

Article Responses

A Response to Langteau, Jun, Gossett, and Samora

by Marie Bauer

In my years working with the Shan people, I would often hear them say, “When I’m in Thailand I can be a Christian, but when I go back to Shan State (Myanmar) I have to be a Buddhist.” It would break my heart, for it shouldn’t be that way. Over the years I had to wonder whether we had taken the time to examine and understand the reasons Shan say this. If we knew, would be willing to adjust our strategy accordingly?

The distinguished authors of this article have done a good job of describing a very commendable model for ministry among the Shan. But I believe their approach displays some assumptions that may hide critical factors in dealing with the plight of displaced peoples. These are common assumptions, but I believe they can impair vital aspects of reaching out to the Shan effectively. It’s an approach that fails to consider the broader context of the Shan situation.

Essentially, I believe the linguistics of this therapeutic situation are crucial. In their approach it appears unnecessary to use the heart language of those you are ministering to. For instance, while the motivation to assist in the healing of trauma is compassionate, the authors seem to believe that it can take place without the facilitating therapists or the Shan believers themselves being able to communicate spiritually and effectively in the Shan language. The situation forces them to use a second language, which in this case is the culturally dominant language of Thai. It reinforces that the Shan people are the underdogs.

The authors explore how bilingualism is the mother tongue of many of the Shan they have encountered. I understand that many Shan speak both Thai and Shan, and will often-times mix Northern Thai and Shan together, since they are linguistically similar. But instead of saying that bilingualism is their mother tongue, maybe we should try to understand why they speak this mixture, and what they speak to each other when no outsiders are around. Shan people expect to speak Thai to Westerners and Thai people. They have probably never even considered that a Westerner or a Thai person could speak Shan, so out of respect, they speak Thai. Speaking Thai also elevates one’s status, which they would

be eager to do in the presence of those who are not Shan. They also want to fit into their new environment, not to draw attention to themselves, since it may invite questions about their identity or their legal right to be in the country for work.

The real issue, however, is what language they speak at home. What language do they speak when they call their family back in Shan State? Most of the time, that language will be one of the dialects of Shan. This is the heart language of the people. The grandparents and children left in Shan State do not speak Thai. If a healing relationship with Jesus is to truly be experienced, Shan people need to know that Jesus speaks their language and knows their culture, too. The use of Thai language in outreach will seclude the more recent Shan newcomers to Thailand, separating them from the Shan who’ve resided in Thailand long enough to learn Thai.

To answer my original question above, using the Thai language gives the impression that Christianity is essentially Thai and the religion of a dominant majority people. It communicates that God is Thai and in order to be Christian you have to be Thai. When you return to Shan State, one is essentially in a Buddhist world, and a change away from all that is Thai makes sense. The processing and healing of trauma, and the deep realities of faith, takes place at the heart level through the heart language.

I have witnessed great enthusiasm among Shan people when offered lessons in Shan literacy. When I learned the Shan language, many people said, “If the foreigner can learn to read and write Shan then I want to, too!” A Shan literacy class was created and now many can read the Shan Bible. As Christians, should we not be seen as those who strengthen the language and culture of those we seek to reach? Doors were opened to me that a missionary limited to the Thai language cannot really imagine.

The Shan culture and language are slowly being destroyed through migration and the systematic destruction by the Myanmar military and government. What is the role of Christians in this tragedy? A normative approach will accept that the Shan language is dying anyway, so we might as well ignore it. We need to be careful with taking the easier road. We cannot justify an approach that propagates the further irrelevance of Christianity to the Shan. We cannot neglect the importance of the Shan language, nor the study required in communicating effectively to Buddhists.

This approach also leads to questions of strategy. Throughout the article, it’s assumed that new Shan Christians will fit into the Thai church. They are introduced to Thai Christians, invited to services, and encouraged to become part of the Thai church. In my estimation, this assumption is the biggest factor keeping the majority of Shan from

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Christ; and, again, a life of faith in Jesus is not easily “translated” back into Shan State. This is tragic, since there’s such an incredible opportunity to introduce Shan people to Jesus while living in Thailand, and for them to then take their faith back to their home villages and families. Instead of the Christian practitioner in Thailand reaching and discipling people in ways that are directly transferrable back into Shan State, the practitioner can easily place the burden of transferability on the new believer. That burden should not be there. This is a sure way to stop a potential movement in its tracks. In fact, it encourages persecution of Christians, because they are more likely seen as traitors, as those who’ve left their culture for another. Again, are we willing to adjust our strategy? Or do we simply tell them they have to be strong and remain a Christian wherever they are, without understanding how our approach contributes to this problem? How far are we willing to go to “become like” those we are trying to reach? How can we best equip and prepare Shan believers to share Jesus back home?

If the growth of the church among the Shan in Thailand is dependent upon Thai seminary trained pastors (or in Burma, upon Burmese seminary trained pastors), there will never be much of a Shan church. This sets up a pattern of cultural and spiritual dependency from the beginning instead of sowing seeds of organic indigenous gospel spreading. A much better approach would be to let Shan people lead their own church groups from the beginning, without a foreigner as a middle man and conduit to God.¹ We have to prevent any sense of hierarchy, where the Shan are at the bottom. Foreigners will be seen as patrons, no matter how you slice it.

We cannot be unaware of this social and cultural hierarchy. Thai people are the ones with power; Shan people are powerless and dependent on the mercy of Thai patrons and employers. Westerners are even higher on the hierarchy, and usually seen as patrons by both Thai and Shan people. If we ignore this, it will create an unhealthy environment where Shan people feel pushed to accept the religion of the patron, as a way of pleasing them or gaining some favor. I’m not indicating it always happens this way, but it often can create an unhealthy and superficial understanding of our situation in sharing the gospel.

We can’t think that “interveners” will be considered as equals. The Shan world is a web of intricate and complex hierarchical relationships, a dance of give and take. These relationships are most important, not absolute truths. Much of the approach in this article is based on the Western

assumption that there are absolute truths that need to be discovered and appropriated, and that this is the key to healing. This approach is not part of the Shan worldview. When the relational dynamics are understood and adjusted to, this can provide an amazing opportunity for the good news to spread.

Throughout the article, there is only one perspective shared, that of the “intervener.” I think a proper study of the situation and any strategic intervention must include the perspective of those being served. This will require a longer period of observation, one in which we can study the effects among those who have been served. From my experience, outsiders coming into a Shan camp are greeted with suspicion; but after trust is built, outsiders are a nice diversion from the difficulties the Shan face daily. The attraction factor is usually based on the hope that the visitors will help them in some way. I have no doubt that the Shan are actually helped in some way. But we need to ask self-reflective questions before we launch. What is the end result of the intervention? What do we want it to lead to ten years from now? Is it in any way building a non-reproductive model? How can we adjust the approach so that the context of the Shan is taken into account?

I believe we need to address deeper and more endemic causes to this crisis with the Shan. For instance, we need to explore why the Shan do not seek asylum when coming across the border. Some of the reasons include their reticence to enter into the Thai system, which is unjust and very complex. They have more control over their lives if they remain under the radar, and work on the black market. And once in a refugee camp, it’s hard to get out.²

We need to be alert that our understanding of causes can present contradictions. The authors indicate that “The barriers to evangelism from language, understanding the Buddhist worldview, or the ability to deal with trauma are all overcome by the local Thai Church.” This is paradoxical to a statement a few sentences earlier where they identify the barriers as the Thai church’s inertia and lack of success. I would say the cause is neither. I would say that missionaries have yet to model well and have instead passed down an inability to understand, engage, and communicate the good news in the mother tongue using Buddhist words and concepts. After saying that little evangelism happens—and that which does happen is not successful—the authors suggest that the local Thai church is effective in communicating in the Thai language and the Buddhist worldview. How is effectiveness judged here? If the little evangelism

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that happens is not successful, then how is it an example of effective communication?

I strongly disagree that weekly collaborative meetings, transferred to Thai leadership and hopefully eventually to Shan, as they describe, is biblical, culturally sensitive, and honors people. It is none of these things. In my mind, holding weekly outreach meetings is not equivalent to a surrogate family. The authors write that the visitors are seen as family, but at what level? They also suggest that Shan is spoken at home, which would indicate that Shan language is for family members and Thai language for non-family members. Don't families do daily life together, and speak their mother tongue together? Weekly planned church-style meetings in another language is not family. It's probably entertainment at best, and propagating dependency and inoculating the people against the good news at worst.

Marie Bauer spent a decade among the Shan people focused on church planting. She and her husband continue their research and coaching in reaching Buddhist peoples with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

¹ For more on this, please see my earlier article in *Mission Frontiers*: Marie Bauer, "New Wineskins? A Case Study on How Assumptions About the Way We Do Church Become Movement Blockers," November 1, 2014, *Mission Frontiers* Nov/Dec 2014, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/new-wineskins>.

² For more information on this, see the work of Pim Koetsawang, *In Search of Sunlight: Burmese Migrant Workers in Thailand* (Orchid Press, 2001).

A Response to Bauer

by James D. Langteau

In response to Ms. Bauer's concerns, let me first address the use of language in the therapeutic process. I would simply say that the multi-lingual dynamic in this region of the world is quite unique. We try to address this complexity in our approach, and we do want to fully respect the value of indigenous language in the life of the Shan people as the article indicated.

My own Thai church is an example. We preach sermons in Central Thai and immediately afterward the congregation divides up into different small groups based on language preferences (Karen, Shan, Thai, English, etc.). This is done

for the purpose of discussing the sermon in small groups and applying it specifically to our lives. It's interesting that the groups are fluid: people move between the groups from week to week, demonstrating that they are not necessarily committed to one particular "native language" preference. In addition, we often hear code-switching during conversations within any given small group. After the small group experience at the end of the worship service, we all break for a communal lunch and fellowship together.

Oddly, this approach of incorporating small groups immediately after the worship service provides some extraordinary, diverse, and positive results.

1. It preserves and respects individual languages and promotes them.
2. It eliminates division and discriminatory barriers (and yes, discrimination is rampant though often subtle in this region) by respecting and embracing all people.
3. It celebrates ethnicities and languages, enhancing all of our lives by exposing us to differing perspectives.
4. It respects the choices of the individuals, since it allows each person to decide for themselves where and how they want to engage in the Body of Christ, rather than dictating to them or telling them what is best for them.
5. It provides a foundation for planting future churches, whether they will be modeled after this example or will choose to preach from a minority language.

Our approach to these displaced peoples is not primarily a choice between multi-lingual ministry or a more focused Shan language ministry, but between compassionate ministry in Thai or no ministry at all. We are serving in Shan neighborhoods where there is no ministry at all. Few would seriously hold back biblical ministry from desperate people until national and expatriate workers could learn the Shan language and share Christ in a carefully segregated linguistic manner—especially when the members of the people group themselves welcome a multi-lingual environment and are responding to it.

Our relationships with the Shan people should not be mischaracterized as superficial or ineffective. As the article indicated, we not only hold outreach meetings once a week, but we also meet often during the week as friends. In fact, we spend more time with our Shan friends and are actually closer to them than with our Thai or Western friends from the Church. And where lives were previously unengaged and unchanged, now we are seeing fruit.

In our church-style meetings the language groups are fluid: people move between the groups from week to week, demonstrating that they are not necessarily committed to one particular “native language” preference.

We are sympathetic to the cross-cultural concerns raised by Bauer, but we are more concerned about the differences *within* cultures than those *between* cultures. Surprisingly, I see far more grace and mercy shown between cultures than within cultures. The truth is that all of us are far more likely to be offended by or have conflicts with people from our own culture than with people from a different culture than ours.¹ The cross-cultural paradigm advocates that we avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings, but it often can be promoted to the point of not engaging others at all. We can't hold a model like the Pharisees who were more concerned with procedure and religious boundaries than they were to engage in actual ministry to others. It was a Samaritan who showed them how to express mercy in that segregated world.

The New Testament narrative describes ministry in multi-lingual environments, as in Acts 2 when Peter preached simultaneously to people from over ten linguistic backgrounds. The early church bridged ethnic groups, color, and nationality, for the Body of Christ transcends barriers. “There is neither Jew, nor Greek, slave nor free, male

nor female, for you are all one in Christ” (Gal. 3:28). Jesus Christ destroyed the barriers, the dividing wall of hostility, and made us one people (Eph. 2:14–15). Therefore, we do not see these people as a culturally segregated project, but as family. Our hope is, after over one hundred years of missions in this region, that this witness would finally see an increase of Christians above 1% of the population. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Bradley Kirkman, Vas Taras, and Piers Steel, “Research: The Biggest Culture Gaps Are Within Countries, Not Between Them,” Harvard Business Review, May 18, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/05/research-the-biggest-culture-gaps-are-within-countries-not-between-them>.



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