

The Conversion Experience of Taiwan's Indigenous People: The Case of Meihsi Village, Jen' Ai District, Nantou County

CHIEN Hong-Mo,

Lecturer, Fujen University Department Of Religious Studies

Translated by Edmund Ryden SJ

PREFACE

The indigenous peoples of Taiwan speak Austronesian languages and have a radically different history, language and culture to the dominant Han people.¹ They have lived in Taiwan for centuries, during which time they had little contact with the outside world. It is only in modern times that European maritime technology and Columbus' discovery of the New World leading to colonial expansion by the maritime empires of Spain, Portugal and Holland, that the indigenous people of Taiwan have been caught up in this same global phenomenon whose effects are still with us today.

Over the past 400 years Taiwan has been occupied by the Dutch (1624-1661), Spanish (1626-1642), the Ming loyalist Koxinga and his son (1661-1683), the Manchu Ch'ing dynasty of China (1683-1895), the Japanese (1895-1945) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (1945-). The indigenous people have been pushed further and further into the mountains until they could not avoid coming under foreign subjugation, thus losing their historical, linguistic and cultural way of life.

In the past the life of Taiwan's indigenous people centred around the tribal village. Each tribe had its own way of life, ceremonies and festivals, code of law, culture of hunting, head-hunting being common to all.² Social organisation found expression in a system of chiefs, elders and ranking according to seniority. They undertook agriculture, cleared land in the forest and lived a life of economic self-sufficiency. This culture survived without change for thousands of years, defining the limits of each tribe.

The disintegration of this way of life took place only within the last hundred years, especially under Japanese occupation and Japan's pro-active policy of colonialising 'barbarian' peoples, which came into conflict with the traditional way of life and caused it to shudder. In 1945 the government of the Republic of China took over from the Japanese and continued along the same lines, but

now promoting sinification. This increased at a rapid pace when the central government of the Republic left the mainland in 1949 to be based in Taiwan.

Apart from the political factors just described, probably the next most important element affecting change in Taiwan indigenous society came from a conversion to Christianity.³ This mass movement happened in the twelve years from 1945 to 1956. The then Catholic Bishop of Hualien, André Verineux, described it as “a landslide that was rapid and extensive, a true movement of conversion to God.”⁴ He believed that this was a unique miracle in the history of Christianity in China. According to a 1991 survey conducted by the Taiwan provincial government, 87% of Taiwan’s indigenous people have some religious belief, of whom 77% are Christians.⁵ This figure represents a falling away from what it was in the 1950s yet it still vastly exceeds the percentage of Christians in Han society. What caused this mass conversion of the indigenous people? Sociologists may look at external factors and cultural shifts,⁶ but how did the people themselves experience this conversion? What experiences determined their adoption of Christianity? How did their inner world explain the conversion? These questions, which concern the specific traits of their culture, seem to be veiled in a mystique of obscurity, rarely mentioned or understood by outside observers. The present study aims to explore one particular village in depth, and by interviewing the first generation of converts, try to gain some insight into the experience of conversion to Christianity among Taiwan’s indigenous people.

The mass conversion happened all over the island and affected all ten of the major tribes. The present study looks at a particularly representative village of the Tayal tribe, namely Meihsi village, Jen’Ai District in Nantou County. This village was the first in central Taiwan to convert to Catholicism and hence is of particular significance for understanding the conversion experience of the indigenous people.

The method of research is mainly in-depth field research and interviews of old people 70 years old and more. The face-to-face interviews are then analysed and the material organised to be of use for future researchers.

TRADITIONAL BELIEF IN MEIHSI

Meihsi is the nearest indigenous village of Jen’Ai District to the lowlands, situated on Route 14a in the upper reaches of the Wuhsi river.⁷ The people belong to the Tukutaya group of the Seedeq branch of the Tayal tribe. In the Japanese era they were named Tongang and Sipo but after 1953 these two classifications were gradually subsumed under the broader name Tayal. Today Meihsi is divided into three distinct locales: Meihsi, Catholic Church and South Mountain Stream (Nanshanhsi), with 200 households and a population of close to 900.

Traditionally the people of Meihsi believed in *Utux*. '*Utux*' is the collective name given by the Tayal to all supernatural forces. The term's references and grammatical uses are very broad. For the Seedeq branch of the Tayal tribe the concrete forms of expression of reverence to *Utux* are given by *gaya*, which encompass and determine folk customs, dates of ceremonies, headhunting, divination and healing, and hunting and weaving. Strictly speaking the food, clothing, housing and activities of the people all come under the scope of *gaya*. Thus in order to understand the conversion experience of Meihsi we must first explore the notions of *Utux* and *gaya*.

UTUX (ANCESTRAL SPIRIT)

The Seedeq normally believe *Utux* to be their ancestors. There are many ways of studying this concept but here we concentrate only on the ways in which the people of Meihsi explain the term and distinguish three uses:

Utux Ludan

Utux means 'spirit' and *Ludan* means 'old person'. Hence *Utux Ludan* refers to the spirits of deceased, especially one's own parents or relatives. The old people believe that the *Utux* have means of communicating with the living and in dreams will foretell the future. Bakan Nomin says,

Before the death of my parents and of three of my children I dreamed of it in part. It is true, the *utux* will speak to us through dreams.

Labe Walis describes it like this:

Before Walis Neyung died I saw spirit fire in his kitchen. It was round and very beautiful. I stayed there looking at it a long time. Then I went home, but from my own window I could still see it for about 35 minutes before it went out. A few days later I heard that Walis Neyung had died. Later I thought, you came to tell me first. So in my prayer I told my deceased father that he had given me his power, because my father was the one in the village who could best see spirit fire.

These spirits can be divided into good and bad spirits:

Good Spirits

Good spirits are those of old people who die accompanied by others, with someone holding their hand, telling them to go in peace. If the dying person has some particular concern then the family members will promise to resolve or look after this matter so that the old person can die in peace. Such a person becomes a good spirit. In times of difficulty the people will ask for assistance from the good spirits as the elderly interviewee, Bakan Nomin, says,

When I am in great suffering or very sorrowful such as when my children fall ill or have died, I constantly beg my deceased parents and relatives to come to my aid.

She believes that in her moments of difficulty her ancestors will come and help. Another interviewee, Bakan Pihu says,

I am already 83. I do not know what more I will do in this world. I constantly ask my deceased parents and husband to take me home. Being sick means that I live in great fatigue!

Bakan Pihu believes that after death she will be united to her parents and husband and so begs them to take her sooner.

Bad Spirits

In the traditional way of seeing things, if a person dies without the assistance of their family members or friends, as when they die in an accident or commit suicide, they are called *Mukudunog*, which means bad death and after death their spirit will become a bad spirit. An old person who dies in this way will not be invoked by the living. In traditional healing or expulsion of worms, it is held that the sickness or worms are brought on by a bad spirit and a special ceremony is needed to expel them.⁸ Normally the old people will never speak directly of the bad spirits, preferring to use substitute expressions to refer to them.

Utux Balo

Here *Utux* means 'spirit' and *Balo* means 'above'. This is the spirit in heaven above, who has the power to reward good and punish evil.

According to the elderly Labe Walis,

Before my father died, he enjoined us children many times in no circumstances to steal anyone else's belongings or quarrel among ourselves or with other people, or kill anyone since *Utux balo* would punish us.

She specifically noted that *Utux balo* was an ancient term and this is how she heard the old people speak of it a long time ago. Pering Tado also noted,

When my father was sick, he often told my younger brother and I that we must in no circumstances quarrel or get into disputes. We should help each other because *Utux* truly sees us.

Utux Tumunimun

Here *Utux* means 'spirit' and *tumunimun* means 'weaving'. This is the spirit who wove the world into existence. As far as I know the Tayal weavers were the best of all the indigenous people in Taiwan. They used the simplest form of loom but were able to execute all kinds of pattern and perhaps for this reason they had the notion of *Utux tumunimun*.

The elderly interviewee, Diwas Pawan, said,

Everything in our world is woven by *Utux tumunimun*, everything we see and even our own bodies are all alike in this respect.

Thus *Utux tumunimun* had a great influence on everyday life. We may say that he is the weaver-creator of the world.

Utux is the ancestral spirit, and also has the power to reward good and punish evil and even more is the creator of human beings and the world. In the hearts of the people, *Utux* is a refuge in suffering, the judge of good and evil, the creator. In the past people lived their lives with faith in this *Utux* for thousands of years. In practice in ordinary life people would not refer to *Utux tumunimun* unless they were asking how the world came into existence. More normally they would use the former two terms.

GAYA (NORM, TABOO)

Exactly what *gaya* is is not easy to say. Based on our survey in Meihsi we distinguish four kinds of *gaya*:

Kali Ludan

Kal means 'speech' and *ludan* is 'old person', so '*kali ludan*' is the speech of old people or ancestral precepts. The words of dying old persons or what the elders say can all be included in the concept. If the younger generation do not observe this teaching then people will say, "*ka gaya laqy ni,*"⁹ which means, "this child does not respect the teaching of the elders." Among the Seedeq this is a very serious offence and implies that the child has no manners and should be very much ashamed.

Moral Norms

In the past young people were not permitted to meet in private, that is to say, they were not allowed to freely choose marriage partners. Even going around alone was frowned on as suspect, giving rise to gossip in the village. If this was substantiated, then the villagers could ask the culprit to kill a pig to expiate the sin and calm popular anger. A pig was an item of major economic importance and could be exchanged for land or other valuable commodities. If the matter was even more serious and the culprit refused to kill a pig then the people could, after obtaining the master's permission, go into the person's herd to kill pigs themselves and no matter how many were slain the offender and his family were not to object. The pork obtained was sent to every household in the village and was called *mekan gaya*,¹⁰ that is the food obtained because of a breach of *gaya*. In these circumstances it was not necessary to remove the pig's bristles, which was also a form of insult, very different from the normal practice of removing the bristles at a wedding or ritual ceremony.

Close relatives were also prevented from marrying lest *Utux* kill the children born or the children of relatives by fire or by drowning. Such unions would cause the complete collapse of the whole family structure, called *Sumelaq tadan*.¹¹ Thus relatives did not go out together and this norm was very strictly adhered to, inspiring fear and prudence.

Unwritten Law

These village norms were never written down, existing only in the teaching of the elders, yet like law they were universal customary norms that regulated human life. A breach of *gaya* would be punished by *Utux*. Bakan Nomin recalls,

It was forbidden to take a hemp thread lying on the road for oneself. Rather it should be put on a tree so that the owner would find it again. Failure to observe this norm would earn one a swelling sickness where the body would constantly swell until one burst open and died.

Before going out to hunt it was essential to maintain harmony in the family. If there was a quarrel or dispute among family members then the hunter involved had to renounce this occasion for hunting; there was no other option. Should he persist in going then he would certainly lose blood, either by receiving a small wound or by a life-threatening wound. Even more fraught with taboo was having an accident when no relatives were beside one, this was called *mukudunog*.¹² People saw this as the most tragic outcome possible and endeavoured to ensure that it never happened to them.

Sumalu Gaya

Sumalu means 'to do'; *gaya* means 'norm' or 'taboo'. The term refers to a ritual norm or taboo and applies to norms governing any ritual activity, whether a rite of passage, periodic ceremony, healing rite or other form of sacrifice. Many of these norms were not made public. Only after the appropriate rites had been performed could the people engage in planting or harvesting. The rites were to gain the blessing of *Utux* and ensure the success of the harvest. All rites and ceremonies had these *gaya* norms. Once the old people who had given the norms or the conditions that had called for the *gaya* were no longer present then the *gaya* lost their basis and fell into disuse.

The Japanese determined to change the traditional culture of the indigenous people, substituting rice for their traditional millet such that all the traditional agricultural festivals lost their significance and fell into disuse. Traditional practices such as tattooing and head hunting were also stopped by force under the Japanese. Now only a few scattered traditional healers are to be found and soon there will be no one to carry on their work and this institution will also die out.

EARLY CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

Before the Japanese occupation Meihsi still maintained the custom of head hunting so contact with the outside world was restricted to exchange of material objects; outsiders could not enter the territory. Under the Japanese, the government forbade all missionary work in the mountains and thus the tribal people kept their traditional religion. Christianity only came to Meihsi after 1945.

At present there are three churches in Meihsi: the Taiwan Presbyterian Church, the Catholic Church and the Japanese Holy Spirit Church (*Seirei Kyokai*), the Catholic Church having the largest number of adherents, followed by the Presbyterians and lastly the Spiritists. But the order of propagation is somewhat different: first Presbyterians, then Catholics and finally Spiritists. Initially all the people became Presbyterians but then most of these became Catholics while a few of these again converted to the Spiritists. Hence mobility and change of faith is a feature of Meihsi Christianity.

ENTRY OF THE TAIWAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Presbyterian Church came to Taiwan in 1861 and in 1873 Dr George Mackay conducted missions deep into the interior on the east coast, without any success. When the Japanese came they forbade missions into the mountain districts¹³ and thus these missions did not take place until after the arrival of the Chinese government in 1945, at which time the Presbyterians made the most rapid and effective steps into mountain areas.

The first to preach Christianity in Meihsi was the American pastor James Dickson and his wife. They reached Puli in the early years of the Chinese takeover of Taiwan and attempted to head into the mountains from there, entering into Meihsi. Later they discovered that the language of Meihsi and the Taroko dialect of Hualien was the same Tayal dialect so they sent four Taroko Christians as missionaries instead. Old people in the village remember that the first missionaries were Kumu Losin, Dumun, Labe and Wilan and that this was in about 1949. They walked over from Hualien. These women were all of the Seedeq branch of the Tayal tribe and hence spoke a dialect that the people of Meihsi could understand. Kumu Losin pointed out that the old people who formed *sumalu gaya* were all dying off one by one and so the traditional *gaya* were no longer of any use as norms, so she said we should use foreigners' *gaya* instead. Lubi Nokan remembers, "Kumu Losin exhorted the villagers to accept Christianity this way." She believed,

The old people who had made our *gaya* had all died and no one could teach us. It was as if we had lost our direction so when Kumu Losin and her companions came to the village to preach we thought we might as well adopt the American *gaya*, since it was also *gaya*.

Kumu Losin's missionary method was to compose simple exhortations and put them to music to be learned and sung. The tunes were children's tunes and the words were in their own language, thus "*nahali puliyuh nahali puliyuh lunlungan namu*,"¹⁴ which means "you should quickly change and accept the new religion". Because the music was simple and the tunes memorable it was easy to preach in this way. Villagers of 70 to 80 can still sing these songs, which shows how deep an impact this missionary method had. Pering Tado recalls,

Kumu Losin used a Japanese Bible and only added a few notes in Seedeq and then constantly repeated these items.

When Christianity came to Meihsi most people converted and joined the Presbyterian Church. They built a thatched roof church in the village. The reasons for the success of this mission were threefold: (1) the Tayal people already believed in *Utux* and so quickly adopted belief in God; (2) under the Japanese era they had lost their traditional *sumalu gaya*; (3) Kumu Losin successfully used their own language, simple catchy tunes and constantly repeated phrases. The hospitality of the Tayal meant that Kumu Losin gained great respect and so was successful in her mission. Unfortunately Kumu Losin and her companions lived in Hualien and it was some time before they could come back to Meihsi. The foundations of the faith were not firm and when Catholic missionaries arrived, most of the faithful transferred to the Catholic Church.

ENTRY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church returned to Taiwan with Spanish Dominicans in 1859 and by 1949 had been around for nearly 100 years, concentrated in the west of Taiwan. After 1949 there was a massive influx of missionaries who followed the retreating Nationalist government to the island, who began to extend the existing mission.

The first Catholic missionary to reach Meihsi was the Canadian Fr. Jacques Armand, M.M. in about 1953. He was a Maryknoll missionary, had worked in mainland China, Manchuria, and had been put in prison for two years by the Japanese. On release he had been expelled from the mainland and had then come to Taiwan to continue his missionary work.

Fr. Armand's missionary strategy was to use the distribution of material goods as a means. At the time the mountain areas were very poor and the life of ordinary people was very difficult so when Fr. Armand arrived with aid he asked the village chief to gather all the people together, no matter what their religious affiliation, and he distributed the goods fairly to all. Along with the distribution of goods, Mr. Pan used Japanese to introduce Catholic doctrine to the people. This strategy worked in bringing Catholicism to Meihsi and a church was built in the village. After its construction many villagers moved to live near it thus forming a very special village with the church at its centre. The new section of the village was called 'Catholic Church'.¹⁵

Aside from the material aid he provided, Fr. Armand also contributed to the formation of native catechists and this was another reason for his success. He had not been in Meihsi long when he invited six young people, men and women, and sent them to the temporary catechetical school attached to the Catholic church in Wu Feng for six months' training.¹⁶ On completion of their

programme they returned to Meihsi and thanks to them the people converted successfully, most adhering to the Catholic Church and being baptised one by one.

ENTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT CHURCH

The Holy Spirit Church came to Taiwan during the time of Japanese occupation. After the withdrawal of the Japanese it was left in tatters. Around 1964 some Japanese came and found Mr. Shimoyama and asked him to help them spread their faith.¹⁷ Mr. Shimoyama found his ex-pupils, among whom were the recently retired Catholic catechist Sapu Habik. Sapu Habik invited another retired catechist, Walis Lubi, to assist him in working for the Holy Spirit Church.

The success of the Holy Spirit Church parallels that of the Catholics after the initial Presbyterian mission, but in the second case the number of converts was far fewer, such that the present state of the Church in Meihsi is severely limited. The Church was supported by Japanese believers and thus erected a church for Sunday worship. This building suffered in Typhoon Doug in 1994 and collapsed in the earthquake of 21 September 1999. Moreover the Pastor Sapu Habik is now suffering from senile dementia and the prospects of continuing or reviving the work of the Church are not high.

CONVERSION EXPERIENCE IN MEIHSI

Why did the people of Meihsi convert from a strict form of ancestral worship to Presbyterian Christianity? And why did they then leave the Presbyterians for the Catholic Church? Finally, why did a few convert to the Holy Spirit Church? The beginnings of an answer to these questions are already present in what has been said about *Utux* and *gaya*, here I shall continue to look at the survey material to provide a fuller response.

THE DECLINE AND RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GAYA SYSTEM

The main reason that the people of Meihsi converted to Christianity surely lies in the decline and fall of their traditional tribal system of *gaya*. For the Seedeq, the norms of *gaya* are firm rules but under the Japanese there had been a systematic attempt to destroy these norms. The *gaya* that regulated Seedeq life, especially the system of *sumalu gaya* associated with periodic festivals disintegrated and in their wake other *gaya* were also relaxed and moral norms fell into decline. In the face of this situation the people were happy to accept a foreign system of *gaya* because they saw this as a traditional system and one that was very close to their own. Thus they accepted baptism and in so choosing a new system of norms they were able to maintain their traditional *gaya*.

*Utux balo and Tama balo*¹⁸

A key to the success or failure of the Christian mission was an effective choice of language to translate and express Christian terms. The first generation of missionaries and Christians had to find ways of uniting Christian belief in God with Seedeq belief in *Utux*. Since Kumu Losin was herself of the Seedeq she naturally chose the terms *Utux balo* and *gaya* to express her teaching and thus made it easy for the people to unite their traditional belief in *Utux balo* with Christian belief in God. Moreover, the traditional *Utux tumuninun* could also be used to interpret the notion of a creator God so that the people could easily move from their traditional religion to Christianity, without feeling that there was any conflict between the two. Hence we may say that the cause of the success of the initial Presbyterian mission lies in the felicitous harmony of belief in *Utux* with the Christian God.

When the people of Meihsi speak of the Christian god today they still use the term *Utux balo*. Even when later they use the more intimate *Tama balo*, they do not perceive any difference between the two terms. For them *Utux balo*, *Utux tumuninun* and *Tama balo* are all one and the same. Hence while conversion to Christianity may seem like a departure from tradition, in fact it was more an experience of reconfirming traditional belief.

Gaya and the Ten Commandments

Besides belief in *Utux*, another feature that seemed to have fallen into disarray only to be revived was the system of *gaya*, and this by an equation with the Ten Commandments. Pering Tado held,

When Kumu Losin came to Meihsi, she said, "Do not steal; do not steal things that belong to others; do not fight with others..." These precepts were all to be found in our old people's teaching of *gaya*, so it was easy to accept them.

Of the Ten Commandments, the first three are concerned with *Utux* and the last seven were all to be found in traditional *gaya*. In fact traditional *gaya* were even more strict than the Ten Commandments, so the acceptance of Christianity not only did not imply a conflict with *gaya*, rather it reinforced *gaya*.

There do, however, exist features of *gaya* that were in conflict with the Christianity that was then preached, notably the role of the faith healer, but these elements only emerged later and were not an obstacle to conversion.

RELATIVES' GROUP BEHAVIOUR AND *GAYA*

Traditional life demanded that relatives should always act as one. In hunting, for instance, relatives would go together and on their return the food would be shared with all family members. It was the same for agricultural work and even more so in the time when head hunting was practised, when group

solidarity was a means of survival. This group behavioural *gaya* is equally manifest in the conversion experience.

Pering Tado maintains,

The heart of the indigenous people finds it easier to sympathise with or feel for other people. So when Kumu Losin came from Hualien to preach she began to go from door to door and awoke many feelings of sympathy and the people took turns in hosting her.

When preaching, she would teach songs or dances, and relatives and neighbours would all come to learn them and so received Christian baptism together. Since the only form of Christianity that arrived was Presbyterian, so people naturally became Presbyterians.

In the conversion from Presbyterianism to Catholicism, there was a similar group phenomenon, as Bakan Pihu explained,

Originally all the people in the village were Presbyterians but then a child from our family, Pering Tado, went to catechetical school and so all the old people in our family gathered and decided that on his return, we would all follow him. So we all left the Presbyterian Church and became Catholics.

Lubi Nokan, who is now 80, remembers how she moved from the Presbyterian to the Catholic Church because her husband's family had decided that the whole family should become Catholics. One reason for Labe Takun, now 84, to convert was also because of the influence of relatives. Her husband's relatives came to visit and said that they had all become Catholics and only she and her husband remained with the Presbyterians, would it not be better to all be Catholics.

This *gaya* of the whole family or of the relatives was truly a major cause of the conversion of the village, influencing the initial conversion to the Presbyterians and the subsequent conversion to Catholicism, and, at least in the case of the family of Sapu Habik, the conversion to the Holy Spirit Church. The emphasis not on individual religious experience but on the behaviour of relatives, and the family is a defining feature of the conversion of the indigenous people. When relatives came preaching then the villagers would feel ashamed to refuse to listen. Moreover, the change from one Church to another, even back again, is also a feature of their conversion experience.

DIVINING *GAYA* BY DREAMS

In traditional life dreams were understood as a means by which ancestral spirits communicated with people. Hunters used to rely on dreams to determine their possible success or failure; before clearing new ground it was also necessary to divine by dreams. The faith healer would decide whether or not to heal on the basis of revelation given in dreams. Indeed, before making

any important decision the old people would normally rely on dreams. Dreams were the way in which the ancestors spoke to the living and the old people were firm in their belief in this.

In Meihsi's conversion experience, divination by dreams played an important role in deciding whether or not to believe. Labe Takun says,

After we had been Presbyterians for some time, my husband remained firm that we would not become Catholics. He said, "We are in the Presbyterian Church. We will not move." Later my husband's family kept coming to invite him to join the Catholic Church, because "we are all one family and do not want to be separated." We said that he would not go and then I and my husband decided to *tumala sepi*,¹⁹ to wait for a dream, to see what revelation the dream would bring and only then decide whether or not to go to the Catholic Church. My husband then said that he dreamt of a light, a very beautiful light; there was just a bright light. When he woke up he was felt very refreshed. Because of this we changed to the Catholic Church. We went to the church to see Fr. Armand and said we wanted to enter the Church. Fr. Armand asked us to place our hands on the Bible and there was a rite of welcome. That night I had a dream. I dreamt of a very blue sea and I was in the sea. I was completely naked; I had no clothes on. A woman came over and she supported my shoulder and pulled me out of the water, taking me to the shore.²⁰ This was my dream of joining the Catholic Church. It was a good dream.

Another interviewee, Lubi Nokan, also said,

My husband and his brother had decided to join the Catholic Church. I felt that changing religion was not a good thing and I had a nightmare. I dreamt that I was almost stolen away by a monkey. The monkey was just like Satan and I woke up in a fright. When later my relatives came to invite me to join the Holy Spirit Church I refused to go because to change religion is not good.

Lubi Nokan's nightmare did not impel her to return to the Presbyterian Church. Having changed to the Catholic Church she remains a Catholic to this day, which is proof that the influence of the relatives is greater than a nightmare. Yet the nightmare does determine her response to the next collective action of her relatives, which shows that there is a relationship of cause and effect between divination by dreams and the relatives' collective behaviour.

The *gaya* divined in dreams had a determinative role in the conversion experience of the people of Meihsi and in this respect was a continuation of traditional *gaya*. Dreams are specifically related to the individual and are an important means of communication between the ancestral spirits and the living. In the context of collective decisions by the group, the dream has a decisive role for the individual. The experience of the dream gives a surer foundation to the conversion such that one's faith is less likely to waver.

Meihsi's conversion to the Presbyterian Church had no connection at all with American aid. But aid did play an important role in the conversion to Catholicism. When the Japanese left in 1945 Taiwan suffered a severe lack of resources, especially in the mountain areas. When American missionaries brought aid the first village they reached in Jen' Ai District was Meihsi. In fact at the time the people still lived in the communities of Tongang and Sipo, having not yet moved to Meihsi proper. Fr. Armand came from Taichung to Meihsi bringing American aid and with the help of the village chief, he distributed this fairly to each household without discriminating on the basis of sex, age or religious background. He treated all equally.

Although the aid was not directly linked to preaching the Gospel but it did make the people realise that there were really good people around, ready to freely give them what they needed to live on. They saw the doctrine of the Catholic Church as much the same as what Kumu Losin had preached but in the question of practical charity, the Catholics showed much greater love than Kumu Losin had shown. The Catholic Church was the one which really loved the people. The unselfish giving of aid moved the hearts of the people and so gradually they left the Presbyterian Church for the Catholic Church, the practical assistance given being a major factor.

There are those who reflect on the powerlessness of the Catholic Church in Taiwan and believe that it is because there was too much reliance on the distribution of aid. When this dried up then the faithful left the Church. This may be true for some areas but it does not apply to Meihsi. Meihsi later became the centre for supplying aid throughout Jen' Ai District and on the same basis of giving equally to all without any form of religious discrimination. At least in Meihsi, distribution of aid was a means but not a strategy for winning converts. Moreover, when the aid stopped the people did not leave the Church. This remains true to the present day. Hence to suppose that aid was the sole reason why people became Catholics is false. As to whether aid engendered an attitude of passively relying on outside assistance and thus not becoming self-subsistent, this requires further study.

With regard to the distribution of aid, the people were able to see beyond the material objects to the heart behind this charity and it is this that really marked their experience. When they began to gradually convert to the Catholic Church, those who did not so convert would criticise them for doing so only because of the aid distributed, whereas in fact dream divination and group pressure were far more important factors in ensuring that the change took place without fear. Labe Takun recalls that time,

Later the Presbyterians kept saying that those who went to the Catholic Church went because of the clothes, because there were things to be had. It was for these things that they went. However, to say this was to cast

aspersions on other people's conduct and this is not good. Moreover, they also took the aid! And still persisted in saying such things. It is not as if the catholic Church did not give to them too! How could they still say these things?

When asked what her experience felt like then, she said,

We did not say anything. Let them go on talking. What did we have to say against them? Nothing. In fact it was all the same, we all believed in God! Up until today our opinion has not changed, it is all the same. I have nothing to say against them They also believe in God. It is all the same...

PREACHING BY NATIVE PEOPLE IN THE NATIVE TONGUE

Another important factor in the success of Christianity in Meihsi was the use of local people using the native language to preach. Ever since the first preaching by Kumu Losin and her companions, the Gospel was preached in the Seedeq language using traditional religious terminology and concepts so that it was easy to accept and so the people soon converted to Christianity. Unfortunately, the Presbyterians had come a long way on foot from Hualien and although they used the Seedeq language they were not locals.²¹ Hence they sowed the seeds of the faith but those seeds were reaped by the Catholics.

When the Catholics came, at first Fr. Armand came with Han Chinese accompanying him, who use Japanese to preach to the people, but the effect was not great. What really produced a change was when the first group of local catechists returned from their training. They were able to use their own language and explain the Gospel in terms familiar to the people. They had seen the prayer life of the foreign missionaries and their love for the people. Word spread and in this way the villagers converted to the Catholic Church. It is because these catechists threw themselves wholeheartedly into the mission that the distribution of aid brought about the fruit of conversion. Moreover, this first group of catechists believed that Catholic doctrine was far more systematic and more comprehensive than that of the Presbyterians. Of course, they were comparing the proper theological formation of the Fathers with the teaching of Kumu Losin and companions, who had never received any formal theological training, and using this as the criterion of assessment.

The success of the Holy Spirit Church in Meihsi was also because Mr. Shimoyama immediately sought the help of a local person, who was his own student and so this added the dimension of teacher-pupil relationship to the work of preaching. Then the pastor rallied his own relatives and so founded and spread this Church. Although the Church is now without adherents, there is no denying that it existed for some 20 years. It is also a case of success coming from using local people to preach.

REFLECTIONS ON THE INCULTURATION OF THE CONVERSION EXPERIENCE

It is now nearly half a century since Meihsi converted to Christianity and over the last fifty years despite rapid social change and occasional exposure to non-Christian religions, the people of Meihsi remain firm in a Christian environment. Even those who do not go to mass or worship and have only a limited grasp of doctrine and the Bible, still subjectively feel themselves to be Christians. At birth, marriage, death and burial Christian ceremonies are essential for them to feel that all has been properly done. Except for the Han Chinese who live in the village and have an alcove for their spirit tablets/statues at home, the homes of the indigenous people maintain a Christian atmosphere. How deep, though, the roots of this faith go remains open to question.

AN UNINTEGRATED BELIEF SYSTEM

On the level of religious language Christianity may be said to have entered Meihsi successfully but the main reason for this is the indigenous belief in *Utux* and the continuation of *gaya*. In traditional life the people often prayed to *Utux ludan*, calling on their assistance, in healing rituals, in the curses associated with hunting and laying traps and when faced with crises in life. When they became Christians these invocations to the ancestors were repressed, healing rituals and the curses associated with hunting were forbidden, so that prayer should be directed to *Utux balo*. According to their own testimony this was fine in public, in the church, but when they met with crises in life they would still pray to their ancestors, asking for their protection. This was quite natural but did not always meet with the approval of the priests. Hence in normal life the faithful would remember the exhortations of the priests and pastors and pray only to *Utux balo*.

Prayer to the ancestors is a traditional feature of indigenous belief. In the course of inculturation we must ask how this can be integrated into their religion and reflect on it within the Christian theological context lest their lively traditional faith be swept away by Christianity. We should let the Seedeq realise that they can call on their ancestors' protection without thereby feeling guilty. This is something that the Christian faith must reflect on in the face of the culture of minority peoples.

THE SECULARISATION OF RELIGION

In the experience of conversion the solidarity of a group of relatives was an important factor. As a result individual religious experience or quest for a fuller life was downgraded and group activities were exalted so that Church activities were rather like social functions without much religious flavour, more worldly and practical in nature. Hence it is hard to see how Christianity

contributes to individual conversion of life, to raising personal standards of morality or to enabling a person to better seek meaning in life.

Another phenomenon along these lines is that other competing secular forces become mixed up in religion even leading to schisms. Religious and political life are intertwined for the indigenous people and this largely because religious conversion is a matter of the relatives working as a group or a family as a whole and the election of politicians is the same. Hence religion gets caught up in political conflict, such that for political gain or to win votes religious truth is made subservient to political aims and Christianity is wholly secularised. This is a negative consequence of the phenomenon of group conversion.

ESTABLISHMENT OF A LOCAL CHURCH

The total conversion of Meihsi to Christianity occurred because the faith was preached in the local language by local people. This shows the importance of building the local Church as the only means by which Christianity may develop.

Unfortunately even today the Catholic Church in Meihsi is a Church of foreign missionaries. The local catechists have all retired and so nowadays there is no-one to take the seed deep into the soil. In this situation it is not easy to establish deep roots for the faith. The Catholic Church has been rather passive in promoting local Church workers. For a long time the salary offered was too small to support a family. The first batch of catechists had to retire for this reason. This is an old problem in the history of Catholic missions in Taiwan and it has not yet been resolved.

A similar situation exists among the Presbyterians. There is a lack of local preachers and pastors; those sent are not locals and are not familiar with the culture and history of Meihsi. They are often changed and so have difficulty in establishing deep roots.

The Holy Spirit Church has been in the hands of one man for a long time and given that he is now old and suffering from senile dementia there is very little promise for the future development of this Church.

To establish a local Church requires suitable leaders and they need training. How the Christian Churches can find such people and provide suitable training is a question that is posed by the past half century of missionary work in Meihsi.

CONCLUSION

The Christian conversion experience of Meihsi has its own features peculiar to the indigenous environment, notably the Seedeq' belief in *Utux* and their norms of *gaya*. This is the main reason for their conversion.

In a time when stress is laid on the local Church and in a time of inter-religious dialogue, it would seem that Christianity must engage in dialogue with the local religions of Taiwan and the indigenous peoples' traditional religion, even if this tradition has for the last half century be clothed with Christian garb. Traditional religion and culture have not yet won the approval and acceptance of Christianity. The inner heart of the indigenous people is still living in between these two traditions, the visible aspect existing in the Christian sphere whilst the traditional aspect remains suppressed below without having gained true freedom and expression. This form of split existence is a loss for both. Only through mutual dialogue and mutual comprehension, learning from each other and respecting each other's worth can each enrich the other. Only by working in this direction will there come the day when Christianity is truly the religion of Taiwan's indigenous people.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Taiwan Indigenous People should include both the lowland and mountain tribes. By lowland peoples is meant those living on the West of the island and on the Ilan Pacific Ocean plain: the Ketagalan, Kavalan, Taokas, Pazeh, Hoanya, Siraya and others. In two centuries of Han occupation these tribes became sinified and in 1874 the Manchu government decided to treat them as Han, depriving them of their status as indigenous people. Hence the present study focuses on those peoples who retain their Austronesian culture, history and language, that is the Amis, Tayal, Paiwan, Bunun, Rukai, Puyuma, Tsou, Saisat and Tau, along with the Shau, who have recently had their indigenous status restored, in all ten tribes.
- 2 Head hunting was practised by all the tribes on Taiwan until the Japanese forcefully stopped the practice and it went into oblivion.
- 3 Most of Taiwan's indigenous people converted to the Presbyterian, Catholic and True Jesus Churches. In certain localities a small number joined groups such as the Assembly of God, Seventh Day Adventists and Methodists but these other groups did not have the influence of the former three Churches.
- 4 See Taiwan Provincial Documentation (ed.), *Chunghsiu Taiwan sheng Tongchih: Chuan 3: Indigenous People: Religion*, p. 421.
- 5 See Taiwan Provincial Government Office (ed.), *Republic of China Year 80 [1991] Report of Survey of Economic and Living Conditions among Remote Communities in Taiwan Province: First edition: Mountain, Plains and Urban Mountain People*, February 1993, pp. 39-42. In this report the number of Protestants is around 46% and 31% Catholics. In 1985 the total figure for indigenous Christians was 87% of whom 51% Protestant and 36% Catholic. The 1991 figures indicate a sharp and rapid decline in the number of indigenous Christians.
- 6 On this point sociologists, at least with respect to the Catholic conversion, distinguish five important factors, three of which relate to the Japanese policy of destroying traditional culture. A fourth point maintains that indigenous religion was rather simple and so had no depth and so was easily replaced by the more solid theology of the Catholic Church. The final factor is said to be that the Catholic missionaries took a very sympathetic attitude to the indigenous people. For further information see Taiwan Provincial Documentation (ed.), *Chunghsiu Taiwan sheng Tongchih: Chuan 3: Indigenous People: Religion*, pp. 422-424.
- 7 The local people refer to themselves as coming from Meihsi village. In official government records

Meihsi is part of Nan Feng Village, which is in Jen’Ai District, Nantou County. Nan Feng Village also includes the Plains Aborigine villages of Feng Shulin and Feng Linkou in the lowlands. Since these latter two areas have no connection with the people in the present study, the name Meihsi will be applied to refer only to the mountain village. In fact, even in this use Meihsi is a collective name comprising the hamlets of meihsi, Catholic Church and Southern Mountain Stream (*Nanshanhsi*). However, the normal use among the indigenous people of Jen’Ai District is that ‘Meihsi’ includes all three of these hamlets.

- 8 See Chien Hong-mo, “Traditional Religion and Environmental Protection of Indigenous People in Taiwan: A Case Study of the Tukutaya Group of the Seedeq Branch of the Tayal Tribe,” in *Fijien Religious Studies*, No. 2, December 2000, pp. 49-50.
- 9 *Uka gaya laqy ni*. In Seedeq ‘*Uka*’ means ‘having not’; ‘*gaya*’ is the ‘ancestors’ exhortations’; ‘*laqy*’ means ‘child’; ‘*ni*’ means ‘this’. The whole clause means ‘this child has no *gaya*’.
- 10 ‘*Mekan*’ means ‘to eat’ in Seedeq.
- 11 ‘*Sumelaq tadan*’ is in the Seedeq language: ‘*Sumelaq*’ means ‘to destroy, tear apart’; ‘*tadan*’ means ‘relatives’.
- 12 ‘*Mukudunog*’ in Seedeq means ‘being without anyone around at the time of death’. The references to bad spirits refers to those who die by violent means or by accidents.
- 13 According to Pihu Kula, among the first missionaries who came from Hualien was one Tayal man who had been imprisoned by the Japanese for engaging in missionary work. This illustrates how firm the Japanese were in forbidding missions among the indigenous people.
- 14 *Nahali puliyuh nahali puliyuh lunlungan namu*. In Seedeq, ‘*nahali*’ means quickly’; ‘*puliyehi*’ means to change’; ‘*lunlungan*’ means way of thinking’; ‘*namu*’ means you’. The whole sentence means ‘you should quickly change your way of thinking’, that is, quickly change your traditional belief and accept Christianity and believe in God.
- 15 The Catholic church in Meihsi collapsed in the earthquake of 21 September 1999 and is now being restored.
- 16 The first six catechists were Pering Tado, Sapu Habik, Walis Lubi, Pihu Walis, Iwan Pawan and Awe Nawi.
- 17 Mr Shimoyama’s father was Japanese and his mother Tayal from Li-hsing village. After the Japanese defeat his father was sent back to Japan while his mother remained in Li-hsing. When he was young he had taught at the public school in Wu She and so when the Japanese came to ask him to found the Holy Spirit Church he sought out his ex-pupils to join.
- 18 In the Seedeq language ‘*tama*’ means ‘father’; ‘*balo*’ means ‘above’. The whole phrase means ‘father in heaven above’.
- 19 In the Seedeq language ‘*tunahli*’ means ‘to wait for’; ‘*sepi*’ is a ‘dream’. The whole phrase means ‘to wait for a dream’, ‘to divine by dreaming’.
- 20 Later Labe Takun added that the woman of the dream was Our Lady but at the time she did not know what Our Lady looked like. It was only later when she saw the statue in the church that she could identify her. Thus even though she did not know at the time, she still believed in her dream.
- 21 The Tayal tribe is divided into the Tayal and Seedeq branches. The Seedeq are further subdivided into Tuluku, Toda and Tukutaya. Kumu Losin and her fellow Presbyterians were Tuluku whereas the people of Meihsi are Tukutaya. Their dialects are mutually comprehensible but they belong to different *gaya* and in the past would go head hunting against each other. The local people felt that the preaching by local Catholics was closer to them than that by Kumu Losin.