

Doing Mission from the Underside: Wa Woman's Perspective

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Christians in Myanmar, including the Wa people¹, understand mission as evangelizing the non-Christians. The American Foreign Baptist missionaries introduced mission as changing a person's religion and conversion of non-Christians, especially Buddhists, to Christianity. This mission concept came with British colonialism and Christians in Myanmar adopted it believing that there is no salvation apart from Christianity. Mission is thus focused on religious conversion of non-Christians to Christianity.

This mission model did not succeed because there are a few Burmese Christians in Myanmar who converted from Buddhism and Myanmar is still a predominantly Buddhist country. The situations facing people in Myanmar today demand an alternative mission to the colonial mission. The overwhelming voices of the suffering people longing for wholeness challenge the Christians and the church to "do mission from the underside." In this sense, "Doing Mission from the Underside" is not mere religious conversion but a challenge for social, political, ecological conversion and transformation. Based on today's Myanmar situation, doing mission from the underside will include listening to the voices of the suffering, listening to the voices of women, and listening to the earth. In this paper I will give my perspective on "Doing Mission from the Underside" as an Indigenous Christian Wa woman. This paper seeks to show that the voices of the suffering people need to be addressed for mission to be realistic and relevant. "Doing Mission from the Underside" is a challenge to Christians and the Church, to have solidarity with the oppressed, and to reclaim mission as Exodus from bondage, as holistic, liberative, and inclusive of women and men.

1. Listening to the Voices of the Suffering

Myanmar has had long periods of suffering. People have been suffering from political instability (ethnic wars), economic insecurity, religious fundamentalism and natural disasters. These injurious conditions cause incredible sufferings to people. They have been extremely stricken physically, intellectually, mentally, spiritually by these sufferings. The struggle for survival is the only way they can live.

My name is Ai San Paong. I came to Yangon when I was 12 years old. Living in the biggest city, I hopefully thought that I could continue my education well and get some privilege than living in my village. My hope disappeared when I was adopted by a Burmese Buddhist family and worked as a domestic helper in their house. My life was more difficult than I could imagine. I could not go to school 2 to 3 days a week. My adopted parents fixed a timetable for me to fulfill my duty well and not to miss my domestic responsibilities. I was afraid that I would fail my examination and I tried to find time to read my lesson. When I went to the toilet, when I had my meals and when I went to bed, I secretly read my lessons.

¹ Wa is one of the 135 minority groups in Myanmar, which is also found in China, Laos, and Thailand. The total Wa population is estimated at one million.

When they came to know these, they destroyed my books because they thought that I didn't want to do my responsibility. Living with such people was uneasy and painful for me. I was fed with insufficient food. When I was sick, they didn't bring me to the clinic. I was cured by the medicines they gave me. While my fever was high, I was blamed because I couldn't fulfill my work. Sometimes, they battered me. My body was full of sorrow and my tears flowed when my body was hurt. I was so sad to face such a bitter life. I was not permitted to visit my friends. I imagined my friends suffering and living in desperate conditions. I thought about the day I could liberate myself from such a miserable condition. I could only pray to God from the bottom of my heart.²

This is one of the life stories of the young Wa³ who, while trying to construct a better life ended up facing miserable suffering. The writer revealed his reality of being enslaved and exploited due to economic, political and social marginalization of his people. He is a Christian Wa who is poor, oppressed and marginalized due to his religion, ethnicity and class. He hoped for an exodus, liberation from social, economic, political and religious oppression and discrimination. He understands his own suffering and the suffering of his people and he hopes for liberation for all his people.⁴ It is the suffering of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized and the suffering of the whole body. Analysis of this suffering reveals that this suffering is due to loss of self-identity and human dignity.

The suffering of the Wa people requires a mission that redeems their self-identity and human dignity. It is to liberate them from slavery, exploitation, dominant power, oppression, and marginalization. Therefore, exodus mission is imperative. It is not only to liberate them from domination power and but also to empower them for nation building. Thus, it involves social, political, and economic concerns. As they have had a long and painful suffering, their uniqueness and value have been destroyed. Their journey to self-identity and dignity will be a long process until the whole body is healed.

Political, social, and economic circumstances have made them weak and backward. They have very limited access to opportunities for education and development. Their basic need is unity and solidarity among each other, between men and women as well as young and old people. Solidarity (among Christians as well as Christians and non-Christians) can only be the strength to build their identity, dignity, self-worth and nation. The mission challenge is to change their life from being weak to being strong, from being oppressed to being liberated, from being powerless to being empowered, and from being victims to being heroes or heroines. Exodus mission is needed to transform their existence from being victims to being agents of a better society.

² From a personal testimony submitted to the writer in 18.8.2005 and translated from Burmese.

³ Literally, the word "Wa" means "fat" in Burmese language. However, with its symbolic form "o", it was read as "zero" by some people. Due to this Burmese term, the Wa people have been misread as "zero people". At that time "zero" represented the situation of the Wa people in social, political, economic and religious-cultural spheres, having been victims of communist wars, sufferers of economic insecurity, and losers of social status and dignity. In another sense, the name "Wa" is not their real name. It is the name by which they have been labeled by the Burmese people to distinguish them as a people.

⁴ From a personal testimony of one student who lived with another family to support his education but who ended up being abused and could not study well.

Sayama Beauty Kat is a strong and courageous Wa woman and a young missionary in the Wa peace zone⁵ for the last ten years. She observed that the mission demanded by her people is not evangelization; it is education, literacy and development. As a courageous woman missionary, she is in solidarity with her people and listens to their suffering.

*Sayama Beauty is a brave and faithful woman servant of God. Although she is living under the control of the Wa authority, she is not afraid and can ask the chief for help on the problems of the villagers. Because of her courage, she is allowed to serve there.*⁶

The mission needed by the Wa people is the mission revealed by God through Moses (a spiritual nurturer and national leader), Aaron (a priest and leader), Miriam (a prophetess, singer, dancer and leader), Zipporah (a mother and priestess), Puah (a midwife life-giver), Shiprah (a midwife life-giver), Pharaoh's daughter (a nurturer, savior), Esther (a national leader and liberator), Deborah (a prophetess, counselor, warrior) who liberated, saved their people and built their nation. The exodus mission that is social, political, religious is essential for the Wa people.

The Wa Youth Centre's⁷ mission is exodus mission as it is trying to conceptualize the relevant mission of the Wa people. It emerged because of the painful cry of the migrant Wa children, the orphans and the poor who became victims of rape, abuse and dehumanization. It focuses its mission on the young Wa boys and girls, promoting their education, morality, living standards, spirituality, and intellectual development. The young children who have been nurtured and empowered have rediscovered their self-worth, identity and full human dignity.⁸ However, its mission is not encouraged and recognized by Christians who judge that nation building and social development are not religious concerns. For this ministry at the Wa Youth Centre, I am not given a minister's identity card, as I am rejected as a minister of God.

Teacher, please help me. I don't have any place to go. My adopted father forces me and my sister to be his wives. I am afraid of him. Every night, he forces us to sleep in one bed with him. My sister is pregnant. I am tortured every night by his sexual abuse. I appealed to

⁵ This area is called the Wa Autonomous Region, which is ruled by "the United Wa State Army (UWSA). It was the site of wars and dominated by the Communists of China and Burma. Wa men were recruited as warriors for the KMT (Kuomintang) and the Burma Communists and women were taken as their wives. Due to unceasing wars, it became isolated and backward. This area was liberated in 1989. Missionaries and teachers were invited to do development projects in the region.

⁶ Esther Khun, "Reading Samaritan Woman with the Context of Wa Women," an unpublished Master of Divinity Thesis at Myanmar Institute of Theology (March 2008), 45, 46.

⁷ The Wa Youth Centre was built due to social, economic and political problems facing young people. It is an educational and social work centre and a church for the Wa migrants in Yangon. The writer was one of the founders of this Centre and she continues to serve as administrator at present.

⁸ Many students have accomplished their education and are now serving as teachers, nurses, social workers, pastors, ministers, etc. Some are continuing their further studies abroad. Some are continuing their education at medical institutes, engineering, computer science, marine science, of religious studies at Myanmar Institute of Theology and other theological institutes, universities and seminaries.

*him with my dripping tears every night because I am afraid that I would be destroyed and could not continue my education.*⁹

The suffering of this young Wa girl, Ei San, and the young Wa girls was the reason for my mission and my desire to be an energetic woman for God's mission at the Wa Youth Centre. These young Wa girls came to Yangon to study but they were forced to become domestic helpers and lesser wives of the man who had promised to support them in their education. Listening to these voices, I realized that liberation and freedom from oppression and dehumanization are essential to the Wa mission.

2. Listening to the Voices of Women

Women are more than half of the population of the country as well as of the church in Myanmar. They actively participate in the church's mission and social development and nation building. They are the backbone of the church and family, home and nation. In the midst of political instability and economic insecurity, women hear God's call and fulfill God's mission where it is demanded. Many women energetically dedicate themselves as local missionaries and leave their families. Likewise, many actively choose to involve in God's ministries in church and society, but they are not fully credited, recognized and accepted by men. Therefore, the reality of women is suffering due to sexism, patriarchy and gender hierarchy in both church and society of Myanmar.

*I don't want to work under a woman.*¹⁰

These words are misogynistic because they deny women's leadership and affirm male superiority regardless of education, ability, talent, intellect, spirituality, and morality. It discloses sexism, patriarchy and gender hierarchy in the church and ministry. It challenges women to redefine their identity. Hearing these misogynistic words for the first time at the beginning of doing mission, I experienced and realized gender discrimination, sexism, sex-based oppression, marginalization and exclusion in church and society. Moreover, I was conscious of the situation of women as subordinate to men. Thus, these words which I first experienced became the reason for my mission to be in solidarity with women. Women's oppression is more dreadful because it is the oppression that comes from within and starts at home, and within family, and between men and women. Listening to women is a great challenge for the church and society.

*The real self-identity of Wa women is lost with the patriarchal hierarchical religious structures. One of the male leaders said that there is no leadership position for Wa women ministers in the Wa context now. They still remain as the secondary class in the ministry of God as well.*¹¹

⁹ The Wa young girl who experienced sexual violence and abuse came to the writer in 2002 for her security. The writer presented her case to the Women's Affairs Committee for action. The survivor of violence has stayed at the Wa Youth Centre, with the writer, for five years and she has now graduated from university.

¹⁰ These words were spoken by a misogynist to the writer when she served as Director in the Wa Orphanage Centre of the Wa Convention. He resigned from his work because he didn't want to work as assistant to a woman. At that time the writer was a theologically trained female minister while he was a lay minister.

¹¹ Esther Khun, 41.

In the family and social structure of the Wa, the head or ruler or superior position is confined to men; women are kept from headship or decision making roles. Women are thought to be incapable to be heads of men. The patriarchal social pattern degrades women to be dependent, subordinate and submissive to men. Women are forced into domestic sphere to bear children, rear children, cook, wash, clean and serve her family, especially her husband, parents-in-law and her children.

*The head of the family is the father...When the father dies, his eldest son becomes the head of the family. And when the eldest brother dies, his eldest son inherits the position of the head.*¹²

Bama women and most of the ethnic women of Myanmar are suffering from patriarchal cultures. Therefore, it is observed that Myanmar women do not dare to speak in public and they do not have the courage to raise questions in the classrooms or in public. The reason for their silence in public is due to the cultural teachings about the character of a good woman¹³ that has been imposed on them.¹⁴

Melford E. Spiro, a male scholar and a foreigner who investigated gender hierarchy in Myanmar, observed Myanmar women's weak and inferior status and Myanmar men's strong and powerful status in the public sphere. He criticized Myanmar's culture as an "ideology of the superior males" and "an ideology of dangerous females." The superior male concept is articulated in a way that males are noble because of their biological anatomy; however, women are ignoble and polluted by their biological nature and sexuality. This ideology of male superiority is taught as a logical teaching because of the belief that males alone are born with *phon*,¹⁵ therefore, men are said to be innately higher than women in intellectual, moral, and spiritual areas.¹⁶ He discovered that the cultural ideological concept of evil and dangerous women was articulated due to men's fear of losing power to women rather than their maintaining men's power and authority over them.¹⁷ Thus, patriarchal cultural concept of *phon* is the root cause of women's oppression in Myanmar.

The male hierarchical culture of Myanmar, which is personalized by "*phon*," is found in most ethnic minorities including the Wa people. It stratifies men and women, putting

¹² Daw Tin Yee, *The Socio-Economic Life of the Wa National* (Myanmar: National Centre for Human Resource Development of Ministry of Education, 2004), 39-40.

¹³ Patricia Mary describes Myanmar's cultural expression of a good woman: "She should respect her husband and serve him as slave... She has to be ready for her husband, and be a consultant for him especially when he meets with danger. She must dress him well. In general, she should respect him as her own brother. She should know how to cook, wash men's *longyi* (men's wear) and decorate the house. She also needs to know how to weave and keep the house in order. She can only sleep after her husband has gone to bed but she must rise before him and eat meals after him." See Patricia Mary, OSM, "Myanmar Catholic Women and their Struggles," *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*, Evelyn Monteiro, SC and Antoinette Gutzler, MM, eds. (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ It is a Myanmar word which refers to male power, glory or holiness.

¹⁶ Melford E. Spiro, "Gender hierarchy in Burma: cultural, social, and psychological dimensions," *Sex and Gender Hierarchies* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 317-318.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 330.

men's sphere in public and confining women to the private domain. As this male hierarchical culture is adopted by Christians, the patriarchal domination is exercised at home, in society and church. Consequently, women have accepted their role as auxiliary, subordinate, inferior and submissive to men. During the wedding ceremony, women are told to be submissive to their husband who is the head of the house.

Women's ordination is still denied in most churches. The consequence was seen at the Centenary Jubilee of Wa Mission on April 15-22, 2008, when missionaries, both men and women were honoured for their 40 or 25 years of service. Sadly, those men who were honoured were all ordained but none of the women who were honored was ordained. Although women have been actively participating in church's ministry and God's mission, there are no ordained women in the Wa Convention. In the whole Baptist Convention in Myanmar only 30 women are ordained. Thus, sexism, patriarchy and gender hierarchy discriminate against women in ordained ministry and full participation in God's ministry and society. The patriarchal concept of *phon* is dominant and women's public identity is not accepted.

As the exodus mission is essential to the Wa people, the exodus women are also essential to reveal the real identity of women in God's ministry and in nation building. The Wa women are brave and strong as Exodus women who struggle to save and help their people in the midst of political domination and struggles. They are educators, missionaries, mothers, healers, evangelists, nurturers, teachers and leaders. Their national spirit is strong as they have to resist the political power, economic struggles and social instability. They are doing mission at the front, not the back. They are the agents of transforming their society, country and nation. Although they are not equally treated and fully credited like the men, as exodus women, they take the initiative and risk for the mission of God.

Sayama,¹⁸ I have been serving in God's ministry as a Sunday school teacher and women's leader for many years without having salary. I am a farmer and work with my husband for our livelihood. He met an accident and cannot work well. My husband complains that I do not get salary for my work in the church. I am faithful to God as I have dedicated my life to God. Now my daughter is in the ninth standard but I cannot support her to continue her education. I am worried about that and I would like to ask your help.¹⁹

Like the Syro-phoenician woman who challenged Jesus and his disciples, the Wa women challenge male dominant power at home and in society. Although they suffer multiple oppressions which dehumanize them, they are still strong and have belief and hope in God. Today Wa women are fighting patriarchy and advocating solidarity among themselves. Women's solidarity with each other leads to empowered women for peace, love and justice – women who are no longer victims but agents of transforming society and church. "My Freedom"²⁰ pictures women's journey to freedom, despite the pain and

¹⁸ From Wa language which means "female minister."

¹⁹ Martha, the Wa woman minister who is also a poor mother and farmer shared her suffering with me on January 11, 2009. She requested the writer to keep her daughter in the Centre and to support her education.

²⁰ Mary Dun, "Women Empowerment," *Thamar Alin, and Baptist Theological Journal*, no. 5 (2000-2001), 88.

suffering. However, it is also full of confidence and empowerment so that women can claim they are fully people of God.

3. Listening to the Earth

As the land is extremely poor to grow rice, the people can not rely on it for its food sufficiency. Most of the Wa peasants produce barely enough food to feed their families. With the scarcity of water in the Wa hills, disease is badly widespread. 75% of the population suffers from rice shortages for four to six months of the year. The economic crisis brought the two notorious reputations to them in the history: the headhunters and the poppy growers.²¹

The economic crisis facing people in Myanmar is an earth problem. As Myanmar is an agricultural land, the earth is the matrix of life. The economic security of the people is dependent on the earth. Myanmar is rich with natural resources and mineral resources. Today Myanmar is well known as the poorest country because the mineral resources of the earth have been exploited and the earth has been destroyed. The ecological crisis and global warming not only alarm the people; they strike at the people badly. An example of this is the impact of the typhoon Nargis.²² Thus, people are facing the economic dilemma because the earth cannot not feed them anymore.

Likewise, the headhunting practice in the history of the Wa describes how much the earth's fertility is essential for the fullness of their life. Wa people know that the earth is their life. The earth provides the resources to sustain their life. But because they lack knowledge about the earth and the earth's community, they practice shifting slash and burn cultivation, which has destroyed the web of life and eco-balance of the earth. As rice harvest can provide the families sufficient food only for half year, they have to rely on the income from opium crops for the rest of the year for their survival. Poppy became the main crop as it can be cultivated even on a barren hill and doesn't need much labour and other materials. Moreover, the natural coolness and the appearance of the opium within six months²³ made growing opium profitable. The Wa, therefore, became opium growers and earned the reputation of their land being the opium centre. Consequently, the Wa United State Army became Asia's deadliest drug cartel. The long years of soil erosion and exploitation of the forest made the land only suitable for crops like opium. So because of their own ignorance, certain political factors and their economic needs, the Wa have become identified with opium growing.

The earth's problem is still an unfathomable issue. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] commission on eradication of drugs suppressed opium production completely by 2005 to make the land as opium-free zone. But this causes the Wa peasants and people great suffering due to: (a) decrease in income; (b) insufficient food; (c) termination of children's education; (d) health problems; (e) mass resettlement in new areas - e.g. from the barren north to the south.²⁴

²¹ Aye Nwe, "The Rights and Roles of Ethnic Minorities in Myanmar: Wa Ethnic Perspective", *Engagement* vol. 3 (Myanmar: Judson Research Centre, 2004), 82.

²² The cyclone demolished one-third of the population of Myanmar on May 2, 2008. It also destroyed 70% of trees and the delta area where rice is mainly grown.

²³ Daw Tin Yee, 126.

²⁴ Aye Nwe, 84.

This outcome was clearly shown by the number of youth coming to the Wa Youth Centre. When it began in 2000, there were 70 students who came to study. In 2003, the number of students reduced to 45. In the last two years, the number of students decreased to 30 -35. The economic crisis also causes disruption in the education and development of the Wa. As result, the Wa people who live in the areas of opium cultivated region faced tremendous economic problems and they are so anxious for their future as they know that the earth is not that productive. Their future would be in danger if the earth's problem cannot be solved. A wise leader said, "It would be a great problem for the survival of all Wa in the coming three years, as the land doesn't produce good crops." As Mother Earth who feeds the people is suffering, the Wa are suffering too. Listening to the earth is crucial for economic redemption. The earth is needed to be saved from human exploitation. Therefore, the mission of the Wa challenges them for an exodus mission that includes ecological mission, focused on ecological conscientization, education, sustainable development of the people.

Conclusion

Doing mission from the underside is the urgent mission needed for Myanmar and the Wa people as they face social, political, economic, religious and ecological dilemmas. It reveals that voices of the suffering people are essential for doing the mission of God. It is an alternative mission paradigm that embraces the people's suffering, and envisions a more holistic, inclusive and liberative mission. This mission not only challenges men and women of the Wa to claim their exodus and but it also challenges them to be agents of their own transformation - for a better future where their identity, dignity and fullness of life can be realized.

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