


Spiritual Transformation and Inculturation as a Key to the Understanding of Sacred Architecture: Case Study of Wooden Church Heritages in the Northeast of Thailand

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ABSTRACT

 This paper is an exploration of key concepts to understanding sacred architecture. The first part of this article is divided into three topics; the first studies the meaning and anatomy of the sacred. The second topic is the concept of spiritual transformation as a key to understanding what sacred architecture represents. The third topic discusses the concept of inculturation as another key concept to understand how the sacred is manifested in the world.

In the second part of the article there are analyses of wooden churches that belong to the decades-old Christian community in northeast Thailand and their heritages. The analysis of both cases will show how spiritual transformation occurs from an urban scale to a building scale, and how the cultural context can solidify the form of architecture and what it meant to the communities.

Keywords: *sacred architecture, spiritual transformation, inculturation, vernacular architecture*

THE ANATOMY OF SACRED

A proper study of the concept of the Holy or Sacred, emerged during the early 20th century. Nathan Soderblom (1866-1931), a Lutheran priest and theologian, asserted in 1913 that the central notion of religion was holiness and the distinction between sacred and profane was basic to all real religious

life.¹ This concept influenced Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), also a Lutheran theologian and scholar of comparative religion, who develop the idea of Numinous (adj.) that derived from Latin word *Numen*²

Otto described the sacred as the element that, "Profoundly affect us and occupy the mind [...] in the lives of those around us, in sudden, strong ebullitions

¹ Nathan Soderblom, "Holiness (General and Primitive)," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* vol.6, ed. By James Hasting (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1913).

² Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), page 7.

of personal piety and the frame of mind such ebullition evince, in fixed and ordered solemnities of rites and liturgies, and again the atmosphere that clings to old religious monuments and buildings”³ (sic). From his point of view, the sense of the sacredness can be perceived through a numinous one. Otto stated that the sacred experience can be understood through the expression of *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*, a mystery before which man trembles and is fascinated, is both repelled and attracted.⁴

The idea of distinguishing between the sacred and the profane was influenced through *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957) by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), one of the most influential historians relating to religion in 20th century. Eliade pointed out that the sacred can be understood through the concept of Hierophany, the manifestation of the sacred into this world, that converts the profane existence to the sacred existence through four elements: Sacred Space, Sacred Time (related to story in the myths), Sacred Nature and cosmic order, Sacred Life (human existence and his body).⁵

Eliade states the relationship between four elements. First, the manifestation of the sacred into the profane world always started from the center, the most sacred part of the sacred place. Second, by the manifestation of the sacred through natural element and cosmic order, religious man can realize the sense of sacred in this world and engage with them differently from things in the profane world. Third, every sacred ritual is the symbolization of events in mythology, which is revealed through the story of the hero, the prophet, the God, and the god or goddess. Fourth, by engaging with the sacred through a manifestation of space, time, natural elements and order, through the sanctified life of ritual, the world of religious man can becomes real and meaningful. Many of Eliade’s works show how to study and analyze the sacred. Studying symbols and rituals in a historical context is the foundation

to understanding their manifestation within society and can become a basis for a study of comparative religion.

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Understanding symbolism alone is not sufficient to understand how the sacred manifests and connects man to sacred architecture. Religious architecture is not merely a denotation of symbols, but real and physical phenomena in which man must engage and experience, both functionally and emotionally.

It works as a vessel for the sacred journey from the profane world to the sacred world; the way religious men can transcend from a mere human to the state of a sacred one. As Nicholas W. Roberts described, “The architecture of some place of worship leads the visitor on the journey or pilgrimage from the everyday world of the street to the most sacred place. The journey, sometimes made more significant by physical difficulties, emphasizes the separation from the profane world and allowing time for contemplation.”⁶

Therefore, sacred architecture should provide the spiritual transformation along with the symbolism between ritual and architecture.

INCULTURATION: THE EMBODIMENT OF THE SACRED MANIFESTATION INTO THE PHYSICAL WORLD

Sacred architecture is neither a symbolic style which was successful in the past, nor a random expression of architects. Religious architecture has to be considered as both. As William P. Alston described, “Concepts without feelings are empty; feelings without concept are blind.”⁷

Symbolism and transformational aspects are not

³ Ibid., page 12.

⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans* [Online] 29 May 2016. Available from: <http://global.britannica.com/topic/mysterium-tremendum-et-fascinans>

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The sacred and the profane: the nature of religion* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987).

⁶ Nicholas W. Roberts, *Building type basic for places of worship* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004), page 3.

⁷ William P. Alston, “Tillich’s conception of a religious symbol,” in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1974), page 13.

enough for sacred architecture to manifest itself because concept and emotion do not belong to the physical world. However, architecture is the concrete form of the cultural context to which it belongs.

This article will introduce another key concept to understanding sacred architecture, Inculturation. Inculturation is the interaction between Christian faith and the non-Christian cultures it encountered. As a theologian, anthropologist and priest, Aylward Shorter defines inculturation as, “The creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures”⁸ Therefore, inculturation can be represented in various ways such as art, architecture, music, ritual, or dressing.

In this article inculturation does not exclusively mean the phenomena that occur only in Christian tradition or history. When given an expanded context, the concept of inculturation appears numerous and significantly all over the world in various religions and cultures. An example of this would be the transmission of Buddhism from India to China in 1st Century, and blending with Taoism, Chinese traditional arts, and iconography.⁹

In the process of transmitting Buddhism to Japan in 6th Century, inculturation appeared through the concept of *Shinbutsu-shugo* or syncretism of *Kami* and Buddha, the worship of Buddha and *Kami* at the same time. Another distinct case is cited in Alexander Horstman’s research, *The Inculturation of a Transnational Islamic Missionary Movement: Tablighi Jamaat al-Dawa and Muslim Society in Southern Thailand*. These examples show that the concept of inculturation does not belong solely to Christianity. Therefore, in this article, inculturation does not only mean interaction or blending new religions within cultural contexts, but it will be shown as a concept of how sacredness is embodied and cultivated onto the unique and diverse contexts of Thai people.

WOODEN CHURCH HERITAGES IN THE NORTHEAST OF THAILAND

The case studies for analysis of how important spiritual transformation and inculturation in this article include:

1. Songyae Church, official named Archangel Michael, Songyae Church is located in Songyae village, Yasothorn province, northeastern Thailand.
2. Nabua Church, official named Epiphany, Nabua Church is located in Nabua village, Sakon Nakhon Province, northeastern Thailand.

HISTORY OF THE CHURCHES

Songyae Church and Nabua Church are located in the northeast of Thailand, known locally as the Isaan region (อีสาน). They are built within Catholic villages of the same names. Songyae village is located 43 kilometer from the Yasothorn provincial city; Nabua village is located 86-87 kilometer from the Sakon Nakhon City. Historically, the two villages are quite similar. Their geographic environments are both filled with swamps and thick forests. Compared to other communities in the region, both locations are fertile. In the earlier days of the settlement, the people moving into the areas faced frequent and serious bouts of fever, most likely from what is now known as Malaria. The new villagers were hesitant to stay too close to the existing villages. When sickness and death became more evident, a rumor started that a Fierce Ghost and a Strong Ghosts (ผีดุ ผีแข็ง) possessed the area. The less sociable and the weaker members of the community were accused of being Ghouls (ผีปอบ) in disguise. They were subsequently expelled from those early settlements. They settled in the area where both villages are now.

⁸ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (NY: Maryknoll, 1988)

⁹ Rong Xinjiang, “Land Route or Sea Route? Commentary on the Study of the Paths of Transmission and Areas in which Buddhism Was Disseminated during the Han Period”, *Sino-Platonic Papers* 144 (July 2004): 26-27



Figure 1a, 1b:
The image of Songyae Church (left) and Nabua Church (right)

French missionaries who had the power to exorcise and cure people were invited into the settlements. The cured people admired these new savers, and the Catholic Church gained new congregants. That is the historic beginnings of the churches and their villages, 1887 for Nabua and 1890 for Songyae. (Figure 1a, 1b)

THE SETTING

The settings of the Songyae Church and the Nabua Church are similar. Both Catholic villages, are distinctly divide into two territories, the village

and the church. Songyae Church is located in the northern part of its village; Nabua Church is on the west side of its village. The locations of both villages are rural. Even though they are Catholic villages, they do share similarities with other Isaan villages. The houses are grouped into *Kooms* (คุ้ม), a cluster of houses that belongs to relatives or close friends. A *Koom* is the sub-community in villages or towns. *Kooms* that belonged to the Buddhist Sacred Place (Wat or temple) are called *Koom-Wat* (คุ้มวัด), meaning the sub-community that surround the temple. The people in each *Koom-Wat* generally join ceremonies or rituals in the temple of their own *Koom*. (Figure 2-5)



Figure 2:
The site map of Songyae Church. Source: Google Map



Figure 3:
The site map of Nabua Church. Source: Google Map



Figure 4:
Songyae's village gateway



Figure 5:
Nabua's village gateway

RITUAL AND THE SACRED PRESENCE OF THE VILLAGE

Songyae village has a unique sacred architecture called Prayer Shrines (จุดสวด), small shrines which have a cross and an altar. There are seven prayer shrines in Songyae, each having its own territory. The people in the *Koom* around the shrines are expected to take care of their shrines as part of their civic responsibility. Before sacred processions, the shrine is decorated. On the Assumption of Mary's Day, there will be an arch with flowers and leaves with the altar containing a small statue of Mary, which is also decorated with flowers. On Christmas Eve, the shrines are decorated with handmade stars combined with electric lights and the altar holds a Christmas grotto representing the Nativity Scene.

For every sacred procession that occurs in the Songyae church, the people of the *Koom* will gather at the shrine. As the procession moves around the *Koom* they pray together with the priest for the purification, protection, and blessing of prosperity. (Figure 6)

In this respect, the character and purpose of prayer shrines in Songyae share a resemblance to Spirit

Houses. In Thai culture people believe that every place has its own spirit called the Lord of the Place who conquers and protects the place (เจ้าที่). In the forest or in natural sites these spirits are called Lord of the Forest and Mountain (เจ้าป่า เจ้าเขา). People show their respect to those spirits by building and maintaining small shrines where spirits or Devas (divine being) can dwell. To please those spirits proper worship or offerings are made, the offerings can be flowers, joss sticks, or food, especially on ceremonial or important days. Spirit house can be found in every part of Thailand.

Songyae's prayer shrines resemble a community spirit house, which belongs to a community or a village. Most villages in Thailand have their own shrine that belongs to the village or community.

In Christian cultures, there are also shrines, but not shrines in which spirits dwell. The purpose of Christian shrines is to remind people about the presence and teaching of divine persons. (See Roman Catholic's Code of Canon Law, Book IV Part 3, Can.1230 and 1234) Those shrines are generally found along pilgrimage roads, and crossroads in rural areas called a *wayside shrine*.¹⁰

¹⁰ Milda Baksys Richardson, "Reverence and Resistance in Lithuanian Wayside Shrines", *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 12 (2005): 249-267.

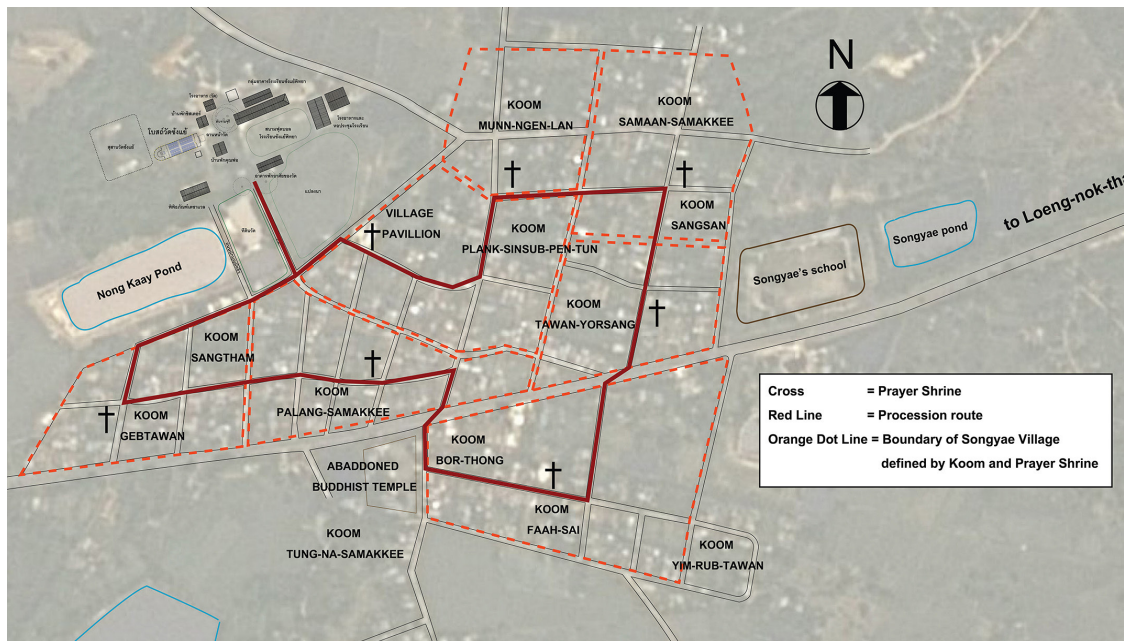


Figure 6:
Diagram showing the routes of the sacred processions and positions of the seven prayer shrines inside Songyae village, and the territories of the Koom which belong to each shrine.

Songyae's prayer shrines have characteristics similar to both community spirit houses and Christian shrines:

1. Prayer shrines belong to the divine presence of the Christ and sacred rituals in the church. They do not belong to an individual spirit as local spirit houses do.
2. The main reason for rituals and offerings to spirit houses is the Animistic beliefs, the fear of and protection from spirits who can be either good or bad. People always properly worship and give offerings to spirit houses. While rituals and ceremonies that happen at prayer shrines belong to events of the Catholic liturgical year.
3. Each of Songyae's prayer shrines belong to the *Kooms*, in the village. The responsibility for cleaning and decorating lies with the people in the *Kooms* surrounding the prayer shrines
4. Even though the prayer shrines and spirit houses are different by their contextual representation, rituals, and the sacred entity that belongs to them, both of them work the same, as moral defense mechanism. Both the prayer shrines and spirit houses remind people of divine presence within their territories, and being aware of that keeps behaviors in check.
5. The difference of physical attribution: as spirit houses belong to spirits, its dwelling place is built to resemble a house,¹¹ while each of the prayer shrines is built as a cross and an altar. Additionally, Songyae Church also has other shrines built to resemble local houses. There is a shrine for Virgin Mary in front of the church. The shrine is made of wood, with gable roof and opening in the front. This shrine resembles a grotto of the Virgin Mary in Western style, it applies local, wooden architecture and is decorated with local style vases and flowers.

¹¹ For Phra-Phoom (พระภูมิ), who is Deva (เทวดา), their spirit house must be built as a temple with a spire on top (that represent Mount Meru in Brahmanism.)

Finally, the prayer shrines also provide an area in which Songyae villagers can recognize the sacred trace. The sacred trace is the important factor that makes people perceive the sense of sacred in their territories. The sacred trace in each prayer shrine neither belongs, nor exists, by them but it is:

- 1) *Sacred presence of the church* as the sacred center of the whole area
- 2) *Ritual of procession* that takes place into the village.

- 3) *Boundary of the village* that distinguishes profane of the outside from sacred inside.
- 4) *Koom*: that is the Isaan's concept of dwelling.

The concretization of the four factors with its physical attributes creates the presence of the sacred in the ritual. When the ritual ends, what is left is the sacred trace recognized by Songyae villagers. It reminds them that the place they are attending is a sacred place, protected by divine presence of the Christ. (Figure 7-12)



Figure 7:
A spirit House in Trok Mor community, Bangkok. Source: Damnoen Techamai



Figure 8:
Ritual for Settlement of the Spirit House. Source by Kittisak Rathprasert from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p40bQPtHQHA>



Figure 9:
One of the prayer shrines that was decorated on Assumption's Day.



Figure 10:
The villagers, from the Koom that belongs to the prayer shrine, gather around the shrine to receive blessings in a sacred procession.



Figure 11:
 Decoration of a prayer shrine during a Christmas procession of the sacred star. It is one of the important ritual/cultural ceremonies of the Catholic community in Isaan.



Figure 12:
 The Virgin Mary shrine in front of the Church building.

SACRED JOURNEY: THE TRANSITION TOWARD A SACRED CENTER

Both Songyae and Nabua churches use the Rain trees or *Chamjuree* trees as the center of their churches' area. The trees work as a transitional space that calms body and mind prior to entering the church. To profoundly understand how the Sacred Dimension of the Church's *Chamjuree* tree manifests itself as a sacred threshold and the symbol of life, one must understand the relationship between the giant tree and its sacred dimension in Thai culture and its significance in the belief system.

BIG TREE AND SACRED DIMENSION IN THAI CULTURE AND BELIEF

In Thai culture, Animism drives the main stream religion. People grow up believing that every big tree has its own divine spirit who protects and sustains the tree and its surrounding environment with prosperity and liveliness. Therefore, Thai people would wrap Three Color Silks around the trees, symbolically representing the sacredness of the trees. This also works as an indirect warning to unknowing people not to cut or damage those trees. To show their respect, people worship and give offerings to spirits who belong to those trees, as well as placing spirit houses beneath them.

When Buddhism became the main religion in Thailand, this belief did not disappear. It was proselytized and adjusted. The three color silks were changed to Yellow Silk that represents monks' clothing. This ritual process is known as Tree / Forest Ordination (บวชต้นไม้ / บวชป่า). The context of the ritual became ordaining those guardian spirits to a monk and keeping the role of protector and sustainer of nature at the same time.

For Thai people large trees are always a symbol of the sacred and life. A sacred tree can be located on private properties, in commercial areas such as banks, parking areas, or tourist's sites. If those trees have a religious role, they will be given more significance. They are considered a Sacred Threshold that defines sacred spaces around and inside religious places. (Figure 13-18)

The function of *Chamjuree* Tree that belongs to religious places can be classified into two categories:

1. Physical function: the tree is used as a recreational area, the umbrage provides freshness and calm that adjusts the temperature of the body before entering a building. This function is important due to the hot-humid climate of the area.

2. Spiritual function: the tree is used as a transitional space that provides *Sa-Ngob* (สงบ) means stillness and *Rom-Yen* (ร่มเย็น) means shade + cool. For Thai people, “ร่มเย็น” have deeper meaning. It can mean physical shade and shadow,



Figure 13:
A family is worshipping the spirit of Bothi trees, which is wrapped with three colors of silks at Wat Kham Chanot, Udonthani province. Source: udon-news.com



Figure 14:
A rain tree wrapped with three colors of silks in a tourist site in Kanchanaburi Province. Source: www.amazingthaitour.com



Figure 15:
Bothi tree wrapped with yellow silk on the Thai Commercial Bank's lawn, Thalad Noi, Bangkok. Figure by gratisod, source: <http://pantip.com/topic/34567325>



Figure 16:
Bothi tree at Wat Si Maha Pho, Prachinburi Province. This tree works as a center of a sacred space and the place for a Buddha statue, with a circle cloister surrounding the area. Source: <http://board.palungjit.org/attachment.php?attachmentid=1093352&d=1281960266>



Figure 17:
Rain tree with a spirit house, in front of Wat Pong Sanuk Tai, Lampang province. The presence of the tree provides tranquility before entering into Temple (Wat). Figure by Memories pink, source: <http://2g.pantip.com/cafe/blueplanet/topic/E10937131/E10937131.html>



Figure 18:
The shadow of a Bothi tree cast on Wat Pong Sanuk Tai's temple (Ubosot). The tree stands in front of temple, providing a presence of stillness and tranquility before entering into temple. Source: <http://thaiaibc.com/lampangnet/tag/wat/>

or the virtue or merit of governing body or divine being, that protects and provides peacefulness to the people, such:

- *Tai-Rom-Borom-Bothi-Sompaan* (ใต้ร่มพระบรมโพธิสมภาร) literally means under umbrage of *Bothi* + Abbot, that actually means *covering by virtue/merit of the King (to live peacefully in Thailand)*.
- *Por-Mae-Pen-Rom-Bothi-Rom-Sai-Kong-Look* (พ่อแม่เป็นร่มโพธิ์ร่มไทรของลูก) literally means Father and Mother is the *Bodhi* tree. The shade or Banyan tree shadows their own son; meaning the Father and Mother is divine the patronage of their own son. They can cover and protect their son like the sacred tree that provides shade, shadow and peaceful presence.
- *Rom-Yen-Pen-Sook* (ร่มเย็นเป็นสุข) compose of *Rom* + *Yem* (shade + cool) and *Pen-Sook*, be happy/prosperity, that means state of stillness, calmness (สงบ) as being under the tree's shade provides a peacefulness to beings.

Rom-Yen is an important concept with deep and wide meaning for Thais. People believe that the tree, its spirit and surroundings are sacred. People can live under the protection of the sacred or divine presence, as the Thai aphorism, *Nee-Ron-Ma-Peung-Yen* (หนีร้อนมาพึ่งเย็น) literally means run out from hot, to depend on cool, or abstain from the suffering and the sin that belong to profane world; to live calmly and peacefully in the sacred world.

SONGYAE AND NABUA'S CHAMJUREE TREE

The concept of *Sa-Ngob* + *Rom-Yen* is also utilized at Songyae's and Nabua's *Chamjuree* trees. When people come to church, they always like to stand under the *Chamjuree* tree before a ceremony or rituals take place. The *Chamjuree* trees perform as transitional spaces that adjust both people's body and mind before entering the Church.

Songyae Church and Nabua Church distinctly separate their own boundaries from the villages' area. In the case of Songyae, after passing through

the village gateway, the path leads to the end of the village. From this point, it is the transitional space that connects the village and the Church's area. It is 240 meters from the edge of village to the Church courtyard, which is under the *Chamjuree* tree. Looking along the road towards the area of the Church, the Church's building is hidden from view. Numerous trees cover the road leading toward the center of the Church's areas. The closer people come to the area, the denser the trees covering the space. As people walk along the path, the view of the Church building is hidden until they come to stand under three *Chamjuree* trees. The branches and shade of *Chamjuree* trees cover the entire area of the Church courtyard, and works as a visual guide to the Church. By making them the center of the place, the gigantic *Chamjuree* trees dominate the Church area. From this point of view, people can clearly perceive the image of the Church as it is gradually revealed to them.

In terms of the spiritual transformation, the separation between village and Church areas provide an awareness of crossing from one realm to another; from the sanctified village to the sacred place behind the grove, from the place of man to the sacred place belonging to God. The duality of existence, the concealing and revealing creates both an intoxication and fascination at the same time. It attracts people to search for the sacred that hides inside, and then they are impressed when it is found

In its environmental context, the Nabua Church differs from Songyae's. With no other tree inside the church area, Nabua's *Chamjuree* tree becomes the single, dominant object. It is the center and the image of the place. The tree's shade provides a respite for the people from the high temperatures. Nabua's *Chamjuree* tree stands as the church's terrace and the transition space between the outside and the portico of the building. When Nabua's villagers come to the Church they always rest beneath *Chamjuree* tree.¹²

The concept of *Sa-Ngob* + *Rom-Yen* can be found in both Songyae's and Nabua's *Chamjuree* trees. Therefore, the existence of *Chamjuree* trees inside Songyae and Nabua churchyard is not *just* the normal tree, but the symbol of sacred life that belongs to the church. At the same time they also

¹² Interview Jareon Chantarasunee, the secretary of the Nabua Church, 26 December 2014.

act as a sacred threshold, a place where people are reminded of changing levels between sacred church and the profane outside world. The *Chamjuree* trees are also the symbol of life, which peoples can live comfortably and be protected.

Furthermore, the existence of the *Chamjuree* trees of both Churches are included in cultural activities and ceremonies in the village, they act as a place for recreation, and place for interaction between villagers before and after services. In addition, Songyae's *Chamjuree* court also connects three different areas; the community hall, a school, and the

Church building. In Thai tradition, it is believed that a good society must be comprised of *Bo-won* (บวร). บ = บ้าน (*Baan*) or house/community, ว = วัด (*Wat*) or temple/sacred place, ร = โรงเรียน (*Roung-Rearn*) or school. The *Chamjuree* court acts as the center of them all, the center of Songyae's peoples' life. Whenever people come to the community hall for meeting, or send their children to school, they always pass through this place, the point where the image of the Church (toward front facade) manifests itself. The Nabua Church does not have a school near the Church area, so its *Chamjuree* acts as place for *Baan* and the *Wat*.) (Figure 19-24)



Figures 19a, 19b:

Songyae villagers are gathering and dancing under the Church's Rain trees during a cultural ceremony that is related to a religious day. Source: Songyae memorial data.



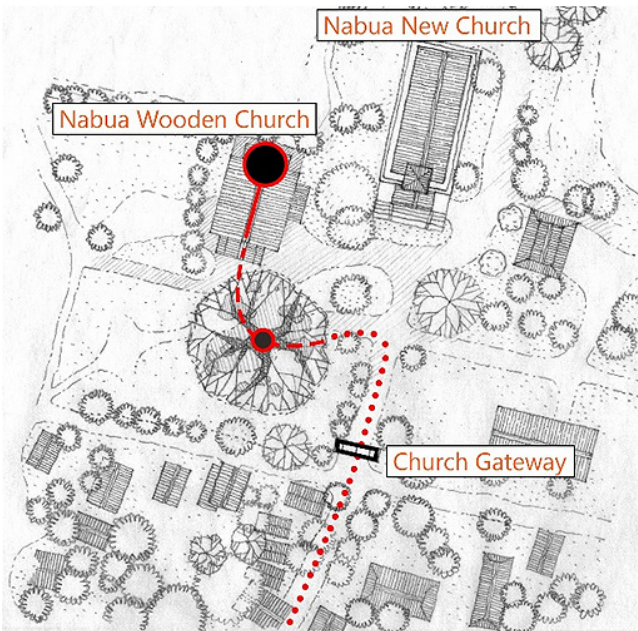
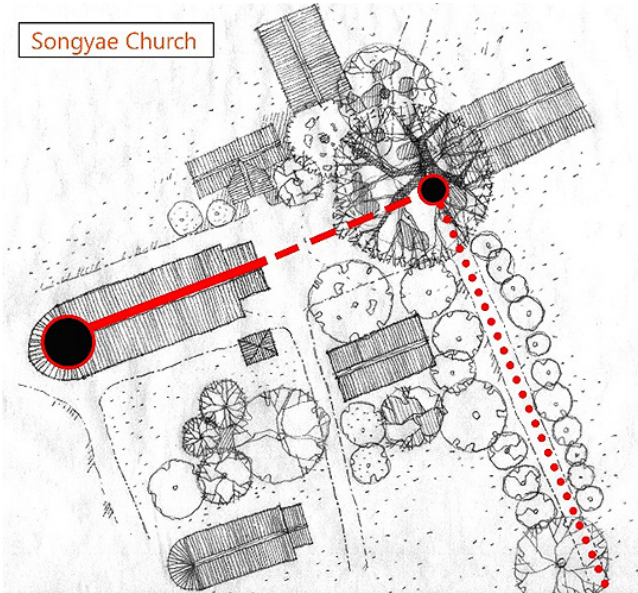
Figure 20:

Nabua villagers are gathering around the Church's Rain tree for a church activity (in this picture, show when the Church was moved toward road, before it was moved back.)

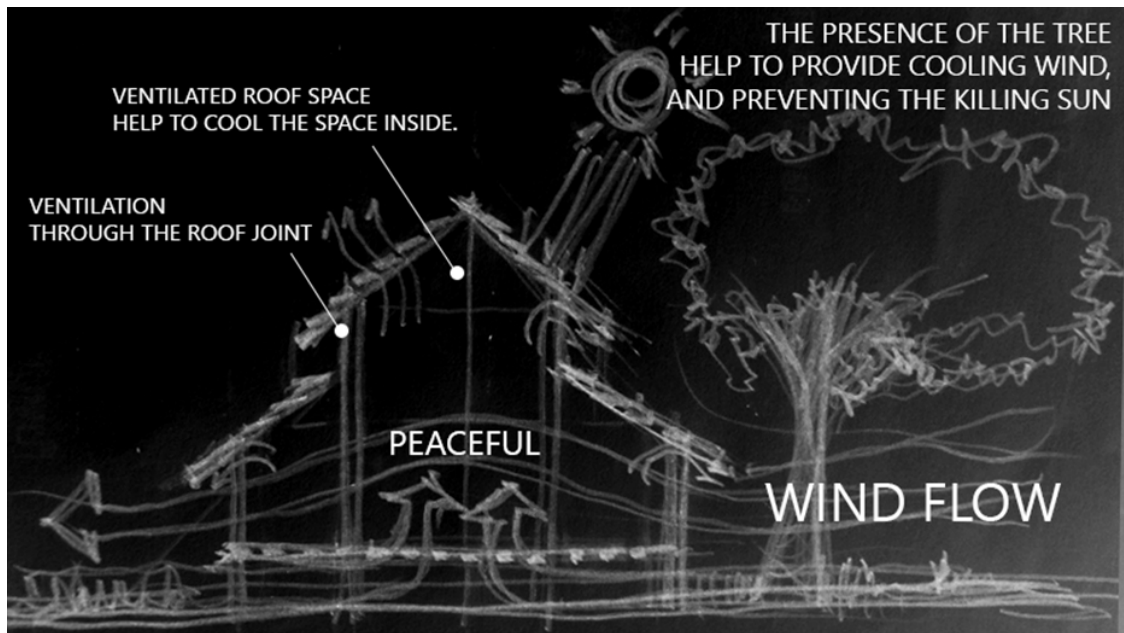


Figure 21:

Sanctification of Fr. Pierre Corlas and Renovated Church building, on January 2012. Source: Fr. Daniel Khuan Thinwan, Nabua's old abbot.



Figures 22 and 23:
Views from the Chamjuree trees toward Songyae's Church building (above) and Nabua's Church building (lower), and diagram shows relationship between the sacred path and the sacred center of the church.



Figures 24:
Diagram showing how the trees provide a sense of comfort and calmness in relation to church buildings.

ONE CHURCH, TWO SACRED PATHS AND SACRED EXPERIENCES

There are two paths to the Songyae Church. The first one is St. Michael's Road, which is the main road of village, the other one is St. Matthew's Road, which was constructed later. In the past, St. Michael's Road was the only convenient way to the church. Now when the visitors come from the nearest town, Kudchum, St. Matthew's Road is the main access to the village and the Church.

In 2015, Songyae Church made major changes to its access. The key factor to making this change was its gaining fame as "The Largest Wooden Church in Thailand". It became one of the more popular tourist attractions of the Yasothon province. Many people, whether as a tourist or as a pilgrim have come to this *Amazing Wooden Church*, (which is the Church's slogan) so the Church committee decides to:

1. Removed the village's gateway from St. Michael Road and built a new one on St. Matthew Road.
2. Completed the Church's gateway, to declare it the threshold of Songyae Church for visitors.

3. Build a parking area on the transitional space/field in front of the Church area. The parking area is next to church gateway
4. Build the walkway from parking area to the Church building. The walkway passes the Church museum.

With these changes Songya church now has two accesses: the entrance for Insiders (villagers) and the entrance for Outsiders (visitors)

Each of the different paths to the Church affects the Sacred experiences. (See Figure 25-27) The new approach designed for visitors allows for a different perception from that of the villagers' perceptions of the sacred. Visitors are not reminded about the existence of the *Chamjuree* trees as the center of Songyae's sacred way of life or are reminded of the existence of the prayer shrines, sacred processions, and *Kooms* in the village. Visitors perceive the Church's Gateway as the threshold, reminding them to engage with a sacred place, they understand the museum as an element along the pathway, and they observe the Church's building from the side not from a frontal view like Songyae villagers.

Meanwhile, people of Songyae still use St. Michael's Road as their main road. The path that brings them to the *Chamjuree* trees is still a place belonging to the community area, a place where parents send off their children, a place where image of the Church manifests itself before them, and a place for rituals.

For Nabua, the pathway from the village gateway to the Church is the same route. The road brings people to the Church's gateway at the end of village. From this point, people will see two Church buildings. The first building is the old wooden Church that was built in 1967, with the huge *Chamjuree* tree in front of it. The second building is the current Church. The new Church is a masonry construction and was built with money and labour patronage by Archdiocese of Tharae-Nongsang and by donations.

Currently Nabua Church has two approaches. The first approach to the new Church passes through the Church gateway along the road, with the new Church at the end. The second approach engages the *Chamjuree* tree first, before entering the wooden Church. (See Figure 28-30) Using either the first or second approach, people always gather under the *Chamjuree* tree before ceremonies occur.

After using the new Church, Nabua villagers became nostalgic for the old wooden Church. The villagers built the original Church and each concrete footing records the names of those who were involved, so it is a record of village history. Therefore, in 2012-2013, the wooden Church was renovated to be a memorial and museum. Although it is not used for regular ceremonies many villagers request special services to be held there when appropriate.



Figure 25:
Map of Songyae, the red line represent villagers' pathway of sacred procession and pathway to the Church and yellow line represent visitors' pathway, and the white cross represents prayer shrines inside the village.



Figure 26:
Views from villagers' path showing the Chamjuree tree that works as the center of the Church's area.



Figure 27:
Views from visitors' path showing the Church's gateway that works as a sacred threshold indicating the boundary of the Church, the museum, and the Church building which is approached from the side



Figure 28:
Map of Nabua Village, the red line represents the approach to the wooden Church, and the yellow line represents the approach to the new Church building.



Figure 29:
View from the path approaching the wooden Church.



Figure 30:
View from the path approaching the new Church building.

CHURCH BUILDING: THE BODY OF THE SACRED COSMOS

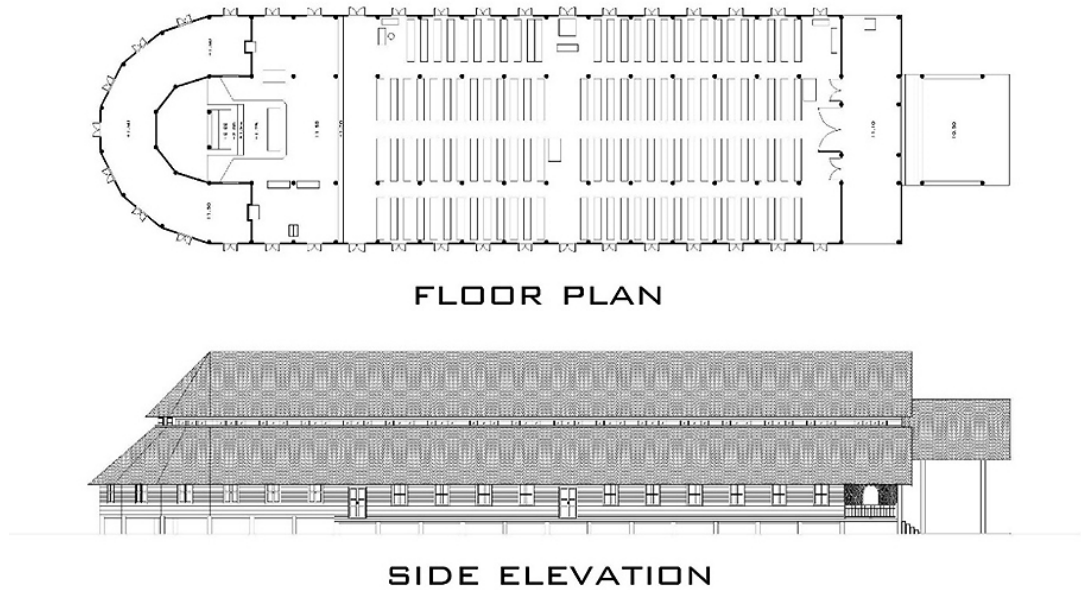
SONGYAE CHURCH

The current Songyae Church building is the fourth built by the Church. Construction began in 1947 and finished in 1952. The Church's building has been built and renovated by the villagers. It is made of iron, wood, and Dipterocarpaceae wood, featuring 227 columns and 80,000 wooden shakes. It's "The Largest Wooden Church in Thailand"; 16 meters wide, 57 meters long, and 13 meters high. (Figure 31-32)

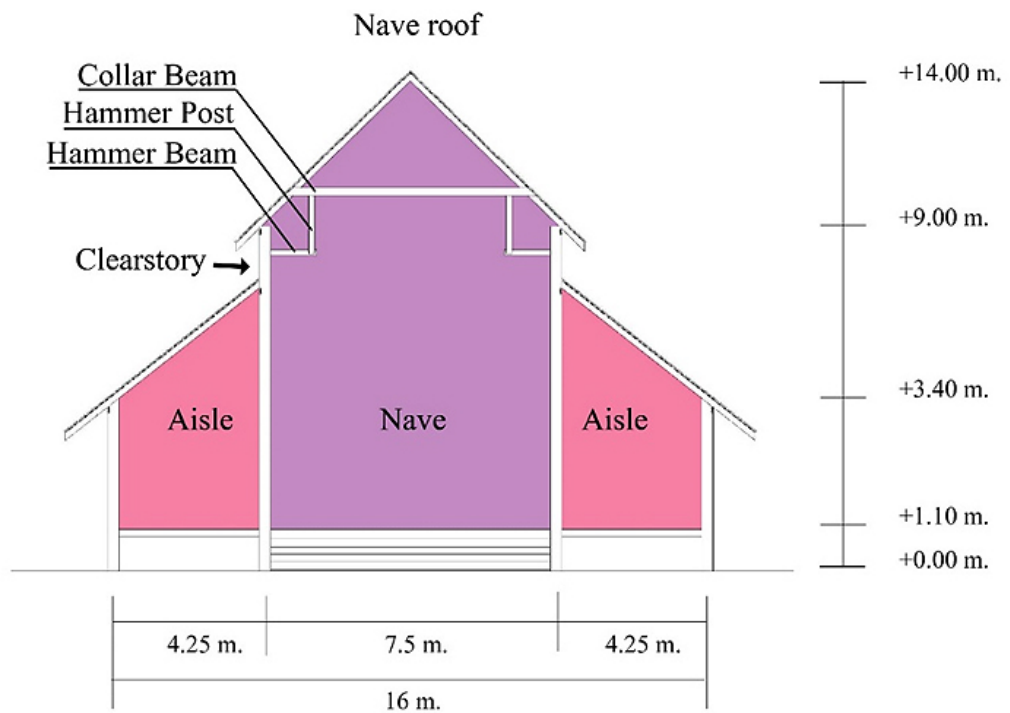
The Church has a longitudinal plan, the same as churches in Western Europe. The building is divided into three parts: four meters of narthex, 36 meters of nave and aisle and 17 meters of the sanctuary with an ambulatory at the end of the building. Light comes through the clerestory windows built into the side of the Church. The Monitor roof has two levels: a nave roof and an aisle roof.

The limitation of skilled workers, modern construction techniques, materials, and budget, are the main factors for any building in rural areas. Acknowledging those conditions, the Church has to be constructed and preserved by the villagers. Its structure should not be too complicate yet it must give the feeling of dignity and fascinating as architecture representing the House of God (*Domus Dei*), and has to be big enough for the congregation and its increases in the future.

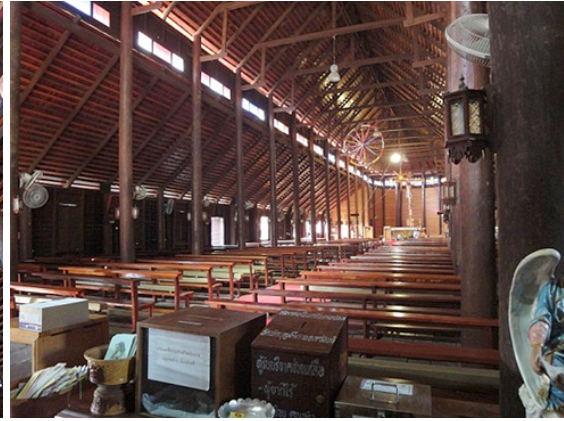
The church was constructed with a raised floor, and a roof structure made with collar beams instead of tie beams. The collar beam is supported by the hammer post that stands on the hammer beam, bracing areas over the clerestory windows. This type of roof structure provides a vertically open space and is visually pleasing without the disruption of tie beams. The continuity of clerestory windows makes the roof plane and its structure appear to float independently from the wall panels. This is the same technique, used for floating dome of Hagia Sophia, which surround by circle of light through the window at the base of dome, that make it look as floating in the air.



Figures 31:
Plan and section of Songyae Church building



Figures 32:
Cross section of Songyae Church building



Figures 33a, 33b:
The atmosphere inside the Songyae Church

The following elements generate gradations of shade and shadow: the variety of color values of the handcrafted wooden shakes that were cut and painted piece-by-piece, the light penetrating the gaps between the wall panels and rafters, and the depth of the roofing planes. The roofing planes give a sense of softness and diversity due to their natural properties. The shade, shadows, and the illusion of the depth blur the existence of collar beams dematerializing the roof planes; making it deep and mystical, transcending its material property. (Figure 33a, 33b)

NABUA CHURCH

Nabua Church was built in 1967. The design and construction management were provided by Father Pierre Colas (1934-1987), and the villagers. The Nabua Church building is “The Widest-Span Wooden Church in Thailand”; 15 meters wide, 27 meters long, and 12 meters high. The roof structure is a scissor roof; the foot of the scissor trusses braces the rafters.

The Nabua Church’s roof provides a double-pitched, gable roof. The main pitch’s rafter is braced onto the column, while the scissor trusses work as the

second-pitched rafter. This character provides the unity of space in the building. It’s different from the nave and aisle structure of Songyae and western church architecture. Furthermore, the main pitched rafters also provide visual guidelines to the top of the upper space and defines the significance and dignity of the space under the altar and cross.

When the heat is transmitted into the building, it will gather in the triangular spaces, and then flow out through *Kor-Song* (คอสอง), the wall vents between the upper part of the walls and the rafters. The Church walls are constructed by the local technique called *Fah-lai* (ฝาไหล). It is actually a sliding vertical window that becomes part of the wall. It is used to adjust light and ventilation in the building, similar to using vertical blinds. When it rains, *Fah-Lai* can be shut to prevent the rain, then the *Kor-Song* becomes the main source of ventilation. The low heat conduction of the wood, along with *Fah-Lai*, *Kor-Song*, and the raised floor of the Church always allows the wind to flow through upper levels (*Kor-Song*), middle levels (*Fah-Lai*) and lower levels (the space under the floor). These are the important factors in providing a comfortable atmosphere inside the church even though the temperature outside is quite high. (Figure 34-36)



*Figures 34a, 34b:
The atmosphere inside the Nabua Church*



*Figures 35:
Fah-Laai, the sliding wall vents.*



*Figures 36:
Kor-Song, the wall vents with cross bracing wood.*

THE CHARACTERS OF TRANSITIONAL SPACE SONGYAE AND NABUA CHURCH THAT RESEMBLES LOCAL THAI ARCHITECTURE

Influenced by the longitudinal plan of Western churches, Songyae Church had a small balcony inside the building that resembles the exo-narthex of Western churches. Later on, during the renovation of the Church in 2004-2006, the abbot re-designed

the Church's front façade and a portico was built. Boonlert Phromsena, the abbot of Songyae Church at that time, mentioned that, "To prevent the destruction of wooden plank of stair and balcony, and to provide recreation space for villager who come to the church."¹³ (*sic*). Similarly during Nabua Church's renovation of the façade a portico also provided.

The addition of the porticos to both churches changed the character of space before entering the buildings. Formerly, Songyae and Nabua porches were too small and not suitable for Thai climate and

¹³ Interview Boonlert Phromsenan, the abbot of Songyae Church, 31 July 2009.



Figure 37a, 37b:

Front view of Nabua church before the renovation, showing the small of Source: Fr. Daniel Khuan Thinwan, Nabua's old abbot.



Figure 38a, 38b:

The renovated portico of the Nabua Church in 2012.
Source: Fr. Daniel Khuan Thinwan, Nabua's old abbot



Figure 39a, 39b:

Front views of Songyae Church before the renovation.



Figure 40a, 40b:
The renovated portico of Songyae Church that works as a recreation and interaction area for Songyae's people.



Figure 41:
View from Wat Sutat's main temple toward to the temple gateway.

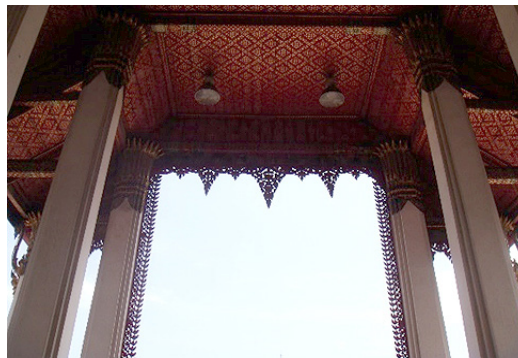


Figure 42:
Shading under the portico of Wat Sutat's main temple and its decoration that represent the concept of a sacred grove/forest.



Figure 43:
Carved window of Wat Sutat's main temple that represents the sacred tree.

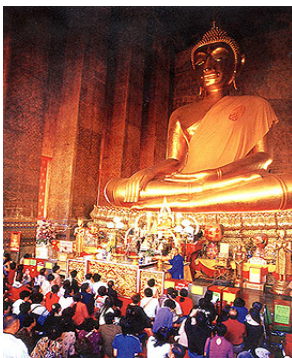


Figure 44:
The atmosphere inside Wat Kalayanamitr, showing the de-materialization technique from shade and shadow inside the building that holds the glistening statue of Buddha.
Source: <http://www.dhammathai.org/watthai/bangkok/watkalayanamit.php>



Figure 45:
The atmosphere inside Viharn at Wat Phra That Lampang Luang.
Source: [luckyinlife.multiply](http://luckyinlife.multiply.com)

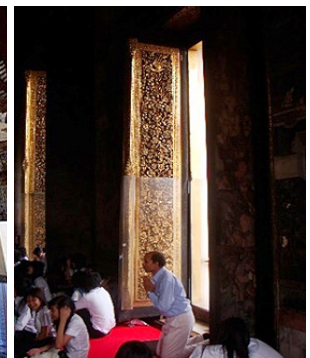


Figure 46:
The contrast between outside and inside the building of Wat Sutat's main temple.

culture. In the Thai culture of space, the portico or balcony (มุข, ชาน, ระเบียง) works as a transitional space and a recreational area, especially for the elderly who like to sit and talk to each other on the portico, before entering the main building. The portico also connects two kinds of spaces with different qualities: the hot air and blazing sunlight of the outer space, with the haziness and calmness inside the building. (Figure 37-46)

STEP UP TO THE DIVINE REALM

The raised floors of church buildings not only provide ventilation and wind flow inside the building, but also emphasizes the importance of those places. In Thai culture, raising the floor of a house represents a hierarchy of space, the ground floor represents the realm of the brute, where animals and beasts reside, which is different from the realm of man or *Manussa* (มนุษย์) that was derived from Sanskrit word मनुष्य, the composing of *Mana*, heart or conscience and *Ussaya* an elevated or high-mind, so *Manussa* signifies a being whose heart/conscience is elevated.¹⁴ Most stairs are made by wood, so if people do not step cautiously, it will cause noise that disturbs others.

The hierarchy of space and standing-sitting position shows the respect Thais are giving to the divine or to the elderly. When passing by or respectfully approaching elders, people kneel or bow down to show respect. This characteristic affects the design of architectural space, especially in Buddhist architecture. It enforces people to change their action from standing and walking in front of a temple's court, to taking off their shoes, to stepping up to the raised floor of a portico and showing respect to the sacred inside the temple, even before entering the temple. When inside, people are expected to sit down and move around with respect. They are then allowed to

look up to the statue which is raised higher than the floor level. The closer they move to the statue, the humbler their actions become.

In the past, Songyae Church was designed for congregants to sit on the floor. After the renovation in 1994, chairs were introduced along with adjustments to the windows' height. Even though changing from sitting on the floor to sitting in chairs, the Songyae people are still aware of the sacred threshold. When Songyae people come to church, they will first take off their shoes and when they move closer to the sanctuary or altar, they will sit or kneel on the floor to show respect to the divine, whether it is during a ritual or not.

In the past, only priests and important guests attending ceremonies of Nabua Church sat on chairs while others sat on the floor. The figures 49a and 49b, show the ordination ceremony of Fr. Surapong Navant, the first Nabua village-born priest in 1984. When the ceremony was finished Fr. Surapong, as guest of honor, sat on the chair at the gate of church building. Other villagers sat on the floor or lower level, even children outside the church sat on the ground to show their respect to their priest.

Therefore, in the term of spiritual transformation, walking up to the building is not merely a motion. It is the mediation between spaces. Everyone who wants to cross to another space must prepare, especially if that place is a religious place. One needs to be reminded that they are coming into a sacred space that is distinguished from a profane space. The sense of sacred in ritual-architecture¹⁵ can be found in many religions: body cleaning in a lavatory before going into a Jewish Tabernacle, putting a hand into the blessing water and making the sign of the cross when entering the Catholic church, bathing before Salah in the *Masjid* of the Islam, or cleansing hands and mouth and bowing before passing through the *Torii* at a Japanese temple. (Figure 47-51)

¹⁴ Dhiravamsa, *Nirvana Upside Down* (USA: Wisdom Moon Publishing, 2012), page 17.

¹⁵ Read more explanation in Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*, vol.2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).



*Figures 47:
The stairs of Songyae Church.*



*Figures 48:
The raised floor of Nabua Church.*



*Figures 49a, 49b:
The ordination ceremony of the first Nabua village-born priest.*



*Figures 50:
Visitors praying around the small Mary in the sanctuary.*



*Figure 51:
Villagers praying with repose around an altar in the sanctuary.*

LIGHTING AS AN AESTHETIC TOOL FOR A SENSE OF THE SACRED

In the case of Songyae Church the light characteristics and the atmosphere inside differs from the accustomed Buddhist architecture. As previously stated, Thai Buddhist Architecture usually provides the transition from heat to coolness, in this context represents leaving sufferings and troubles of the outside world to enter into coolness and calmness provided by the higher power, elders, king, or the teaching of the prophets. This allegory leads to the characteristic of indirect lighting in Thai architecture. The direct light as provided by the Western clerestory window, is not preferable in Thai architecture because the atmosphere inside would not have the intended effects of calmness and coolness under the shade. The brilliance of the centerpiece of worship would not be as effective also.

In the Songyae Church, even though western-styled clerestory windows are used, they are only a small horizontal strip. Looking at the exterior of the building, not only are these clerestories small, but they are placed under the shade of the roof's eave. There are also stained glass installations. This results in a soft light. Besides the light coming through the windows, there is light coming through the gap between wall panels and rafters. This light shines from below up to the roof giving the roof various dimensions, the lower part in clear light and the top part in darkness. This variation in light makes the roof look as if it was floating above the walls. At the end of the building is the ambulatory of the sanctuary. Lighter colored wood is used in combination with large clerestories surrounding the ambulatory causing the sanctuary to become brighter and more prominent. The combination

between local architecture and western architecture seems to perfectly complement each other.

Nabua Church's unique architecture differs from the Western-influenced Songyae Church. The usage of a scissor beams supporting the roof results in a wide span generally not found in local architecture. The usage of *Faah-Lai* and *Kor-Song* in a sacred space is also new, as it is not found in any Buddhist temples. The Nabua Church combines this physical uniqueness with traditional raised flooring. The raised floor is used for the ventilation and is the symbol of a higher plane of sacredness. *Faah-Lai* and *Kor-Song* are used to create calmness within the dim light and gives members a focus when performing rituals.

The light that penetrates the building, along with the existence of the church cross work as the Transcendental Point, the point where people cannot reach by their physical body, the point where they can't understand by the reason, the point where faith and fascination erupts from the deepest mind.

Finally, a significant attribution to the aesthetics is the vertical space inside religious buildings. It is one of the main properties belongings to sacred architecture around the world because the vertical axis represents the connecting point between realms: underworld, human world and heaven. So the upper spaces of both Songyae and Nabua Churches represent the transcendental realm beyond the human world. It is the sacred and divine realm of God, manifested through simple but elaborate construction of those wooden churches. It is the concrete result of local beliefs, local culture, local aesthetics, local materials, local techniques and skills, and the creativity of the builders. (Figure 52a, 52b)



Figures 52a, 52b:

The haziness of light and shadow in Songyae Church (left) and Nabua Church (right) that helps people focus their intension and lift up their spirit.

CONCLUSION

All of these researched components show the systems of spiritual transformation: the boundary of village that separates the sacred village from the profane outside, the village gateway, the prayer shrine as the sacred sub-center around the village and related *Kooms*. To move toward the Church one has to cross the realm through the hidden path before engaging with the *Chamjuree* trees, the sacred center of the place. Upon entering the Church one interacts with it mysteriously and fascinatingly.

One of the unique characters of these wooden church heritages is that they have been constructed, preserved and renovated by the villagers since the churches were built, not by outsiders, craftsmen, or labors. An important factor that helps to preserve this character is the wood construction, which is the local material in the area, and the simplicity of its structure which is suitable for local skills and local economies. The villagers can pass on the knowledge of church building from one generation to the other, so the wooden church heritage remains the property of the community. The villagers

love and care for it because they have built and preserved it for a long time on their own

The raised-floors, haziness of light and shadows, the dematerialization, the comfortable environments from the ventilation, and *Chamjuree* trees, the mysterious and sublime inside guiding to the cross and altars, are all part of the core of each of these two sacred places.

All of the researched elements show that the essence of sacred architecture is the process of the Spiritual Transformation through the composition of four architectural elements: the sacred center, the sacred path, the sacred boundary, and the sacred threshold. Every process of analysis must be considered in term of symbolism, emotional experience and inculturation. The contextual elements provide creativity; the uniqueness and the sense of belonging to the community are realized in the structures. The sacred architecture helps people transcend their physical boundaries. As Pope John Paul II stated, "The dialogue of the Church and of cultures assumes a vital importance for the future of the Church and of the world."¹⁶

¹⁶ International Theological Commission, Faith and Inculturation (1998) [Online], 29 May 2016. Available from: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1988_fede-inculturazione_en.html

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