

# Spirit House: The Practice of *Rean Theivoda* in Cambodia

by *Daniel Shinjong Baeq*

## *Introduction*

**T**emples have been and continue to be a pervasive institution in the religious history of mankind (Stark 2007),<sup>1</sup> and one of the primary ways through which man has endeavored to communicate with his god. While the complex structures, practices and beliefs associated with temples and shrines have confronted God's people within the pages of Scripture (and throughout the church's mission for the past twenty centuries), the temple has also been embedded in their history. This article attempts to examine how a proper exegesis of the biblical material surrounding Solomon's temple, particularly as it relates to a structure known as the *Rean Theivoda* ("spirit house," "angel tower"), can help determine this structure's potential as a vehicle for communicating Christian beliefs and shed insight into mission in Cambodia today. Admittedly, these reflections are not conclusive in themselves, but are only an initial and partial evaluation of the broader process of "critical contextualization" (Hiebert 1987), a process that must ultimately involve the local Cambodian believing community.

## *Contextualization and Method*

For the last three decades, "contextualization"<sup>2</sup> has received much attention from missiologists and missionaries, with a renewed emphasis on authenticity in both Christian practice and the theology of the peoples who are responding to the gospel.<sup>3</sup> Definitions of "contextualization" vary, but I find Enoch Wan's especially clear and concise. For Wan, "contextualization" denotes

the efforts of formulating, presenting and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that it is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency (Wan 2010).

Additionally, Ninian Smart outlined the seven dimensions of religion—doctrinal, ritual, mythic, experiential, ethical, social, and material—that need to be dealt

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with if there is to be a complete contextualization of biblical truth in a given culture (Smart 1996).<sup>4</sup> If Smart has narrowed down the religious aspects that may need to be contextualized, Paul G. Hiebert has provided a model for the process of “critical contextualization,” whereby aspects of religion and culture can be addressed appropriately.<sup>5</sup> He suggested a four step process: 1) phenomenological analysis (exegesis of the culture); 2) ontological reflection (exegesis of the Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge); 3) critical evaluation; and 4) missiological transformation (Hiebert 1987; Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 21–29) (Figure 1).

This paper seeks—through exegesis and, to the degree possible, the application of “critical contextualization” principles—to evaluate, both biblically and missiologically, the potential appropriate use of the *Rean Theivoda* (angel tower) in Cambodian Christianity. The phenomenological analysis (step 1 in Figure 1) draws upon the author’s knowledge of *Rean Theivoda*, which he gained from over sixty research papers written by his Cambodian university students.<sup>6</sup> The ontological reflection (step 2) will not be exhaustive due to space limitations. One passage will be examined exegetically while others will be suggested for further study.

One limitation of this study is that local Cambodian Christians were not a part of the contextualization process. Thus, for steps 3 and 4 (critical evaluation and missiological transformation) I will simply offer

suggestions, since the necessary decisions about the use of *Rean Theivoda* need to be made by the hermeneutical community of Cambodian Christians.

### Contextualization in Cambodia

Protestant mission in Cambodia began in 1923 when Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hammond of the Christian and Missionary Alliance began their ministry there (Cormack and Lewis 2001, 57). As the church grew and matured, hymns were indigenized by putting Christian lyrics to traditional Cambodian music. Similarly, the Bible was translated using familiar, authoritative Buddhist religious terms (derived from Sanskrit and Pali), so that the Bible would be received as a holy text and not be seen as foreign.<sup>7</sup> These efforts at contextualization were successful in relaying the gospel in easily identifiable terms.

Church growth came to a near standstill during the communist revolution of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979). Not many Christians survived this period, as people of any faith or education were targeted and massacred. Some, however, were fortunate enough to flee to refugee camps in Thailand. There, missionaries evangelized a new group of Cambodians and gathered them into churches (Cormack and Lewis 2001, 13). Without their Christian predecessors, a *new Christian culture* began to emerge in the camps, one that did not recognize the importance of contextualization or the need to deal with the personal and communal issues of Cambodian society. Then

in 1991, with the help of UN peacekeeping troops (1991-1992) and the United National Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC, 1992-1993), Cambodia became a nation with religious freedom.<sup>8</sup> Thus a new community of Christians from the camps moved into the country under foreign protection.

As Cambodia has become increasingly less dangerous in recent years, the number of missionaries has risen rapidly. However, those who attempt to evangelize are met with much resistance, especially because many missionaries discourage traditional practices. Most traditional celebrations or rituals (such as weddings and funeral traditions) identify participants as members of Cambodian society and are closely related to their traditional religions. All of these areas of Cambodian culture need to be addressed as potential candidates for contextualization. Among these rituals and practices is the daily practice of praying and giving offerings at the *Rean Theivoda* (hereafter *RT*). Can the structures, practices, and beliefs associated with the *RT* be used to communicate Christian beliefs in a way that are both compatible with cultural norms but distinctive enough to be perceived as carrying a different message? Can the *RT* be used to complement and enhance scriptural truth?

### A Brief Description of the *Rean Theivoda*

The *Rean Theivoda* is a prominent structure in Cambodian society, one that exists in the majority of Cambodian homes, businesses, and even Buddhist temples.<sup>9</sup> One major ritual practiced at a *RT* is prayer to ancestral spirits (*Neak Ta*) for the protection and blessing of the household. Such prayers are performed by putting one’s palms together and bowing toward the *RT*. Sometimes these prayers are accompanied by the

Figure 1. Methodology of Critical Contextualization (Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 22)

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Phenomenological analysis	Ontological reflection	Critical evaluation	Missiological transformation
Description without judgment	Biblical reference/ social function	Hermeneutical community	Transformation of people

burning of incense, as people believe that their prayers ascend with the smoke from the incense.

Another ritual practiced at the *RT* involves the giving of different kinds of offerings. For example, after their daily visit to the market, the women usually offer some of their groceries to the various spirits that reside either in the miniature house of the *RT* or under it. On special occasions, flowers like jasmine and lotus are placed there to venerate the higher spirits, including ancestral spirits. This act not only expresses respect for the ancestors but also conveys filial piety toward the living, both parents and elderly relatives. The offering of prayers and food at the *RT* falls within “the practical expressions through which religious identity is founded and lived out in the real world” (Moreau 2006, 329). Because of their importance in Cambodian society, the rituals at the *RT* and other folk practices are areas that the Cambodian church needs to address.

### Background

Like most traditional practices and beliefs, both missionaries and Cambodian Christian communities alike have strongly rejected the practice of the *Rean Theivoda* as a form of idolatry. Some zealous missionaries often encourage new believers to destroy their *RT* prior to being baptized in order to show their faith in Christ. In my ministry in the small town of Kampong Cham, the *RT* often became an issue for new Christians and those being evangelized.<sup>10</sup>

As the Cambodian Christian community continues to spread rapidly,<sup>11</sup> culturally foreign and strange practices are being introduced and traditional practices visibly rejected,<sup>12</sup> creating both public and private<sup>13</sup> conflict between Christians and non-Christians.<sup>14</sup> So far no Cambodian church or foreign missionary has attempted to accept the traditional

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practice of *RT*. Undoubtedly, accepting such a practice without appropriate contextualization will lead to syncretism. On the other hand, any strong rejection of the *RT* that ignores the significance and influence of this ritual could produce a “split-level Christianity” in the long run (Hiebert et al. 1999, 15). A split-level Christianity (where some Christians return to the former folk practices of their old belief system), may occur when the church or its leaders are unable to successfully deal with the serious life crises that their members face.

### Historical and Religious Background

In the South Asian countries of the Indochina peninsula, the worship of spirits in the “spirit house” is common practice (Reichart and Khongkhunthian 2007, 97–103). In Cambodia this type of spirit house is called *Rean Theivoda* (literally “angel tower,”) or in more formal religious terminology, *Preah Phumdey* (the earth god). This worship of spirits originates from an ancient belief that likely existed long before any of the major religions predominated in Cambodia.

The main function of the *RT* is religious in nature. The *RT* is a place where people honor several venerated spirits including “*Neak Ta* (ancestral spirits), *Preah Ko* (the sacred bull), and Buddha” (Ranges and LeBoutillier 2010, 92).<sup>15</sup> *Neak Ta*, often thought of as a grandfather-like spirit, finds its origin in the oldest ancestral spirit belief system in Cambodia (Baeq 2007, 61–62).<sup>16</sup> It represents a nature spirit and therefore is believed to exist in animals, old trees, rivers, and houses (Choulean 2000, 3–6). Though ancient, this belief system continues to persist to this day.

Historically, the practice of *RT* was adapted by various religions. It was widely accepted during the Hindu empires of Chen La (505–802 AD) and the early Angkor (802–12<sup>th</sup> c.). During this period, the *RT* became a place of prayer to the angelic spirits of Hinduism and has been called the “angel tower” ever since. People believed that the angels would descend and sit on top of the *RT* and thereby give protection to the household.

Around AD 1181, under the reign of King Jayavarman VII, Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to Cambodia (Chandler 1992, 56). Rather than getting rid of the structure, the *RT* was dedicated to Buddha by royal decree. Cambodian Buddhist monks integrated the *RT* into Buddhism at that time<sup>17</sup> and even now *RT*s are preserved in Buddhist temples to house guardian spirits. Many temples have four to eight towers of *Preah Phumdey*, a formal title for *Rean Theivoda*, erected around the fence to protect the vicinity from evil spirits (*vinnien akkrok*).

Along with the *RT* structure itself, the folk practice of *Neak Ta* survived through the Hindu and early Buddhist periods, and is still practiced to this day with its syncretistic form and meaning (Anon. 1973, 113–116). The folk practice of worshiping household *Neak Ta* at the *RT* is common among rural Cambodians as well as many urban dwellers.

### Ethical and Social Functions of *Rean Theivoda*

There are three ethical aspects to the practice of *RT*. The first entails respect for parents and the elderly. Those who pray daily to the *Neak Ta* at the *RT* are constantly reminded to care

for their parents and elderly. The fear of being punished for neglecting the *Neak Ta* elicits dutiful devotion of one generation to another.

The second aspect of the *RT* is how this ritual relates to the spirits who are believed to reside *beneath* the *RT*, namely the spirits of dead travelers, the poor, and unborn or dead children. People offer food at the *RT* each day to allay these spirits and in so doing ward off harm and invite blessings (the spirits of the dead babies, for example are believed to attract customers to vendors). This and other beliefs (e.g., that those who refuse to help the needy risk becoming the target of their wrath after the needy die) all work to engender sympathy toward the marginalized.

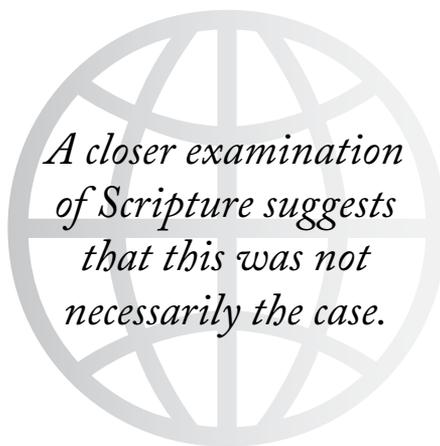
Lastly, the *RT* also provides the opportunity to publically demonstrate one's level of dedication to, and respect for, the ancestors. By building an extravagant *RT* structure, dutifully offering food and daily prayers, and participating in other ceremonies to honor the dead, people attain great honor, respect and recognition in the community. It is also believed that praying to the *Neak Ta* brings protection to the community as a whole.

Having laid the basic foundation needed to understand the practice of *RT* (which satisfies the first step in critical contextualization), we now turn to the second step, the exegesis of Scripture and development of a hermeneutical bridge to the culture. Since the *RT* structure itself is most visible element and focal point for the aforementioned rituals, a similar case of the contextualization of a building—namely Solomon's temple—will be examined to search for a potential hermeneutical bridge.

### *Contextualization of the Temple in the Old Testament*

When YHWH called Abram, a “worshiper of pagan gods” (Josh.

24:2), to become Abraham, he did not call him within a religious or cultural void. YHWH knew full well that Abraham's worldview was limited by his culture and his popular notions about God. But YHWH seems to contextualize His purposes by using the form and practice of the ancient Near Eastern treaty with all its accompanying idolatry (Gallagher 2006, 146-147; Petersen 2007, 118-119). Likewise, we can see in hindsight that the construction of Solomon's Temple in 2 Samuel 7:1-17 served as another step in moving the people of God from the initial significance of the tabernacle to a Messianic kingdom concept.



### King David and the Temple (2 Sam. 7:1-17)

Most Christians assume that the building of the temple was the will of YHWH; a closer examination of Scripture suggests that this was not necessarily the case. To better understand the missiological implications of adopting religious architecture such as the *RT*, we need to carefully examine 2 Samuel 7:1-17<sup>18</sup> to uncover 1) which factors influenced David to propose the idea of building a “house of cedar” (temple) for YHWH (vv. 1-3); 2), what YHWH's initial response was (vv. 4-7), and 3) why YHWH temporarily permitted the temple structure to represent the “house” (dynasty) of David from

which the kingdom of YHWH's son (v.14)—the son who would ultimately build YHWH a house for His name (vv. 8-17)—would be established. We will also discuss how the pagan concepts and forms associated with religious architecture were adopted to represent the ways of YHWH.

### *David's Plan to Construct a Temple (2 Sam. 7:1-3): Man's Thoughts*

Several factors contributed to David's desire to build a temple for YHWH. Arnold suggests that David's proposal was based on the successful establishment of his kingdom in the region and the completion of his own palace (2003, 473). It was during this time of peace that David turns his attention to doing something for YHWH and comes up with the idea of building a temple.

As David contemplated what he could do to honor YHWH, he must have remembered his earlier experiences with the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>19</sup> Arnold suggests that since the Ark of the Covenant had previously been captured by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:11), David wanted to safeguard it from future danger (2003, 473) Indeed, David's first attempt to bring it to Jerusalem had initially failed<sup>20</sup> and the second time the process had not been easy. On both occasions, however, David was overjoyed at the prospect of having the ark brought to Jerusalem. This reflected his love for YHWH and his genuine desire to build a temple befitting the true God of Israel as neighboring nations had done for their gods.

There is strong evidence that the Israelites were constantly being exposed to the influences of the surrounding nations. And when the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, YHWH knew that they would want a king like the neighboring nations even before they had asked for one.<sup>21</sup> In Deuteronomy 17:15-20, instructions are given to Israel's future king. The biblical account seems clear that

YHWH had decided to use the form of earthly kingship to contextualize the deeper meaning and significance of *Messianic* kingship in redemptive history. Similarly, some scholars suggest that the fact that temples were so widespread throughout the ancient Near East led to the idea of building a temple for YHWH as well (Kaiser 1978, 150; Collins 2007, 124).<sup>22</sup> Also, David's desire to build a temple for YHWH seems to reflect the popular notion that a house was better than a tent, and therefore, God would prefer a temple to a tent as well.

Some liberal theologians have suggested that David's proposal may have been modeled after the prevalent ancient Near Eastern royal ideology of securing and expanding a dynasty (Bergen 1996, 335). Archeological research on ancient Near Eastern culture does indicate similarities between aspects of the Davidic-Solomonic temple and other ancient Near Eastern temples.<sup>23</sup> Overall, however, the biblical text does not support the idea that David's reason for wanting to build a temple was to make a name for himself<sup>24</sup> or his dynasty, but rather to make a name for YHWH<sup>25</sup>; David's intentions<sup>26</sup> were pure.

#### *First Response of YHWH (v. 4-7): Correcting False Assumptions*

Nathan's role in David's court was to help David discern and follow the will of YHWH. When David first spoke to Nathan about building a temple for the Ark of God, Nathan told him to proceed with whatever he had in mind. And David would have gone ahead with his plans had YHWH not spoken to Nathan that night to let him know that He had not authorized this proposal (Firth 2009, 384; Brueggemann 1990, 254). Nathan delivered the following oracle,

"This is what the LORD says: *Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?* I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been

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moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, *did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"* (2 Sam. 7:5-7 NIV, emphasis mine)

YHWH poses two questions in this passage (see italics above). Keil and Delitzsch suggest that the first question carries a negative overtone (2001, 2:596). In fact, Old Testament scholar William J. Dumbrell interprets verse 5 as a "clear refusal" of David's idea, especially when the same account of this story in 1 Chronicles 17 is considered (Dumbrell 1984, 145).<sup>27</sup> Thus by posing the first question, YHWH establishes the fact that David will not be the one to build a house for Him.

Many evangelical scholars suggest that the statement following the first question explains the reason for YHWH's refusal. After denying David's request, YHWH describes how His dwelling place had always been in motion, moving with His people. Additionally, Martens notes that YHWH raised the subject of His dwelling place to negate the "notion that God dwells, as pagan gods do, in temples" (1981, 141). Indeed, God's second (also rhetorical) question reinforces the idea that dwelling in a tent had been YHWH's choice and preference. Thus it seems credible to suggest that YHWH preferred to dwell in a tent in order to reflect the "mobility of the divine presence" (Dumbrell 1984, 145).

The flip side of YHWH's initial choice of a tent over a house could be that He was concerned about just

what the loss of the "mobility" of His presence would mean (Brueggemann 1990, 254). Dumbrell suggests that YHWH wanted to prevent the institutionalization of faith, which could lead to the corruption of the priesthood, as was the case with Eli's two sons in Shiloh (1 Sam. 2:17) (Dumbrell 1984, 145).

Another plausible reason that YHWH refused David's petition—and this relates to issues of *RT* practice—is that temples were pagan in origin. As noted earlier, liberal critics have pointed out the similarities between Solomon's temple and other temples (Stacey 1979, 239; Walton 2009, 2:442). We know from hindsight that since the Spirit of YHWH had instructed David as to how the temple was to be built,<sup>28</sup> YHWH was not concerned about structural similarities to pagan temples. What was at issue for YHWH was the failure of the people to keep His precepts. The later history of Israel and Judah reveals the propensity of the Israelites to follow other gods and the wicked practices of the surrounding nations.<sup>29</sup> Although at first YHWH rejected David's petition to build Him a temple, a new covenant of a Messianic dynasty would later be given to David (2 Sam. 7:8-16).

#### *The Davidic Covenant: YHWH's Thoughts (v. 8-17)*

Most scholars agree that this passage contains the Davidic covenant (Campbell 2005, 72; Firth 2009, 382) and many point out how it stands apart from the previous covenants YHWH made.<sup>30</sup> Firth states that "this is an *essentially promissory* covenant that does not require any specific action on David's part" (2009, 382). Indeed, it is not presented in the form of a conditional "if-then" structure.

Examination of this passage reveals that YHWH's covenant has two parts (Grisanti 1999, 236–240). In the first, YHWH begins by reminding David that it was He who had chosen David when he was just a shepherd boy and it was He who had led him until the present time (vv. 8, 9b). Then He makes a series of promises (vv. 9b–11a) concerning David and the Israelites that would come to pass in the days of David.

In the second part of this covenant, YHWH expresses His thoughts concerning David's idea of building Him a "house of cedar." If the first part of the covenant would be *physically* manifested in the *immediate* future, the second part would be *spiritually* manifested in the *everlasting* future. Without being explicit, YHWH contrasts David's "house of cedar" with the "house" He is going to establish for David (v. 11b). While the "house of cedar" would result from human effort, the "house" for David would be YHWH's initiative.

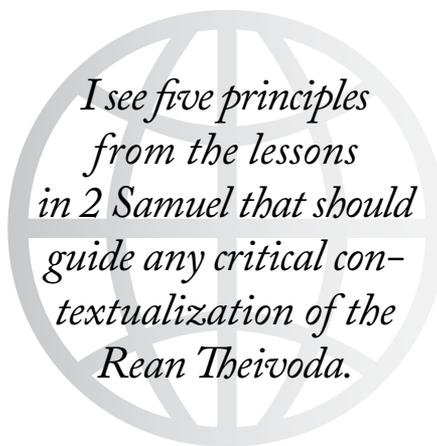
Because this dynasty would be established by YHWH himself, it would have all the qualities of an everlasting dynasty. Further, from this dynasty, YHWH promises to raise up David's offspring (v. 12), one who will also be a "son" to YHWH (v. 14). And this "son" will be the one to build a house for YHWH's Name (v. 13a). This "one way covenant" with David was, in essence, not about David's immediate successor, Solomon, but about the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

This is especially evident since neither Solomon's kingdom nor his throne was "physically" established forever.<sup>31</sup> Further, after Solomon dedicates the temple, YHWH responds to Solomon by making a covenant with him (1 Kings 9:4–9). Here the covenant differs from the *unconditional, one-way* covenant that YHWH made with David in that it follows a conditional

"if-then" format. This further supports the idea that the "house" that YHWH would build for David would not be a physical house, but a spiritual one. However, the question arises: Why did YHWH allow an earthly temple to be built when the house to be built for His name would be a spiritual one?

#### YHWH's Purposeful Authorization: The Temporary Grant

YHWH was gracious to grant Israel a king when they cried out for one, even though He objected to it. And He was gracious enough to use this model of kingship and kingdom to build His revelations upon. Similarly, the building of the *physical* temple, despite YHWH's reservations,<sup>32</sup> was



permitted on a *temporary* basis to be used as "*typos*" until the redemptive plan through the Messiah was fulfilled (Goppelt and Ellis 1982, 114–115). Groningen also supports the view that the temple became the central place where YHWH *gradually* revealed the redemptive history of the Messiah (1990, 855).

Although nowhere in Scripture does YHWH give direct permission for the temple to be built, some passages do indicate that YHWH allowed it and accepted it.<sup>33</sup> The construction of the temple did, at least initially, serve to bring forth a nationwide commitment to wholehearted offerings (1 Chron. 29:1–9).<sup>34</sup> And, as Kaiser points out,

the history of the Exile clearly reveals that Yahweh Himself would be the real temple of true believers (Ezek. 11:16–21) (1978, 239).

As the kings fell away from God, king and people alike frequented the high places in order to worship other gods (2 Chron. 33:3–5). This physical temple—despite David and Solomon's genuine desire to make a name for YHWH, and that of a few subsequent kings to turn the people's hearts back to the Lord—failed to fulfill its role.

As for the spiritual temple, both Jesus (John 1:14; 2:21) and the hearts and bodies of those who believe in Jesus (1 Cor. 3:16) are referred to as the temple. Indeed, the temple would only be perfected in the body of Jesus Christ. Numerous passages support the idea that the temple of Israel was internalized in the person of Jesus.<sup>35</sup> For example, Jesus referred to himself as the temple when he said, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19–21). The account in Mark 14:58 records, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with humans hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands.'" It is worth noting that Jesus, who knew he was the true temple, acted to restore the true spiritual purpose and meaning to Herod's physical temple, which had become a "den of robbers."

The disciples of Jesus believed that Jesus embodied the "presence of God's grace far more than the temple" (Goppelt and Ellis 1982, 115). John recorded in Revelation 21:22, "I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Omnipotent and the Lamb Himself are its temple." Paul also taught the reality of an "internalized" temple and applied it to the Corinthian believers themselves when he said, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16) The true temple where

YHWH resides in the heart of believers. This is an *internalizing* of the temple. In fact, this is precisely what Jesus emphasized when he told the Samaritan woman that the physical location did not matter—what matters is the worshiper's heart.<sup>36</sup>

### *Contextualization Principles Learned and Applied*

Through His preference for the *tent*, YHWH showed His desire to be mobile in order to dwell among His people and to move with them. YHWH's intent still remains the same—He desires to move with His people even through changing times and cultures. YHWH is willing to contextualize in order that “all may be saved” (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). I see five principles from the lessons in 2 Samuel 7:1-7 that should guide any critical contextualization of the *RT* in its Cambodian setting.

*Principle 1: YHWH allowed His tabernacle to be contextualized into a temple to adapt to changing times and settings.* YHWH knew that the nation of Israel would transition from living in tents to houses as they acquired land and settled down. YHWH knew that their worldview would change and that they would come to value a temple over a tent. And in His grace, I believe He allowed a foreign structure, one akin to pagan structures, to represent His Name because He knew that in this new setting a temple could be used to communicate His message.

Christian forms, including visible structures and metaphysical theologies, also need to be utilized to communicate eternal truths in ways that are specific to different cultures and worldviews across the different generations and periods of history. To accomplish this, the mode and style of communication need to be modified, while conserving the truth.

For Cambodians, the *RT* is one such pagan structure that has long been a

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part of their worldview and experience. Asking Cambodians to denounce or abandon the *RT* would be like asking someone not only to change into a different set of clothes, but to cut off a part of their body. Since the physical structure and practices surrounding the *RT* are so central to Cambodian culture and life experience, it would be worthwhile to discover ways to contextualize it appropriately.

*Principle 2: The structure or form does not matter as much as the meaning conferred on the form itself; meaning takes precedence over form and the heart or intentions of the believer who adopts the foreign forms is more important than the forms themselves.* Even though the form of the tabernacle was allowed to change, the meaning remained unchanged; although YHWH accepted Solomon's temple (despite certain foreign influences), He never allowed any pagan meaning to contaminate what the temple stood for. Further, God recognized the genuine love that David had for Him and allowed David to express his love by arranging for Solomon to build the temple.<sup>37</sup>

I understand intention to be closely related to conscience. Conscience is the passive counterpart of intention, both of which are internal in nature. Thus Paul's discussion about the eating of food sacrificed to idols hinged on the intention of the eater. Likewise, if one does something for YHWH with pure intentions, and an appropriate meaning is attached to the form, then one can expect to have a clear conscience. If one does something with an evil intention without regard for YHWH, one has attached a wrong meaning to the form and one's conscience is not clear.

Since there is no obvious parallel form like the *RT* in Christianity, it is difficult to replace the practices performed at the *RT* with Christian ones. Since the *RT* is such an integral part of the Cambodian culture, it may be possible to alter the structure of the *RT* so that Christian meanings can be conferred on them.

Without a doubt, the rituals practiced at the *RT* are unacceptable, since praying to ancestors or spirits and offering goods to them are both unbiblical.<sup>38</sup> Thus changing the belief system behind praying at the *RT* would be a challenging but necessary step. There would need to be clear teaching that differentiates between these very different concepts of offering. Offerings are made at the *RT* to allay the spirits so that they will protect rather than harm their household and community. In contrast, offerings in the Christian context are given with the knowledge that all that we own comes from YHWH and that He is more interested in the attitude with which we give the offering rather than what and how much we give. Likewise, while believers and non-believers alike use similar body gestures while praying, there are (or at least should be) very different attitudes toward, and conceptual understandings of, this common form. Believers should be given instruction on prayer so that there is no confusion as to the theology behind it.

With respect to the practice of *RT*, whether the hermeneutical community will reject, modify, or accept it will depend on their ability to replace pagan meanings and attach Christian ones to the form (Baeq 2010, 201-202).

*Principle 3: YHWH's revelation is progressive, that is, it becomes gradually and increasingly more clear with the passage of time (Kaiser 1978, 234) so that it moves from the visible and tangible forms and rituals to the invisible, eternal spiritual truths.* The concept of messianic redemption has become increasingly more complete and encompassing over time.<sup>39</sup> In this particular passage YHWH used David's desire to build a "house of cedar" to explain the coming of an eternal King, the Messiah.

Similarly, the Ten Commandments are clarified from the Old to the New Testament, all the while giving greater value to spiritual truths. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount parallels Moses' delivering the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. In the Mosaic covenant, it was sufficient not to commit murder, the emphasis being on the outward display of obedience to the law. In contrast, when it comes to the New Testament, Jesus clarifies the true intent of the law and says that thinking murderous thoughts, calling a brother "Raca," or not being reconciled to a neighbor, all falls under the commandment "Do not murder." Jesus fine-tunes and clarifies God's precepts and shows that the intent of the heart takes precedence over the outward appearance.

In regard to the practice of *RT*, it should be understood that Cambodian religion and culture are heavily based on external forms and rituals. Western Christianity, on the other hand, has had sufficient time through its long history to move from an emphasis on visible and tangible forms to more invisible spiritual truths. Thus a huge chasm exists between the way that Western Christian missionaries want to relay the Good News versus how Cambodians are ready to receive such a message. They need a "stepping-stone" to go from the tangible, visible religious culture to the invisible, spiritual truths taught

by the missionaries. They need both a stepping-stone and time to cross it. It is conceivable that contextualized pagan forms can serve such a function, as something to bridge the gap between a maturing Christian culture and a pagan one. With each generation, this gap is lessened and, once they are able to internalize spiritual truth, the need for the stepping-stone may disappear entirely.

One application of this principle may be that a contextualized form of the *RT* would be allowed on a temporary basis just as YHWH allowed the temple as a temporary arrangement. Even if the *RT* is modified to convey Christian truths,



it should only be a stepping-stone to decrease the antagonism of Cambodians against Christianity so that Christianity is not perceived as a foreign and dishonorable religion that seems almost anti-Cambodian. If YHWH was willing to wait for His people to completely conform to His ways and will, missionaries should not be quick to dismiss what seems like the entire traditional culture of the Cambodians.

*Principle 4: A christocentric messianic message must be the highest cause and the primary reason for adopting pagan forms.* Despite the danger of syncretism, YHWH permitted the construction of the temple in order to

establish Messianic redemptive history through it. The contextualization of the tabernacle into the temple strengthened the nation and developed the concept of a Messianic dynasty.

To apply this principle to the practice of *RT* would require creativity. Since the *RT* is by the main gate, one suggestion is that a cross be placed on top of the miniature house so it will resemble a church building. Further, in the miniature house that is the *RT*, a praying-hands statue can be placed inside instead of a statue of Buddha, a *Neak Ta*, or some other idol. In this way, whenever a Christian enters the home, he or she can be reminded to pray for his or her household. Further, it could be used as a reminder that the church is not a building to be visited weekly but rather the body of Christ both gathered in churches and scattered in homes and places of work. Moreover, it could be a reminder that Jesus is the head of the church and of the household of faith, the one who dwells with us and in our hearts. The Bible could remind them to always put the Word of God in the center of their lives and to whole-heartedly follow His ways.

*Principle 5: Even when contextualization is successful, there is always the danger that the Christian meaning of accepted forms will become altered or distorted, and thus a constant openness to reformation is necessary if syncretism is to be avoided.* Even Solomon's temple, which made a name for the Lord, lost its purpose over the successive generations. Empty rituals were carried out merely for the sake of keeping religious ordinances, and both kings and the people began to turn to other gods. Once a form begins to lose its intended meaning, rituals can themselves become the focus of worship. Thus God raised up many prophets to get the people to turn from their wicked ways. Even when another temple was built

during Ezra's time and the returning Israelites repented and truly turned to God's ways, by the time of Jesus' ministry, His "Father's House" had once again become a den of robbers.

Similarly, if the practice of *RT* is contextualized so that a new Christian meaning is conferred on the *RT*, the congregation should continue to be reminded not to focus on the physical structure (lest they revert to idolizing the form) but rather to focus on the christocentric meaning that justifies its use. Furthermore, just as the notion of the temple was eventually "internalized" through the redemptive history of the Messiah, the role and significance of adopted pagan forms should diminish so that the Christians are weaned away from the forms themselves, lest the forms become objects of worship.<sup>40</sup> Christian meaning should be reinforced, strengthened and internalized so that the need for the forms diminishes over time.

### Conclusion

The principles that emerge from this Old Testament passage are not limited to the five listed above. And other passages will need to be studied to uncover yet other principles. Contextualization is neither an easy nor an instant process, but requires comprehensive effort and a great deal of patience. I have tried to address the first and second steps of critical contextualization in this paper. However, as Hiebert has recommended, critical contextualization has to be done from an *emic* (insider) perspective of cultural and biblical analysis (Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 21–28). Since this paper was drafted in the absence of the local community of faith, the suggestions made here are based solely on the author's experiences of engaging students, doing research, and teaching cultural studies at

**U**nless decisions are made by the community of local believers, any decision, even if good and appropriate, can easily become irrelevant.

the Cambodian University for Specialties (CUS) in Kampong Cham, Kingdom of Cambodia.

The next step is the critical evaluation of what was learned from the first two steps (my attempts at descriptive and biblical analysis). This step of reflecting on the biblical teaching and cultural realities needs to be carried out within the local community of faith and missionaries as they engage in intensive dialogue. Unless decisions are made by the community of local believers, any decision, even if good and appropriate, can easily become irrelevant to the actual faith community (Hiebert et al. 1999, 27–28). The role of the hermeneutical community, which is comprised of local leaders, believers, and missionaries, is critical for successful contextualization. The purpose of this paper was to simply to make some suggestions that would promote the critical contextualization of the *RT* (see Appendix 1, p. 38).

This brief survey of the practices surrounding the *RT* has sought to provide some general insights into the ethical and social functions of these rituals as they relate to everyday issues in the lives of Cambodians. In traditional folk religion, the practices of *RT* have provided answers about filial piety, communal relationships, social ethics, health, safety, fortune, and the meaning of life. The task of contextualization must also meet multiple needs. After these related forms and meanings are analyzed, the pagan meanings need to be detached and replaced with Christian meanings that not only provide profound answers to everyday issues but also show that God is concerned even about the smallest needs. Even if the

*RT* is creatively adopted to convey Christian meaning and worldview for the current generation, believers will have to be vigilant in guarding the new Christian meaning from mutation.

If the missionaries and Cambodian Christians continue to denounce the practice of *RT* and refuse to engage with the issues that are relevant to Cambodians, the pull of folk religion may cause some believers to go underground, creating a hidden level of false meaning and practice. In this case, they would hold both an orthodox public faith and a more private traditional faith that still conserves older meanings and practices. The failure to allow the church to address the meaningfulness and significance of *RT* practice may create a "schizophrenic" faith in these believers (Tillich 1964, 3). Indeed, the practice of *RT* may or may not be modifiable for Christian use but the decision must remain with the Cambodian believers. Giving local Christians the opportunity to deal with these issues over time will help them to discern Biblical truth more clearly than before so that whether they decide to modify and accept the *RT* or denounce it, they will have clear reasons for their convictions.

Good contextualization cannot be created overnight or without critique and opposition. Agents of contextualization should anticipate these hurdles in their ministry of transformation (Kraft 2005, 255–273). As Kraft has pointed out, time is a critical factor in contextualization.<sup>41</sup> Each generation will need to re-evaluate the efforts of the previous generation and strive to keep their faith and practices pure. **IJFM**

Appendix 1. Suggestions for Critical Contextualization of the *Rean Theivoda*

	Practice	Belief	Biblical Reference	Social Function	Christian Response
Structure	Angel Tower ( <i>Rean Theivoda</i> )	Place of service for haunting spirits and ancestral spirits	2 Sam. 7:1-29 2 Kings 5:15-19	Generosity toward people and toward the spirits	Preserve the structure with noticeable changes but reject spirit worship
	Spirit House ( <i>Preah Phumdey</i> )	Style of Hindu or Buddhist temple		Worshiping high gods and earthly angels	
Offerings	Food	Spirits of the unborn, dead children, and those who died on the streets without any family	Mark 7:14ff Rom. 14 1 Cor. 8-10 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1	Social ethics toward travelers, weaker people, and the marginalized	Reject the offering of food to the spirits but teach social responsibility for the marginalized and prayer for them
	Flowers (Jasmine, Lotus)	Worshiping ancestral spirits ( <i>Neak Ta</i> )	Acts 14:13 Ps. 103:15	Filial piety toward living parents and dead ancestors	Discard the practice but emphasize Biblical teaching about respecting and obeying parents
Prayer	Prayer or Wish ( <i>Bueong Sueong, Attitan</i> )	Protections and blessings	Ps. 65:2 Luke 6:12 Col. 4:2	Household and communal protections and blessings	Prayer for family, community, the church, and world missions
	Burning of Incense	Ascends with their prayers to heaven	Ex. 30:1 Luke 1:10 Rev. 8:3-4	Visual confirmation of their prayer	Needs further discussion

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rodney Stark, a professor of the sociology of religion at Baylor University, describes this phenomenon as “temple religion,” which has a long history since ancient civilizations (2007, 64–112).

<sup>2</sup> As the Western missionaries have endeavored to reach all people groups from different religions, races, and cultures, terms like indigenization, inculturation, contextualization, and appropriate Christianity have been used to make the Gospel message and praxis authentic to them (Shorter 1988; Hes-

selgrave and Rommen 1989; Gilliland 2002; Kraft 2005). Each term overlaps in meaning but puts different emphasis on certain aspects of making Christianity appropriate and relevant to different people groups. The word ‘contextualization’ was first used by Shoki Coe (Coe 1976) to move beyond *indigenization* to transforming society as a whole (Ott, Strauss, and Tennent 2010, 266).

<sup>3</sup> In his book *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Hiebert added self-theologizing as a fourth principle to Henry Venn’s three-self principles (Hiebert 1985, 193–224).

<sup>4</sup> The theme that this paper is dealing with, *Rean Theivoda* (angel tower), falls in different dimensions of Smart’s model (1996). It has a *materialistic* dimension because these rituals are carried out at a structure; a *ritual* dimensions because prayers and food offerings are practiced daily; and *ethical* and *social* dimensions, because it teaches moral values and reinforces appropriate social behavior.

<sup>5</sup> According to Hiebert, there are three responses to the old belief system; acceptance, leading to syncretism; rejection, leading to a split-level Christianity; and engagement,

leading the community of believers to critical contextualization (Hiebert 1985, 183–190; Hiebert, Tienou, and Shaw 1999, 20–29).

A notable aspect of critical contextualization is that it is not conducted by the missionary (as was traditionally the case), but rather by lay Christians and church of leaders of the target group, with the missionary's support and guidance. In this case, the missionary is merely the facilitator and is there to try to answer difficult theological questions. Critical contextualization shifts power to the local people.

<sup>6</sup>The author taught cultural studies at the Cambodian University for Specialties (CUS) in Kampong Cham from 2005–2009 and collected ethnographic research papers from student assignments on various subjects on Cambodian culture, including the practices involving the *Rean Theivoda*. 62 students submitted research papers on this subject.

<sup>7</sup>One good example of lexical adoption is the term “priest” in the Old Testament. The Cambodian Bible adopted *preah song*, a word of Sanskrit origin used to refer to Buddhist monks. More than half of the Cambodian hymnal consists of traditional melodies that new believers are accustomed to hearing and singing.

<sup>8</sup>Since then the Cambodian church has enjoyed freedom of worship and missionaries have rushed into the country to make up for lost time. According to the Association of Korean Missionaries in Cambodia (AKMC), approximately 45–50 Korean missionary units entered Cambodia annually between 2006 and 2009.

<sup>9</sup>The structure of the *RT* looks much like the “spirit houses” found in Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. They differ slightly in size, style and extravagance, but are always located next to the main gate of the house so that the family members can pray whenever they go in and out of the gate.

There is a platform (usually on a pedestal made of cement or wood) on which is some type of miniature house with a roof over it. Some are very modest, while others are quite large and painted with gold colors. The style of houses differs greatly. Some look like the Hindu temples in Angkor Wat, others like Buddhist temples, and yet others like traditional houses made of wood. Regardless of style or size, it must look like a shelter so that the high spirits can dwell inside the structure and the lower spirits, under the platform.

The high spirits include *Neak Ta* (ancestral spirits), the Hindu angels, and Buddha. The lower spirits are the spirits of the homeless (who have died in or near the house) and of unborn or prematurely deceased children. Religious expression in Cambodia is closely related to

architecture, dancing, music, sculpture, etc. In other words, expressions of faith tend to be outward and visible. The *RT* as a structure serves to remind them of many of their beliefs and values.

<sup>10</sup>Destroying or moving the *RT* invites scrutiny from villagers. Leaving it alone also tempts new Christians to fall back into old practices and to entertain the lingering question of whether difficulties in life are due to neglect of the *RT*.

<sup>11</sup>According to the Evangelical Fellowship of Churches in Cambodia (EFC), 0.3% of the population was evangelicals in 2004, but this percentage grew to 0.7% in 2008 and 1.3% by 2009.

<sup>12</sup>John (pseudonym) is a Korean missionary who used to work in Thailand. His ministry is a good case of this rejection model. In the mid-nineties, he planted a church with a few Buddhist background believers. He required the new believers to denounce their “spirit houses” and destroy them before baptism. It became a ritual for John to go with new believers to their homes and help them to destroy their spirit houses. But early in the 2000s, while he was helping destroy a spirit house, some of the neighbors called the newspaper; John's picture and the burning spirit house appeared in the major newspaper. The head monk of a nearby temple convicted John, but he fled the country immediately. In 2003, missionary visa quotas were reduced significantly for Korean mission agencies and within a few years later some of mission agencies closed their offices in Bangkok.

<sup>13</sup>While many Cambodians have welcomed recent modernization and the economic aid that has gone hand in hand with NGOs and missionaries, the older generation feels that “Westernization” is making their culture immodest and that the younger generation disregards their customs.

<sup>14</sup>Conflicts between Cambodian Christians and Buddhist nationalists have been reported in major broadcasts and daily newspapers in Cambodia each year (Croucher 2003). See the following: <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/11105.htm>

<sup>15</sup>In the folk beliefs and practice of *Rean Theivoda*, people worship many other spirits; *Mrun Kongviel* (the spirits of the unborn or children who died early), *Vinnien Areak* (spirits of people who died on the streets without family), or *Preah Phumdey* (heavenly angels designated to each house to protect the family members) (Chhun 2010).

<sup>16</sup>This research was based on interviews conducted in 2006 with students of the Cambodian University for Specialties and with local Christian leaders who reside in Kampong Cham province.

<sup>17</sup>Chou, Ta-Kuan, a Chinese ambassador who traveled to the Angkor Empire during 1296–1297, observed their religious life. He records that in addition to the main statue of Buddha—which people called “*Po-lai*” (a Chinese transliteration of *Prab* (*Preah*), god or divinity of religion)—the Buddhist temple had many “buddhas on the towers,” to which people sacrificed “fish and meat” every morning (Chou 1992, 11). This is very similar to the present practice of *Rean Theivoda* and explains why Buddhist temples today preserve the spirit houses around the temple.

<sup>18</sup>The author of Chronicles also recounts the same event with his own interpretation. In depth study of 1 Chronicles 17:1–15 is also recommended.

<sup>19</sup>The ark had been captured and placed in a foreign temple, then placed in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh (1 Sam. 6:1–15) and in the house of Abinadab (1 Sam. 7:1).

<sup>20</sup>His previous attempt to bring the ark to the city of David was unsuccessful when Uzzah accidentally touched it and it ended up being left in the house of Obed-Edom (2 Sam. 6:1–11).

<sup>21</sup>Deuteronomy 17:14 “When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us.”

<sup>22</sup>“No!” they said. “We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam. 8:19b–20). Payne states that Saul's kingship over Israel was not the original will of God but His “permissive will” (Payne 1972, 325). Israel's petition to have a human king was “to conform to the standards of their pagan neighbors” (Payne 1972, 323). Kaiser also notes, “God had promised Abraham (Gen. 17:6,16) and Moses (cf. Deut. 17:14–20),” that they will have a king, but the Israelites “could not wait for God's timing and insisted to have one right away” (Kaiser 1995, 77).

<sup>23</sup>Roland K. Harrison further indicates that “Phoenician skill was drawn upon heavily in the design and building of the Temple, although the general pattern of the wilderness Tabernacle was basic to the structure” (Harrison 1969, 410).

<sup>24</sup>The people of Babel also wanted to make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:4) “Come, let us build ourselves a building with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and be in unity and not scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

<sup>25</sup> In 1 Kings 5:5, 8:17, and 8:18 Solomon quotes David as having told him to build a temple for the Name of the Lord.

<sup>26</sup> God recognized David's genuine intention to bring glory to God. 1 Kings 8:18 has Solomon quoting YHWH, "But the Lord said to my father David, 'You did well to have it in your heart to build a temple for my Name.'" Further, immediately following God's covenant with David, David responds to God saying, "... Do as you promised, so that your name will be great forever" (2 Sam. 17:25b, 26a).

<sup>27</sup> In the same account in 1 Chronicles 17:4, God answers, "You are not the one to build me a house to dwell in."

<sup>28</sup> In 1 Chronicles 28, David gathers all the officials to announce that God has endorsed the establishment of his dynasty and has, by the Spirit of the Lord, given detailed instructions for a temple. In v. 12 it says, "He gave him the plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the LORD and all the surrounding rooms, for the treasuries of the temple of God and for the treasuries for the dedicated things." Also in v. 19 it says, "All this," David said, "I have in writing as a result of the Lord's hand on me, and he enabled me to understand all the details of the plan."

<sup>29</sup> King Manasseh of Judah is described as the king who led Judah and the people of Jerusalem astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites (2 Chron. 33:9). In 2 Chronicles 33:2-6, "He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places ... he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshipped them. ... In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built alters to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his children ... practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spirits."

<sup>30</sup> There are covenants, including the Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Palestinian, Mosaic covenants. Among them the Davidic covenant is unique and important for messianic hope (Enns 1989, 503-512).

<sup>31</sup> 1 Chronicles 17:14 says, "I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever." This "house" cannot be Solomon's temple because it was destroyed by the Babylonians. The second temple was built as recounted in the Book of Ezra and later renovated by Herod.

<sup>32</sup> Permission to construct the Temple was granted despite the dangers of corruption and of "a state-supported religion" that

would "place itself wholly at the service of the state and [would] begin to hallow the state in the name of its God" (Bright 1953, 41).

<sup>33</sup> The construction of the temple was accompanied with divine signs: answer to prayer at the site (2 Sam. 24:18-25), divine instructions concerning the design of the temple (1 Chron. 28:12a), and God's consecration of the temple after the dedication ceremony (1 Kings 9:3).

<sup>34</sup> The Israelites gave wholeheartedly for the construction of the temple just as their ancestors had done for the building of the tabernacle during the Exodus (Ex. 35:4-36:7).

<sup>35</sup> Bergen lists many New Testament teachings concerning Jesus based on the Davidic covenant, which shows Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills the Davidic covenant on the house that YHWH promised. "(1) the son of David (cf. Matt. 1:1; Acts 12:22-23; Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rev. 22:16, etc.); ... (3) the builder of the house for God (cf. John 2:19-22; Heb. 3:3-4, etc.); ... (5) the possessor of an eternal kingdom (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-25; Eph. 5:5; Heb. 1:8; 2 Peter 1:11, etc.); (6) the son of God (cf. Mark 1:1; John 20:31; Acts 9:20; Heb. 4:14; Rev. 2:18, etc.)" (Bergen 1996, 337-338).

<sup>36</sup> Caldwell interprets Jesus' response to the Samaritan woman, "not on this mountain nor in Jerusalem temple" (John 4:21) as a recognition of both places (Caldwell 2000, 26). By teaching about the true worship for two more days in Samaria, Jesus freed the Samaritan believers to worship YHWH in spirit and in truth *even at the temple* on the Mount Gerizim. The location of worship place should not be the central issue, if religious form and meaning are detachable. This permissive adoption of pagan cultures was also practiced to free the new community of worship during the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 (Flemming 2005, 43-53; Higgins 2007).

<sup>37</sup> In fact, God himself has ordered questionable things. For example, he commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. There are biblical texts that tell how God detests the sacrificing of children. So why does He ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? First of all, God's intention was not the blood sacrifice of a human being, rather the testing of Abraham's faith.

<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that Christians do pray and are to pray unceasingly to God. Christians pray to God because as sons and daughters we can boldly come before him with the least of our concerns. In the practice of prayer in *RT*, prayers are not confided to someone in a confident relationship but to unknown spirits with unknown

intentions. If the practice of prayer is to also be used, it must be made clear that the object of Christian worship and prayer is neither "*Neak Ta*" nor lesser spirits (*vinmen areak*).

<sup>39</sup> Messiah was represented in many ways: the seed of the woman, the sacrificial lamb, our High Priest, King, the Anointed One, etc.

<sup>40</sup> Tillich calls this "demonization," when syncretism leads to a form that becomes more important than the sacred meaning (Tillich 1964, 60).

<sup>41</sup> Yet, for this struggle over time to successfully make a foreign culture able to "present and practice the Christian faith" at all times, I would recommend Peter Beyerhaus' three steps of biblical adaption or possession (i.e., selection, rejection and reinterpretation) as a helpful spiral development of contextualization (Beyerhaus 1975, 119-141).

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