

## Hierophany in the Lo Ching Cha

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### The Road to the *Akha* Village

*“Sawadee krub!”*

Upon hearing this strange language, I knew that I was no longer in my own country. I have already set foot on the “Land of the Free”, Thailand. I came with all the feelings of excitement, worries and varied emotions. My passport indicated that I am a Filipino but I was also carrying another passport that of being a Redemptorist Missionary sent to a foreign land. This identity as a Redemptorist missionary was my assurance and gate pass to my everyday encounter in Thailand of the mission of God. It was what I was holding on as I began my journey as a missionary.

Being a missionary in a foreign land was not easy. I was like a child trying to learn everything for the first time; learning how to speak a new language and how to walk in their way of life. And like a child, I needed someone to guide and teach me. The people became my teachers. Learning from them the first few words were difficult; however, their patience and willingness to teach helped me a lot. I considered this childlike attitude crucial to any missionary who wanted to learn new things in the mission and for the mission. Remembering the words of Jesus who said, *“Let the children come to me”*,<sup>1</sup> I came to Jesus through the people in the mission, in the place where He taught me how to speak, walk and live a missionary life. I realized that Jesus was challenging me to move forward among the villagers with a “missionary child” attitude.

This missionary child in me was immersed into the “unknown.” But this unknown experience gave excitement, joy and learning to my true mission. I began to believe that it is in the unknown experience that the known God resides, a God who reveals the beauty, joy and hope in the culture, people, language, places and experience. In my experience, to explore the unknown is to learn the Thai word *“Maipenrai,”* which means “no worries” or “it’s ok”. It is a “no worries” to explore the unknown. God is the God of *“Maipenrai”* in my life. He sets things and what he asks of me is to trust in him in the whole mission immersion. “So, why worry?” *“Maipenrai!”*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19: 14

After a month of being acquainted with the Thai language I was able to settle in the land where I spent my immersion. I was sent to Chiang Rai, one of the provinces in the North of Thailand. The community where I stayed was situated within the compound of a school. In the same compound is the Church of the Nativity of our Lady. It shepherds the Thais, foreigners and indigenous people especially the *Akha*. The Church is in a very dynamic location because it is within the city proper. It celebrates daily masses and other sacraments for the people, may they be foreigners or local citizens.

The Church has fourteen chapels in the different villages of Chiang Rai<sup>2</sup> for the hill tribe called *Akha*. The mountains and hills serve as their haven, the place of their livelihood and the *Akhazang*, their way of life. My experience with the *Akhas* in the villages of San Cha Lon, Hou Nam Lin and Pu Chi Fha is the focus of my paper. I will reflect on the constant manifestation of God within my encounter with their culture and tradition particularly in the *Lo Ching Cha*, and hopefully be able to see its implications on the mission in Chiang Rai.

What is the *Lo Ching Cha*? How does it reveal the identity and religiosity of the *Akhas*? What is its relevance to the Church's mission? How can it be appropriated as a vehicle for evangelization and mission?

Before we take a closer look at the Swing or *Lo Ching Cha* experience during the Swing Festival, let me bring you first to the village where I have started, encountered and experienced the *Akha* people.

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<sup>2</sup> The region of Chiang Rai is the sanctuary for the hill tribes especially the *Akhas*.