

# Symbolic Gift-Exchange as Church Inculturative Mission among the Pgaz K'nyauz in Northern Thailand

Danilo Agustin, Jr.

## Abstract

Since the opening of the Church's doors to the world during Vatican II, the field of missiology has become an interesting route to explore in theology and praxis. In the Asian context, inculturation has become the language of the day. Pursuing this trajectory, this paper began is an attempt to forge a paradigm for the Church's inculturative mission that creates spaces for recognition, dialogue, and negotiation in the encounter of the faith-gospel and the life-world of the Pgaz K'nyauz tribe in North Thailand. In view of an inculturated and emancipative faith, this paper finds essential ground in the works of Louis-Marie Chauvet on Symbolic Gift-Exchange anchored in the Jesus-event and its Christological assertions to provide a theological framework that structures the praxis of inculturation.

## Introduction

As an institution with a privileged position, the Church creates advantageous structures and systems in pursuit of its nobles causes and evangelization agenda. But, it also causes discrimination against and marginalization of its subjects and their realities. In its missionary enterprises *ad gentes*, it encounters the life-event of peoples situated in a particular complex context with unique realities. A problematic attitude that favoured the hegemony of the Church arose from the proclamation "*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church there is no salvation)" that was appropriated into its evangelization *ad gentes*. The claim that goes back to the writings of Cyprian of Carthage in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century was ingeminated and amplified during the Middle Ages, resulting in its triumphalistic and ecclesiocentric tendency. With this, a polarizing wall was put up; it proselytized and implanted a church wherever it went. The divide logically privileged the Church and established its power that intensified in the advent of colonialism in the 16<sup>th</sup> until mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. But, did it really privilege the Church? In Asia, the Church's orientation on evangelization was cataclysmic-other religions, traditional-ancestral beliefs, and cultural practices deemed incompatible with its institutional dogma were demonized. Those of the Pgaz K'nyauz and other cultures in the region, were not spared. Not only did the Church eradicate and suppress the religions and cultural practices of the cultures, it also effaced and

devalued their identity. This also estranged the Church from its true identity. Meanwhile, the Pgaz K'nyauz who had undergone historical-social suffering, grappled with culture and language they considered alien. Their alternatives are to either creatively negotiate with this or resign themselves to the imposing and alien structures and *weltanschauung*.

For this paper, I engage in theoretical analysis on theological discourses, archival-descriptive research on the Pgaz K'nyauz history and culture, interview as well as actual missionary works. Theological assertions are based on scriptural exegesis and Christological insights of Church teachings. This paper aims to contribute insights on missiology by substantiating the notion of inculturation and affirming and recognizing the rich deposits of cultural insights that the Pgaz K'nyauz can share with the Church.