

Worship Vocabulary Research

Procedure

We recently brainstormed all the Thai words that are, in some way, associated with our concept of “worship.” We came up with 21 words that we wanted to understand more fully. Those words are:

นมัสการ	กราบไหว้	บูชา
สักการะ	ถวายคำโมทนา	สวดมนต์
สาธุการ	บวงสรวง	สรรเสริญ
สดุดี	ถวายเกียรติ	ให้เกียรติ
เทิดทูน	ยกย่อง	นับถือ
เชิดชู	เคารพ	คารวะ
ถ่อมตัว	นบถนอบ	รับใช้

We then used these words in an exercise called “pile sorting.” This meant that we took a stack of cards with these words on them and asked people around Phayao to divide the words into groups. We did not tell them how to divide them or what criteria to use as they grouped them together. The only rule was that they have more than one group and less than 21 groups. An interviewee would then divide them up as he/she determined, and we would ask them to explain why they put them in those particular groups. We would then ask follow-up questions based upon their responses. We did not record these interviews but did take notes, both during and after each interview.

After twelve interviews, we met and discussed common themes and anomalies. As certain trends emerged, new questions also arose. Thus, we did six more interviews asking for clarification on eight of the terms. While this exercise was not an exhaustive research effort, we did discover some tentative conclusions about these terms and how they relate to our notion of “worship.” The following is the result of our interviews and analysis.

General Observations

The first observation we made during our analysis pertains to the criteria interviewees used to distinguish groups. While the amount of groups varied, and specific explanations of the criteria differed to a degree, every person divided the words according to the importance or significance of the recipient of the particular action. In other words, people grouped the terms based on levels or realms where the respective terms are most commonly used. For example, one person divided the terms in the following categories: 1) used with beings ที่อยู่เหนือธรรมชาติ, 2) used with the king, 3) used with leaders in society, 4) used with anyone. Another person divided them into terms used with สิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์ and those used with the king. While the descriptions of the levels varied, every interviewee based their groupings on the relative importance of the recipient. (Our hypothesis is that this happened because

all the terms are associated with giving honor, thus people think of the terms in regard to the level of honor-giving implicit in each.)

As we analyzed our initial interviews, there was one finding that emerged from the data which seemed especially noteworthy. We tallied how many times each word was grouped with each of the other 21 words. We noted the words that were grouped with a particular term over 50% of the time. For example, we recorded that นมัสการ was grouped with ถวายคำโมทนา 9 times, with บูชา 9 times, and with สวดมนต์ 8 times. After we tallied the results, we were surprised to find that there were eight words that were not grouped with any of the other thirteen words over 50% of the time. In other words, the terms ถวายคำโมทนา, นมัสการ, ลักการะ, บูชา, สวดมนต์, สาธุการ, บวงสรวง, and กราบไหว้ appear to be closely associated with one another and somewhat distinguishable from the other thirteen. And the distinguishing marker seems to be that these eight words are used primarily in reference to “religious” things, สิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์, or things ที่อยู่เหนือธรรมชาติ. The majority of the other thirteen words are used in reference to people. While this distinction, in actuality, is somewhat blurry, our data shows that certain terms carry a more distinctive “sacred” sense than others. (กราบไหว้, based on how people expounded on it and our own experience, seems to bleed over into the other group of words very easily. It can obviously be used with people worthy of respect. However, it is significant that people, at least initially, grouped it most often with words that have a more “sacred” connotation.)

Besides these general observations about how people divided the terms, we also discovered some interesting nuances of specific terms. These observations were especially insightful in light of how these terms are often used in church. Here is a brief description of how we feel people use these terms. (Note: all of our interviewees were non-Christians but were not necessarily Buddhists.)

Terms Described

นมัสการ – The majority of interviewees explained the meaning of นมัสการ with the word เชิญ (or เชิญชวน). They said นมัสการ referred to inviting a monk to perform a งานพิธี. For example, a person might go to the temple to invite a monk or monks to perform a งานศพ or ขึ้นบ้านใหม่ at his/her house. The other usage of นมัสการ that was mentioned referred to either กราบไหว้พระ or ทักทายพระ. While our data is not conclusive, this second meaning might refer to the approaching or greeting of a monk in order to เชิญชวน. Regardless, our interviews were clear that นมัสการ is used in association with monks, and the overwhelming sense is that it means asking or inviting them to do something.

กราบไหว้ – Of the eight terms with strong religious connotations, กราบไหว้ had the broadest usage since it is frequently used with บุคคล as well. It can be used with

monks, Buddha images, เจ้าที่, the king, and people. However, it is noteworthy that people most commonly grouped it with the other “religious” terms.

สวดมนต์- When asked, “To whom do you สวดมนต์?” people most commonly replied that it depended on the individual person’s beliefs. However, when asked, “For whom do you สวดมนต์?” people responded that it was for yourself. The result of สวดมนต์ is to feel สบายใจ or มีความสุข. The only exception was in reference to a funeral. People would then admit that สวดมนต์ functions to tell the dead person that he/she is in fact dead and can even give บุญ to the dead person. Interviewees described that a person can สวดมนต์ anywhere and at any time. Most people will read a “prayer,” while some people have the words memorized. Two interviewees commented that it was similar to what Christians do.

ถวายคำโมทนา- Interviewees did not give much feedback on this term. They were clear that it was a “religious” word and associated with monks. However, one person did point out that the common expression was อนุโมทนา, which has the sense of saying “congratulations.”

สาธุการ- This was the most difficult term for people to define or explain. In fact, three people did not even include it in their groupings because they were not sure of its usage. People were more familiar with สาธุ, but สาธุการ was strange or unfamiliar to some interviewees. The only explanations we heard connected it with responding to monks.

บูชา- There is a broad range of uses for บูชา. In fact, บูชา was commonly used in the explanations of other terms in our list. It can be used in combination with many other words, such as เคารพบูชา. It broadly means to “offer” something, whether it is food, flowers, incense burning, respect, or honor.

สักการะ- This is most often used with บูชา, as in สักการบูชา. It often refers to offering gifts or lighting candles at the temple.

บวงสรวง- The overwhelming sense of บวงสรวง is that it is an occasion to give honor or pay homage to past kings and leaders in society. It is common to have one day a year in which people บวงสรวง a particular king/leader. It involves offering gifts and lighting candles in their honor. Interviewees were clear that it was not an opportunity to ask for favor from the deceased. (However, our experience leads us to think that receiving some type of favor is an implicit motive in this practice.)

สรรเสริญ- While a couple of interviewees suggested that สรรเสริญ can be used for monks or สิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์, the obvious realm for this term is royalty. This is evident because 100% of our interviewees said that สรรเสริญ is used in reference to the

king. The sense of the term is giving honor and praise, primarily through lavishing honorific titles and descriptions upon the king.

สดุดี- สดุดี was grouped with สรรเสริญ 11 of 12 times. We are not sure how to account for the anomaly of one person separating them, but the rest of our data indicates that the two terms are fairly synonymous.

เทิดทูน- The meaning of เทิดทูน is similar to words such as ยกย่อง, เชิดชู, and ให้เกียรติ, but it has one significant distinction. Interviewees reserved เทิดทูน for those who deserve the highest degree of honor (thus, its strong connection to สรรเสริญ and สดุดี). You เทิดทูน someone who อยู่เหนือหัว. The common recipients of เทิดทูน appear to be the king and parents. Or, as one person said, เทิดทูน is for ผู้มีพระคุณ. While the obvious meaning relates to giving honor, people also illustrated that it carries with it a deep sense of love, affection and loyalty.

ยกย่อง- ยกย่อง and เชิดชู have very similar meanings and usages. They both can be used in reference to คนทั่วไป who have done something significant, to the king, and even to the nation. They express the desire to hold someone up so others can observe and appreciate their worthiness.

เชิดชู- While their meanings are similar, เชิดชู, as indicated by its less frequent usage, appears to carry a slightly higher level of honor than ยกย่อง. For example, one person said ยกย่อง can be used for a foreigner who speaks good Thai. เชิดชู is used for someone who wins a gold medal in the Olympics.

ถวายเกียรติ and ให้เกียรติ - These two terms obviously have a synonymous meaning. However, our data shows that there is significance in the use of ถวาย or ให้. ให้เกียรติ was grouped over 50% of the time with a variety of words, such as ยกย่อง and เคารพ. Yet, the only words grouped with ถวายเกียรติ over 50% of the time were สรรเสริญ, สดุดี and เทิดทูน. Thus, while both terms are used in reference to people and the king, people were more likely to reserve ถวายเกียรติ for a higher realm of honor. (Two people even stated that ถวายเกียรติ can be used for สิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์, while no one used ให้เกียรติ in that sense.)

เคารพ- Similar to บูชา with the “religious” words, เคารพ was often employed in the explanation of other terms. Thus, the usage of เคารพ is fairly broad. However, its most common usage is in reference to บุคคล who are worthy of respect.

นับถือ- This term is most commonly associated with เคารพ and has a similar meaning. Though, นับถือ is unique in the sense that you can นับถือ people, as well as นับถือ a religion or a nation.

คารวะ- The only word closely associated with คารวะ was เคารพ. Our data did not reveal any new insights about its usage.

นบถ- The majority of our interviewees described นบถ as being a physical manifestation of showing respect, or deference, to the king or other notable people. It shows a person is aware of the other's significance or honor. In addition, three people did mention that it can be used in regard to monks, and one even said it can refer to เจ้าที่.

ถ่อมตัว- Interviewees often struggled to place this term in a larger group. The comments about this word emphasized that ถ่อมตัว means to know yourself in relation to others. For example, if you have a problem with your boss, keep it to yourself because you know your position. (After our interviews, we agreed that it would have been more helpful to use the phrase ถ่อมตัวลง.)

รับใช้- By far, รับใช้ was the most disconnected term that we asked about. It was often left in a group of its own. Interviewees typically said you can รับใช้ another person, though it was also used in reference to society, the king, the nation (as in a soldier), and, as one person indicated, monks. (We included รับใช้ because we wanted to include the idea of serving, from *latreuo* in Greek, as it relates to worship.)

Reflections

One of the difficulties in trying to find words similar to the English word “worship” is that the meaning of “worship” is slippery. It can refer to the idea of giving your life completely to another being. It can suggest giving honor to one thing above all else. And it can describe what people, and Christians in particular, do when they gather together for religious meetings and ceremonies. The meaning expands even more once you bring in the New Testament's ideas of serving (*latreuo*) and bowing down (*proskaneo*). However, one commonality with all those uses is that the recipient of all those actions, in the Christian usage, is one God.

Therefore, one of the difficulties with finding Thai words that correlate to these ideas is the fact that the Thai worldview is so different. Our idea of worship is dependent upon a monotheistic worldview. Thus, common Thai vocabulary will not carry the same sense of “worship” to which we might be accustomed.

One of the biggest surprises in our research was the way people explained the word นมัสการ. While the meaning has morphed as it has been used in the church, thus Christians understand it different, we wonder how much the idea of “inviting” is still connected with the word. In other words, are the connotations of “inviting” still present in the minds of Thai Christians when it is used in church? Also, what do non-Christians think when we say, “เราจะนมัสการพระเจ้า?”

One preliminary reaction to the data is that our concept of worship correlates much more with the terms associated with the king than with the “religious” terms. In particular, the term that seems especially significant for how we view God is เสด็จ. The fact that the ideas of high honor, love, loyalty, and พระคุณ are all connected to เสด็จ suggests that it should be incorporated into common Christian vocabulary.

Our research has also given us lots of questions to wrestle with? Such as, what would be the result of incorporating กราบไหว้, both the term and the action, more heavily in Christian worship? How does สวดมนต์ connect to Christian worship? How would emphasizing (or deemphasizing) Jesus as king affect Christian worship? Or, what is the significance of เจ้าที่ being mentioned so rarely in connection with these “religious” and honor-related terms?

Finally, we realize that there are other terms or phrases that could also have been analyzed. (In fact, one interviewee suggested the phrase มอบกายถวายชีวิต, which, in fact, seems to capture much of what we mean by “worship.”) Also, we know that words get their meaning as they are used within a particular community. Thus, Christians use these terms differently because they are using them in the context of Christian theology. And yet, we think this research might be helpful in understanding the rich connotations these terms carry with them in the minds and hearts of Thais, both Christian and non-Christian.