paolo referred to the respect bestowed to him by the parishioners as the “respect toward the priest as a sacred man (*il rispetto del prete come uomo sacro*)”.<sup>35</sup>

This chapter analysed how the Catholic faith inculturates in BanCho, departing from the enculturated worldview of the locals. As Fleming (2014, p.158) says, “Christian inculturation always involves a reassessment of its relationship to Thai religiosity, which has been indelibly shaped by Buddhism”. In the case of BanCho, the local religiosity is mainly related to the animistic religious practices of the Hill Peoples. Thus, the resulting Catholicism reflects the enculturated animistic background of the converts. The data show that the BanCho Catholicism is deeply inculturated: it differs from the thought-elaborated Faith of the missionaries, preferring experiences and praxis over doctrine and theological speculations. The BanCho Catholicism departs from a perception of religion which is not based on belief, but on knowledge of God. In fact, God is located in the ‘organic cosmos’ and often intervenes in the parishioners’ lives. This organic cosmos is crowded, with *phi* living along with God. The only aspect of the BanCho Catholicism that the priests criticise is the non-exclusivity reserved to God by some parishioners. For the remaining aspects, the priests are aware of their own enculturated conceptualisation of Catholicism, and refrain from imposing it on the local parishioners. The presence of local catechists also helps in shaping a locally informed Catholicism: from the extracts it can be seen that the catechists understand the local religious needs and worldview. The catechists know about the need to emphasise on behaviours, providing a ‘path’ for the parishioners to follow. The priests are used to people not paying attention to their sermons, they usually make them short. The catechism is centred around the concept of love: God is the loving father, in contrast with the unpredictable animistic spirits. One of the priests summarised how catechism should be done in BanCho: “here is what I

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Don Paolo.

say to people: God loves us and he's our dad (*papà*)”.<sup>36</sup> Catholicism becomes the religion that drives away the fear of spirits. Moreover, through a pragmatic perception of blessings and rituals, the parishioners feel contented and ‘filled up’ with holiness after the mass. The priest – as performer of ritual – enjoys the respected role of ‘holy man’. Thus, the findings in this chapter agrees with Fleming (2014, p.170): “Christians have not so much Christianised the local animistic culture as have been the subject of indigenisation themselves”.

Although the missionaries have showed an excultured and accepting attitudes towards the creation of a BanCho-enculturated Catholic religiosity, they have more than once condemned what Bolotta (2019) calls the ‘Thaified’ Catholicism of the Thai Catholic Church. Thus, the next chapter analyses how the missionaries criticise three main aspects of ‘Thainess’ permeating the Thai Catholic Church.

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<sup>36</sup> Observative notes, 05/03/2020.

## Chapter 4: A missionary critique of the honour-shame culture permeating the Thai Catholic Church

This chapter aims at analysing the critiques made by the missionaries regarding three specific aspects of Thai national culture – ‘Thainess’ - which permeate the Thai Catholic Church. In order to better understand these critiques, the chapter first discusses how these critiques must be seen as belonging to the wider cultural conflict between an honour-shame culture (Thailand) and innocence-guilt one (Italy). Secondly, the chapter focuses on three main critiques brought forward by the missionaries: 1) the Thai ‘sense of God’ as a higher and ‘royal’ entity; 2) the superiority of Thai priesthood as a caste with ‘holy prestige’; 3) the ‘wall of indirectness’ that aims at saving one’s ‘face’.

The first chapter discussed the need for the Gospel to be counter-cultural. Only by being counter-cultural, the Gospel is able to change a society’s unjust systems and transform that society into the Kingdom of God (Dotolo, 2011; Mattam, 2002; Cuturi, 2004). Following this line of argument, the Gospel in Thailand should speak of/for the minority and oppressed cultures, becoming an instrument of/for liberation and justice. Thus, inculturation should aim at making the Gospel an instrument for societal change. However, during the interview Don Franco reflected on how the Thai Catholic Church embraces some aspects of Thai society that he perceives as ‘sinful’:

Inculturation, for me, it’s not *inculturation*. Because inculturation – I mean the Gospel – must change the culture as well. [...] Your relationship with God cannot be set on the criteria of another religion. Culture, which is permeated by that different religion, cannot condition the new religion. That’s why it was difficult for us – missionaries and priests – to say things. It’d be necessary for the [Thai] Church to change and take a decisive stand. If we continue doing things because of a social conditioning, then we adapt to the world. We are *of* the world, we are not simply in the world. But in Thailand the social conditioning is very strong, even the bishops who should guide the change... they don’t, they just adapt.  
[Don Franco]

The missionary argues that the local culture should not condition how one perceives and relates to God. Don Franco perceives this conditioning and the resulting adaptation as a ‘sin’: the Thai Church is ‘worldly’ (of the world), not just in it. In the eyes of the missionary, the Thai Church should reject the ‘sinful’ cultural aspects of Thai society. By not being of the world, the Church would embrace empowering and counter-cultural stances. Bosch (1991, p.386) lays down nicely this concept: “the church can be missionary only if its being-in-the-world is, at the same time, a being-different-from-the-world”. This chapter illustrates which aspects of the Thai Catholic Church make it “of the (Thai) world” - according to the missionaries. Don Franco uses the phrase “of the (Thai) world” to criticise the Thai Catholic Church; Bolotta (2019) refers to it as “‘Thaified’ Catholicism”. Before analysing the specific critiques, it is useful to understand how the Thai stratified hierarchical system works, and how the missionaries perceive it.

### **‘Facework’ and honour in Thai society**

One morning I was having breakfast with the missionaries. I was using a new (Thai) mug. Out of the blue, Don Franco said: “These things can only happen in Thailand”. Don Paolo looked as puzzled as I was, so I asked for an explanation. Don Franco made us notice that the logo on my mug was printed facing outwards, to make other people notice it – if the mug was held by someone right-handed. In Italy, the logo is printed on the other side of the cup, so that it is the drinker who sees it. “Everything you do, here in Thailand, is a display for others to see you” Don Franco said.<sup>37</sup> The missionary was using my tea mug as an example to demonstrate the ‘quest for face’ of the Thai people. The term ‘face’ refers to one’s social identity, that is how one presents himself to society and is perceived by society. Intachakra (2012, p.620) concisely explains that ‘face’ is a public self-image “that everyone wants for both himself and the chosen other(s), and expects the latter to share the same want”. Although the mug was probably just a mug, it is interesting to see how the missionary perceives this ‘face-quest’ as permeating every aspect of Thai daily life and – thus – ‘Thainess’.

‘Face’ is a fundamental brick for the construction of Thai society’s hierarchical pyramid (Mulder, 2000). Thai society is described by Aulino (2017, p.417) as a “social body”, that is “an actual living organism of which everyone is a part”. The social body is healthy and functions only if all the parts work in a harmonious and integrated way. ‘Face’ does help society to work as one body: harmony is achieved by maintaining and enhancing one’s own and other people’s ‘faces’ (Bilmes, 2001). This counter-balancing of ‘face-want’ helps the stability and harmony of the social hierarchy: “Thai face produced communication strategies that involved indirectness, a complicated series of linguistic honorifics, and general sensitivity to refrain from giving offense to others” (Flanders, 2011, no pagination). The respect towards someone else’s ‘face’ entails the recognition of that person in a specific position of the social hierarchy. The more ‘face’ one has, the more respect and honour he receives. The more honour one receives, the higher he is positioned in the social hierarchy. A common way for Thai people to display their power and enhance their social identity – i.e. do ‘facework’ – is to make merits and to document their charitable acts through social media (Georges, 2017). The missionaries perceive the ‘face-quest’ as a non-Catholic value:

#### **What in your Catholic teachings is against the local culture?**

That people always must be photographed when they do something. The right hand must know what the left hand does, and the left hand must know what the foot does. Everyone must know everything, because it must be publicly recognised that you are good. To recognise the ability and skills of someone is a social aspect, in order to gain social acknowledgment (*riconoscimento sociale*). This is good but only to a certain extent. But it doesn’t have to be the main thing, otherwise there is not the concept of doing charity work for *amore Dei*, for the love of God. On these things there is a cultural conflict with Thai

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<sup>37</sup> Observative Notes, 03/03/2020.

culture.

[Don Franco]

In Italian, the term ‘*amore Dei*’ derives from the Latin expression ‘*gratis et amore Dei*’, which means to do something for free, without expecting anything in return, as an act of genuine altruism (Treccani, 2020). This is in contrast with the intention of doing good to gain social acknowledgement - ‘face’ and honour. Georges and Baker (2016) identify this cultural conflict between public acknowledgement and altruism as a conflict between honour-shame and innocence-guilt cultures. Georges and Baker (2016) describe as honour-shame cultures those societies in which people’s honour is awarded (or denied) by society. Thus, people in honour-shame cultures would need society to decide whether their actions are good or not: “acceptable behaviour is defined by ideals from the community. You must be the person others expect you to be” (Georges and Baker, 2016, p.36). Those actions that are acknowledged as good will bring honour and ‘face-gain’ to the doer; ill actions will bring shame and ‘face-loss’. In contrast, in innocence-guilt cultures people decide to act according to the rules or laws, which are internalised into a person’s conscience. Thus, people in innocence-guilt cultures know the goodness of their actions even when society might condemn them and, vice versa, “guilt needs no audience because it results from breaking an internalized code” (Georges and Baker, 2016, p.37). During the interviews, P Bum expressed the sense of publicly acknowledged goodness. He talked about how the Centre helps the ‘kids’ to know the “value of their life” (คุณค่าของชีวิต). I wanted to know what he meant with the expression ‘value of life’.

**What do you mean with ‘value of life’?**

To feel that I have value (เรารู้สึกว่าเรามีคุณค่า) I have to do what is right, what is good. I have to let other people see that I did good, so that I will see my value in their eyes (เราจะเห็นคุณค่าในสายตาของคนอื่น). If we don’t do good, we don’t make our life valuable for others (ไม่ได้ทำให้ชีวิตของเรามีคุณค่าเพื่อคนอื่น).

[P Bum]

Although P Bum did not use the word ‘honour’, his concept of ‘value’ could be translated as ‘honour’, since “honour is essentially when other people think highly of you and want to be associated with you” (Georges and Baker, 2016, p.40). What P Bum expresses is a deeply relational understanding of goodness, which needs the acknowledgment of an external entity. Don Franco would be likely to say that this goodness is not ‘gratuitous good’, but good made for ‘face-gain’. Is a ‘face-gaining’ good still good? Aulino (2017) would argue that the ‘face-gaining’ good is not an individualistic strategy, but a means to enhance harmony and peace in the “social body”. Moreover, it is not an ‘amoral goodness’, because “what is best for relationships and people is morally right; what shames is morally wrong” (Georges and Baker, 2016, p.37). Conversely, Persons (2016) and Mulder (2000) criticise ‘face-gaining’ good, seeing it merely as a way to ‘climb up’ the social pyramid. Persons (2016) describes attachment to ‘face’ as an amoral cultural

phenomenon, which goes against the Buddhist teaching of detachment from desires and affections. He affirms that culture has substituted religion in Thai society, so that there is not moral judge for ‘Thainess’: Thais “cling to salient cultural values as utterly sacred treasures, even when some of those values impugn the straightforward teachings of their most exalted moral teachers” (Persons, 2016, no pagination).

The aim of this thesis is not to defend nor to deny the morality of ‘face-gaining’ acts. The views presented above simply demonstrate that the critiques made by the missionaries are not new in the literature. These types of critiques are usually put forward by missionaries sent to honour-shame cultures from innocence-guilt ones. In fact, Flanders (2011) and Georges and Baker (2016) illustrate how Western theology has focused more on guilt and innocence rather than honour and shame. For example, the atonement formulations speak of releasing “our guilt-ridden souls” (Flanders, 2011, no pagination). Nevertheless, the Bible is not a ‘face’- and honour-free book: “the motif about face runs through the Bible” (Georges, 2017, p.7), so does the motif of honour. An example cited by Todd (2014) and Flanders (2011) is the term ‘*makarios*’ of the Beatitudes of Matthew. The term is usually translated in English as ‘happy’ or ‘blessed’. However, the original meaning is “the conditions and behaviours which the community regards as honourable” (Hanson, cited in Flanders, 2011, no pagination). The translation of ‘*makarios*’ in the Thai Bible reflects the Western enculturated innocence-guilt bias (Todd, 2014). The preference for innocence-guilt theology prevents the creation of a Thai inculturated theology that emphasises the honour-shame cultural matrix of Thai society. Moreover, the innocence-guilt bias enculturated into the missionaries generates misunderstandings with the cultural context of honour-shame cultures. The aim of the rest of the Chapter is to analyse three of these misunderstandings, as presented by the missionaries in BanCho.

### **The missionary’s critique to ‘face’ and honour in the Thai Catholic Church**

During participant observation and the interviews, I asked my informants about their relationships: with God, with the missionaries, with the employees or with the pupils hosted in the Centre. This section analyses how these relationships are perceived in the eyes of the missionaries (coming from an innocence-guilt culture) and the parishioners (from an honour-shame one). The critiques made by the missionaries are in regard to three of the aspects identified by Georges and Baker (2016) as characteristic of honour-shame cultures: 1) the patron-client relationships; 2) the importance of social roles; 3) the indirect communication. These three aspects are manifestations of honour-shame cultures: they aim at maintaining harmony in the “social body”. However, they go against some of the missionaries’ enculturated principles. I illustrate how the missionaries criticise these three characteristics as they see them embraced by the Thai Catholic Church.

#### **1) The ‘Divine Patronage’ of a Royal Dad**

I still remember the first time I attended a Thai mass. I had been learning Thai for two years and I could understand most of the daily conversations. However, the mass shattered my confidence: I could understand the sermon done by an Italian missionary in Thai, but the rest of the mass was a sequence of

mysterious words and readings. I wish I could say that now I do understand everything that is said during the mass. The language used in the Bible and in the mass is a mixture of High language and Thai Royal Language. Doty (2007, p.173) uses the term ‘High Language’ to refer to the language “used when dealing with government officials, giving speeches, writing documents”. The Royal Language is used to relate to royalty and other “elevated groups, such as priests or noblemen, or even divine and sacred beings such as deities” (Moshe Ami, 2001, p.27).<sup>38</sup> Todd (2014, no pagination) refers to the Thai Christian language as ‘Christianese’, since it is a language with specialised vocabulary which is not used outside the Church. Doty (2007) identifies two reasons behind the complex language used in the Church. The first reason is the emulation of Buddhist language. Doty (2007) explains how the Buddhist language derives mainly from Pali and it is a specialised language that the majority of laymen – and even monks – do not understand. Thus, the language of Christianity must meet the Thai expectation for a religious language being “sacred, special, and incomprehensible” (Doty, 2007, p.210). The second reason for using a complex language is the need to honour God as men’s superior: ‘Christianese’ is used to enhance God’s social status. This is how one of my informants reasoned about the use of Royal Language in the Mass:

**Why is the mass in the Royal Language?**

Because God is someone high, so we need to use the Royal Language. Like with the King. As if I am a person that is humble/inferior (ต่ำต้อย). I am a normal person talking with someone with a high honour/prestige/rank (ยศ). Even Jesus, he’s still God. [...] It’s like conferring respect, praising someone (ให้เกียรติ ยกย่อง). When you pray individually it’s different, because it’s like being alone with your dad (พ่อ). But when in public it’s with everyone else.

[P Jaet]

P Jaet would agree with this quote from Seely (1957, p.52): “The use of high language is a recognition of rank”. The relationship between man and God is an unequal relationship, in which the ‘inferior’ man has to bestow honour to God in front of the others. The honorific speech of High and Royal Languages is a subtle but powerful instrument to enhance ‘face’ and honour (Persons, 2016). The use of honorifics is necessary while there is an audience, so that God can ‘gain face’ in the eyes of a third party. When the faithful is alone with God, s/he uses a less formal language. P Jaet in his solitary prayers calls himself ‘son’

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<sup>38</sup> The Royal Thai Language is a register of Thai Language which is mainly used to talk to/about the royal family and monks. Even within the royal family, there are different terms for the same concept in order to differentiate one’s rank in the family. The Royal Language reflects the hierarchical stratification of Thai society, in which the King is at the apex. For example, the formal way in which ‘commoners’ should address in writing the King or the Queen is: “ขอเดชะฝ่าละอองธุลีพระบาทปกเกล้าปกกระหม่อม”, which *Thai-Language.com* (2020a) translates as: “May it please Your Majesty's feet's dust covering (protecting, guarding over) my sinciput”. The personal pronoun to address the King and the Queen is “ใต้ฝ่าละอองธุลีพระบาท” (literally: “the dust under Your Majesty's feet's soles”), because the ‘commoner’, prostrated in front of the King, was only able to see the dust under his soles and was not allowed to look into the King’s eyes (Prayom Songtong, 2017).

(ลูก) instead of the formal first-person personal pronoun used in the mass (ข้าพเจ้า). A Lahu convert said that she talks to God in Lahu Language when she is on her own:

Because when I use the official language, the official prayers, I think that it's not natural (ไม่เป็นธรรมชาติ). I don't feel like we [God and I] are relating to each other closely (ไม่ได้เชื่อมสัมพันธ์).

[P Kaew]

However, the 'public' prayers must contain honorifics. The lack of honorifics or the use of a more common or colloquial register would "degrade the sense of God".<sup>39</sup> This is how Don Franco criticised the use of Royal Language, seeing it as an adaptation of the Thai Church to the 'worldly' elements of 'Thainess':

Why is the Gospel translated in the High Language of the King? Why is 'hand' not just a 'hand', but 'the King's hand'? Why can't you say 'to walk' (เดิน) but you have to use the Royal term (เสด็จ)? Why do you have to say the royal word for God (ข้าแต่พระเจ้า)? Why can't you just say 'father' (บิดา)?<sup>40</sup> Jesus taught us to say 'Father' (*Padre*), you talk informally to Jesus (*dai del tu a Gesù*). But here in Thailand you can't. [...] The Thai culture decides how you must call your God. Because otherwise it is not a God. It's a nonsense. When you call God with a high name you do it to make other people - who don't know him - know that your God is a high God. But at the same time, the others' culture (which is also yours) doesn't allow you to call your God with the term 'Father'. You're conditioned. For fear that the others will say that your God is inferior to their God, you call your God with the name that others want you to use. You adapt, you don't tell them that your God is different.

[Don Franco]

Don Franco affirms that 'face' – "fear that the others will say that your God is inferior to their God" - determines how Thais depict God. I do not know if this is true. However, what I can do is to draw a simile

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Don Franco.

<sup>40</sup> The term that the missionary used in Thai to say 'father' is a formal one (บิดา), not the common term 'dad' (พ่อ) which P Jaet used above. Don Franco was probably translating the term from Italian: in Italy people address God as 'Father' (*Padre*, บิดา), rather than 'Dad' (*Papà*, พ่อ). Thus, the way Italians refer to God is still formal. Pope Francis has more than once encouraged people to conceptualise God as 'Dad' rather than 'Father', affirming that this would bring more intimacy and love into the relationship (Cernuzio, 2019; Redazione Internet Avvenire, 2018). During his sermons in Thai, Don Franco never used the Thai word 'dad' for God, but he used the more formal 'father'. I heard both the missionaries describe God as 'dad' in more informal occasions, such as casual conversations with the parishioners or during the catechism. They rarely use Royal Thai terms in their sermons, limiting them to verbs such as 'going' or 'saying'. On the contrary, I once joined an online mass from another Italian missionary working in Bangkok, and he frequently used Royal Thai terms. The same happened when a Thai priest celebrated the mass in BanCho. Future research should look into how Thai Catholics conceptualise God through language.



between the depiction of the King of Thailand and God: they are both seen as loving and protective ‘dads’, to whom ‘children’ owe respect – also through Royal Language - and obedience. Petervich (2012) affirms that the Thais conceptualise God as a King, and they relate to him as if he were the King. I would be more specific: the use of Royal Thai Language shows – and probably facilitates - a conceptualisation of God as the prototype of the ‘good Thai King’. In Thailand, the image of the ‘good Thai King’ has been recently associated with the late King of Thailand, Rama IX (r.1946-2016). The ‘good Thai King’ “is represented as a father of the people, as one who takes their problems to heart. His wisdom and kindness offer relief from misery and natural adversity. Such as it is reiterated of all kings, this places the history-less and face-less commoners in a dependent relationship of gratefulness and obligation” (Mulder, 2000, p.111). Thus, a relationship of patronage<sup>41</sup> is established between the King (the patron) and ‘his’ children (the clients). At the apex of the hierarchical structure, the King is the Patron and Father of the nation.

However, the term ‘father’ does not represent how the king is conceptualised: Rama IX was called the “dad of the (Thai) nation” (พ่อแห่งชาติ). His birthday is still celebrated as Father’s Day (‘Dad’s Day’ in Thai) throughout Thailand. The term used – *pho* (พ่อ) – expresses “psychological closeness” (Iwasaki and Horie, 2000, p.531). At the same time, it shows a client-patron relationship, since the term ‘*pho*’ expresses an awareness of disparity in social rank: “this awareness creates the relationship of ‘deference/patronage’ that exists between socially unequal individuals. Such a relationship prescribes that the more powerful party acknowledges his responsibility to help and protect the less powerful (‘patronage’), and the less powerful in return shows his willingness to be guided (‘deference’)” (Iwasaki and Horie, 2000, p.531).<sup>42</sup> The King of Thailand is a loving dad, to whom deference is due because of his generosity and love. Moreover, Jackson (2009) explains how with Rama IX the discourse of the God-King (*deravaja*) was re-introduced into Thai history, after decades of crisis for the royal family. Rama IX became “enveloped by a symbolism and discourse of magico-divinity” (Jackson, 2009, p.361). The “divine aura” (Jackson, 2009, p.363) of Rama IX helps the conceptualisation of a King-God with supernatural powers.

A similar conceptualisation of King – as ‘divine, caring dad-patron’ - is applied to the Catholic God: he is a dad who provides ‘supernatural’ security and protection to his children. Thus, the children must be faithful and grateful clients, they must repay his protection through offers, loyalty and praises, i.e. ‘face’. None of the Thai informants reported fear of God in the interviews, but they depicted him as loving, forgiving and caring – in contrast with the feared spirits. The protection provided by God is embedded in a term that three of my interviewees used to refer to God: “refuge” (ที่พึ่ง).<sup>43</sup> This is the same term that Mulder

<sup>41</sup> Georges and Baker (2016, pp.51-52) describe patronage in collectivistic society as “a reciprocal relationship between two unequal parties. [...] The materially rich provide survival and security to clients in exchange for honour and prestige”.

<sup>42</sup> The term ‘*pho*’ is not only used to refer to the King or as a personal pronoun for God during individual prayers. It is also used as personal pronoun for Catholic priests. The missionaries in BanCho are both called ‘*pho*’ by the parishioners and even by the Buddhist employees. On Father’s Day, the missionaries are celebrated as ‘dads’ of the Parish and presented with a cake by the pupils hosted in the Centre.

<sup>43</sup> Interviews with Khru Jan, Khru Neung, Pa Nee.

(2000, p.61) uses for patrons. As the previous chapter analysed, the parishioners convert after experiencing a direct divine intervention into their life. After their conversion, they expect God to keep paying back their faithfulness, offers and gratitude. If God does not pay back their loyalty, the parishioners are likely to move away from Catholicism, looking for another patron. This is in line with what Fleming (2014, p.170) affirms: the concepts of God and Jesus in Thailand are shaped by the notions of Kingship and the patron-client order of society, God is “the one who rewards loyalty and obedience”. Thus, God and Jesus must be honoured by the use of Royal Thai, at least in public prayers. In private prayers, my informants use informal language, calling themselves ‘son’ like P Jaet. For Don Franco, God is a loving father who puts himself at the same level of humanity through Jesus. For my Thai informants, God is a loving and forgiving dad, and that is why he is in a higher position and must be honoured and praised by his child-clients.

## 2) The importance of social roles

Another characteristic of honour-shame cultures is the importance of social roles: “In an honour-shame culture, every person has a proper role. People maintain honour by behaving according to that role” (Georges and Baker, 2016, p.57). Thus, behaving according to one’s social role determines the amount of one’s honour. This honour can be lost if the person does not follow the “unwritten rules of behaviour” (Terwiel, 1984, p.27) regulating social behaviour. Taylor (1995) and Honneth (1995) argue that in pre-modern Europe the concept of honour was also related to one’s social class: the nobility – as born in a higher social class – had ‘innate’ honour. However, the bourgeoisie started to doubt the concept of honour as predetermined by social class. The concept of honour was gradually substituted by the concept of dignity, which was – theoretically – applied in an egalitarian and universalist way. Taylor (1995) notices how the concept of dignity is in line with a democratic society which wants to avoid the existence of first-class and second-class citizens. It is this enculturated bias – defined by Flanders (2011, no pagination) as “Western egalitarian impulse” – which drives the missionaries’ critiques:

It’s as if there were a caste system. The centre of the system is Bangkok. When people see a priest, a white garment, they all kneel. I’m a priest. I certainly have the role of guiding others. But not like this... So the difficulty at the beginning was to transit from our role of spiritual guide - as a guide among others, as a person among his equals - to the role of guide separated from his equals. Even the bishop eats on his own. The authority in Thailand is lonely. [...] You’ll never have friends. Even now, I’ve been here for twenty years. I don’t have friends. I have people who are bonded to me, but friendship as we intend it it’s really hard. Because if you’re friend with them, you put yourself on their same level. [...] If you lower yourself too much, you’ll lose your freedom. They’ll take advantage of you. There is not friendship as service for the other. Even the authority here it’s not authority for serving the other. Authority is authority as power (*comando*). Unfortunately, in the Thai pyramidal culture the value is to be higher than anyone else. [...] And the fear of the Thai priests and bishops is to lose their prestige (*autorevolezza*)

and their authority.

[Don Franco]

From the extract above, it can be seen how the missionary criticises the stratification of Thai social classes - the value of “being higher than anyone else” – and the necessity to stick to one’s social-class related behaviour. The priests – just by being priests – are given special treatments. However, if their behaviour is not in line with the social norms, they can lose their prestige and authority. Throughout the years, the missionaries have tried to change the behavioural expectations of the parishioners:

At the beginning, when we went to the villages for the mass, they [the villagers] wanted us to sit on a higher position. Now, they got used to us sitting on a lower position. They know who we are even if we sit low, because we’re missionaries. But if it’s them, the Thai priests, they keep sitting high. And if you ask them why, they tell you that this is culture. [They tell you that] they, the priests, have the right to sit here, high up. While the people have the right to sit low.

[Don Franco]

The right of ‘sitting high’ derives from the priests’ social position. The missionaries, with their ‘egalitarian impulse’, reject the “unique treatment based on someone’s rank” (Georges and Baker, 2016, p.58). In the missionaries’ words, the local Thai priests accept the special treatment. Both the missionaries lived in Bangkok for a couple of years before moving to the North. While being in Bangkok, they worked and lived with Thai priests. Both the missionaries condemn the behaviours of the Thai priests in Bangkok, who accept gifts and special treatment from the rich, ex-Buddhist converts.

We [priests in Thailand] are compared to the monks. Here [in BanCho] they are used to us as down-to-earth (*alla buona*), as coming from a country where we are more down-to-earth (*alla mano*), more *social*, not... *thue-tua* (conceited, ถือตัว). On the other hand, the Thai priests play along: they like to be honoured, they are a caste that receives *tham bun* (merits, ทำบุญ) from ex-Buddhists – not the Karen priests though.

[Don Paolo]

The term *thue-tua* (conceited) has been used by three informants to refer to Thai priests.<sup>44</sup> The Thai term for ‘being conceited’ is a compound word, it literally means “to uphold oneself in high regards”. Persons (2016, no pagination) defines *thue-tua* as “acting aloof or priggish, [...] acting as you are better than others”. A translation of the Thai definition of conceited is “to consider oneself without accepting to be de-classed because of one’s own greatness in prestige or status” (ไว้ตัวไม่ยอมลดตัวเพราะหิ่งในศักดิ์หรือฐานะของตน เป็นต้น) (Thai-Language.com, 2020c). It is worth noting that in the Thai definition, the word used for prestige

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<sup>44</sup> Interviews with P Mint, P Bum, Don Paolo.

(ศักดิ์) can mean authority, honour, status, prestige. It is also used to compose the word sacred or holy (ศักดิ์สิทธิ์). Thus, if I was to give my own translation for the word conceited as used by my informants, I would use the expression ‘to uphold one’s holy prestige’. The Thai priests – according to my informants – tend to see themselves as possessing superior holy status, which gives them the right to receive special treatment and to be on a superior hierarchical level to laymen. Bolotta (2018, p.148) also analyses the laymen-clergy relationship in a similar way: he refers to the differences between Thai clergy and laymen as a “difference in socio-moral status”. He sees the clergy-laymen relationship as the reproduction of the relationship between Buddhist monks and laymen – as Don Paolo said.

However, both my informants and Bolotta (2015; 2018) affirm that the priests who *thue-tua* are mainly the Thai priests in Bangkok. The attitude of priests belonging to ethnic minorities is similar to the missionaries’ down-to-earth attitude. This is probably due to the fact that the majority of the parishioners and priests in the North are poor and come from a non-Buddhist cultural background. During the fieldwork, the offers that the priests received from the parishioners were food – mainly fruit – grown by the parishioners themselves. The Thai Catholic Church in the North is a poor church, that relies on foreign missionaries to expand and bring economic resources. I interviewed a Thai Bishop during the fieldwork. He told me that the Thai priests in Bangkok do not want to leave the capital for the North. He said that they “don’t have enough missionary spirit yet (จิตตารมณ์ธรรมทูตยังไม่ถึง)”.<sup>45</sup> I wonder if the reluctance of the Thai priests to leave the rich parishioners in Bangkok is somehow related to how their role is perceived differently in the North.

Regardless of their ‘egalitarian effort’ to be seen as equal to the parishioners, the missionaries in BanCho are still honoured and respected because of their social role. Persons (2016, no pagination) notices how an anti-*thue-tua* behaviour may actually enhance even more respect and admiration: “this humble behaviour does nothing to dismantle the entrenched hierarchy. [...] In fact, it is precisely because their behaviour takes place in the context of confirmed power distance that they become so admired by those below them”. When asked about their relationship with the missionaries, the employees spoke highly of them. Among the various terms used to describe the missionaries, the terms ‘to sacrifice’ (เสียสละ),<sup>46</sup> ‘heartful care’ (เอาใจใส่),<sup>47</sup> ‘to help’ (ช่วยเหลือ),<sup>48</sup> ‘to honour others’ (ให้เกียรติ)<sup>49</sup> were all used. Thus, an anti-*thue-tua* and special treatment attitude may actually increase the social distance between the missionaries and the parishioners. The high respect of the parishioners towards the missionaries is also exemplified in a typical Thai behaviour: *kreng-jai* (เกรงใจ). The next section analyses this attitude towards the missionaries, showing how a virtue for honour-shame culture is perceived as a ‘wall’ by the missionaries.

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Pho John.

<sup>46</sup> Interviews with N Manaw and N Maprang, P Mint, P Bum.

<sup>47</sup> Interviews with Khru Neung, P Mint, P Kaew, Khru Jan.

<sup>48</sup> Interviews with Pho John, P Mint, P Mali, P Jaet, P Toy, Pa Aem, Khru Maen.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Khru Neung.

### 3) The ‘wall’ of indirect communication: *kreng-jai* (เกรงใจ)

The last characteristic of honour-shame cultures analysed here is the preference for indirect communication: “words are for the purpose of managing relationships and social identities, not presenting information. Harmony takes priority over ideas. Truth in communication is defined relationally, not logically” (Georges and Baker, 2016, p.53). Thus, indirect communication is a tool to maintain the stability and harmony of the “social body”. However, Flanders (2011, no pagination) affirms that indirectness goes against the “Western belief that the self is truly itself when allowed to engage in unfettered self-expression of the internal characteristics that constitute a putative true essence”. The Thai attitude that expresses indirectness is ‘*kreng-jai*’: ‘*kreng-jai*’ can be translated as “being reluctant to impose upon; being considerate of another’s feelings” (Thai-language.com, 2020b). Wyatt and Promkandorn (2012) illustrate how the literature provides 26 different definitions and conceptualisations of *kreng-jai*. Some of these definitions see *kreng-jai* as a positive, harmony-oriented attitude; others see it in the negative way expressed by Flanders (2011).

*Kreng-jai* started to be part of this research one evening. I was sitting in the living room with Don Paolo. A kid previously hosted in the Centre had just left, after having a chat with the missionary. Don Paolo had not seen him in months. It was only that evening that the missionary learnt that the kid had been in a bad car accident. He was shocked. When the kid left, Don Paolo told me: “You know, it’s like as if there is a wall between them and us”.<sup>50</sup> During a later interview, he identified this ‘wall’ as the result of the respectful attitude of the parishioners towards the clergy. He affirmed that the parishioners respect the priests as the Buddhists respect the monks. Their respect is shown also through a *kreng-jai* attitude:

#### **How do they express their respect towards you?**

With the Thai greeting. Also with the fact that they *kreng-jai* a bit. They show consideration (*si fanno riguardo*). It’s rare that they invite you over for dinner, for a festive occasion. It’s the opposite: they’re afraid to invite you. No one asks you to go for a ride together. There is a detachment (*distacco*). It’s a cultural aspect that is hard for us, because we’re not used to not have relationships of friendship with the people.

[Don Paolo]

Don Paolo does not judge the act of *kreng-jai* as a negative attitude. He is aware that it is a way to show respect and consideration towards his social role. However, he would prefer a more closed and ‘direct’ relationship with the parishioners, since in the eyes of innocence-guilt cultures, “there is a touch of distance in the feeling of *kreng jai*” (Cassaniti, 2015, p.114). The other missionary is more critical of *kreng-jai*. During the fieldwork, I taught English to an employee of the Centre after dinner. At the end of one lesson, we started talking about her boyfriend and how they met. The term *kreng-jai* came up, as she *kreng-jai*

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<sup>50</sup> Observative notes, 20/02/2020.

towards him: she did not want to act improperly around him. She told me that she had to speak politely to him in order to ‘give him honour’ (ให้เกียรติ). I wanted to hear what the missionaries thought about *kreng-jai*. Thus, after the lesson I went straight into the priests’ living room and asked them what they thought about *kreng-jai*. This is how I recorded Don Franco’s reply in my notes:

Don Franco translated (*khwam*)*kreng-jai* as ‘human respect’ (*rispetto umano*). But then he added that *kreng-jai* is not even that, because *kreng-jai* is more about losing ‘face’. “They [Thai people] don’t tell you or don’t act because they’re afraid of losing ‘face’ in front of others or yourself”. And he said that *kreng-jai* creates problem, because it can prevent one person from promptly communicating an issue to others, and thus it delays actions to help, until it is too late to intervene. He told me that every time someone tells him that he didn’t do something because of *kreng-jai*, he rebukes them that *kreng-jai* is not a Catholic principle. Because it is not about love, but it is about self-love (*amor proprio*). “You don’t tell something because you’re afraid of what will happen to you, what people will think of you. You are afraid of losing ‘face’”.

[Observative Notes, 2/3/2020]

The missionary translates ‘*kreng-jai*’ as “human respect”. A literal translation of “*rispetto umano*” would be “respect for the human being”. However, its actual meaning emphasises an ‘excess’ of respect, thus resembling *kreng-jai*: according to *Encyclopedia.com*, ‘human respect’ is “an excessive regard for the opinions or esteem of other men. [...] Concern for the opinion of others may lead one to act against moral principles and thus to do evil in order to gain the esteem of others”. The Italian dictionary *Internazionale* also affirms that ‘human respect’ can lead to a “non-free self-expression of one’s own beliefs and to the subordination to external social matters and worldly benefits”. These definitions do not see the aim of human respect as peace and stability, but they focus on the challenges to morality – i.e. not doing what is right because of social conditioning. Quinto (1985) explains how ‘*rispetto umano*’ derives from the Latin term ‘*timor humanus*’ or ‘*timor mundanus*’, which means ‘fear of man/world’. For a Thai, to *kreng-jai* is a quality, a virtue to be taught to children (Mulder, 2000; Intachakra, 2012). For an Italian, to show *rispetto umano* is a flaw, even a sin. To have human respect is a sin because the fear of man is predominant over the fear of the Lord (*timore di Dio*), leading the man to abandon or deny God (Quinto, 1985).

Don Franco sees *kreng-jai* as even worse than human respect: *kreng-jai* is not a mere subordination to social norms, but it is the sin of going against morality – and God - to preserve one’s own ‘face’ (“self-love”). Here there is an evident conflict between the perceptions of honour-shame cultures and innocence-guilt ones. As Bilmes (2001) analyses, the difference in perceptions derives from misinterpreting the aim of a *kreng-jai* attitude: for the Thais, *kreng-jai* aims at keeping the peace; for the missionaries, *kreng-jai* aims at preserving one’s own ‘face’, constituting an obstacle to morality, efficient communication and ‘unfiltered’ friendship.

Linked to the critique of *kreng-jai* there is also another critique by Don Franco. I explained how *kreng-jai* is depicted by the missionary as a ‘fear of man’ over the virtuous ‘fear of the Lord’. Don Franco affirms that the *kreng-jai* of the Catholic Thais prevents them from “sacrificing their lives” for their Faith:

The Thai Church is not a Church with a strong Faith. In times of difficulty it would not be able to bear witness with its death. Yes, there have been some martyrs in Thailand. But analysing closely the Catholic situation, the Catholics do live an experience of faith, but not as far as to feel that it is everything in their lives, and that it is worth to sacrifice their lives for Christ. If they would be in a difficult situation and would have to sacrifice their deities, they would sacrifice their deities. If they would be in a difficult situation and would have to choose between the King and Christ, they would look around them, at the people surrounding them, and then they would choose the King. Because culture dictates them their priorities.

[Don Franco]

The extract shows how the missionary criticises the lack in the Thai Catholic Church of ‘commitment to death’ for the Catholic faith. (Thai) Culture sets the social expectations on people’s behaviour: a *kreng-jai* attitude of submission is preferred to a disruptive and shaming fight. The Thai Catholics are more likely to sacrifice their faith, rather than taking a decisive anti-social body stance. Thus, it is unlikely – at least for this missionary – that the Gospel and the Catholic faith will soon become a counter-cultural instrument in Thailand: in a country where the majority of the population is Buddhist, a *kreng-jai* attitude results in the bending of the Catholics in order to fit into the larger (Buddhist) society.

In conclusion, this chapter casts some doubts about the feasibility of making the Gospel counter-cultural and – thus – ‘fully’ inculturated into ‘Thainess’. First of all, the missionaries still uphold an enculturated vision of the Gospel that belongs to innocence-guilt cultures. Thus, they tend to judge negatively ‘facework’ and honour. On the other hand, the Catholic relationships among the parishioners, priests and God do reflect the characteristics of ‘Thainess’ as an honour-shame culture. Georges and Baker (2016) and Flanders (2011) affirm that a theology of ‘face’ is possible and necessary for Thailand. However, the missionaries criticise the three characteristics of the ‘Thaified’ Catholic Church related to ‘face’. They affirm that these ‘face’ characteristics make the Thai Catholic Church “of the world”, thus ‘too Thai’: too concerned with ‘face’, honour and hierarchy; far from the egalitarian and humble Church that they support. Thus, this chapter illustrates how difficult it is to set the cultural matrix into which the Gospel must incarnate: can both the honour-shame cultures and the innocence-guilt ones promote a counter-cultural Gospel?

Another final – unanswered - question remains: has the Gospel been successfully incarnated into the Thai honour-shame culture? Or is inculturation in Thailand an “empty inculturation” (Cuturi, 2004, p.31) which embraces the elements perceived as ‘sinful’ without changing Thai society for the better?

## Conclusion

This thesis analysed how Catholicism in BanCho is understood by the local parishioners (Chapter 3) and how the missionaries criticise the ‘Thaified’ aspects of the Thai Catholic Church and its Catholicism (Chapter 4). In this final chapter, I would like to draw some final remarks and to raise some questions that would be useful for researchers interested in the topic. The chapter is divided into three sections: the first one refers to the impact that conversion has on the individuals’ religious sphere; whereas the second one explores the impact of conversion on the social norms and the social system. The third section presents some final thoughts, considering inculturation in terms of both ‘religious’ and ‘social’ spheres. This division in ‘religious’ and ‘social’ spheres is necessary to analyse how the Gospel can be counter-cultural. In fact, Cuturi (2004, p.11) affirms that conversion “does not only touch upon the individual spheres of spirituality and religiosity, but it touches upon the layout of the social and political systems in society, the symbolic and communicative practices”. She later extends this reasoning from individual conversion to religious adaptation: true inculturation happens when the new religion is not reflected only through rituals and the liturgic dimension, but when it embraces and changes the ethical and social systems too. In her words: “if inculturation happens in the liturgic dimension as its main practical application, then the practical actualisation [...] leads to a dissociation between forms and social contents” (Cuturi, 2004, p.31). She refers to this ‘partial’ adaptation as an “empty inculturation” or a “folklorisation of tradition” (*folclorizzazione della tradizione*) (Cuturi, 2004, p.31). In order to discuss inculturation in BanCho, I therefore divide the chapter in two sections: the ‘religious’ sphere and the ‘social’ sphere of inculturation.

### 1) The ‘religious’ sphere in BanCho Catholicism

As illustrated in Chapter 3, the encounter between the Gospel and the enculturated animistic religious background of the majority of the parishioners leads to a Catholicism that is ritual- and behaviour-focused. The cosmos of the parishioners is crowded, inhabited by entities belonging to various religious traditions. Conversion is usually prompted by miracles, and it results in a life free of threatening spirits and expensive sacrifices. As one of the missionaries said, conversion to Catholicism is liberation from fears and economic burdens.<sup>51</sup> The parishioners in BanCho find refuge in the loving dad-God, who is a patron who pays back loyalty and obedience. As Mejudhon (1998, p.93) says: “Christianity offers its followers a relationship with a Spiritual Power. [...] Christianity attracts people in trouble for it tells them that they can turn to God and depend on God’s help”. By abiding by the Catholic rules, the parishioners become immune to the spirits’ anger – as long as they “let them be”.<sup>52</sup> The local catechists have a fundamental role in the adaptation and teaching of the Gospel to the local communities: they understand and adapt the Gospel to the needs and the enculturated worldview of their own communities. That is why they rarely translate the sermons into the local languages, but they insist on the rules and required behaviours, e.g. the Lent behaviour-set. The

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<sup>51</sup> Observative notes, 5/3/2020.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Khru Maen.



missionaries accept the BanCho Catholicism – although they acknowledge that it is different from their own understanding of faith. Don Paolo goes as far as saying that – maybe – the BanCho Catholicism provides a better approach to religion: less doubts and less questions, more lived experiences of God.

[BanCho's approach to Catholicism] is an experiential approach rather than a rational one.

They don't ask themselves too many questions, they are doing better than us.

[Don Paolo]

Chapter 3 illustrated how the BanCho Catholicism does adapt to the spiritual needs and the enculturated religious identity of the parishioners. If inculturation is the process through which the Gospel becomes “meaningful to a given community at a given historical moment, with its specific religio-cultural identity” (Mattam, 2002, p.309), then I would say that in BanCho the Gospel is working towards this direction – at least in the spiritual and religious sphere. The interviews have shown how the community is re-interpreting and adapting to itself the Gospel. At the same time, the missionaries are supervisors who need to guarantee the “trinitarian unity in diversity” (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004, p.299) of the Universal Church.

However, as Cuturi (2004) affirms, inculturation is complete only when it happens in the social and political systems of a given society. Pieris (1988, p.28) agrees, affirming that conversion must not be limited to individuals: conversion must be “accompanied by a corresponding structural change”, because “it is the person in dynamic relationship to society and not simply the person in isolation that needs to be put right, if we wish to put the world in order”. Thus, the next section departs from the missionaries' critiques to the ‘Thaified’ Catholic Church of Thailand (Chapter 4) in order to understand how the adaptation process in BanCho might not be an integral inculturation as intended by Cuturi.

## 2) The ‘social’ sphere in BanCho Catholicism

Chapter 4 analysed three main critiques made by the missionaries in regard to what Bolotta (2019) would call the ‘Thaification’ of the Thai Catholic Church. The missionaries identify the concepts of ‘face’ and ‘honour’ as anti-Catholic, upholding what Flanders (2011) refers to as a “Western egalitarian impulse”. The missionaries do not see ‘face’ and the deriving hierarchical system as compatible with any (Catholic) moral system. Don Franco stated that the Thai priests – especially in Bangkok – fear to lose their privilege if the ‘face’ system is abolished: this fear – according to him - is preventing a ‘deeper’ inculturation of the Catholic values into Thai society. The Thai Catholic Church is “of the world, [...] not simply in the world”.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, I have no knowledge nor experience about Thai Catholicism in Bangkok. What I do know is the social dynamics within the Catholic Centre in BanCho. Thus, my analysis focuses on this reality.

Although the missionaries criticise the Thai value of “being higher than anyone else”,<sup>54</sup> their Centre endorses and promotes a strict social hierarchy. First of all, the BanCho Parish provides access to Thai public

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with Don Franco.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Don Franco.

school for hundreds of children belonging to ethnic minorities. In Thai schools the pupils are taught “to accept a subordinate position in the centralized bureaucratic world of the Thai nation-state” (Keyes, 1991, p.89). It is also through education that ‘Thainess’ is inculcated in the ethnic minority pupils: the Thai modern education system has been constructed by the state as a “modern technology to gradually inculcate and convince non-Thai ethnic groups to become Thai” (Kwanchewan and Prasit, 2009, no pagination). Moreover, the pupils become grateful ‘Thai subjects’ thanks to the teaching of what Thongchai (1997) calls the “royalist-nationalist history”. However, the hierarchical system that subordinates the pupils does not cease outside the fences of the school. In fact, this system is recreated also in the Catholic Centre. During the interviews with the final-year students hosted in the Centre, the importance of hierarchy and respect towards one’s seniors emerged. My informants clearly distinguished between the other same-age students and their juniors. They referred to the same-age students as ‘friends’ (เพื่อน), while the younger students were ‘juniors’ (รุ่นน้อง).<sup>55</sup> The relationship between students of different age cannot be an ‘equal’ relationship of friendship: the juniors must show respect towards the older students. This is how one of the girls recalled her relationship with her seniors when she first arrived at the Centre:

I respected them [seniors] (เคารบ). I couldn’t be natural with them (ทำตัวแบบธรรมชาติไม่ได้).

It’s different from my village. There I’m close to my seniors who are not much older than me. In here I was *kreng-jai* the seniors, but with my friends (เพื่อน) I’m not *kreng-jai*, I can talk about anything, in any way.

[N Maprang]

Thus, even between the pupils there is a strict hierarchical structure. The younger pupils are at the bottom of this hierarchy. A Karen employee, who was hosted in an all-Karen hostel when she was a student, said that the strict hierarchical relationships between the ‘kids’ are encouraged by the use of Standard Thai in the Centre:

[In the hostel where I used to stay] people speak in Karen language, so they don’t have to address each other as seniors (พี่) or juniors (น้อง). It’s like everyone is your friend. No one cares or takes offence (ไม่ถือสา).

[N Fasi]

The use of standard Thai may contribute to the creation of a hierarchical system. However, it is not the only factor. During the interviews with the educators, I asked them what the aim of their work was. Their replies emphasised the need for the ‘kids’ to behave according to the rules and to be ‘appropriate’.<sup>56</sup> N Fasi

<sup>55</sup> Interviews with N Bo and N Pui, N Phaa and N Perm, N Manaw and N Maprang.

<sup>56</sup> Interviews with P Bum, P Mint and P Mali.

said that the aim of the Centre is to teach the ‘kids’ how to “enter society” (เข้าสังคม). This is how she explained what skills one needs to ‘enter society’:

For example, here in the Centre we teach about being modest and well-mannered (อ่อนน้อม ถ่อมตน), to listen to what the ‘big people’ say (เชื่อฟังผู้ใหญ่). And how to conduct oneself (วางตัว) in front of the ‘big people’, so that the kids know how to behave with others.

[N Fasi]

The role of Catholic hostels as a platform for ethnic minority pupils to ‘enter (Thai) society’ has also been analysed by Bolotta (2015) and Tan Su Aie (2007). The hostels eradicate the pupils from their native culture and provide them with the necessary skills to understand and feel a sense of belonging to Thai society. Within the Centre the ‘kids’ learn how to behave according to the “unwritten rules of behaviour” (Terwiel, 1984, p.27) regulating Thai society. At the basis of these rules there is the need for the pupils to “conduct themselves”, as N Fasi said. ‘To conduct oneself’ (วางตัว) is a compound word. The first term (วาง) also means ‘to lay down’ or ‘to place’. Thus, the employees in the BanCho Catholic Centre aims at teaching the pupils how to ‘place themselves’ in the hierarchical system of the Centre and of the wider Thai society. A way to see how this ‘placing oneself’ permeates the activities in the Catholic Centre is the order in which the ‘kids’ physically place themselves to receive the eucharist during the Mass. The nuns stand up first and start the queue, followed by the director of the Centre and the other employees – usually according to their age. After them, the students queue up, starting from the seniors.

However, the ‘sinful’ Thai system is not only recreated among the pupils – who are mainly non-Catholic - but even among the Catholic employees. As the extracts in Chapter 4 showed, the priests feel lonely, separated by the ‘wall’ of *kreng-jai* from their employees. Don Franco describes what happened when he became the “manager” of the Centre:

From being a priest I became the *chaonai* (boss, เจ้านาย). So you didn’t introduce yourself as a priest, your role as a priest was not predominant, that wasn’t your main role as perceived by the people. [...] You employ and pay a lot of people. There’s a weird relationship with the people, not like in Italy. There isn’t a vicar-parishioner relationship. The relationship is between the boss and an employee. It was hard at the beginning.

[Don Franco]

The priests are the employers and the ‘owners’ of the Catholic Centre and its projects. The priests - as employers – are the patrons of their employees.<sup>57</sup> Taylor (2007, p.21) observes how this priest-patronage affects the teamwork in a Parish: “members fail to feel joint ownership of the ideas of their leaders”. In fact,

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<sup>57</sup> The personal pronoun used for the missionaries also indicates a patronage relationship: see Footnote 42.

during my stay at the Centre, the missionaries often complained about a ‘lack of commitment’ or a ‘lack of dedication’ by the younger or short-term employees towards their jobs and the mission of the Catholic Centre. On the other hand, the Catholic employees to the question “What do you do in the Centre?” simply described the tasks required by their jobs, without linking it to the aim of the Centre itself, e.g. providing either educational or economic opportunities to those in need. Moreover, all the employees interviewed – catechists excluded – decided to work in the Centre because they considered it a convenient job: easy, with flexible time, near home and stable. The (Catholic) principles and aims underpinning the Centre’s projects were not even cited as one of the reasons for the employees to work in the Centre. Thus, the Centre attracts employees – or ‘clients’ - mainly because of the convenience and security of its jobs; not because the employees believe and share the mission of the Centre. I tend to think that the employees are not aware that their jobs and the Centre itself are an actualisation of the Catholic teachings in everyday life, outside the church building. For them, Catholicism is ‘contained’ into the walls of the church. So how can Catholicism change the social system if even the Catholic employees do not realise the permeating Catholic principles in their own jobs?

### **Final Remarks**

The Catholic Centre provides a means for ‘Thainess’ to penetrate and inculcate into the pupils and the employees. Through the Centre, the pupils are inserted into the “greater tradition” (Mattam, 2002, p.307) of ‘Thainess’. Rather than eradicating the elements of ‘Thainess’ perceived as ‘sinful’ by the missionaries, the Centre reproduces the hierarchical system and the ‘subordinating virtues’ of Thai society. The educators aim at providing the pupils with the necessary skills to ‘place themselves’ in this system, rather than condemning it as the missionaries do. Moreover, if inculturation should bring a change in ethical and social contents, why do the Catholic employees not articulate and share the mission of the Centre? Cuturi (2004, p.31) would say that the Gospel in BanCho has only brought a “folklorisation of tradition”, an “empty inculturation” in which the forms do not match the contents. On the contrary, Georges and Baker (2016) would condemn the critiques of the priests on the ‘sinful’ elements of ‘Thainess’, affirming that a theology of ‘face’ and honour is coherent with the Gospel and necessary for inculturation. Moreover, to create a ‘Thainess’-free bubble in the Catholic Centre would isolate the Catholic community from the wider Thai society. This type of community would lose its ethnic/national identity, and Mejudhon (2005, no pagination) affirms that an identity loss would inhibit the “spiritual growth” of said community, affecting “their identity as well as their bonding to Christian meaning”.

The aims of this thesis is not to provide a definitive answer as to whether or not the BanCho Catholicism is either truly inculturated or ‘empty’. What this thesis does is to raise awareness about the issues surrounding the different interactions analysed here between the Italian Catholic missionaries, ethnic minorities, the Gospel, animistic religions and ‘Thainess’. The debates about inculturation should take into consideration the various questions raised in the first chapter:

1) Who is changing whom and what is changing? (Eaton, 1997, p.244). Is it the Gospel changing the local culture or vice versa? Is BanCho Catholicism providing the Universal Church with a more experiential approach to faith? Is the 'knowledge' of God in BanCho deemed to be acceptable? Must the Hill Peoples become Thai in order to be Catholic? Or do they become Thai because of their association with Catholicism?;

2) How to choose what to keep and what to exclude in inculturation? (Cuturi, 2004, p.30). What is considered 'sinful' in a given culture? What criteria is used to decide what is 'sinful'? Is 'face' worthy of a theological reflection? Why do missionaries feel the need to condemn the non-exclusivity of Catholicism practiced by the BanCho parishioners?;

3) Who has the authority to decide what has to be changed? Is it the missionary, with an enculturated 'Western' cultural background? Is it the Thai priest, with all the so-called 'sinful' elements needed to successfully 'enter (Thai) society'? Is it the Karen priest, who understands the minorities of the so-called "little tradition"? Is it the BanCho people, who do not ask questions and 'know' of God?.

My thesis has explored or touched upon some of these questions. It does not claim to provide all the answers. However, I do hope that this thesis will provide useful insights into a Catholic community in the North of Thailand, for which inculturation is an everyday practice - an entanglement of entities that still have to unravel themselves.

Word count: 31.353 words

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**Appendix A: Interviewees' list and interview details**

	Fictitious Name	Date of Interview	Sex	Ethnic Group	Role in the Parish	Religion	First generation Catholic?	Duration of the interview
1.	Khru Jan	19/2/2020 21/3/2020	F	Yao	Catechist	Catholic	Yes	70 min
2.	Pa Nee	21/2/2020	F	Isan	Employee	Catholic	No	43
3.	N Jeaw N Pui	23/2/2020	F F	Akha Akha	Student Student	Catholic Catholic	No No	27
4.	P Mali	25/2/2020	F	Karen	Employee	Catholic	No	77
5.	N Fasi	26/2/2020	F	Karen	Employee	Catholic	No	35
6.	Khru Neung	27/2/2020	M	Isan	Catechist	Catholic	No	44
7.	P Mint	1/3/2020	F	Lahu	Employee	Catholic	Yes	58
8.	N Perm N Phaa	2/3/2020	F F	Lahu Lahu	Student Student	Catholic Animist	No	45
9.	P Toy	3/3/2020	F	Northern Thai	Employee	Buddhist		35
10.	N Manaw N Maprang	4/3/2020	F F	Northern Thai Northern Thai	Student Student	Catholic Catholic	Yes Yes	37
11.	Don Paolo	5/3/2020	M	Italian	Priest	Catholic	No	100
12.	P Bum	10/3/2020	M	Mong	Employee	Catholic	No	35
13.	Khru Maen	11/3/2020	M	Lahu	Catechist	Catholic	No	41
14.	Po John	13/3/2020	M	Thai	Bishop	Catholic	No	18
15.	Don Franco	15/3/2020	M	Italian	Priest	Catholic	No	95
16.	P Kaew	17/3/2020	F	Lahu	Employee	Catholic	Yes	47
17.	N Poog	17/3/2020	F	Northern Thai	Employee	Catholic	Yes	21
18.	P Jaet	20/3/2020	M	Karen	Employee	Catholic	No	63
19.	Pa Aem	21/3/2020	F	Northern Thai	Employee	Buddhist		17

**Total length of the interviews:** 908 minutes  $\approx$  15 hours

**Note on the prefix to names:**

- The prefix 'Don' is Italian, it is used in the thesis to address the Italian priests.
- The prefix 'Khru' means 'teacher' in Thai and it is used in the thesis to address the catechists.
- The prefix 'N' stays for 'Nong' (น้อง), it means 'younger sibling' and I use it to address anyone younger than me (less than 26 years old).
- The prefix 'P' stays for 'Phi' (พี่), it means 'older sibling' and I use it to address people older than me who are less than 60 years old.
- The prefix 'Pa' (ป้า) means 'aunt', I use it to address women who are older than 60 years old.
- The term 'Pho' (พ่อ) means 'dad' in Thai. It is also used as personal pronoun for priests.

## **Appendix B: Main themes explored with the interviewees**

### **1) With the Italian missionaries:**

- Motivations and aspiration for becoming a missionary;
- Reality of the Catholic Centre once arrived;
- What they do in the centre;
- Challenges they face every day;
- Cultural conflicts with the locals;
- Religious conflicts with the local religions;
- Relationships with parishioners/employees;
- Rewarding aspects of their 'service'.

### **2) With the Catechists:**

- Motivation for conversion (either theirs or the parishioners');
- Motivation for being a catechist;
- How they came to know the Catholic Centre;
- Reception of catechism by local people;
- Challenges they face in teaching catechism;
- Rewarding aspects of being a catechist.

### **3) With the Employees in the Centre:**

- How they came to know the Catholic Centre;
- Motivation for working/studying in the Catholic Centre;
- What they do in the centre ;
- (If converted to Catholicism) Factors behind their conversion;
- How do you pray?
- (If they are not Catholics) Does the Christian God exist?;
- Relationships among the people in the Centre;

**4) With the Students hosted in the Centre:**

- How they came to know the Catholic Centre;
- How they felt the first time they arrived in the Centre;
- First encounter with Catholicism;
- (If converted to Catholicism) Factors behind their conversion;
- Reactions of their (non-Christian) family to their conversion;
- (If not converted to Catholicism) Differences/similarities in their religion and Catholicism.
- Relationships in the Centre.

**5) With the Thai Bishop visiting the Parish:**

- How does it differ to work with local priests and foreign missionaries?;
- The Karen and their 'intrinsic' religiosity.