

## **Reaching Animist Asian (Mien) in America**

By

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The Mien People have been in America for over Four decades, but little is known about them outside their own people. “Who are they? Where do they come from? Why are they here? What do they believe? Why are their minds closed to the Gospel?” How could they be reached effectively with the Gospel? In order to contextualize the Gospel in a way they could understand it in the light of their culture, we must understand their mindset and their worldview, as well as their current or past belief system. The problem is made more complicated now that they live in America.

The name, “Mien”, means “We are the people”, and all other people groups are outsiders. However, to the Chinese they were referred to as barbarians. The Mien were first recorded by Chinese historians in central China about 500 B.C. Due to political pressure in Nanking, they moved down the coast to Canton, then inland to Kweichow, Kwangsi, and Yunnan. Eventually, some moved back toward the coast to the Hainan Island, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. To date, no one knows exactly how many Mien there are in the world. Mr. C.W. Callaway, a missionary to the Mien in Thailand estimated that there are close to a million Mien in the world. They are known as a people without their own country or land, yet they have a distinct culture and language.

Alternate names for the Mien people are “Yiu Mien, Yao, Mien, Highland Yao, Pan Yan, or Ban Yao.” (Mien). There are approximately 23,000 Mien in the United States.

700,000 have been estimated to live in China, 300,000 in Vietnam and Thailand, and a

few live in France and Canada. As early as 1963, the Mien in Namtha, the Northern most province of Laos and a center for United States CIA Mercenary forces, were engaged in CIA activities led by warlords “Chaomai and his brother Chaola”. During the war, many Mien people were recruited by the CIA to fight in the war as well as help lead trails. When the war ended, the Mien became the target of the Communist party, so many of them fled to Thailand for refuge due to their involvement with the CIA. Those individuals eventually ended up in refugee camps in Thailand and in recent decades, many of them have settled in the West Coast of the United States. The Mien are the newest minority group currently making a new life in the United States, and today, most of the Mien people are located in the states of California, Oregon, and Washington.

The Mien has survived through many disastrous war experiences. However, life in America is almost as difficult as it was in Asia for the older generation. Due to cultural and language barriers, many cannot get a job and because they have no land to plant and raise their own food, some even regret coming to America. For the first generation of the Mien people in America, learning English is not easy. Even back in their homeland, the Mien were not industrialized. They were farmers and they had no written language until recent decades. Thus, to try to learn English is not merely “learning a new language” to them; it is like teaching a baby to speak.

The traditional religion of the Mien people is animist (where both the spirit of their ancestors and nature are worshipped due to the belief that there are natural and supernatural spirits of their ancestors which live in and animate all things) mixed with Taoism/Buddhism. Their religious leader are the shamans and their religion centers around the need to please the spirits, especially their ancestors, to ensure peace and

prosperity in every day life (Global Prayer Digest, Frontier Fellowship, Inc.). In general, the Mien people recognize eighteen chief deities and many other minor gods and spirits. They are also heavily influenced by the Chinese worldview, which incorporates the belief in good spirits as well as bad spirits (such as jungle demons and valley demons). The Mien believe that it is their duty, as well as their obligation, to make peace with the spirits. In particular, unique to the Mien culture is their merit-making ceremonies performed for the males before the age of twenty. These ceremonies last two days and the purpose is to introduce him to Taoist pantheon and guarantees him entry into the realm of the ancestors when he dies (Lewis, p 160). The Mien practice Animism solely by relying upon the ability of the Shaman (priest) to manipulate the spiritual realm. For the Mien people, evil takes on the form of pain, sickness, death, and sin. When a person gets sick, the Mien believe it is due to displeasing the spirits so a shaman called on to determine whether the offense is major or minor and whether a sacrifice of a pig or chicken will be sufficient. Interestingly enough, sacrifices of animals' blood are the usual means of atonement in the sense that they can either appease their ancestors or anger the spirits. The Mien also believe that material favors can be gained from the sacrifice(s). In addition, Animistic rituals, or sacrifices, are held during occasions ranging from birth to death, from weddings to the New Year or a particular calendar date.

The Mien people believe that "human beings have many souls" (Lewis, p156). Thus, for many centuries, the Mien have practiced "bridge" ceremonies in the attempt to "gather their lost souls". In addition, they constantly sought to live in harmony with the spirit world through meticulous observation of rituals and ceremonies and paid careful and proper respect to the spirits in order to try to earn their way (their souls) to their

ancestors. In addition, the Mien believe that the spirit(s) of the dead still communicate with the present world through Shamans who act as the intercessor for the living and the dead. Through chantings during a ceremony, the dead tells the shaman what their needs are and the Shaman will relay that to the living. The living will then sacrifice according to the response that the spirit(s) of the dead have requested. The Mien people are no different from any other lost creature of God. They try to get to God on their own, not knowing that Jesus is the only way.

Understanding these basic beliefs of the Mien people is crucial for the means of effective evangelism. In addition, it is important to note that there are (religious) similarities in the Jewish and Mien culture in that there is a need for blood sacrifices for atonement. “The Jews in the Old Testament sought to atone for their sin through a system of animal sacrifice”, but “here was Jesus as the ultimate sacrificial Lamb of God, who paid for sin once for all” (Strobel, p 179). Today’s Mien Christian leaders are capitalizing on this in evangelism. In fact, turning back to God is going back to the real Mien tradition and religion.

When the traditional worldviews and beliefs of the Mien people are understood, the messenger will then be able to present the message of Jesus Christ more effectively. However, difficulty still arises when the unbelieving Mien attempts to answer questions in his own futile knowledge. For example, to the question of who the “Mien” are, and where they came from, as Christians we know that God created us in His image but for the Mien, they have a legend that tells of their beginning. It is believed by the Mien that the “Emperor Pien Hung of China was attacked by the very powerful Emperor Kao Want and faced defeat. However, a dog named Phan Hu was able to get through the lines, and

killed the aggressor, Kao Want, and brought his head back to the Emperor Pien Hung. As his reward, Phan Hu was given with one of Pine Hung's daughters as a wife, whom he took to the mountains. They produced 12 children, six boys and six girls, from whom sprung the twelve clans of the Mien" (Lewis, p136). The Mien tribe is divided into 12 clans and the line of decent is traced through the males. Thus, the Mien people have no concept of the true Creator. They know only of legends concerning the creation. Roman 1:19-32 describes exactly where the Mien are in the stages of their disbelief. They have clearly seen the things God has made "and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things." They have "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than Creator." According to Douglas Groothius, "We come to know God's truth much more fully and internally through the Holy Spirit after conversion, but unless we apprehend something of God's truth before conversion (through God's general revelation and common grace), the very logic of conversion fades away." (Groothis, p143)

The Mien lack proper understanding of the scripture (Romans 10:1-2), and is one of the reasons why many Mien have not come to know the Lord. Mien people do not have the concept of the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God. Most of the Mien have not heard the Gospel presented clearly to them. Therefore, legends and superstitious words from the shaman (their religious leader) such as, "If you listen to those kinds of words (the gospel), you will be displeased to your ancestors" take precedent in their mind over the gospel message when it is presented. Words like these scare the Mien people and keep them from hearing the gospel.

The Mien are superstitious people. Traditionally, Mien in Asia strongly resisted change, especially “religious” changes. That is why although the practice of animist ritual is expensive, most poor Mien still spend a great deal of time struggling to save enough money to afford various ceremonies. Ceremonies of utmost importance include the death ceremony (the funeral rites which is believed to be part of sending the spirit of the dead to the ancestor or the “other world” where their soul will reside until it reincarnates), and other ceremonies to appease their ancestors.

Understanding the basic structure of the Mien family also enables the messenger to communicate the gospel message more effectively. The family unit is very important to the Mien. “Unity and togetherness” of the family is one of their most valuable assets. The importance of an individual’s existence is defined through the relationship he or she has with the family or the community in which he or she lives; and the evaluation of an individual is in terms of honor or shame. Divorce or intermarriages are rare among the Mien people. In fact, we see how important and valued the family unit is in one’s decision to become a Christian. For the most part, it was the common practice that unless the whole family believes and converts corporately, one would not make the decision to accept Christ on his own. To make a decision on one’s own means to reject the others. Peter Cha’s observation was correct when he stated that the “Western culture is guilt-based, and Asian culture is shame-based” (Carson, p233).

Furthermore, since the head of the household is the oldest male in the family, his decision to accept or reject Christ has a lot of weight and influence on the overall decision. Thus, reaching Mien young adults is a great and difficult task. “In Asian-American families, the young adult’s quest for self-identity has always been a focal point

of conflict and tension between immigrant parents and their American-born children.” (Carson, p228). Asian parents hold to the idea that identity is passed down from one generation to the other, or that his identity is an extension of the parent. The belief is that an individual is unable to live outside of the family traditional structure and will not survive because he/she has no identity aside from that belonging to the family. However, the younger Mien generations growing up in the United States are influenced by the American culture and “commonly assume that the make of self identity is their own personal project and perceive their parents’ involvement as unnecessary if not intrusive.” (Carson p. 228) This conflict creates a problem when trying to reach young Mien adults as well. The young adults believe that they ought to be able to make decisions on their own and may want to make the decision to accept Christ but at the same time they do not want to be ostracized by the family. Thus, the young adult has a difficult time accepting the Lord unless they have their parents’ approval. Many American-born Mien face similar struggles as that of which Peter Cha described. They “feel oppressed and manipulated because they don’t know their own culture and language well” (Carson, 246).

Migrating to the United States has also done much to impact the religious practices of the Mien people. Under the weight and bondage of terrifying spirits and the constant need to appease the spirit, as well as the economic hardship and lack of skillful shamans, many Mien people have turned to God. Other reasons include the strong feelings of dissatisfaction with the way things are under the old way of life.

Today, the Mien people have the New Testament and the Pentateuch available in the Roman and Thai script, which have been devised for the Mien by western

missionaries. When the Mien people come to Christ, they also find that they have gained freedom from the ancestral spirits as well as other evil spirits. Faith in Christ for the Mien people means that they no longer have to appease the spirits or be terrified by them. However, unless the Mien people in America are able to break away from the trap of their culture, they will not experience God's grace fully. "God's truth is not provincial, parochial, or partial; it is universal in scope and application. Yet it also allows for unique cultural expression and the creative of individuality of people made in the image and redeemed through the Lamb" (Grootius, p73). The important thing to remember is that any culture that is contrary to the Word of God must be changed, and that is a difficult idea for many Mien people.

Although Christianity is almost never the first choice of the Mien people for solving their problems, many have come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ over the last couple of decades due to different trials and temptations. However, just as Dr. Feinberg stated, "Not everyone will be convinced by the evidence for Christianity or the truth of the Bible" (Cowan, 254). In fact, for many Mien, it is usually when all the animistic rituals have been attempted and failed that they consider becoming a Christian. There are still many more that are not Christians than there are Christians.

Many issues have caused the minds of unsaved Mien to be closed to the Gospel. First and foremost is the issue of inappropriate contextualization of the scripture (I Cor. 9:19-23). Second, there is the issue of soil receptivity (Mark 4). Third is the issue of sin (Ephesians 2:1-3). The Mien people do not understand the concept of sin nature or committing sin against Almighty God. Fourth, there is the issue of Satan (II Cor. 4:4). Satan has blinded the minds of the Mien people. They worship creation rather than the

Creator. The Mien worship and sacrifice in the form of payment for their souls, not knowing that Christ was and is the ultimate sacrificial Lamb. Fifth, there is the issue of religion itself (Mark 7:1-13). The Mien people worship the spirits of their ancestors and that of other evil spirits; yet they live in fear of those same spirits. In addition, they are too afraid to challenge their own worldviews and traditions and replace them with Christian values. Many do not want to abandon their people, not knowing that they can still be a Christian and be “Mien”. Finally, there is the issue of negative exposure to Christianity (Titus 2:1-15). Many are resistant to the Gospel because of a few so-called “Christian’s” bad testimonies. These issues are not mere excuses for the Mien not to believe in God. They are extremely legitimate and of utmost concern to the Mien people.

Therefore, how can the Mien Church, similar to other Asian-American churches, reach out effectively to Asian (Mien) Animist in America? The church must “grow as a community of the word and as a community that interprets the word faithfully and performs the word authentically” (Carson, p232). Finding a point of contact with the Mien is a major goal in the steps of contact making (I Cor. 5:9). Through association with the Mien, the ministry of incarnation is put into practice. It is also through genuine contact with the Mien that the ministering party learns of the people and earns their respect and the right to be heard. A messenger of the Gospel must find ways and avenues to infiltrate the good news to the Mien people. Learning the Language of the people is also an important strategy in contact making. Knowing the language breaks down the language barrier and allows the messenger to communicate the gospel in a more effective manner. Equally important is for the messenger to be a student of the culture. He or she must seek to understand the explicit (things that we can see) and implicit (unseen or

unspoken) values of the Mien people. It is important to develop an ability to identify with those you aim to reach, and to constantly look for a point of entry.

Once contact is made, the messenger must understand that in the Mien culture, a reaction of reciprocation will occur. For example, if you were to invite a Mien person to your home, you could anticipate that they will invite you to their home as well. Keep in mind that “spirituality is not a private concern, it is subject to the challenge of evidence and logic” (Grootius, p 85). Thus, the messenger of the Gospel is wise to find a common ground in the Bible that the Mien could relate to or that could fit the Mien context. An example of this is the story of Exodus where the redemption of Israel from Egypt was accomplished by Divine intervention. However, it was required on the part of the Israelites to have faith in the efficacy of shed blood (Ex. 12:1-13). In the New Testament, redemption (Christ’s shed blood on the cross) is for the purpose of making possible the fellowship of a redeemed people with God. Similarly, the only requirement on the part of His creatures is faith in Jesus Christ. Difficulty arises when one tries to communicate this to the Mien people, because until they realize that they are a sinner, they would not realize that they need a Savior or a Redeemer.

Therefore, in presenting the Gospel to the Asian (Mien) Animist who does not believe in the one true God and who does not understand the concept of sin nature or sin against God, the Messenger is wise to start from Genesis. The method to be used in evangelizing this group of people is to start with God, the Creator, and the beginning. In addition, instead of “telling”, propose questions. This will help with their “guided self-discovery” which will also allow the Mien to see that “the Bible declares its own authority and that truth is self-revealing.” Dialogue and discussions also work well.

Initiate the discussion with questions such as: 1) How did we get here and how did the world come into existence? Have them give you an answer, and when given the opportunity, share the Christian perspective of how God Created man in His own image (Gen. 2:26a; 1:27). 2) Who made (or created) this universe? When the opportunity arises, explain the creation account (Gen.1:1). 3) Do you believe that God exists? Obviously, yes you do, but when the opportunity presents itself, explain why there is only one true God. 4) Who is this God and what does He say about himself? When the opportunity comes, explain that this God claims to be the “I AM”, or the God of creation, and that He self-existed before the creation of the world. The Mien people are able to relate to this context due to their belief in creation and an origin all living things.

Next, the dialogue should proceed with the question: 5) What is this God like? This will give the messenger the opportunity to explain about God’s holiness and His plan for mankind. 6) Did man ever have a relationship or contact with this God? A detailed explanation concerning the fall of man and why man has broken the relationship with God should be presented. The Mien are able to relate to the broken relationship due their understanding of the effect that wrong doing against a higher being could produce this type of result. A messenger might not be able to ask all these questions at once, but they are helpful in developing an interest of the Biblical account of the beginning, and the Creator of the universe is also introduced.

Another question that could be presented at this time is: 7) What caused man to lose contact with this God? This question is asked when the target audience understands and believes that man once had a relationship with a Divine God. When the opportunity comes, take time to explain Sin and the effect it had on the relationship between God and

man. 8) Does man still have contact or relationship with God? Here, the gospel message could be presented, and it should be emphasized that those who believe in Him are able to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. 9) Does this God want to have relationship with man? Of course! He desires all man to be saved and to come to the knowledge of His truth (I Timothy 2:4). The messenger has to be wise, and depending on the level of reception, the questions should not be asked all at once.

The ultimate goal is to demonstrate that God exists and that He is our Creator. However, because our ancestors sinned against Him, we then became separated from Him. Nonetheless, He wants to have a personal relationship with us, His creation. Therefore, He provided a way to have a relationship with Him through His Son Jesus. The Mien people are able to understand the concept of salvation when the messenger can communicate to him or her that that Jesus is the “bridge” (the way) to the Father (John 14:6). As previously mentioned, the Mien people have tried for centuries to build a bridge for their lost souls through their futile animistic ritual; now they can come to know the God who is able to bridge them with the Father.

Another important point to keep in mind when ministering to the Mien people is that they need to be assured that God is powerful and cannot be compared with the evil spirits. Once the existence of God is established and the sin nature discussed, the messenger, knowing the fear of the Mien towards evil spirits should take the time to reassure them with the word of God that the God they now know is also the God over all other spirits. Furthermore, teaching the Mien the knowledge of sin without the anticipation of mercy will only cause them to keep on running from God. This is seen in the account of the prodigal son who, through his misery, gave him the desire to return to

his father with a repenting heart. He needed the confidence and reassurance that a welcome would await him when he returned.

The messenger is also wise to introduce the “Powerful God”. Who is God? Is he the Creator that He claims to be? (Gen.1:2; Deut. 4:19; Ps. 19:1). God is eternal, invisible, holy, powerful, faithful and merciful. This God is greater than all gods, and the Holy Spirit is greater than all other spirits, including evil spirits who oppress and possess unsaved people (Acts 10:38; Mark 5:15-18). Besides teaching them about God, the Mien people need to be assured that God not only is able to protect them from evil spirits who would be displeased with them once they become a Christian, they would spend eternity with God in a place where no fear abounds. As Dr. Habermas stated, “Not only did Jesus make functional claim to be able to lead his followers to the truth, but he added a crucial ontological component: He was the truth, and what people do with Him will determine where they will spend eternity” (Cowan, 105).

The Mien need to understand their relationship to God: (1) Man’s dignity should be discussed -Gen. 1:27; 2:7. (2) The fall of man and its effect on the relationship between God and man needs to be clearly presented-Gen. 3. (3) Man’s sin and the broken relationship must be clarified-Gen.6:5,12). And ultimately, the message that God redeems man through Christ should be presented in a manner that could be understood (Rom. 5; I Cor. 15:49). God loves mankind (John 3:16) and salvation belongs to Him (Ps. 3:8). Salvation is a gift of God and eternal life is available through Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:23). Thus, when they know the plan of God for fallen man, the next step further is to let them know the remedy for their sin. God said, “As many as received him, to them he gave the power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his

name (John 1:12). “Christ died for our sin according to the scriptures; he was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the scripture (I Cor. 15:3-4); therefore, “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Rom. 10:13).

Once the existence of God is established, His authority and plan for fallen man presented, we are ready to present the Good News of His salvation plan, and the redemption of mankind. At this point in time the unsaved Mien should come to understand that there is God and this God has revealed himself to mankind concerning. He either could accept or reject. As the Holy Spirit works in their life, convicting them, the messenger’s prayer is that they will repent from their fear of evil spirit to trust God who is all Powerful. “Believing the truth that Jesus taught about himself is essential to salvation and discipleship” (Groothius, 142) Christian faith involved both intellectual assent and personal trust. As Mien converted from Animist to Christianity their worldview also change as well. As Dr. Groothius stated “For any worldview to be true, it’s essential tenets must be consistent with one another logically in accordance with laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle” (Groothius, p 97)

The conversion of the Mien Animist in America require a complete shift of allegiance in the mind. It is clear from the Joshua 24:14, it required putting away foreign god. From Acts 19:18-19 “and many that believed came, and confessed, and showed their deeds. Many of those also who used magical art brought their books together, and burned them before all men...” The Mien believer also burned all their animistic ritual paraphernalia when converted. This is a way to show that the old way no longer has power over the new converted. For the Mien, Faith in God means their outwardly their

animistic paraphernalia are burned similar to the setting stone of witness in the days of Joshua, it also parallels to magical books burning in Acts 19.

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