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SHARE Newsletter

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“Hill Tribes’ Blood is in my veins.” —an Advocate Walking alongside Marginalised Hill Tribes

Written by: Lai Ka Chun

In mid-2018, a junior football team and their assistant coach were rescued after 18 days in Tham Luang Nang Non cave in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. Their 25-year-old coach’s care in the cave was indispensable. This incident made the coach a hero in Thais’ hearts. However, this coach was originally stateless, as well as the other 3 boys, who had no Thai citizenship.

According to UNHCR, there are about 480,000 stateless people in Thailand, and most of them were living in remote mountainous area near the border. As they belonged to no country, they could not enjoy the rights of education, healthcare, employment, and social security as other citizens. Even though they lived on Thailand’s border generation after generation, their identities were not recognised by the country.

For stateless people were marginalised by the mainstream for long, their situation was rarely known. Although the coach and the boys passed the verification of identity last August and were naturalised as Thais, it was likely due to their worldwide attention.

“I am of hill tribes.”

Tui, from Karen tribe in northern Thailand and a CEDAR’s companion, has concerned on rights of hill tribes in northern Thailand for over 20 years. His antecedents migrated from Myanmar to northern Thailand. Tui grew up in the hills and witnessed the hardship of hill tribes as second-class people since young. During his adolescence, he moved to a small town nearby the border with his family and learned Thai and English. Upon university graduation, he did not start working in hotels in the city as his fellow hotel management graduates, but he spent a year to visit 60 villages along Thai-Myanmar border. He saw

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the tribal blood is running
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-Tui, UHDP



In This Issue

Focus: “Hill Tribes’ Blood is in my veins.” —an Advocate Walking alongside Marginalised Hill Tribes

Back To The Bible:
Resurrection and Integral Mission

Join Hands Join Hearts: We are awaken: STOP Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Taking Action: When Poverty Becomes a Sin



Tui

poverty in tribes. Tui said, “Since then, I changed my path. As part of the hill tribes, the tribal blood is running in me, I can probably help them.”

Being brought up in town, Tui deeply understood the importance of language learning. After graduating, he volunteered for teaching hill tribe children Thai at a school. He hoped that the children could use Thai and hence minimise the discrimination against them when they continued their study in town. Later, he joined an international Christian children organisation and spent eight years there to learn about poverty alleviation and development work. This experience broadened his horizons and equipped him with community-based development skills. Tui dedicated himself to hill tribes’ advocacy and development after leaving the organisation. He joined another Christian organisation, Upland Holistic Development Project (UHDP), to help hill tribes in aspects of agricultural enhancement, advocacy for their civil rights and natural resources.

“Many hill tribes living near northern Thai, Myanmar and Laos borders are stateless. For example, Karen people have been living in northern Thailand for more than 700 years, but they, like other tribes, have no land rights and no proof of ownership of the land they live on,” Tui said. In recent years, the Thai Government began developing national parks or forests on a lot of hill lands, meaning that the lands belonged to the state. This made it more difficult for tribes who had been there for generations to obtain land ownership. This seizure of land entitlement implied that their homeland for years can be taken away suddenly, putting the tribal communities in an even more vulnerable condition.

Developing Sense of Belonging to Land

However, it is never easy to fight for hill tribes’ land entitlements. Therefore, on one hand, Tui works with other NGOs to delegate tribal representatives to submit appeal to the government and advocate for their rights of land; on the other hand, he helps them register their identities to gain official recognition for legal residency. In fact, it takes time to advance changes of the government’s policy on hill tribes.

Prior to any change in policy, poverty of hill tribes is the current challenge Tui has to respond. Tui shared, “Though they do not have the official land rights, while they are still living here, they have to learn how to preserve and utilise land resources they depend on. They have to develop the sense of belonging to the land.” Tui and other UHDP members then organise residents to form a management committee, and make a plan of hill lands with the help of technology, so that they can set rules of use. UHDP also suggests organic farming and land protection that their farming

methods are more suitable for their lands, and hence their income increases in long term. Tui said, “They love the forests. We hope that they would manage their places well by making good use of their resources.”

UHDP implements advocacy and development work according to the community’s ability and resources, which aligns with CEDAR’s belief. Over the years, CEDAR and UHDP have been assisting those hill tribes without farmlands to grow vegetables on small land spaces next to their houses. They can provide for themselves by growing seasonal vegetables and bananas with natural fertilisers, or keeping chickens, pigs and fish. If they manage their small farms in backyards well according to the seasons, their produce should be sufficient for their family, and even sell in the market or share with their neighbours. Tui said that backyard farming was initially hill tribes’ culture. UHDP supports them to master the techniques and enhance their produce’s quantity and quality.



Backyard farming

“Our colleagues come from different tribes and can speak tribal dialects. We first enter local communities and learn from them. Then we make development plans based on what they have.” Tui believes that hill tribes have their unique wisdom and their work has to be contextual. If we impose a particular model onto communities, the result can only be counterproductive.

Embracing his ethnic identity and dedicating to advocacy and development for hill tribes, Tui’s commitment illustrates his respect and obligation to the community. May Tui’s service encourage each of us to be a beautiful testimony in our own environment.

Resurrection and Integral Mission

Written by: Au Bing Chung (Lecturer at the Christian Ministry Institute)

Resurrection is an eschatological idea, and Integral Mission addresses the responsibility and stewardship of Christians living on earth. Although there seems to be no apparent connection between the two, the eschatological view of Christians will affect how they interpret their missions.

Paul systematically illustrated the beliefs on resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 with 58 verses in total. He challenged the false beliefs of the Corinthian church about resurrection with a witness record of the resurrected body of Jesus Christ (vv. 1-34) and conveyed to Corinthian Christians by metaphors the idea that there will be a new body, an utterly transformed body after the resurrection (vv. 35-44). Moreover, Paul appealed to the inseparability between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of Christians that the former was deemed as a paradigm for the latter (vv. 23, 48-49).

While 1 Corinthians 15 only talks about bodily resurrection without explicitly addressing the renewal of the world, N.T. Wright, a New Testament scholar, has embarked a theological discussion of the imminent new kingdom and new creation in light of the resurrection. Wright proposed that the Kingdom of God is not a foreign entity which is somewhere distant in the heavenly realm. His kingdom will realise on earth as in heaven to bring in a renewed world at the end days. In other words, it is both a renewal and continuation of the world that we live in. Wright drew on 1 Corinthians 15:58 to encourage Christians that whatever they do now, be it related to social construction, justice, or caring ministry, will contribute beyond their current lives into welcoming the Kingdom of God.

(Read full article: <https://cedarfundeng.wordpress.com/2019/04/03/share232-bible-study-eng/>)



We are awake: STOP Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Under the warmth of the bright and serene sun, a group of Ethiopian village and school girls stood before a hundred villagers, and sang songs with shiny smiles and beaming faces. Some of them had a uniformed yellow T-shirt on, where the slogan “STOP Female Genital Mutilation” was displayed clearly in the local language. This day was the special day of village education day, and also the performance day of the advocacy club.

Even though Ethiopia government legislated female genital mutilation (FGM) illegal back in 2004, the practice of such act indeed has continued, since the cultural practice is deeply rooted; change of cultural practice and mentality of practitioners often takes time. FGM (also known as female circumcision) is administered on young girls in Ethiopian villages between the age of 12 and 16, usually by female tribe leaders or village healthcare workers. Such “circumcision” can be in various forms. They include removal part or all of the clitoris, inner and outer lips of the vagina, and closure of the vulva. In the last form, known as infibulation, a small hole is left for the passage of urine and menstrual fluid. FGM is a harmful traditional practice that it causes damage to women’s health, such as recurrent infections, pain during intercourse and childbirth, complications during childbirth, and fatal bleeding.

The largest national evangelical church network Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church (EKHC) truly understands the lasting harm that FGM custom imposed on local girls and females, therefore EKHC has been committed to fighting against it. EKHC explains that communities support FGM due to the following reasons:

- Reducing women’s sexual desires in order to prevent promiscuous sexual behaviour
- Taking FGM as a cultural rite of a girl’s initiation into womanhood
- Regarding FGM as equivalent to male circumcision prescribed in the Bible

Since 2014, CEDAR has been supporting the anti-FGM advocacy programme of EKHC Development Commission (EKHCDC). EKHCDC mobilises schools, churches, and government agencies in western Ethiopia where FGM custom is prevalent. The advocacy activities include village education sessions, formation of advocacy groups in schools and villages, cross religion forums; and most recently small focus groups of mothers were formed, aiming to end FGM at this generation.

The results since 2014 are encouraging: the number of female under-16 who suffers FGM has decreased 80% compared to that in 2012, 49 advocacy groups have been formed with over 3,400 participants. Anti-FGM messages are no longer a taboo but gradually being accepted. A young married couple shared their hearty message with villagers: they decided to reject such harmful traditional practice, therefore they have been able to enjoy a happy marriage relationship, where the wife does not need to suffer unnecessary pain during sexual intimacy nor childbirth.

In order to reverse a cultural malpractice, especially one that is deeply entrenched in gender inequality, advocacy driven by both genders is essential. We give thanks to God that the EKHC programme has been effective and has brought positive changes to Ethiopia. Though CEDAR's financial support to this project will end in June 2019, we invite you to continue praying for the beneficiaries, for Ethiopia's villages that still administer FGM, for the women who suffer from FGM, and for the realisation of Ethiopian government's will to become a "Zero FGM" country.



Janice Cheng (far right) and other trippers visited ethnic minorities in northern Thailand

When Poverty becomes a Sin

Written by: Janice Cheng (participant of CEDAR's exposure trip in 2018; church pastor)

In December last year, I went to the Thai-Myanmar border with CEDAR to learn about their poverty alleviation projects in the area. We visited some villages with CEDAR's local partners and spoke to local residents who are mostly ethnic minority groups from the mountainous areas. Since they have not been granted Thai citizenship, they do not enjoy any social welfare, employment or education benefits or support.

The Thai-Lahu Foundation (TLF) is a Christian organisation that mainly serves the Lahu ethnic group. They help the minority groups improve their living standards by providing them with knowledge of agricultural techniques, health and sanitation training, and education support. Led by the organisation's staff, we went to villages and visited two churches that TLF has a connection with. If a Christian organisation helps to fulfill people's material needs, then a church helps to fulfill their spiritual needs. These two ministry approaches complement each other.

In one of the churches we visited, the pastor and his wife came from a church in a big city. Their original plan was to establish a church at the Mae Sai border area in northern Thailand and carry on with their "evangelical mission". However, the issues arising from poverty and injustice in the region confronted them to reconsider the role

of the church in the community.

In the border area of northern Thailand, owing to their circumstances and personal limitations, many ethnic minorities have often become victims to exploitation and oppression in the hands of criminals. Their wages are suppressed and their women are easy targets for human traffickers. Having children is perhaps a curse to them because they do not have the necessary means to provide for their children. There are also many women who have been sexually-assaulted that need protection and company to overcome the dark experience. These situations persuaded the pastor and his wife to make their local church as a base to connect with the local community and to provide necessary services to the residents. The couple also gave all they have to provide foster care for a group of children.

In Jesus' time, many perceived the grassroots, the sick, and the poor as sinners. Even though these marginalised groups had never committed a moral sin, the privileged looked at them as having been cursed by God. On them, "poverty" equalled to "sin", and their "sin" was innate.

If poverty is indeed a sin, it is a "sin passively borne by the sufferers". The poor do not have the autonomy to choose their living environment and are powerless to overcome the predicaments caused by their surroundings and social structure. At some point, they would inevitably have to commit the "sins" which we regard as immoral, such as prostitution, surrogacy, drug cultivation, and other participation in criminal acts.

In this way, poverty is indeed an extremely destructive "sin". In the old days, Jesus Christ deliberately walked among the marginalised groups. He wanted to repair the relationship between the poor and the rest of the world and to re-establish the lives of these "sinners". Since Jesus has already demonstrated how it is done, the church as the bride of Christ should eagerly follow in His footsteps. Have we been lacking the courage to face and respond to the problems induced by poverty?

(Read full article:
<https://cedarfundeng.wordpress.com/2019/04/03/share232-taking-action-eng/>)