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Original Article

Nine Grains of Rice and the Messianic Society: A Religio-Cultural Analysis of Karen Rice–Merit Networks in Northern Thailand

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Abstract

This study examines how the Karen Rice–Merit Networks (RMNs) in Northern Thailand express a lived religio-cultural solidarity grounded in the indigenous philosophy of the Nine Grains of Rice. Rooted in the Theology of Rice, this worldview sacralizes agriculture by linking rice's life cycle to Christ's Paschal Mystery. Using a qualitative design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with 10 Karen priests, 2 organic intellectuals, and 3 RMN coordinators, supported by textual analysis of Church documents, participant observation of RMN's zonal meeting, and diocesan records. Findings reveal that the RMNs embody three interrelated dimensions: (1) self and family welfare, fostering food security and moral formation; (2) community welfare, promoting mutual aid and social justice; and (3) spiritual welfare, integrating Eucharistic symbolism with Karen identity. These practices sustain a counter-capitalist ethos rooted in reciprocity and sufficiency. The study concludes that the Nine Grains of Rice provides a religio-cultural developmental model for constructing a Messianic Society, and it recommends deeper youth engagement, ecological formation, and contextual catechesis to ensure the continuity of the missiological economy of grace.

Keywords: *Karen rice-merit networks, Messianic society, nine grains of rice, religio-cultural identity, theology of rice*

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Introduction

Rice is deeply woven into the world's agricultural traditions and spiritual beliefs. Seen as both sacred and all-encompassing, it touches nearly every part of agrarian life—shaping economies, societies, and rituals, and serving as both economic and spiritual force (Davidson, 2016). For the Karen people of Northern Thailand—who call themselves *P'gaz k'Nyau*, or “human person”—rice is not just food; it is central to who they are and how they live. Their way of seeing the world views nature, humanity, and the Absolute Being (*Ta Thi Ta Tau*) as interconnected, creating and upholding both life and morality (Fung SJ, 2024; Phatthanaphraiwian & Greene, 2023). Within this perspective, Catholic Karen communities—who were evangelized by Betharram missionaries beginning in 1951 after they left China—wove their farming values with Christian ideas of community and self-giving (Bistis SCJ, 2022b). This blend led to a unique *Theology of Rice*, which Fr. Niphot Thianwihan later articulated, an understanding that interprets the rice cycle as a symbol of Christ's self-giving love and resurrection. (Thianwihan, 2021).

In 2002, the Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC) and the Research and Training Center for Religio-Cultural Communities (RTRC) established the Rice-Merit Networks (RMNs), turning this theology into real-life practices of sharing rice and supporting each other across more than 700 villages (Karunan, 2019). The RMNs are grounded in the *Nine Grains of Rice* doctrine, an indigenous belief that treats farming as sacred and lays out an ethical way to share resources—not just within the family, but with the poor, the larger community, and even ancestors. At its heart, this network stands against capitalist values, contrasting rice—which represents life, sacrifice, and mutual support—with money, which stands for competition and hoarding. The Nine Grains promote a theology of solidarity, making sharing a sacred responsibility, and they reflect the Church's call for full human development and joining in the Messianic Kingdom (Paul VI, 1967; Francis, 2015).

This study takes a close look at the Karen RMNs, showing how the ideas behind the Nine Grains encourage people to think theologically, care for the environment, and stay strong in tough economic times. It explores how Karen wisdom acts as a faith-based answer to today's social and economic challenges. This research, therefore, addresses the question of how Karen religio-cultural wisdom functions as a theological response to modern socio-economic disruption. Specifically, the study aims (1) to interpret the religio-cultural meaning of the *Nine Grains of Rice* as a theological model of solidarity and transformation and (2) to evaluate how the Rice-Merit Networks operationalize these principles in forming a Messianic society within contemporary socio-economic contexts.

Literature Review

The literature review synthesizes the historical background of the Karen RMNs of Northern Thailand, the Karen holistic worldview and indigenous wisdom blended with the ‘Theology of Rice’, and the elements of contextual Catholic theology as articulated in Church documents.

Role of Rice in Shaping Asian Culture

Rice occupies a central role in shaping the identities and cultural traditions of Asian civilizations. In Southeast Asia, it is the most significant crop due to its political, economic, and social importance, although sustaining productivity remains a persistent challenge in certain countries (Fuller, 2011; Mutert & Fairhurst, 2002). The crop is widely regarded as sacred, and rituals throughout the cultivation cycle reflect reverence for rice. Traditional paddy rice farming demanded substantial labor and

required coordinated irrigation, fostering interdependent cultures characterized by strong social norms. Existing studies prove that for many Southeast Asian communities, rice serves as the primary means of subsistence, and rice culture reinforces key identity concepts such as communal values and religious practices, often involving expressions of gratitude to nature spirits, including the Rice Goddess, *Mae Phosop* (McDermond, 2014; Siriwan, 2015; Talhelm, 2022). A study conducted by Nosten (2015) states that rotational farming, practiced by groups such as the Karen, illustrates the connection between agricultural self-reliance and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, the modernization of rice cultivation has led to the increased use of intensive agricultural inputs, resulting in environmental and health impacts from the use of fertilizers and pesticides. These pressures, combined with socio-economic changes and declining yields in some regions, threaten the traditional rice complex and risk the erosion of cultural cohesion (Shepherd, 2017; Toolkiattiwong et al., 2023).

Karen Rice–Merit Networks in Northern Thailand

The RMNs began in Northern Thailand in the late 1970s, when Betharram missionary priests established “rice banks” to assist families facing rice shortages and famine, and to protect them from exploitative lenders. Over time, these efforts evolved into the Rice-Merit Ceremony (Pha Pha Khao) during the 1980s, initiated by Fr. Niphot Thianwihan, marking a shift from merely surviving to valuing the moral importance of sharing within the community. In 2002, the network became official as the Rice–Merit Network (*Khrua Khai Gong Boon Khao*) through a partnership between the DISAC and the Research and Training Center for Religio-Cultural Communities (RTRC) in Chiang Mai. Today, the network brings together approximately 1000 village groups that run revolving rice funds, support families in need, and build solidarity through shared ceremonies (Karunan, 2019).

The RMNs are more than just an agricultural group; they embody a moral economy rooted in the idea that rice provides both nourishment and spiritual significance. By treating rice as “*life that dies to give life*,” the network transforms the simple act of sharing into a way of embodying Christ’s redemptive love (Thianwihan, 2021).

This qualitative theological method aligns with the Church’s invitation to discern the “*signs of the times*” (Paul VI, 1965). By interpreting social practices through the lens of faith, the study seeks to reveal how divine grace operates within local economic and cultural systems. The RMNs, therefore, are not only community initiatives but also theological texts—places where the Gospel becomes incarnate in daily life.

The Karen Holistic Philosophy

The Karen see life as a web that connects people, nature, and the divine, a harmony summed up in the saying *Tar Oh Mu So Per*, meaning “*all life together*.” This outlook is kept alive by the ethic of reciprocity, *Maz dauv Maz Kaf* (“I help you, you help me”), which is the foundation for strong community bonds (Karunan, 2019; Suhardiman et al., 2025). This ethos ensures self-reliance in traditional practices like rotational farming (*rai mun wian*) and underpins Indigenous Community Welfare Systems (ICWS) such as rice banks (Rigert, 2024). In this way, the RMNs serve as practical examples of reciprocity, helping to distribute rice fairly, keep society balanced, and support local self-reliance.

Looking at RMNs as creative institutions that evolve over time, they draw on traditional ways of farming together to push back against outside economic forces and

protect their food security. In doing so, they put into action the Catholic Church's vision for complete human development, living out what *Populorum Progressio* and *Gaudium et Spes* describe as “a more perfect form of justice among men” (Paul VI, 1967, 1965).

The Theology of Rice

The Theology of Rice, developed by Fr. Niphot Thianwihan, connects Christian sacramentality with agrarian ethics. It treats the rice cycle—sowing, harvesting, and pounding—as symbols of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. This perspective sees agriculture as a calling for self-giving and supporting the community, making daily farm work a way to share in divine grace (Thianwihan, 2021). Thianwihan also compares rice and money, using the RMN to question capitalist individualism and encourage an “*economy of sufficiency*” based on gratitude, justice, and shared wellbeing.

The Messianic Society

The RMNs also embody what Catholic social teaching envisions as the construction of a Messianic Society—the lived realization of the Kingdom of God in temporal structures. Drawing on Church documents such as *Lumen Gentium* (Paul VI, 1964), *Gaudium et Spes* (Paul VI, 1965), *Populorum Progressio* (Paul VI, 1967), *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Paul VI, 1975), *Laudato Si* (Francis, 2015), and *Dilexi Te* (Leo XIV, 2025) this vision encompasses three dimensions: integral human development, social justice, care for the common home, and the sanctification of temporal affairs. The Church's mission of evangelization thus includes the transformation of economic and cultural life so that faith becomes incarnate in social practice (Francis, 2015).

In this theological framework, the RMNs become microcosms of the Messianic Kingdom. Each act of rice-sharing is a sacrament of solidarity, embodying the Christian call to build communities rooted in justice, reciprocity, and peace.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design integrating semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to explore the religio-cultural and theological meanings of the RMNs in Northern Thailand. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the interpretation of lived experiences and theological expressions that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods (Patton, 2002).

Participants and Sampling

The study sample comprised 10 Karen priests (five parish priests and five assistants) from the Diocese of Chiang Mai, two organic intellectuals, and three RMN coordinators. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals directly involved in RMN activities and able to provide theological and cultural insights. According to Subedi (2021), purposive sampling, which emphasizes in-depth exploration, may involve a limited number of participants. This approach is particularly valuable in qualitative research, as it facilitates intensive understanding, especially when employing semi-structured interview designs.

All participants were adults between 35 and 70 years of age. Selection criteria required active involvement in pastoral ministry, familiarity with the RMN, and willingness to participate. This participant composition provided diverse yet complementary perspectives on the influence of the Karen philosophy and culture on faith and community life.

Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed using themes identified in a literature review on the influence of ethnic community culture on religious and social life. Drawing from Church documents and the Karen philosophy of life, the questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section addressed the impact of the Nine Grains of Philosophy and the practice of RMNs at personal, social, and religious levels. The second section focused on the challenges of implementing the Nine Grains philosophy and RMNs effectively.

To ensure validity and depth, the open-ended questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in Karen culture and academics with experience in RMNs functionality. All experts held doctoral degrees and possessed over 5 to 10 years of experience in their respective fields. The validated questionnaire items were used to collect data through semi-structured interviews with participants. These interviews were guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit rich and reflective responses in qualitative research (Park, 2025).

The researcher also participated in a zonal RMN meeting at Chiang Mai Zone 2, observing committee members' interactions and administrative practices. Supplementary data were obtained from annual RMN reports and records from the DISAC. Information collected from the participatory meeting and the annual report was used to enhance the discussion and findings sections.

Interview transcripts, observational notes, and documentary materials were coded thematically following Naeem et al. (2023). Recurrent themes related to solidarity, reciprocity, and spirituality were identified and synthesized to construct a conceptual model of the RMN as a lived theology. Descriptive analysis across sources ensured validity and interpretive depth.

All participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided consent before participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

Results/Findings

This section shares the main findings of the study based on its two objectives: (1) to interpret the religio-cultural meaning of the Nine Grains of Rice as a theological model of solidarity and transformation, and (2) to examine how the Rice–Merit Networks (RMNs) put these principles into practice to shape a Messianic society in Northern Thailand.

The results bring together qualitative data from interviews, diocesan reports, and observations at RMN meetings.

1. The Nine Grains of Rice as a Theological Framework of Solidarity

The *Nine Grains of Rice philosophy* reflects the Karen belief in the connection between people, nature, and the divine. It treats agriculture as sacred, seeing rice as the “Essence of Life” (*K'la*), symbolizing both physical and spiritual nourishment. Dividing the harvest into nine parts—for self, family, relatives, the poor, community, exchange of things, religious formation, ancestors, and the hope of a Messianic society—shows an ethical system based on reciprocity and gratitude.

In theological terms, the Nine Grains reflect a contextual expression of the Theology of Rice, where the process of cultivation embodies a rhythm of self-giving and renewal inspired by the Paschal Mystery. This cycle reflects the Paschal Mystery of Christ and turns farm work into a sacred act. The practice stands for a spirituality that values sharing and sacrifice, in contrast to money, which represents

individualism and accumulation. By making rice a moral symbol, the Karen see material exchange as an act of faith that supports the community instead of competition.

Seen this way, the Nine Grains act as a model of solidarity, where the cycles of growing and sharing rice reflect divine generosity. This worldview turns everyday survival into a clear sign of the Kingdom of God.

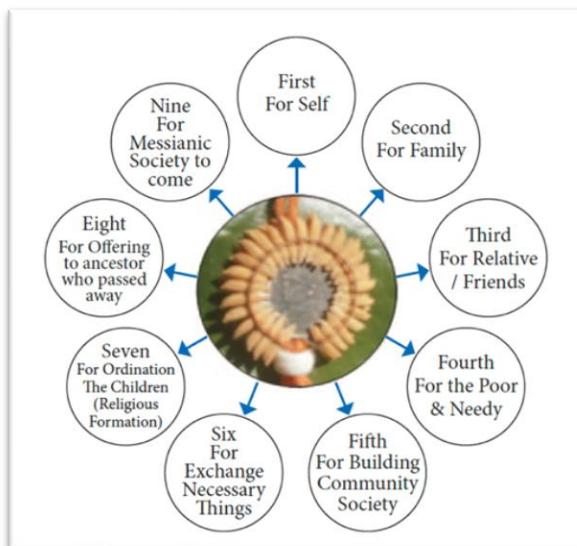


Figure 1. The Philosophy of Nine Grains of Rice

2. Dimensions of Practice within the Rice–Merit Networks

The field data show that the RMNs put the Nine Grains philosophy into practice in three ways: caring for self and family, supporting society and community, and nurturing religious and spiritual life. These areas move from meeting personal needs to reaching shared and higher goals, reflecting a complete Messianic vision.

a. Self and Family Welfare

Participants said rice is the basis of both physical life and moral growth: “no rice, no life.” The RMN approach helps families have enough food, avoid debt and exploitation, and pass on values like hard work, sufficiency, and contentment to the next generation.

At this level, rice becomes both nourishment and moral pedagogy. Personal stewardship is sanctified as participation in God’s creative work, and the family unit becomes the first locus of faith-based resilience.

b. Society and Community Welfare

RMNs help not just families but the wider community through mutual aid, shared rice banks, and emergency help. They support widows, the elderly, the sick, orphans, young men and women in religious formation, and families hit by disasters (Rugchat & Buochareon, 2021). Parish married men and Marian Solidarity groups also help children from low-income families attend school.

These actions put the Karen idea of reciprocity— *Maz dauv Maz Kaf* (“I help you, you help me”)—into practice as organized solidarity. RMNs become local examples of Catholic social teaching on justice and fairness, turning charity into real community change.

c. *Religious and Spiritual Welfare*

Rice has profound religious meaning: it “dies three times to give life,” reminding people of Christ’s death and resurrection. The connection between bread and rice in the Eucharist adds to the spiritual meaning of daily work. Through the RMNs, local sharing rituals become part of Catholic practice, strengthening Karen Catholic identity. The network’s motto, “*Delicious rice, Good people, Have virtue,*” sums up its values of gratitude, forgiveness, and virtue.

In this setting, RMNs are places where farming and Christian faith come together. Sharing rice in rituals acts as a sign of unity, showing that holiness grows from community life.

3. *Integrative Analysis: From Grain to Kingdom*

In all these areas, the Nine Grains of Rice serve as both a symbol of faith and a guide for development. The RMNs turn beliefs into daily actions, letting communities experience salvation through sharing. Growing, storing, and sharing rice shows the path from personal duty to community and spiritual fulfillment.

Table 1. Consolidated Findings on RMNs’ Contributions to Self, Society, and Religious Welfare Systems

Question	Keyword/Phrases	Theme	Meaning
How do the Nine Grains of Rice support self and family welfare?	“Rice is life”; “rice dies three times”; “no rice, no life”; “family security”; “avoid debt”; “sufficiency vs. consumerism”; “passing on values to next generation”	Self-sufficiency; Moral discipline; Agrarian resilience	The Nine Grains model grounds personal life in discipline, food security, and moral formation. Rice becomes a pedagogy of character and dignity.
How do RMNs strengthen community and society?	“Sharing with widows/orphans”; “help sick & elderly”; “Maz Dauv Maz Kaf mutual aid”; “emergency rice reserve”; “unity across villages”; “committee discernment”	Communal reciprocity; Social justice; Collective welfare	RMNs serve as a community safety net rooted in reciprocity, distributing resources fairly and strengthening social cohesion.
How do the Nine Grains express religious and spiritual meaning?	“Rice has spirit (khwan)”; “Eucharist connection”; “thanksgiving Mass”; “rice procession”; “delicious rice, good people, virtue”	Sacrificial spirituality; Inculturation; Eucharistic identity	Rice symbolizes Christ-like self-giving. RMN rituals embed Catholic faith in Karen cosmology and nurture spiritual identity.
How do RMNs contribute to forming a Messianic Society?	“Helping without repayment”; “unity in sacrifice”; “rice vs. money worldview”; “building hope for	Lived theology; Transformative solidarity; Kingdom values	RMNs embody a micro-Messianic society where justice, compassion, and dignity shape

	future generations”; “sufficient economy as Christian ethic”		communal life through shared grain.
How does RMN participation shape youth and future leadership?	“Youth proud to join rituals”; “declining participation”; “need teaching”; “use media to attract youth”; “elders teach rice wisdom”	Cultural transmission; Youth fragility; Formation needs	RMNs offer a formation ground for future leaders, teaching identity, ecology, spirituality, and solidarity.
What are the key challenges for sustaining RMNs?	“Urban migration”; “climate change”; “monetization of life”; “less rice farming”; “dependence on priest leadership”	Structural vulnerabilities; Economic pressure; Ecological fragility	Sustainability requires adaptive strategies: ecological awareness, youth formation, and consistent pastoral leadership.

Table 1 provides a synthesis of qualitative findings derived from semi-structured interviews with Karen priests, RMN coordinators, and organic intellectuals, wherein participants’ responses—organized around six guiding questions addressing the influence of the Nine Grains of Rice philosophy on self and family welfare, community support systems, religious life, social solidarity, youth engagement, and the challenges faced by RMNs—were analyzed for direct keywords and recurring phrases, subsequently categorized thematically to reflect salient patterns and principal domains of RMN practices and experiences as consistently articulated by informants.

Table 2. Consolidated Document-Based Findings on Indigenous Community Wisdom, Religious Beliefs, and Welfare Systems

Document Focus	Keywords/Phrases	Themes	Meaning
Indigenous philosophy self-development	“ <i>Maz Dauv Maz Kaf</i> mutual aid”; — ‘you help me, I help you’”; “rotational farming (<i>rai mun wian</i>)”; “self-reliance”; “food self-sufficiency”; “solidarity-based survival”; “rice seed at cheaper price”; “support for sick and poor families”	Subsistence ethics; Reciprocity; Household resilience	Indigenous philosophy ensures family welfare through cooperative labor, reciprocal exchange, and food security. It forms a moral economy that protects families from hunger, debt, and vulnerability.
Indigenous philosophy and community development	“Rice collection systems”; “humanitarian relief”; “networks of solidarity”; “community seed systems”; “support for conflict-affected households”; “resource sharing”	Social cohesion; Communal welfare; Mutual responsibility	Community welfare systems operate as culturally embedded welfare systems that distribute resources fairly, prevent exploitation, and sustain community-wide security during crises.

Indigenous welfare system towards spiritual development	“Rice, land, water are sacred”; “Creator (<i>Ta Thi Ta Tau</i>)”; “wellbeing of human and more-than-human beings”; “ecological rituals”; “sacred environment”; “Messianic Kingdom already among us”	Sacred ecology; Holistic spirituality; Sacramental worldview	Indigenous cosmology perceives nature as sacred and interlinked with divine presence. Rituals sacralize ecological life and embody a spirituality of gratitude, harmony, and interconnectedness.
Indigenous welfare system towards religious fulfilment	“Sharing embodies Kingdom values”; “reciprocity as spiritual virtue”; “communal harmony”; “justice and peace”; “ecological reverence”; “solidarity practices”	Kingdom ethics; Transformative solidarity; Communal virtue	Community welfare practices become lived expressions of the Kingdom of God—where justice, sharing, and peace govern relationships, revealing a lived Messianic social vision.
Indigenous welfare system and ongoing generational development	“Youth research groups”; “participatory mapping”; “formalizing customary systems”; “mediators/translators”; “Training of Trainers (ToT)”; “visibility and legibility”	Youth empowerment; Leadership formation; Cultural renewal	Youth participation ensures cultural transmission and equips new leaders with skills to negotiate with state authorities, strengthening long-term continuity of Indigenous governance.
Challenges to sustaining Indigenous wisdom and practices	“State land policies”; “criminalization of customary land use”; “protected forests”; “cash-crop economy”; “youth migration”; “loss of traditional knowledge”; “decline in rice-growing culture”	Structural marginalization; Economic pressures; Generational rupture	Sustainability is threatened by restrictive state policies, market-driven agriculture, and declining youth engagement, leading to erosion of Indigenous ecological and cultural systems.

Table 2 presents a synthesis of findings from documentary sources, such as research articles, reports, cultural records, ecological statements, and governance descriptions. The extracted content is systematically organized according to six guiding questions that examine Indigenous philosophies, community welfare systems, sacred ecological perspectives, spiritual expressions, youth involvement, and sustainability challenges. Identified keywords and phrases are thematically categorized to highlight recurrent patterns. The themes derived from documentary analysis complement the interview data by elucidating the structural, cultural, and ecological foundations that support Indigenous community welfare practices.

Table 3. The Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC)’s report on RMNs, 2025

Name of Zone	Number of Parishes	Amount of Rice Collected (Kg)	Amount of Donation (THB)	Number of Participants	Participation Percentage (%)
CM-1	3	-	-	-	-
CM-2	8	25,416	300,900	1,385	27.7
CM-3	5	13,452	145,061	865	17.3
MHS	10	28,536	640,570	2,757	55.0
Total	26	67,404	1,086,531	5,007	100

RMN REPORT – 2025

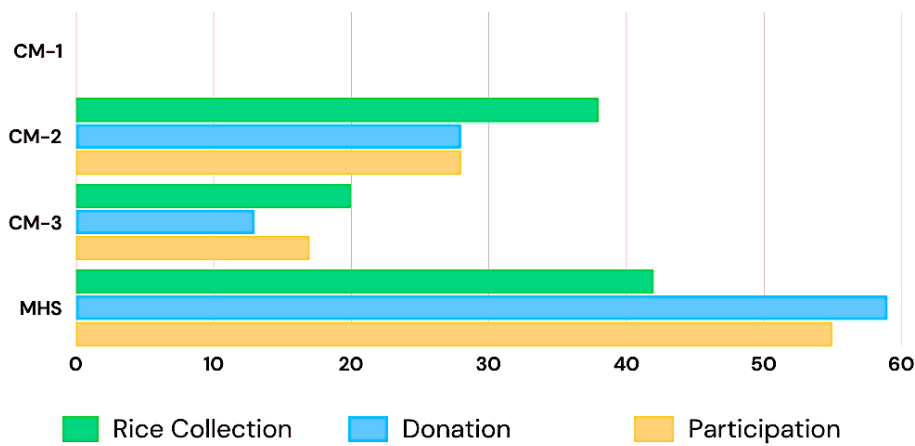


Figure 2. Diagram of RMN Contribution and Participation Report for 2025 (Percentage Breakdown)

Table 3 and Figure 2 present the data reported by DISAC for 2025, showing rice collection, monetary contributions, parish participation, and engagement levels across the four administrative zones, as well as the percentage breakdown of participants in the RMN events.

Theologically, this journey from grain to Kingdom puts the Church’s vision of full human development into practice and looks forward to a Messianic Society—a community where economic life is shaped by compassion, justice, and balance with nature. It is because every Christian has a role in building the Kingdom of God, utilizing their unique abilities and opportunities to accomplish God’s purposes, and thereby acting as a necessary link in the plan for the world’s salvation (Bistis SCJ, 2022a). By sharing rice in simple but meaningful ways, Karen Catholics transform daily labor into a sign of divine grace and communal hope.

In summary, the *Nine Grains of Rice* function as both a spiritual symbol and a developmental framework within the Rice–Merit Networks. They link personal virtue, community welfare, and faith-based solidarity into a lived expression of the Karen Theology of Rice. These findings reveal how local agricultural and religious practices embody an integrated vision of human flourishing that prepares the ground for the following theological discussion.

Discussions

This discussion builds directly on the organized presentation of interview and document findings, synthesizing their thematic patterns without repeating the data already shown in the Results section. The Catholic Church, driven by its mission of solidarity and commitment to integral human development and dignity, supports marginalized populations as crucial social safety networks, providing welfare, support, and holistic formation to reach mainstream systems (Bistis SCJ & Kobvithayakul, 2025). The RMNs within the Chiang Mai diocese are administratively divided into four zones: Chiang Mai-1, Chiang Mai-2, Chiang Mai-3, and Mae Hong Son. The 2025 DISAC report documents significant engagement across 26 parishes within the Chiang Mai Diocese. Collectively, the RMNs collected 67,404 kilograms of rice, THB 1,086,531 in donations, and involved 5,007 participants, illustrating both the material and spiritual vitality of the Nine Grains of Rice philosophy. These data reveal a theological pattern of solidarity, with rice-sharing serving as an expression of faith.

A comparative analysis of the four administrative zones reveals distinct emphases with theological significance. Mae Hong Son contributed the largest share of rice (42.3%), funds (59%), and participants (55%). The high rice-to-cash ratio in this zone indicates a community deeply rooted in agricultural symbolism, where rice maintains its sacred status as *'life that dies to give life.'* Chiang Mai Zone 2 demonstrated balanced integration, while Zone 3 showed increasing monetization, reflecting a compromise between traditional reciprocity and modern economic structures. In contrast, Zone 1 reported no contribution in 2025, a gap that extends beyond material measurement and suggests a religio-cultural crisis of belonging. This absence of participation risks exclusion from the communal sacrament of sharing and underscores the need for alternative, non-agricultural forms of contribution, such as participation with other zones, savings groups, or liturgical offerings.

Interpreted theologically, the rice-to-money ratio functions as an indicator of cultural transformation. Rice, as a counter-symbol to money, represents the moral economy of mutual aid. Where monetary donations increase disproportionately, the sacred symbolism of rice is weakened, and the community's theological inventiveness risks configuration with capitalist logic rather than Eucharistic solidarity. Mae Hong Son's predominance in rice contributions thus becomes more than statistical—it is a witness to the persistence of a *'sufficiency economy'* and a spirituality of contentment grounded in the theology of rice. As Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'*, *"the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together, and we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation"* (Francis, 2015).

The findings also reveal that the RMNs are not merely welfare institutions but grassroots sacramental communities. Their structure mirrors a lived ecclesiology in which faith and economics intersect. Each grain of rice offered embodies the principle of kenosis (self-emptying love) and becomes a medium of evangelization. Participation in the RMN transforms members into co-creators of the Messianic

Kingdom, where justice, equity, and peace are not abstract ideals but daily practices.

The act of giving rice functions as a tangible participation in God's redemptive economy, where material sustenance becomes a channel of spiritual communion

Challenges faced by the Rice-Merit Networks

However, sustaining this Messianic society model faces critical challenges. The first is *declining youth participation*, driven by urban migration and material aspirations. Furthermore, the cash-crop economy causes a generational gap as youth migrate to cities, often prioritizing earning money over growing rice, leading to a decline in participation and a loss of traditional knowledge (Walker, 2001). Young people increasingly perceive rice-merit activities as outdated, privileging economic success over community service. Without strategic catechesis and leadership formation, the transmission of this religio-cultural tradition risks interruption. Secondly, structural changes in agriculture and the economy, including land fragmentation, reduced rice cultivation, and *climate-related disruptions*, have reshaped livelihoods. These changes disrupt the subsistence base that supports the theology of rice. Thirdly, *institutional dependence*—particularly reliance on the motivation and leadership of local parish priests—creates vulnerability in continuity. When leadership transitions occur, enthusiasm for RMN participation can wane.

Theologically, these challenges represent tensions within the ongoing construction of the Messianic Society. The Church's mission of integral human development, as articulated in the Church documents, calls for a faith that transforms temporal structures without losing cultural rootedness. The RMNs exemplify this transformation by translating Eucharistic sharing into economic solidarity. Yet, for the movement to endure, it must re-contextualize its methods for new generations—linking traditional agricultural metaphors with ecological stewardship, youth education, and social media engagement. In doing so, the networks can continue to embody Christ's command to "*give them something to eat yourselves*" (Mk 6:37) in a contemporary idiom.

The study indicates that the Nine Grains of Rice continue to function as an effective religio-cultural instrument for constructing a Messianic social vision in Northern Thailand. This practice bridges indigenous cosmology and Catholic theology, allowing Karen communities to articulate salvation through daily acts of reciprocity. The primary challenge is generational rather than conceptual: maintaining rice as both a material and spiritual symbol, so that economic modernization does not diminish its sacramental significance. When informed by this religio-cultural perspective, the RMNs can persist as a prophetic witness to an alternative moral economy, one that envisions the Kingdom of God through the everyday sharing of food, faith, and communal life.

Limitations of the Study

This study provides valuable insights into the religio-cultural aspects of the RMNs in Northern Thailand; however, it has some limitations. The research focused primarily on the Chiang Mai diocese and relied heavily on interviews with clergy and RMN coordinators, which may not accurately reflect the views of lay members, women, or youth. Additionally, since the study employed a qualitative approach, it does not reveal the quantitative effects of RMN practices on household food security or local economies.

Future research could compare different dioceses or ethnic groups to identify regional differences in the theology of rice, as well as in farming practices and their implementation. Using both ethnography and participatory measurement methods

could give stronger evidence of the social, economic, and spiritual effects of RMNs. More study is also needed on how to involve youth, how eco-spirituality adapts to climate change, and how indigenous agricultural wisdom can be combined with Catholic social teaching. This research would help us better understand how the *Nine Grains philosophy* can continue to serve as a living theology for human development and the building of a Messianic Society today.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the RMNs of Northern Thailand embody a dynamic synthesis of religion, culture, and community development. Through the practice of the Nine Grains of Rice, the Karen people integrate Catholic faith with indigenous wisdom, constructing a lived religio-cultural solidarity that unites material welfare with spiritual purpose. Sharing rice becomes both an act of communion and a reflection of Christ’s redemptive generosity—a spirituality of self-giving that transforms ordinary labor into participation in divine grace. Each grain becomes a sacrament of gratitude, sacrifice, and communion, transforming everyday subsistence into a witness of the Messianic Society envisioned in the Gospel.

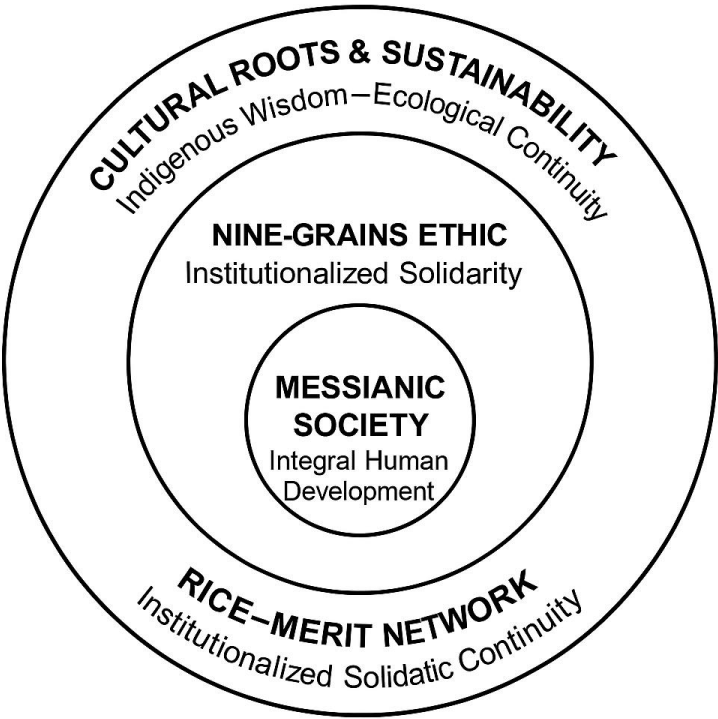


Figure 3. Proposed Model for RMNs’ Vision of Messianic Society

Figure 3 shows the proposed circular Model for the RMNs’ Messianic Society. The model uses concentric layers to show integration and reciprocity, not just a step-by-step process. And thus, it is reciprocally inter-connected and not pyramidal. This model highlights how theology, culture, and community life are interrelated among the Karen people. At the center is the Messianic Society, which stands for the highest goal of human development, where justice, peace, and unity reflect the Kingdom of God. Around this is the Nine Grains Ethic, which represents mutual support and moral sharing, based on the Karen idea of *Maz dauv Maz Kaf*, meaning “I help you,

you help me.” The next layer, the Rice–Merit Networks (RMNs), puts this ethic into action by building solidarity and turning faith into social and economic activities. The Theology of Rice treats farming as a sacred act and a way to join in Christ’s Paschal mystery—“life that dies to give life.” The outermost layer, Cultural Roots and Sustainability, represents local wisdom and ongoing care for the environment, ensuring that beliefs and practices remain connected to cultural identity and nature. All these layers together show a complete theology of solidarity, where grace moves from the spiritual center to bring about social change and harmony with nature.

The findings confirm that RMNs function simultaneously as (1) *a religio-cultural model*, illuminating the anthropology of self-giving rooted in the Theology of Rice; (2) *a social mechanism*, institutionalizing mutual aid and collective welfare; and (3) *a spiritual practice*, nurturing conversion and community identity through Eucharistic symbolism. By grounding theological meaning in agrarian ethics, the Nine Grains philosophy resists consumerist individualism and offers an indigenous counter-discourse to capitalist values. The networks thus enact a contextual realization of Church documents, fostering integral human development and revealing that faith can transform economic life into an arena of salvation.

Nevertheless, the continuity of this incarnational economy depends on the Church’s ability to engage new generations and respond to ecological and social change. Youth detachment, agricultural decline, and environmental degradation threaten to dilute the networks’ moral and symbolic vitality. Hence, the RMNs’ future relevance lies in reinterpreting the Theology of Rice for a digital, and climate-challenged world.

Recommendations

Strengthen Youth Engagement and Formation

Develop catechetical modules and school-based programs integrating the Nine Grains philosophy with Catholic social teaching.

Establish youth leadership teams within RMNs to foster responsibility, creativity, and continuity.

Utilize digital and social media platforms to communicate the spirituality of rice-sharing as a living Gospel value.

Promote Ecological and Cultural Stewardship

Encourage RMN communities to link rice-merit activities with ecological awareness campaigns, forest ordination, and biodiversity preservation.

Support seed conservation projects and the use of organic farming methods as expressions of the theology of creation and sufficiency economy.

Integrate eco-theological education into parish and diocesan formation programs. As *Laudato Si* affirms, “*everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity*” (Francis, 2015).

Diversify Forms of Participation and Inclusion

For urban and landless parishes, introduce alternative modes of “rice-merit” through volunteer service, savings cooperatives, and solidarity funds.

Ensure the active involvement of women and lay leaders in decision-making roles within RMN structures to embody inclusivity and shared discipleship.

Enhance Institutional Support and Sustainability

Strengthen collaboration among RMNs, the DISAC, and parish pastoral councils to enhance administrative transparency and capacity building.

Encourage periodic evaluation and documentation of RMN practices to facilitate replication in other dioceses and ethnic contexts.

Advance Religio-Cultural Research and Dialogue

Support interdisciplinary studies linking the Theology of Rice with Biblical theology, contextual missiology, and Catholic social ethics.

Facilitate regional symposia and publications that highlight Southeast Asian approaches to the Theology of Development and the Messianic Kingdom.

In essence, the Rice–Merit Networks reveal that the Nine Grains of Rice is more than a moral code—it is a living theology that sustains community, sanctifies labor, and anticipates the Kingdom of God. By nurturing solidarity through shared grain rather than competitive gain, the RMNs embody the Christian vocation to transform history from within, cultivating a Messianic Society where faith, justice, and love take root in the soil of everyday life.

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