

From Blood to Fruit: Crypto-nationalism and Reformations of the Ancestral Burden  
in the Akha World of Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China

By

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For my Ancestors - the living dead - without whom I would never have had a chance to see the sun and moon, as well as all of my extended family members - the living living - residing in various parts of the U.S.A., southwest China and north Thailand, without whom I, Misuo (*Miqsawr*) and our son Aiden would not enjoy such a warm, loving and meaningful existence.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### 1.1 “We have our own religion!”: Rising religion and “crypto-nationalist” formations in the Akha World of the Upper Mekong Region

In February 2009, the year of the water buffalo, some 4,000 members of the transnational Akha minority group gathered in the predominantly Akha village of Law-ja (*Lawcavq*)<sup>1</sup> in the mountains of north Thailand.<sup>2</sup> Since the late 1980s the village, often referred to as an Akha city (*Aqkaq meq*), has been a major center of power for competing Akha religio-political factions of Old-Traditionalists and Christian evangelicals. The term “traditional(ist)” as used in this dissertation is in no way meant to convey a sense of certain collective identities as more static or reified than others that might be labeled “modern(ist).” Quite the contrary, I aim to present a view of the traditional as an ongoing co-production of the modern in the form of that which might more aptly be framed as either “traditional modernities” or “modern traditions.”

Akha from various parts of the Upper Mekong Region, including north Thailand, east Myanmar (Burma), southwest China and northwest Laos, joined the gathering. The presence of Akha from southwest China and northwest Laos, in particular, was facilitated by an expanding regional infrastructure of highways, tunnels and bridges being constructed as part of the region’s ongoing transformation from the opium producing battlefields of the CIA’s Golden Triangle to the international market of the Asian Development Bank’s Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) (see Walker 1999; Evans et al. 2000; Glassman 2010; Thein Swe and Chambers 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> When writing Akha names and terms I use the most recent Romanized Akha writing system developed by an international network of Akha during a meeting in Jinghong, China in late 2008/early 2009. In this system Roman characters not used to denote initial consonants are used as tonal markers placed at the end of syllables and not pronounced. The consonants used for tonal markers in this system include *q* (long, low tone), *r* (long, high tone), *v* (short, mid-tone), *vq* (short, low-tone), and *vr* (short, high-tone). For example, in the word “Aqkaq” (Akha), “q” marks that each syllable in the word is pronounced with a long, low tone.

<sup>2</sup> As of 2013, Akha comprised more than 85 percent of the village’s roughly 8,000 residents. The remaining fifteen percent of the villagers included Lisu, Yunnanese (Jin-Haw), Shan (Tai-Yai) and lowland Thai (see Li 2013:1).

The gathering lasted several days and was held on the spacious grounds of the partially Akha owned Doi Chang Coffee Factory, which exports premium Arabica red coffee beans as far abroad as Canada and Seattle. A large color banner draped across the back of the main performance stage included insignia of the event’s sponsors, ranging from the local Thai government to the “Fellowship of Akha in Thailand” (FAT), a non-governmental and non-denominational organization based in the nearby lowland town of Chiangrai. The sponsor’s insignia were framed against a large photograph of an iconic Akha swing overlooking an expansive mountainous landscape. Writing on the banner in Bangkok-Thai and a then recently negotiated Romanized “Common Akha Orthography” (CAO) referred to the gathering as “The Second Akha Cultural Festival and Academic Forum”<sup>3</sup> and “The Second International Gathering of Akha” respectively.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the gathering public speeches were given, musical performances and traditional games were staged, and a range of musical karaoke style VCD productions from various musicians based in Myanmar, China, and Thailand were available for purchase. For youth, the highlights of the gathering were the nightly performances by “Ten Fingers” (*Aq Lavq Tseir Noer*), an Akha heavy rock band from Kengtung in east Myanmar. Since the latter 2000s, Akha musical productions from throughout the region have increasingly focused on the theme of Akha (dis)unity. A number of musicians, including those associated with Ten Fingers, have framed either individual songs or entire albums around the recently coined phrase, “Ten Akha are united as one” (*Aqkaq tseir kaq tivq kaq ma*).<sup>5</sup> Through their lyrical productions a number of

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<sup>3</sup> In the original Bangkok-Thai script this was written as: “งานมหกรรมวัฒนธรรมและเวทีวิชาการอาขาคั้งที่ 2.”

<sup>4</sup> In the original Akha script this was written as: “*Khanqgm Aqkaq Pafdzan 2.*”

<sup>5</sup> In a Skype interview with retired U.S. Baptist missionary-anthropologist Paul Lewis in August 2012, I asked if he had ever heard of this particular Akha phrase. He replied that in his roughly 40 years of experience working with Akha as well as studying Akha language he had never heard such a phrase and was further unsure of its meaning, which I had to explain for him (Lewis, personal communication, August 12, 2012). Lewis worked as a missionary-

these musicians have emphasized the “blood” (*xiq*) shared by all Akha as a means of overcoming their religio-political divisions and working together in the interests of their “people” or “ethnic group” (*tsawrjeq*).

During the gathering an emerging coalition of Old- and Neo-Traditionalists organized a series of more private meetings during which they discussed the often sensitive issues of if and how to best “look after and improve” (*lavsav-e*) the “Ways of the Akha Ancestors” (A-kha-zawn [*Aqkaqzanr*]). The indigenous Akha term “Zawn” (*Zanr*), referring roughly to “Ancestral Ways,” has several additional linguistic variations, including “Yawn” (*Yanr*) or “Ghawn” (*Ghanr*). These meetings culminated in the official signing by national-level representatives from China, Myanmar, and Thailand of an Akha language declaration affirming the expanding faction’s commitment to work on behalf of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and endorse a series of revisions to certain taboos and regulations proscribed by the latter.<sup>6</sup> This document, however, was written in a version of the Common Akha Orthography (hereafter referred to as CAO) that differed ever so slightly from that used on the official banner draped across the back of the more public main performance stage.

The orthography used on the banner had been negotiated six months earlier in August 2008 in Maesai, Thailand by a large, regional coalition of Akha representing different religio-political factions (see Morton 2010). During a subsequent gathering in Jinghong, China on the cusp of the 2009 New Year, however, the latter orthography was ever so slightly modified. Akha representatives from China in particular had pushed for the latter revisions so as to make their ever evolving CAO more similar to that of the pre-existing Hani orthography officially

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action anthropologist among Akha from various parts of the region, particularly east Burma (Myanmar) and north Thailand, between the late 1940s and late 1980s before retiring to Claremont, California where he resides at present.  
<sup>6</sup> In chapter nine, “Histories within Histories,” I provide further details on this particular document and its implications for Akha reformations of the Ancestral burden.

constructed and endorsed by the modern Chinese state in 1957. In post-1949 Communist China, Akha have been officially (mis)recognized and afforded certain rights as part of the larger Hani “ethnonationality” (*minzu*).<sup>7</sup>

As these Akha ethnic *intrapreneurs*’ orthographic negotiations and reproductions of Akhaness proceeded, however, a number of obstacles arose as a reflection of their divergent religio-political positions. I use the term *intra*-preneur rather than *entre*-preneur to stress the inward, Akha-centric nature of their project. First and foremost, several prominent Christian elite refused to endorse the second orthography negotiated in Jinghong, China. They accused their Old- and Neo-Traditionalist counterparts, in particular, of having violated an earlier agreement to put aside religion in their language unification efforts by employing the orthography to:

“...undermine the Christian faith among Akha and encourage a return to the animist ways of the past” (Sa-la A-jei [*Saqlaq Arjeiq*], personal communication, July 7, 2010).

Since that time, Christian elite in Thailand, in particular, have largely decided to endorse the first version of the CAO negotiated in Maesai in 2008, thereby marking the second, renegotiated version from Jinghong as a distinctly Old- and Neo-Traditionalist orthography.

Thus, the operation of these two, competing versions of the CAO during the gathering in north Thailand in February 2009 highlighted the religio-political divisions that have dominated Akha identitarian politics since the latter part of the twentieth century. Akha elites’ orthographic choices have reflected and reproduced mounting tensions over the question of defining the anchor of Akhaness amidst the vicissitudes of modernity as well as in relation to an increasingly interconnected and larger Akha World (see Kroskrity 2004:501-509; Woolard 1998).

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<sup>7</sup> This categorization is problematic not the least due to the fact that while the Akha and Hani languages share many linguistic features (see Hansson 1982, 1989:32), they are nevertheless mutually unintelligible (Sturgeon 2005:202). As a result, when Akha and Hani come into contact with each other they must communicate via a third language or translator (Mackerras 2003b:13; Panadda 2004:189). In contrast, Akha from various parts of the region are easily able to communicate with each other in Akha following some minor adjustments for language variety and borrowed terms.

On the opening day of the gathering, following a series of introductory speeches in Bangkok-Thai by several lowland Thai and upland Akha officials from north Thailand, a charismatic Neo-Traditionalist reformer-prophet from Myanmar, “Prosperous One” (*Mazev Guq Zalanq*), took the main stage. Addressing the gathering in Akha, Prosperous One began by imploring his Akha sisters and brothers to reflect on their honorable “Ancestors” (*Aqpoeq Aqpiq*). He then paused before asking everyone to stand and follow him in closing their eyes and bowing their heads as he solemnly recited the names of the initial twenty-five Ancestors shared by all Akha.<sup>8</sup> In this manner, Prosperous One, in Christianized fashion, sought to introduce an element of monochronicity into the Ways of Akha Ancestors, which have otherwise been characterized more by polychronicity or a lack of concerted focus on any single ritual activity at a given moment in time.<sup>9</sup>

Prosperous One’s powerful and articulate voice waxed and waned in intensity throughout the remainder of his address as he called on his fellow Akha to work together in the interests of their “people” or “ethnic group” (*tsawrjeq*), “religion” (*zanr*), and “language” (*dawq*).<sup>10</sup> He

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<sup>8</sup> While Akha generally trace patterns of descent by way of fathers in patrilineal fashion, there are certain matrilineal dimensions to the latter as first, the immediate Ancestors who are called to partake of household Ancestral offerings include “ascending husband and wife pairs,” and, second, the households into which women marry according to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors depend upon their brother-in-law(s) (*Aghoe*) for the “blessings or life force” (*geeqlanq*) required to further propagate their lineage (see Kammerer 1998:663,665). In addition, certain Akha and Hani scholars in China have recently concluded that several of the primal Ancestors of Akha, namely “*Mq Ma*” and “*Dzoeq Tanq Panq*,” were maternal Ancestors (Yang 2010; Wang 2013:31). The latter scholars have further argued that in the distant past Akha society was a matrilineal hunting and gathering society (Yang 2010; Wang 2013:48,142-43).

<sup>9</sup> As U.S. sociologist Samuel Heilman has noted in reference to a particular community of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in contemporary Israel, “...what appears as pandemonium from the perspective of an outsider who assumes that only one focus of activity should be maintained at a time (i.e. monochronicity) – particularly if that focus is sacred activity – is simply the way things are supposed to be. As an event, *Mincha* (the recitation of the afternoon prayers on the Sabbath) is a series of subtly shifting and simultaneous involvements all of which may go on at the same time but all of which are endowed with the same level of significance. Such capacity for simultaneous involvement or polychronicity is an element deeply embedded in Judaism, which mixes community with worship and envelops ritual with communal bonding and expression. The synagogue is after all a house of assembly at the same time it is a house of prayer” (1992:149).

<sup>10</sup> In his Neo-Traditionalist refashionings of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, Prosperous One has reconceptualized the indigenous Akha notion of *Zanr* as first, religion, and, second, separate and apart from culture as further discussed in chapter two.

further implored his congregation to unite under the banner of “our own religion” as inherited from the Ancestors and “carried” (*tawq*) from time immemorial. Finally, Prosperous One concluded by declaring, “The Supreme Creator (*Aqpoeq Miqyaer*) gave us our own religion to carry and only those who carry this religion are truly Akha.”

Between the time of this speech in February 2009 and May 2013, Prosperous One and his Neo-Traditionalist entourage of “disciples” from north Thailand, east Myanmar and southwest China facilitated the “return” of more than 400 formerly Christian households in east Myanmar to a simultaneously lightened and deepened version of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. Prosperous One and his disciples have carried out their efforts under the banner of a formally recognized civil society organization in Myanmar known as “The Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion” (*Mam Mirkhanq Aqkaqghanr Tawq-e Armavq*), hereafter referred to as MATA. These elite have, among other things, endorsed the replacement of expensive sacrificial offerings of black pigs, goats, dogs, chickens or water buffaloes to the Ancestors with less expensive offerings of what are considered new or modern foods such as golden pears from China and durian from Southern Thailand. In late November 2011 Prosperous One informed me that news of their return conversion movement had spread all the way to the Vatican, leading the Pope, by way of the Bishop of Kengtung, to brand him “a demon riding on five dragons” (personal communication, November 28, 2011).<sup>11</sup>

In this dissertation I draw on 32 months of ethnographic fieldwork in various parts of the Akha World between October 2009 and June 2012 in highlighting the efforts of Prosperous One

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<sup>11</sup> The Christian association of dragons with Satan can be found in the New Testament Book of Revelation (12:7-9): “And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him” (The Lockman Foundation 1995:1197).

and his Neo-Traditionalist disciples to imagine, negotiate, and actualize a pan-Akha sense of belonging of a profoundly religious, authentic, and modern nature. I further situate the latter Neo-Traditionalist movements against the backdrop of the multiple and shifting nature of Akha religio-politics through space and time. In doing so, I bring attention to a particular manifestation of the global rise of religion in identitarian politics that not only challenges the paradigm that modernization inevitably leads to the disenchantment of social life but also frames the category of religion as an ongoing historical construct.

In their Neo-Traditionalist movements, moreover, Akha elite have sought to promote the very “survival” of Akha as a distinct people with their own religion, namely the “Akha Religion”. This process can be likened to that of “survival through religion” to build on John and Jean Comaroffs’ observation of a global shift from “cultural survival” to “survival through culture” as part of a broader trend towards the incorporation of ethnicity, albeit in an essentialized rather than alienated form (2009:19).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Akha Neo-Traditionalists’ movement for “survival through religion” is simultaneously a decolonization movement.

I further build on and challenge earlier work on ethnic formations in a national and transnational context. Early work on nationalism was predicated on a view of the nation-state as one wherein territorial and cultural borders coincided (Anderson 1991[1983]; Gellner 1983; Smith 1986). A classic example of the latter ontological framing of the nation-state is found in Eugene Weber’s study of how the early French state employed certain nation-crafting

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<sup>12</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff write of rural South Africa that, “In this desperately poor economy, the alienation of indigenous practices (is) simultaneously a means of self-construction and a source of material sustenance. Cultural survival, with due respect to the organization of the same name, has given way, in many places, to survival through culture. As Xie puts it of the Li population of Hainan Island, China, the commodification of their customary ways and means, often in reinvented form, ‘is vital for (their) survival and sustainability’; even for ‘cultural regeneration,’ adds Hillman, speaking of northwest Yunnan” (Xie 2003:14; Hillman 2003:183; In Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:19).

technologies such as mandatory public schooling and military conscription to turn diverse peasant communities into “Frenchmen” (1976).

The work of later scholars, however, challenged these early framings of the nation-state by pointing to the failure of nation-states the world over to bridge their territorial and cultural borders as evidenced by a resurgence of ethnicity among minorities claiming their long denied “right to be different and to belong” (Rosaldo 1994a:402, 2003; Hall and Held 1989; Flores and Benmayor 1997). Yet others scholars argued that in actuality a key component of the nation-state project was to, “define all those populations not thought to represent the ‘national culture’ as racially and culturally different, producing an alterity that contributed to efforts to build unity and identity” (Glick Schiller 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; Williams 1989; Wimmer 2002; in Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002:306; see also Ong 1996).

In response to the current epoch of globalization, moreover, particularly the “Age of Migration” (Castles and Miller 1998), various scholars forged a new paradigm of the “transnational” variably conceived as either a result of the state’s declining hegemony in framing the borders of belonging (Evans 1997; Kearney 1991; Strange 1991) or “as a constant of modern life” that developed in conjunction with the national, in spite of being “hidden from a view that was captured by methodological nationalism” (Glick Schiller 2000; Glick Schiller et al. 1992, 1995; in Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002:302). More recently, Charles Keyes has argued that what he refers to as “resurgent transnational tribalism” among ethnic minorities such as the Karen, Hmong and Tai in various parts of the Upper Mekong Region is a direct response to the rise of the modern nation-state and the failure of the latter to link notions of “family” and “nation” for minorities as such (2012:31-32).

Here I build on and depart from these earlier framings of the national and transnational in arguing that contrary to conventional thought, transnational identitarian formations such as those of the Akha, Basques (Beck 2004), Hmong (Vang 1998; Schein 2004; Prasit 2008), Iu-Mien (MacDonald 1997), Karen (Platz 2003; Gravers 2007a, 2007b; MacLachlan 2012), Kurds (Guntner 2008), and Roma (Hancock 1988, 2002; Fonseca 1995; Thurfjell 2009) are oftentimes rooted not in the failure but rather the success of nation-states in crafting ethnicity as an ever salient marker of collectivities within a national framework, whether in an inclusive or exclusive manner. Many of the ethnic entrepreneurs behind these transnational movements have in actuality framed their identitarian productions in reference rather than opposition to the dominant model of the nation-state. Moreover, with the exception of groups such as the Kurds (Guntner 2008) and Basques (Beck 2004), a large number of Karen (Gravers 2007a, 2007b), and a minority of Hmong (Baird 2015:61-62), these transnational identitarian formations have in no way sought to challenge or transcend the multiple national frameworks in which their members have been embedded.

In this dissertation I describe the ever evolving Akha World in the making as a non-state space nevertheless shaped in the likeness and image of the state on multiple fronts.<sup>13</sup> For example, certain Akha elite have employed a number of state-making technologies in forging this space (Scott 1998:78). These technologies have included transforming Akhaness from an oral to a literate culture, creating a unified orthography, reforming and standardizing culture, inventing transregional traditions, producing symbolic markers of translocal Akhaness, and generating a standardized historical narrative (Morton 2010, 2013). In forging this space, moreover, Akha elite have had to deal with a number of issues encountered by aspiring states

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<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to the late anthropologist Grant Evans who first encouraged me to consider the everyday ways in which Akha “non-state” making efforts have in actuality paralleled those of state-making enterprises more generally speaking.

such as how to resolve the demands of competing interest groups along the lines of language ideologies, religio-politics, gendered relations and socio-economic class.

Akha elite have further capitalized on their genealogical ties of ancient kinship as a means of both anchoring the emergent Akha World as well as rendering the local more legible. In this respect, Akha elites' identitarian productions differ from those of many nation states the world over wherein parochial ties of actual or blood based kinship were gradually supplanted by more universal ties of imagined kinship in the nation (see Anderson 1991[1983]; Keyes 2012). Rather, in this particular Akha case, elite have capitalized on and indeed reworked parochial ties of actual or blood based kinship in order to promote more universal ties of actual or blood based kinship in a larger Akha World. In their efforts to capitalize on these genealogical ties of kinship, however, Akha elite have engaged in a massive project to document in written form the Ancestral genealogies of Akha throughout the Upper Mekong Region. Thus, not unlike state formations the world over, their documentary efforts have served to render the larger Akha World in the making more legible. As suggested by Scott, moreover, national "governments are not the only actors who 'see like a state' " (1998; in Trouillot 2001:132).

These elite have been adamant, however, in representing this emerging Akha world as a "non-territorial" and even "virtual" space equally molded by their common bonds of ethnic kinship and divergent experiences of national belonging (Wang, personal communication, November 29, 2011). As a result, Akha elite have strongly disagreed with my suggestions that their Akha World in the making can be likened to a non-state formation shaped in the likeness and image of a state. Akha elite, moreover, have been constrained in their efforts to produce a larger Akha World due to first and foremost, their lacking any state of their own, and, second,

their firm positioning in different territorial based states in the region. Indeed, these elite have been highly cognizant of their lacking any state of their own.

Thus it has only been during the final stage of writing and after much reflection on these debates over how to represent Akha elites' visions and productions of a larger Akha World that I have settled on the term "crypto-nationalism" as a means of describing their identitarian productions. Elsewhere, U.S. anthropologist Michael Herzfeld has introduced the term "*crypto-colonialism*" to describe the experiences of a number of modern nation states such as Greece and Thailand that, while having escaped direct colonialism by Western powers, were nevertheless constrained in their independence by Western powers (2002). For Herzfeld, moreover, it is the very celebratory claim of such nations to having never been colonized that is the preeminent trait of a "crypto-colony."

The similar and yet distinct concept of "*crypto-nationalism*" as used in this dissertation refers to a particular kind of collective identitarian formation that:

1. first, while existing betwixt and between the national and transnational, is firmly based in multiple territorial sites;
2. second, is in large part mimetic of the national, albeit not always with either the same intentions or consequences;
3. third, neither transcends nor is subsumed by the national and may in certain contexts serve as a buttress for and in turn be buttressed by the national;
4. fourth, not unlike the rise of various nationalisms the world over, is imagined and indeed predicated on the basis of an inherently cosmopolitan outlook (cf. Anderson 1998);

5. fifth, is distinct from the national in lacking both contiguous territorial sovereignty as well as a monopoly on violence within that territory (exhibiting rather a checkerboard type of territoriality incorporated by the national on multiple fronts);
6. sixth, is cultivated on the part of ethnic minorities that have both undergone serial experiences of colonialism through space and time as well as exhibited a heightened degree of awareness of their lack of any state of their own;
7. seventh, represents a historically particular type of decolonizing methodology that to a great extent involves an appropriation of the tools of the colonizers;
8. eighth, is often highly contested in its centering objectives at the local level by the decentralizing nature of communal life on the local sub-national level;
9. ninth, while premised on a fundamental appeal to that which is perceived as the traditional, is in actuality a highly modernist project;
10. and, last, is strongly claimed by its producers to be something other than a *nationalist* formation.

In essence, it is Akha elite's heightened consciousness as to their lack of any state of their own along with their strong denial of having any ambitions for such a state that marks their vision of a larger Akha World as a distinctly crypto-nationalist formation.

In proposing this concept of crypto-nationalism I aim to contribute towards efforts to critically engage with and represent the ever shifting nature of identitarian politics among ethnic minority elite working to construct subaltern identities the world over. In the chapters that follow I highlight various aspects of Akha elites' crypto-nationalist formation in the making (i.e. the Akha World) while noting a number of obstacles that they have encountered in bringing this formation to fruition.

I have chosen to focus most intensively on the religio-political aspects of Akha elite's crypto-nationalist formation. Religion has long been and continues to be intimately intertwined with both ethnic as well as nationalist identitarian formations throughout much of Southeast Asia and beyond (on Thailand see Thongchai 1994:4; Bowie 1997:48-50; Kamala 1997:3-10; and Khaosod English 2015; on Myanmar [Burma] see Long 2013; Gravers 2007b:251; Za Uk Ling and Bawi Lian Mang 2004; and Ei Ei Toe Lwin 2014). This intertwining of religion, ethnicity and nationalism has been particularly salient in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma), both of which have been at the center of the Neo-Traditionalist movement featured in this dissertation.

Religion, moreover, has played only a minor role in the unification projects of other transnational minorities such as the Kurds and Basques (Guntner 2008; Beck 2004). In other cases such as the Karen, Hmong, and Roma, where religion has been significant, it has largely been so in the form of indigenized versions of evangelical Christianity (Platz 2003; Vang 1998; Thurfjell 2009). In contrast, religion in the form of the traditional-modern Akha Religion has figured prominently in Akha Neo-Traditionalists' efforts to envision and forge a larger Akha crypto-nation. The contemporary Neo-Traditionalist movement of the Akha reformer-prophet, Prosperous One, and his disciples thus recalls the much earlier eighteenth century efforts of certain American Indian reformer-prophets to rework their traditional religions while promoting a larger pan-Indian sense of belonging (see Cave 1999). In the following section I provide a broad theoretical discussion of the rise of religion in identitarian politics the world over followed by a brief discussion of my research methods.

## 1.2 Enchanted Modernities: The Global Rise of Religion in Identitarian Politics

Much is being made of a dramatic resurgence in the political influence of religion the world over (Toft et al. 2011:9). Contrary to claims that modernization would lead to the disenchantment of social life (Weber 2009:307), religion is being recognized as a continuing and increasingly significant domain of politics and public life (Willford and George 2005:9).<sup>14</sup>

Others have argued that as the so-called “world religions” of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism have expanded globally they have been “disassociated” from their territorial and cultural roots (Roy 2010).

Yet other scholars have questioned the validity of the preconceived notions of religion that white Euro-American scholars bring to the study of the religious Other (Asad 1983, 1993; Ruel 1982). Talal Asad has argued against the possibility of a “universalizing” definition of religion (1982). Asad and Malcolm Ruel have further highlighted the historically particular ways in which the anthropology of the religious Other has been problematically framed in reference to the religious Self as a product of the melding of Christian and modern secularist discourse.

In this vein, a growing number of scholars have begun to more fully acknowledge the profound ways in which Christianity underlies “so much of what we consider to be ‘the West’: its discourses, values, and practices” (Cannell 2005, 2006; Masuzawa 2005; Robbins 2004; in Keane 2007:30). Some of these scholars argue that the very notion of religion, as a Western construct, is either inapplicable outside the West or laden with a view of the religious as “not quite modern” (Masuzawa 2005; Mahmood 2012:6). Moreover, the notion of religion as a “set of beliefs, practices, and institutions that can be separated from other spheres of life and compared with other distinct religions around the world...is a product of European cultural and colonial

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<sup>14</sup> A similar argument has long been argued for the closely related concept of ethnicity, also predicted to fade into oblivion as a marker of local or parochial collective identities in the face of the presumedly all-important and more universal or cosmopolitan, collective identity of the nation.

history with no direct translation in...non-European” languages (Smith 1963; Hultkrantz 1979; Smith 2004; in Wenger 2009:5).<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, as noted by Webb Keane, “Christianity is no longer just a story about the West: it has become central to understanding” the post- or neo-colonial world (2007:30). In reference to Africa, moreover, Humphrey Fisher argues that, “One fundamental novelty introduced, in the long run, by Islam (and Christianity) has been the idea of an exclusive religious allegiance” (1985:165). In reference to Asia, Peter van der Veer argues that the imperialist efforts of Euro-American Christian missionaries to “produce modern Christians by converting and educating the colonized to both Christianity and modernity” have had more of an impact in generating modern forms of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and so forth as counter-movements against Christianity than in bringing about actual conversions (2014:31, 1996).

It is the imperial encounter, van der Veer concludes, that underlies much of “what we see today as political religion in the postcolonial world” (2014:31). Indeed, subjugated indigenous peoples the world over have variably sought to *invent* or *reinvent* and in turn claim having a religion as a key means of claiming their share of modernity and thereby asserting their equality with and yet distinction from their colonizers, whether they be Euro-American or not (Wegner 2009). As Tisa Wenger demonstrates, moreover, these efforts to reinvent and in turn claim

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<sup>15</sup> In a 2006 edited volume highlighting American Indian struggles for “religious freedom,” Phil Cousineau writes that, “...no Native American language has a word for ‘religion,’ at least the way that Westerners conceive of it, as institutionalized spirituality. Traditionally, Indians had no institutions, no dogma, no commandments, and no one idea about how to worship, or even what to call the great force at the heart of all life that was perceived by all the tribes in their own way. Instead, there was what sociologist Duane Champagne (Chippewa) calls ‘religiousness,’ rather than a belief system, a *way of life* that encompassed a rich variety of ceremonies, a mosaic of myths, legends, and poetry, together forming a complex heritage and a deep spiritual force” (Champagne 1994; In Cousineau 2006:xix).

having a religion may not merely serve to challenge hegemonic notions of legitimate religion but also undermine indigenous cultural norms (2009:4-6).<sup>16</sup>

In the particular case of the Akha transnational minority, which I analyze in this dissertation, the impacts of a historical as well as contemporary experience of serial colonialism on multiple fronts can be seen in terms of both actual conversions to Christianity (and to a lesser extent Buddhism) as well as the generation of modern forms of Akhaness. In reproducing modern forms of Akhaness, Akha have variably resisted, reworked and accommodated Christianity (and Buddhism), all the while appropriating the tools of their Christian (and Buddhist) colonizers. In the Akha case, however, neither Christianity nor Buddhism are conceived as purely religious and hence interchangeable markers of collective identities. Rather they are conceived as combined and either interchangeable or immutable ethnic, racial and religious markers of collective identity, hence the association of Christianity with white Euro-American foreigners and Buddhism with lowland Tai and Burman communities in the Upper Mekong Region.

In this dissertation I engage with these debates over the nature of religion in contemporary life by highlighting the efforts of certain Akha to invent religion as a fundamental means of unifying their roughly 730,000 members in what I describe as a crypto-nationalist formation. The Akha inventions of religion that I highlight, however, represent particular

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<sup>16</sup> Tisa Wenger describes how certain, “Pueblo leaders began to apply ‘religion’ to their indigenous ceremonies” in an effort to challenge U.S. government and Protestant missionary efforts during the 1920s to ban Indian ceremonies as irreligious pagan practices (2009:4-6). This process of redefinition, Wenger argues, “proved advantageous in the fight against government suppression but hard to reconcile with older cultural norms. Pueblo Indians had long understood their tribal ceremonies as a kind of community work, in the same category as maintaining irrigation ditches and cleaning the public spaces – all of which provide mutual benefits and must therefore be shared in one way or another by all members of the tribe. This understanding of ceremonial participation clashed with Euro-American ideas of ‘religion’ as a distinct sphere of social life and with the Enlightenment ideal of a free individual conscience that had shaped the U.S. Constitution’s provisions on religion. Language shapes perception, and a tribal requirement that seemed matter-of-fact as long as the ceremonies were understood in terms of community work became a violation of individual conscience when they were defined as ‘religion’...In the long run, though, their mutual success at identifying the ceremonies as ‘religion’ helped end Christianity’s monopoly on American conceptions of legitimate religion” (2009:4).

historical constructs that in many ways diverge from and complicate Euro-American conceptions of religion as a distinct sphere of social life and a matter of individual rather than collective conscience. In addition, these Akha inventions of religion are a product of a conscious effort on the part of certain cosmopolitan actors to not so much “disassociate” as purify religion from culture in claiming a modern and yet authentic way of being Akha that is nevertheless perceived as anchored in a primordial past (see Hall 1996b:4).<sup>17</sup>

In this dissertation I argue that these profoundly religious and yet modern reworkings of Akhaness complicate claims that modernization entails the disenchantment of social life. Rather, in the Akha case, the religious and secular aspects of social life are more dynamic and interrelated than static or oppositional (see Asad 2003). As Asad has noted, moreover, that which is perceived as the sacred is necessarily defined as that which is perceived as not secular. Yet, I go further in arguing that we should not merely qualify or contextualize but also question the very applicability of the categories of the sacred and secular to the particular life worlds we seek to study and represent. In this regard, I consider the possibility of moving beyond the sacred and secular binary (see Hirschkind 2012).

In the following chapter I provide background information on the Akha World(s) of the Upper Mekong Region followed by a more in-depth analysis of the religio-politics underlying Neo-Traditionalist Akha elites’ crypto-nationalism. First, however, I turn to a brief discussion of my research methods.

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<sup>17</sup> Stuart Hall has aptly argued that, “Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we might become, how we might have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (1996b:4).

### **1.3 Methodological Engagements with Multiple & Shifting Akha Reproductions of a Modern Authenticity**

The main objectives of my research were to identify and make sense of the ways in which Akha throughout the region were variably reframing their notions and practices of Akhaness in reference to a range of multiple and shifting local, national, regional, and global pressures. My initial research plan focused on questions relating to contemporary Akha identitarian politics. Once in the field, however, my focus shifted to the religio-political dynamics of the latter as I quickly learned that religion has been the primary idiom in which Akha identitarian politics have been framed in the post-Cold War period.

While I traveled and visited with Akha residing throughout various parts of the larger Akha World centered on the upper reaches of the mighty Mekong River, most of my research occurred in the smaller Akha World centered on the Thai-Myanmar border towns of Maesai and Tachilek. It was in these border towns where many of the formal and informal gatherings, negotiations, ceremonies and celebrations that are the focus of this dissertation took place. This world has been at the center of a particular movement on the part of a self-declared Neo-Traditionalist Akha faction working to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging. In following the trail of this Neo-Traditionalist movement throughout the region, I conducted several additional periods of fieldwork in various parts of Xishuangbanna or Sipsongbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in southwest China as well as northwest Laos.

My research methods were a synthesis of multi-sited, itinerant and collaborative ethnography coupled with archival research (Marcus 1995; Schein 2004:276-277; Lassiter 2005; Brettell 1998). I focused on the larger Akha World by way of multiple localities wherein certain Akha either gathered with other Akha from various parts of the region or engaged with circulating materials and ideas representing Akhaness. I traveled with certain groups of Akha as

they crossed multiple national borders. I further collaborated with a diverse range of Akha figures hailing from various upland villages, lowland towns and urban centers throughout the region. Most notable among the latter were Ayoe Nyaw-byae (*Aryoeq Nyawrbyeivq* or Jianhua Wang), Mi-ju Maw-lae-gu (*Miqjur Morlaeku* or Chutima Mawlaeku), and Mi-suo Pyaw-gawn (*Miqsawr Pyawqganr* or Haiying Li), with whom I have variably collaborated during each stage of the ethnographic process – “from fieldwork to writing and back again” (Lassiter 2005:17).

Ayoe (*Aryoeq*) is a prominent scholar and leader among Neo-Traditionalist elite. Originally from a rural Akha village in southwest China, he has since married Mi-ju, an Akha woman from Thailand where the two of them resided until very recently with their family on the outskirts of the lowland, urban center of Chiang Mai. At the time of my field work (2009-2012) it was estimated that no less than 5,000 Akha were residing throughout various parts of the greater urban center of Chiang Mai. Mi-ju, moreover, is a prominent minority rights activist as well as leader not only in the regional Akha Neo-Traditionalist movement but also the national, regional, and, indeed, global Indigenous peoples’ movement. Ayoe, moreover, has played more minor roles in the Indigenous peoples’ movement as it has gained traction in Thailand and Southeast Asia.

During the period of my initial long term field work, Ayoe was a dissertator in anthropology at the University of California-Riverside in the USA. He has since completed his Ph.D. and obtained a position as assistant professor at the Yunnan Provincial Institute for Ethnic Studies, Yunnan University of Nationalities in Kunming, China.<sup>18</sup> Ayoe’s official Chinese and

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<sup>18</sup> Ayoe’s dissertation is entitled, “Sacred and Contested Landscapes: Dynamics of Natural Resource Management by Akha People in Xishuangbanna, Southwest China” (Wang 2013). In the dissertation, Ayoe not only examines the historical dynamics of natural resource management among certain Akha communities in far southwest China between roughly 1949 and the late 2000s but also provides an extensive revisionist account of Akha history that incorporates a variety of sources ranging from Akha oral texts to Chinese imperial records, Euro-American scholarly accounts of the region, and modern day ethnographic analogues drawn from the extant ritual practices of certain Akha communities in the region.

scholarly name is Wang Jianhua. At Ayoe's request, however, I have referred to him directly in this dissertation via his Akha name, Ayoe, while citing his scholarly works via his official Chinese surname, Wang. I have similarly chosen to refer to Mi-ju directly via her Akha name, Mi-ju, rather than official Thai name, Chutima.

Mi-suo, Ayoe and Mi-ju's niece, is an Akha scholar also from southwest China who since 2008 has participated in many of the activities organized by Neo-Traditionalist elite in support of their movement. Moreover, between 2010 and 2012 Mi-suo and I collaborated on our separate and yet closely related research projects. My project focused on Neo-Traditionalist elite's efforts to promote a pan-Akha identity while Mi-suo's focused on the extant Ancestral practices of a particular upland community of Old-Traditionalists in north Thailand and the impact of religious conversion upon relations within the village. Mi-suo's research project culminated in an M.A. thesis completed via the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University in north Thailand (Li 2013).<sup>19</sup> As I have decided in the case of Ayoe, I refer to Mi-suo directly in the dissertation via her Akha name, Mi-suo, while citing her scholarly work via her official Chinese surname, Li. Last, following our marriage in May 2011, Mi-suo and I went from being simply research collaborators to wife and husband-research collaborators.

Finally, I conducted extensive archival research in two collections. The first collection was the Payap University Archives in Chiang Mai, Thailand where I gathered data pertaining to the historical entanglements of certain pioneer foreign Christian missionaries and their Akha collaborators in Myanmar and Thailand between roughly 1947 and 1989. The second collection was the now largely abandoned library of the deceased Dutch Catholic priest turned

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<sup>19</sup> The title of Mi-suo's thesis is, "Neo-Traditionalist Movements and the Practice of *Aqkaqzanr* in a Multi-Religious Community in Northern Thailand" (Li 2013).

anthropologist, Leo G.M. Alting von Geusau, also in Chiang Mai, Thailand. In the latter collection I gathered data pertaining to the historical efforts of certain non-Akha and Akha collaborators from various parts of the region to document and reform the Ways of the Akha Ancestors while promoting the transregional scaling up of Akhanness to varying degrees between roughly the late 1970s and early 2000s. My analysis of these two bodies of data offers a necessary historical framework for more accurately contextualizing contemporary Akha identitarian politics.

#### **1.4 Negotiating the Politics of Research and Representation**

At one point as I was chatting informally with Ayoe during the early part of fieldwork in November 2009, he noted with frustration that as an indigenous scholar writing about his own people he was faced with a major disadvantage – namely that the mainstream Euro-American scholarly community would predetermine his work to be inherently biased and uncritical. He then added that in contrast, as an outsider, my work would necessarily be seen as more legitimate, regardless of whether or not I actually got things right. Ayoe went on to note that, in actuality, as an outsider I was inherently limited in the extent to which I could truly understand Akha, either in terms of language or culture. As a result, he added, I was bound to make some mistakes. In response I commented that while I could not but agree with his point, I would surely do my best to ensure the accuracy of my representations.

Ayoe in turn replied by asking that I permit him to review my writings before making them public in the form of either publications or presentations. In response, I agreed, thereby laying the groundwork for what has since developed into a highly productive and yet complicated series of collaborations that have continued until the present. In this manner, some

of the collaborations inherent to the doing of ethnography were made a more explicit and deliberate part of the entire ethnographic process (see Lassiter 2005). Ultimately, however, I have had the final say on the representations I have made of the Neo-Traditionalist movement in which Ayoe has played a key role. As noted earlier, Ayoe and other Neo-Traditionalist elite have strongly disagreed with my framing of their Akha World in the making as a non-state space nevertheless shaped in the likeness and image of the state.

Ayoe further urged me to be aware of the potentially harmful implications of my work with Akha more generally as well as the network of Neo-Traditionalist elite to which he belonged in particular. He reminded me that national security concerns had long been high on the agendas of the different governments in the region and that Akha came under suspicion due to their cross-border positioning. As a result of these discussions, I gradually came to see my role as a scholar as that of creating a space for a range of Akha voices to be heard while seeking to present a clear and fair analysis of the Neo-Traditionalist movement.

## **1.5 Chapter Outline**

In the ten chapters that follow I begin by providing some background on the contemporary Akha World of the Upper Mekong Region and an analysis of the religio-politics underlying Neo-Traditionalist elites' crypto-nationalism. In chapter three I discuss the larger contextual frameworks within which contemporary Akha identitarian religio-politics have played out since the late 1980s. In particular, I consider the multiple and shifting positions of upland minorities in a cross-border/area studies region that can perhaps least problematically be referred to as the Upper Mekong Region, the scope of which conveniently frames the Akha World in the making that is the focus of Neo-Traditionalist elites' project.

In chapter four I take a methodological detour and reflect on my multiple and shifting engagements in the everyday lives of certain members of the Akha transregional minority who were engaged in a contentious debate over the question of authenticity. In doing so, I highlight the particular ways in which my perception by various Akha as a (potential) believer/disbeliever, authenticator/de-authenticator and even Akha/non-Akha afforded deeper insight into contemporary Akha identitarian politics.

In chapter five I discuss at length the Old- and Neo-Traditionalist discourse equating Akhaness and the carrying of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors (*Aqkaqzanr*) as fundamentally grounded in the act of “remembering and honoring” the Ancestors. I then focus on the Ancestral practices of one Old-Traditionalist household in setting the stage for further exploration of Neo-Traditionalists’ reworkings of the Ancestral burden in a manner that shifts the locus of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and in turn Akhaness from the deeply grounding local contexts of villages and households to that of the upwardly unifying translocal Akha World in the making. Indeed, the deeply grounding local practices of the Old-Traditionalists highlighted in this chapter have posed significant obstacles toward Neo-Traditionalists’ crypto-nationalist project to recenter the Akha World.

Against the backdrop provided in chapter five I turn in chapter six to a broader discussion of Akha identitarian politics in historical and contemporary perspective. I bring into play a variety of representations of Akhaness and the Ways of the Akha Ancestors (*Aqkaqzanr*) that have been made by certain foreign, non-Akha-demics since the early 1980s. These representations offer a baseline from which to consider how Neo-Traditionalists’ more contemporary formations of Akhaness and the Ways of the Akha Ancestors exhibit continuity and discontinuity with the near and, to some extent, distant past. In brief, Euro-American

scholars have unanimously argued for a vision of the Akha polity as existing only at the village level and never beyond (Geusau 1983:274, 2000a; Kammerer 1986:339, 1989:277; Tooker 1988:12, 2012:32). If accurate, these arguments would suggest that the crypto-nationalist project of Neo-Traditionalists represents a radical departure from earlier Akha identitarian formations.

In chapter six I also discuss the shifting nature of Akha identitarian politics as a result of first, the heightened integration of upland Akha villages into expanding lowland states throughout the region, and, second, the rising rates of religious conversion to various denominations of Christianity in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma). Non-Christian Traditionalist Akha have understood these experiences of religious conversion as “taking on the Ancestral Ways of non-Akha Others.” In recent years, however, the increasingly influential leaders of the expanding, albeit far from harmonious, Christian Akha community have worked to not only indigenize or Akha-cize Christianity but also dismiss non-Christian Traditionalists as “people of the flesh or heathens.” It is against this backdrop of rising religio-political factionalism - initially in Thailand and Myanmar and more recently in China and Laos - that Neo-Traditionalist elite from throughout the region have come together in order to imagine, negotiate, and actualize their crypto-nationalist project of the larger Akha World.

In the four succeeding chapters seven, eight, nine and ten, I explore various dimensions of the ways in which Neo-Traditionalists have sought to “look after and improve” the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. In each of these chapters I discuss the various de-colonizing methods by which Neo-Traditionalist elite have worked to actualize their crypto-nationalist vision of a larger Akha World. These methods – arranged roughly in the order in which they are discussed – have included:

1. the reformation and standardization of Akhaness in the form of the one and only authentic Akha Religion;
2. the documentation, “vitalization” and reworking of pre-existing genealogical ties of ancient kinship;<sup>20</sup>
3. the transformation of the Akha Religion from an oral to a literate based tradition by way of the negotiation and production of a unified and distinctly Akha orthography;
4. the production of a written and standardized historical narrative wherein Akha figure front and center;
5. the invention of transregional traditions or annual ceremonial gatherings;
6. and, finally, the creation of numerous material and immaterial productions of translocal Akhaness in the form of an Akha flag, musical and theatrical productions, modern forms of dress, embodied markers of authentic Akha masculinity, and artistic representations of the Akha cosmos.

In their crypto-nationalist imaginaries and practices, moreover, Neo-Traditionalist elite have exhibited varying degrees and kinds of cosmopolitanisms reflecting national, regional, and, indeed global discourses and norms regarding notions of peoplehood, religion, culture, language, and history (cf. Friedman 1994; Anderson 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Elite have encountered these discourses by way of direct and indirect engagements with other Akha and Hani from different parts of the region; their respective national governments, publics and scholarly traditions; and foreign, largely Euro-American scholars, missionaries, and minority rights advocates. My use of the term “cosmopolitanism” here refers to an outlook or orientation

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<sup>20</sup> Here I am following U.S. anthropologist Marian Smith’s (1954:122) use of the term “vitalization” to refer to a process of “adapting still strong cultures to current circumstances, rather than of ‘revitalizing’ moribund cultures” (cf. Wallace 1956; in Buckley 2000:266).

towards the everyday world that reflects a more expansive awareness of broadly, sometimes globally, circulating ideas and practices, rather than a more narrow perspective circumscribed to the local (see Abu-Lughod 2005; Appiah 2006).

In chapter seven I discuss the recent efforts of Neo-Traditionalist elite to refashion Akhaness by way of anchoring their notions of peoplehood in the fundamental domain of religion. In chapter eight I consider the efforts of certain Neo-Traditionalist scholars to mine the vaults of their Ancestral memories in constructing a revisionist history of the Akha wherein they play a central rather than peripheral role. I further discuss a very recent development wherein these scholars have sought to legitimate their revisionist histories by way of reference to science in the form of relatively new genetic studies involving Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples (including Akha and Hani) from various parts of the Upper Mekong Region. Their revisionist histories have challenged the claims of certain Euro-American scholars that the Akha polity has existed only at the village level and never beyond.

In chapter nine I briefly discuss the longer histories behind the rise of the broader Neo-Traditionalist movement of which MATA (“The Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion”) has come to represent one distinct and yet prominent branch. I also discuss the orthographic politics or language ideologies underlying Akha elites’ reformations of Akhaness. The debates and subsequent fissures that have arisen as divergently positioned elite from various parts of the region have sought to negotiate a common and distinctly Akha orthography have posed major obstacles towards Neo-Traditionalist elites’ crypto-nationalist project.

In chapter ten I provide a detailed ethnographic description and analysis of MATA’s efforts to re-spatialize the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and in turn Akhaness in the context of their post-2008 annual transregional celebrations of the “New Year’s Ancestral Service”

(*Kartanr Aqpoeq lawr-e*) in the border town of Tachilek, Myanmar. I present this celebration as a reinvented tradition via which MATA has creatively promoted its modern crypto-nationalist project by way of the production and display of numerous symbolic markers of translocal Akhaness. I further discuss how MATA's crypto-nationalist project has developed hand in hand with that of an equally significant *sub*-nationalist project via which they have positioned Akha in Myanmar as a "sub-nationality of sorts" of Myanmar (see Jonsson 2005:236).

In the concluding chapter I revisit the main arguments of the dissertation. I then close with some final speculative comments on the possible futures of Akha crypto-nationalist formations as they continue to develop in various parts of the Akha World. I further consider how the concept of crypto-nationalism might be usefully applied to the study of similar and yet distinct kinds of transnational identitarian formations on the part of ethnic minorities located within and beyond the Upper Mekong Region.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Background: The “Akha World” of the Upper Mekong Region

#### 2.1 Introduction



Figure 2.1: This figure is an image of the Akha World as represented on the back cover of an Akha language publication of the “Akha Outreach Foundation” (AOF), a prominent Christian evangelical organization based in north Thailand (Akha Outreach Foundation 2011a). The Akha writing along the bottom of the page translates as: “Our Akha people reside in five countries and across seven borders” (*Aqdui Aqkaqzaq 5 mirkhanq 7 mirkaq jawrluf-eu mae*). The stars mark each of the international borders in the region.

Some 730,000 Akha - a Tibeto-Burman speaking people - currently reside in the mountainous borderlands of southwest China, east Myanmar, northwest Laos, north Thailand and northwest Vietnam – an area otherwise known as the Upper Mekong Region as it centers on the upper sections of the mighty Mekong River. This area forms a significant part of a hypothetical cross-border/area studies region that Willem Van Schendel first referred to as “Zomia” as a means of challenging the geographical and intellectual boundaries posed by area studies (2005[2002]). Later, however, James Scott (2009) refashioned or more accurately reified

this hypothetical region of “Zomia” into an actual area studies region in of itself, contrary to van Schendel’s initial intentions.

While preferring the term “borderworld” to “borderland” for reasons as noted by Mandy Sadan (2013:4-14),<sup>21</sup> I have chosen rather to follow the ever dynamic and shifting indigenous Akha lexicon in referring to this region simply as the “Akha World” (*Aqkaq Mirkhanq*), minus any specific reference to the seven international borders that crisscross this region per se. The Akha term “Mi-khawn” (*Mirkhanq*) has, through time, acquired a variety of spatialized meanings including but not limited to region, territory, country, state, or world, depending on the particular context in which it is invoked (see Tooker 2012:69,276). By so doing, I aim to further challenge the longstanding tendency to engage borders and borderlanders as not only inherently peripheral but also hyper-dynamic spaces and communities (see Rosaldo 2003).

Akha anthropologist Ayoe Nyaw-byae (Jianhua Wang) has explained the etymology of the term “Akha” in the following manner:

“The etymon ‘Kha’ (low tone) in ‘Akha’ literally means ‘between,’ ‘middle,’ ‘center,’ or ‘distance.’ The affix ‘A’ is used to refer to the names of people, animals, plants, and so on, and indicates that the word is a noun. Therefore, the term Akha can be semantically translated as ‘people in between,’ ‘people of the middle,’ ‘people of the center,’ and/or ‘people from the distance.’ These meanings are quite simple to explain in reference to the history (of the origin, expansion and demise of the Akha homeland-state of) Jadae...The term Akha aptly applies to their (shifting) political and geographical positions. Therefore,

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<sup>21</sup> Sadan, who adapts the term from Wim van Spengen (1998), uses it in reference to the Kachin “borderworlds” spanning the territorial boundaries of India, Myanmar, China and Thailand. Sadan argues that: “The more expansive term ‘borderworld’ may be preferable at times (to ‘borderland’) because the proximity to a borderline does not always determine the real or imagined interactions of people inhabiting these more widely drawn but interconnected spaces. It is a more liminal or at least multi-layered geography that is different in many ways to the imaginary of the modern nation-state. In many life-choice situations, this trans-border geography affects the possibilities, and constraints, of being Kachin, influencing decisions about where and how local people work, travel, receive education, have relatives, raise a family, and the strategies they adopt to maximize their incomes and their sense of security. Yet this borderworld is a complex, uneven social and political construct, which it is difficult even for the most ardent of Kachin ethno-nationalists to make smooth. This complexity is produced at a number of levels. At the level of the state, there are some common features in how the various national systems of governance territorialise this region and configure the people within it as ‘ethnic groups,’ but there are also distinctions... These larger political contexts... fracture this space politically, culturally and socially, despite the evident and resilient contiguity of language and of kinship that sustains the modern imaginary of ethno-nationalism in some quarters. The result is a varied and uneven range of social geographies across this borderworld” (Sadan 2013:4-6).

the Akha as ‘people in-between’ refers to a politically independent group of people who were geographically juxtaposed between other states. The Akha as ‘people of the middle’ in turn reflects their cosmological view of being at the ‘center’ of the universe... Similarly, ‘people of the center’ indicates their geopolitical position at the center of Jadae... The term Akha was further reinforced as a term of self-reference as a result of the demise of Jadae and migrations of Akha to areas far from their original homeland; hence the fourth semantic meaning of Akha as ‘people from the distance,’ or people residing a great distance from their lost homeland. In other words, Akha refers to ‘the diaspora of Jadae’ and as such embodies a strong nostalgic sentiment towards... Jadae state, the common homeland of all Akha” (Wang 2013:68-69).

In China and Vietnam, however, Akha are officially categorized or mis-categorized, depending on one’s vantage point, as part of the larger Hani and Ha Nhi national minorities respectively. Moreover, as part of the larger Hani “ethnonationality” (*minzu*) in China, Akha have been afforded special rights and privileges relative to the Han Chinese majority.<sup>22</sup> The total Akha and Hani/Ha Nhi population in the region is estimated at some two million people (Wang 2013:20). Estimates of national-level populations of Akha have varied from roughly 275,000 (out of a total of 1.63 million Hani) in southwest China as of 2010, to 250,000 in east Myanmar (Burma) as of 2013, 91,000 in northwest Laos as of 2005, 80,000 in north Thailand as of 2013, and an unknown percentage of the estimated 26,000-40,000 Hani in northwest Vietnam as of 2008 (Wang 2013:20,25-26).

Notably, Akha from Vietnam have yet to participate in the transregional crypto-nationalist movement that is the focus of this dissertation. This is largely due to state restrictions on movement into and out of the mountainous border region where Akha reside in the far northwest of Vietnam. As a result, I only discuss Akha from Vietnam to the limited extent that

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<sup>22</sup> Geusau notes that in pre-Communist China, Hani and Akha groups, along with the “Black Yi,” of the Szechuan/Yunnanese border areas, were viewed by Han Chinese as “Wuman or ‘wild,’ non-Sinicized ‘barbarians’ ” (2003b:2). To a large extent this deep-seated view of Hani as well as other frontier dwelling minorities as uncivilized barbarians – relative to the superior and civilized Han Chinese - has carried over into the post-1949 Communist category of *minzu* (ethnonationality), which while officially applied to the majority Han Chinese as well, is in more popular discourse reserved exclusively for non-Han minorities.

they figured into the imaginations and practices of various Akha from beyond Vietnam as they sought to reforge the boundaries of Akhaness.

At present, Akha constitute both a numerical and also political minority in whichever nation state they reside. The nearly ubiquitous positioning of Akha along the string of mountainous borderlands that have come to define the modern geo-political context of the Upper Mekong Region has led various scholars to characterize them as a “perennial minority” (Geusau 1983, 2000a), retreating “border people” (McKinnon 1997a:102), or quintessential “Zomian” anarchists (Scott 2009:177). Euro-American scholars are unanimous, moreover, in their representations of the Akha polity as having always and everywhere existed only at the village level and never beyond (Geusau 1983:274, 2000a; Kammerer 1986:339, 1989:277; Tooker 1988:12, 2012:32).

During fieldwork I lost track of the number of times that various Akha from the Thailand-Myanmar region of the Akha World in particular commented to either me or others that, “We (Akha) do not have a state of our own.” This remark was most frequently made in order to explain why they had faced so many difficulties in attempting to work together in the interest of various objectives such as negotiating a common Akha orthography or preventing the further loss of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. My Akha collaborators further attributed their lack of a state to their honest, generous and yet gullible nature when compared to the dishonest, stingy and two-faced nature of the various Tai speaking groups that have numerically and politically dominated much of the Akha World in recent history.

## 2.2 Multiple and Shifting Akha Narratives of Modernity

Contemporary Akha unification efforts are occurring amidst the region's post-Cold War (post-1980s) transformation from the opium producing battlefields of the Golden Triangle to an international market for labor, natural resources and tourism (see Walker 1999; Evans et al. 2000; Glassman 2010; Thein Swe and Chambers 2011). As a result of the region's transformation, Akha have experienced unprecedented pressures toward national integration and incorporation into emerging regional economies. Certain Akha, moreover, have been far from passive actors in these historical processes, playing roles as local and international traders and financiers, government officials of varying rank, Christian evangelical missionaries and the staff of various internationally funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Religion, broadly construed, however, is the primary idiom in relation to which Akha have framed their contemporary identitarian politics. In this regard, Akha have responded to their multiple and shifting experiences of modernity in five main ways. First, since roughly the early 1980s some eighty percent of Akha in Thailand and Myanmar have converted to different denominations of Christianity, primarily Protestantism in Thailand and Catholicism in Myanmar. This figure represents some 238,000 people or 34 percent of the total regional population of roughly 730,000. Prior to the 1980s, however, foreign Christian missionaries often lamented both the strong resistance of Akha to conversion as well as the Traditionalist taboo against non-Akha and Akha converts alike residing within the village gates (Nightingale 1968:265; Lewis 1957:229; Kammerer 1990:282). In contrast, as of 2013 at least seven different churches belonging to five different and competing Christian denominations could be found in one Akha village alone in north Thailand (see Li 2013:6).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Akha scholar Mi-suo Pyaw-gawn (Haiying Li) from China writes that, "...there are currently seven different Christian churches and communities located in different sections of *Arbawr* village. These churches include two

In addition, as of early 2014 more than five indigenous Akha Christian missionary-development organizations based in north Thailand were working to convert their “unreached” ethnic kin not only in Thailand but also other parts of the larger, transborder region that are gradually, albeit unevenly, softening to the flow of foreign bodies, commodities, images and ideas across their borders. This missionizing orientation is particularly strong in reference to Akha residing in the post-Cold War socialist states of China, Laos and Vietnam. The Akha Outreach Foundation, a leading Akha Christian evangelical organization based in north Thailand, considers Vietnam “the final frontier for Akha missions” (Akha Outreach Foundation 2011b:41).

Second, a small but gradually increasing number of Akha in Thailand and Myanmar representing less than one percent of the regional population have incorporated Buddhism into their Ancestral Ways.<sup>24</sup> Notably, Buddhism is the religion of the dominant lowlanders surrounding Akha and other upland minorities in the region. Interestingly, during fieldwork I found that whenever Akha from northwest Laos and southwest China first learned of there being Akha Buddhists in north Thailand and Myanmar they reacted with strong disbelief. Not unlike conservative Traditionalists more generally, Akha in Laos and China tend to associate Buddhism with the various lowland Tai groups towards whom they have long harbored antagonistic feelings.

Religious conversion trends among Akha and others such as Kachin and Karen have largely been toward Christianity rather than Buddhism. Indeed, scholars have long viewed Christian conversion as a crucial means whereby minorities in the region have sought to enter the realm of modernity while asserting their equality with and yet distinction from their often more

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churches affiliated with the Akha Church of Thailand (ACT), an additional two churches affiliated with the Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF), a single Akha Catholic church affiliated with *Patrick-Jaw* Catholic Center in Maesuai, a Protestant church run by a South Korean missionary affiliated with the Christian Thai-Korean Church in Maesuai, and a Lisu Christian church affiliated with the *Maitrichit* Church in Bangkok” (2013:6).

<sup>24</sup> “Ancestral Ways” is used here as a translation of the indigenous Akha term “Zanr/Yanr/Ghanr-Sanr Kovq.”

dominant lowland Buddhist neighbors (see Kammerer 1990; Tapp 1989a; Keyes 2003; Kwanchewan and Panadda 2008). Other scholars have made a similar claim in reference to colonized and subjugated peoples the world over – namely that they have variably made sense of their incorporation into broader social worlds and claimed a modern identity via converting to any one of the world religions, albeit Christianity in particular (see Hefner 1993; van der Veer 1996).

Elsewhere, Mi-suo Pyaw-gawn notes that the members of a small but gradually expanding community of Akha Buddhists in one upland village in north Thailand generally felt that in comparison to Christianity, Buddhism was more compatible with their Ancestral Ways (Li 2013:138-140). In support of the latter claim they commented that first, unlike Christians, they were generally free to continue seeking the services of Traditionalist healers and ritual specialists as needed and second, that as Buddhists they were able to continue making offerings to their Ancestors, albeit by way of Thai Buddhist monk intermediaries (see Li 2013:138-140).<sup>25</sup> This relatively recent trend of Buddhist conversion among Akha in Thailand as well as Myanmar warrants further investigation in of itself as well as in comparison to other mid-slope or upland minorities such as Karen and Lahu, both of which have much longer histories of synergistic engagements with Buddhism.

The remaining roughly 66 percent of Akha in the region – representing some 462,000 people – can be categorized as Traditionalists falling along a gradient from more conservative to

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<sup>25</sup> I have yet to either hear of or come across any *Akha* Buddhist monks stationed in any one of the large number of small Buddhist ashrams or monasteries dotting the upland landscape of northern Thailand. Rather the majority of Akha Buddhist novices and monks at present in Thailand are young men in their late teens to early twenties that primarily reside in any one of numerous monasteries in the lowland urban centers of either Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai where they attend one of the government funded Buddhist educational institutions ranging from the elementary to university level. Most of these novices and monks, moreover, leave the monkhood after obtaining a certain level of education. The act of becoming a Buddhist novice and in turn monk remains as one of only a few available avenues whereby young Akha males may obtain a higher education. Another significant avenue for obtaining an education has long been provided by any one of the numerous evangelical Christian boarding schools found throughout various lowland towns and cities in north Thailand.

moderate, reformist, revolutionary and revivalist. First, a small number of conservative Traditionalists, hereafter referred to as Old-Traditionalists, in certain parts of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos have striven at the village level to continue carrying their Ancestral Ways while implementing limited modifications to them. Their Ancestral Ways have revolved around twelve annual household level Ancestral offerings made in conjunction with a series of rites relating to upland rice and the renewal of various structures located within and along their village's perimeter, including the village gates which bound and protect the inside domain from any outside impurities and threats such as non-Akha Others. The practices of one such Old-Traditionalist community are highlighted in chapter five.

Second, in southwest China a growing number of Akha have been selectively “vitalizing” (Smith 1954:122) their Ancestral Ways through an expanding array of “identity exchanges” (Schein 2004) with certain Old- and Neo-Traditionalist factions based in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands and with support from their local governments. In this dissertation I have followed U.S. anthropologist Marian Smith's (1954:122) use of the term “vitalization” to refer to a process of “adapting still strong cultures to current circumstances, rather than of ‘revitalizing’ moribund cultures” (cf. Wallace 1956; in Buckley 2000:266). In post-1949 Communist China, Akha experienced a long period of overt cultural suppression that has only recently abated in the post-Mao period.<sup>26</sup>

Last, an expanding transregional network of self-declared Neo-Traditionalists numbering some several thousand people has since roughly 2008 been working to “look after and improve”

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<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, Akha anthropologist Ayoe Nyaw-byae (Jianhua Wang) has elaborated on this point in the following manner: “In China, various communist campaigns such as ‘the Great Cultural Revolution’ had forced the Akha to abandon many of their cultural traditions. Their traditional belief system was labeled as ‘superstition’ and Akha were forced to abandon it. Under the influence of an enforced belief in atheism, Akha began to perceive of communist Chinese Han as *naevq* or evil spirits whose power surpassed that of all of the natural spirits that Akha traditionally believed in. In order to avoid any harmful punishment from these new *naevq*, Akha came to believe that they had to listen to and obey the commands of Chinese Han officials. Akha were not even allowed to wear their traditional costumes because they were viewed as an impediment to agricultural production” (2013:75-76).

(*lavsav-e*) their Ancestral Ways as a fundamental means of unifying the larger Akha World in the making. In looking after and improving their Ancestral burden, these cultural reformers have sought to literize, standardize, lighten and yet deepen their Ancestral Ways. It is the cultural work of this particular faction that I highlight in this dissertation. These cultural producers or modernizers have included a diverse, multi-national coalition of elite and organic intellectuals hailing largely from certain lowland towns and cities dominated by non-Akha and to a lesser extent various upland Akha villages in the region.

Their ranks have included knowledgeable elders, ritual specialists, scholars, state officials of various ranks, current and former military officials (in Myanmar), business entrepreneurs, leaders and staff members of nongovernmental organizations (largely in Thailand), as well as artists and musicians. While most of the network's members have been men, three of the leading representatives from southwest China and north Thailand have been women. Funding for their efforts, moreover, has come from a variety of sources such as cross-border trade, state funds, grants from various international advocacy organizations as well as a recent regional and global boom in premium coffee and rubber production (See Sturgeon 2010; Wang 2013).

Their modernization efforts have entailed a conscious filtering out or distilling of the religious from the cultural aspects of their Ancestral Ways as part of a process of reinventing what they identify as THE Akha Religion (*Aqkaq Ghanr*). These cultural producers have further chosen the term "Gawn" (*Ghanr*) as the standardized form for that which Akha in the region variably refer to as "Zawn" (*Zanr*), "Yawn" (*Yanr*), or "Gawn" (*Ghanr*) depending on language variety and sub-group affiliation. "Gawn" (*Ghanr*), they have argued, is the "older, more archaic" and hence "authentic" form of the term.

They have further identified THE Akha Religion in the making as the fundamental anchor for an emergent modern and authentic pan-Akha sense of belonging. This group of reformers has framed their efforts in opposition to Akha Christian missionaries portrayed as “unauthentic” or “two-faced” Akha both “preying” on their fellow Akha as well as bringing about the very demise of the Akha as a distinct “people” or “ethnic group” (*tsawrjeq*) with their own “Religion” (*Ghanr*). In this discourse, Religion is perceived as THE fundamental marker of peoplehood.

These elite reformers have further reworked a highly localized indigenous conception equating religion and ethnicity (see Kammerer 1990:278; Tooker 1992:800) to a more politicized and trans-local or regional discourse exemplified in the declaration, “I am Akha and I carry the Akha Religion!” (*Ngar Aqkaq zaq, Aqkaq Ghanr tawq ma!*), as opposed to the religions of “non-Akha Christian and Buddhist Others.” In short, they have asserted an authenticity narrative of modernity wherein being or becoming Akha is fundamentally grounded in the carrying of the Akha Religion and the Akha Religion alone. Some elite, moreover, have gone further in claiming that their carrying of the Akha Religion makes them a more authentic people when compared with non-Akha others such as various lowland Tai groups who are seen as having “adopted a foreign Religion from a foreign land,” namely Buddhism from India (Prosperous One, personal communication, December 14, 2009).

In brief, these Akha ethnic intrapreneurs have consciously reinvented THE Akha Religion, both in the singular as well as separate and apart from culture, in pursuit of three main objectives. First, they have promoted the very survival of Akha as a distinct people with their own religion – a process that may be likened to that of “survival through religion” (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Second, these ethnic intrapreneurs have worked to cultivate a larger, pan-

Akha sense of belonging. Last, they have encouraged a “return...” to the Akha Religion in the remaking among Akha converts to the religions of “non-Akha Others.”

In pursuing these goals, elite have vigorously reworked the Akha Religion (i.e. Akhaness) in order to address new challenges and in particular reference to the so-called world religions of Christianity and Buddhism. The product of their efforts is a seemingly paradoxical indigenous religion with a trans-local outreach, cosmopolitan ambitions, and yet exclusive orientation to Akha and Akha alone (i.e. framed in reference to the Akha World). This simultaneously more universal and yet exclusive reworking of Akhaness explains the unprecedented efforts of certain Neo-Traditionalists to proselytize throughout a re-imagined, larger Akha World-in-the-making framed in reference to the Akha Religion.

As noted earlier, since 2009, Prosperous One and his disciples have “brought back” more than 400 formerly Christian, and largely Catholic, Akha households in east Shan State, Myanmar to the Akha Religion in the making (see Morton 2013:42; Wang 2013:78). In Akha language these return conversions are literally referred to as “to return back up to, pick up and carry Akha *Ghanr* once again” (*Aqkaq ghanr tawq khovq lar-e*). In contrast, the process of outward conversion is referred to as “to go down to and take on the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others” (*Aqcawq-e ghanr gevq ir-e*).

These narratives of conversion reflect a distinctly Akha cosmography as grounded in the deeply spatialized dimensions of Akhaness, inclusive of language, history, cosmology and geography.<sup>27</sup> Each of these dimensions of Akhaness are framed through and through via the directional binaries of on one hand “higher, up,” and on the other hand “lower, down” wherein the former direction is associated with the flow of life giving energy and the latter with its drain

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<sup>27</sup> I borrow the term “cosmography,” which combines cosmology and geography, from art historian Truman Lowe.

(see Tooker 2012:65-71). Akha language, moreover, is deeply engrained with this directional binary.<sup>28</sup>

Prosperous One has a colorful background as first a Catholic and potential seminarian turned military opportunist, immigration official, Akha state representative and more recently crusader on behalf of the Akha people and most importantly, in his view, their one and only true Religion or *Akkaq Ghanr*. Since roughly 2008, he and his disciples have carried out their efforts in various parts of the region under the banner of MATA or “The Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion” (*Mam Mirkhanq Akkaqghanr Tawq-e Armavq*). Based in the Myanmar-Thai border town of Tachilek, this organization has been led and financed by a core group of seven Akha males in addition to Prosperous One. These leading figures have hailed from various parts of east Myanmar and had diverse backgrounds in the Myanmar national military and government, business sector as well as civil society. More background on Prosperous One and MATA is provided below.

### **2.3 Prosperous One: From Catholic War Veteran to (Neo)Traditionalist Prophet**

“...I was born and raised as a Catholic by my father who was Catholic before me, and so I learned the Catholic Zandr (*Kovqadawvq Zandr*).  
As a child I studied in a Christian (non-Catholic) school, and so I learned the Christian Zandr (*Kali Zandr*).  
Later,  
when I was a soldier,  
I learned the Buddhist Zandr (*Paerxeer Zandr*).  
You see I never had a chance to learn about our Akha Zandr.  
In fact, I had inherited a very negative view of the latter...”  
(Prosperous One, personal communication, August 8, 2011).

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<sup>28</sup> For example, the general way of asking how someone is doing in Thailand and Myanmar is by literally asking, “Are you (being) up?” (*Jawr sar dov mir nya laq?*). One would reply in turn by stating they were either “(Being) up” (*Jawr sar dov*), implying well or “Not (being) up” (*Jawr sar maq dov*), implying that they were not well.

Prosperous One was born into a large Catholic family residing in the small but cosmopolitan town of Kengtung in east Shan State, Myanmar. Not far from the present-day international borders with China, Laos and Thailand, Kengtung has long been an important fixture along the overland trade routes that have crisscrossed the region for centuries. Kengtung, moreover, has since the early 1900s been *the* regional center of power for Akha Catholics.

Prosperous One first rose to prominence within east Shan State as a result of exemplary service in the Burmese military. While fighting against ethnic “rebels” in Karen State, he stepped on a land mine and subsequently lost the lower part of his right leg. Ever since that time he has walked with a limp and the assistance of a prosthetic leg. His service earned him both the position of regional commander as well as marriage to the daughter of a prominent ethnic Burman military official.

Prior to joining the military, however, Prosperous One had spent several years in a Catholic seminary training to be a priest. Following an early retirement from the military in the early 2000s, he was moved to a senior position in the Immigration and Customs branch of the Myanmar regional government. Rumor has it that his early retirement was forced on account of his having an extramarital affair and suffering a fall from grace in the eyes of his wife’s father. Sometime later he and his Burman wife divorced and he re-married an ethnic Shan woman.<sup>29</sup> Around the same time he was appointed as one of two Akha ethnic representatives from Kengtung to the central Burman government, at the time positioned in Yangon (Rangoon).

It was during this time that Prosperous One experienced an awakening to his Akha roots, namely the rich and ancient traditions of the Akha Ancestors that he came to realize were an integral part of being Akha. Previously, he noted, he had held a very negative view of Akha *Zanr*

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<sup>29</sup> The Shan are a largely Buddhist, Dai language speaking group who reside mainly in east Myanmar, north Thailand, and southwest China. Myanmar’s 1989 population census estimated the number of Shan at 2.8 million (Takatani 2007:182).

and yet he now began to wonder why in fact a large number of Akha were still carrying it. He was also strongly moved by what he described as the generally downtrodden condition and self-effacing practices of Traditionalist Akha residing in the vicinity of Kengtung. The latter's self-deprecating nature, he noted, stood out in stark contrast to their much prouder and outspoken Catholic and Baptist counterparts.

It was during this time, moreover, that Prosperous One first began to interact with certain members of a particular community of Akha from north Thailand that had since the early 1980s been working on behalf of Traditionalists and in opposition to an ever mounting number of Christian evangelical organizations based in Thailand. In particular, he began to interact with a number of Akha from the Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand (AFECT), a formal association based in the northern Thai city of Chiang Rai.<sup>30</sup>

As a result of these exchanges and his personal experiences in Kengtung, Prosperous One slowly became interested in working to support Traditionalists in Myanmar. He gradually came to the realization that first, Akha *Zanr* was a fundamental part of being Akha, and second, that all *Zanr*, including Akha *Zanr*, Catholicism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and so forth were “good” and that “each group of people, including Akha, had their own unique *Zanr* to carry.” At the same time, however, he came to realize that in contrast to these other *Zanr*, Akha *Zanr* had never been adequately “looked after and improved.”

As he began to follow through on this interest, however, he encountered strong resistance from the leadership of the powerful Akha Catholic community in Kengtung. Rumor further has it

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<sup>30</sup> AFECT was officially established in 1989 as an offshoot of the Mountain Peoples' Culture, Development and Education Foundation (MPCDE). MPCDE was officially founded in the same year by the now deceased Dutch former priest turned anthropologist Leo G.M. Alting von Geusau and several prominent Thai scholars and social activists. At the time, AFECT was led by Geusau's brother-in-law, A-ju Dzeu-baw (*Aqjur Dzoeqbaw*), an Akha male then in his mid twenties that has since played a variety of roles in the contemporary Neo-Traditionalist crypto-nationalist movement.

that he suffered a major blow to his status within the Akha Catholic community in Kengtung as a result of his earlier divorce and subsequent remarriage – both of which are major taboos within the Catholic Church in Myanmar and beyond. Prosperous One subsequently decided to resettle in the bustling Myanmar-Thai border town of Tachilek located some 163 kilometers to the south of Kengtung.

In Tachilek, Prosperous One began to capitalize on old alliances as well as forge new ones with a number of prominent local Akha and non-Akha elite holding positions in the military, civil service and business sector. Ironically, Prosperous One was able to enlist several prominent male Akha Baptist leaders who have been the most educated, literate as well as highly respected members and, indeed, moral authorities of his rather motley crew of Myanmar based disciples. As a result of these efforts, the formal organization MATA officially came into being in 2010. MATA's initial office was located in a light green colored building adjacent to Tachilek's official "Akha Market" alongside the main road running east from the official Maesai (Thailand) - Tachilek (Myanmar) border crossing.

The major financiers of MATA's efforts have been a number of prominent old and nouveau riche Akha with Traditionalist backgrounds who have variably managed to generate their wealth via alliances with the Myanmar and Thai authorities, control of cross-border trading networks as well as business ventures in rubber, oranges, mining and so forth in various parts of Shan State. Notably, Tachilek has long been a major node of passage for various kinds of licit and illicit goods moving back and forth between Thailand, Myanmar, China and several autonomous buffer states located along the Myanmar-China border. The latter states have included areas under the control of Kachin (KIA), Chinese (Kokang), Wa (Mongla), Lahu,

Palaung (Talang) and indeed Akha (*Nabaq*) officials operating (in)dependently of the Myanmar and Chinese authorities.

It is important to note, however, that the Akha Baptists working with MATA have only done so ambivalently. These elite have limited their participation to activities and events that they have deemed first, neutral with respect to religion, and second, supportive of the overall “development” of the Akha people. In general, they have focused their involvements in the areas of education, literacy and media development. They have accordingly sought to distance themselves from MATA’s more explicit efforts to bring Akha converts to the *Zanr* of “non-Akha Others,” especially Christianity, “back up to...” Akha *Zanr*.

The perceived rigid boundaries between the sacred and secular domains of social life, however, are often blurred and porous in practice. As a result, these Baptist leaders have occasionally participated in presumably secular or religiously neutral events that nevertheless had strong religio-political undertones advocating the Neo-Traditionalist position on Akhaness as fundamentally grounded in the carrying of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. One such event, MATA’s annual transregional celebration of the “New Year’s Ancestral Service” (*Gartanr Aqpoeq lawrdzoer-eq*), is highlighted in chapter ten. Last, in excluding themselves from MATA’s more overt return conversion efforts, these Baptist elite have indeed made very strong religio-political statements challenging the Neo-Traditionalist position on Akhaness.

#### **2.4 “I am Akha and I carry the Akha Religion!”: Decolonizing Religious Methodologies**

In their efforts to reproduce a modern version of their Ancestral Ways in the form of THE Akha Religion, these Akha elite have responded to their historical and contemporary experiences of religio-political colonialism and imperialism, whether on the part of early Euro-American or

more recently Akha and Asian Christian missionaries (see van der Veer 2014). Indeed, Prosperous One sees their primary objective as that of uniting and vitalizing the Akha World by, in his words, “disinfecting it of the viruses that have been introduced into it over the past 100 years” by multiple colonial and imperial actors ranging from “the Vatican to the U.S.A and Japan” in the form of Christianity in either its Catholic or Baptist denominations (Prosperous One, personal communication, July 24, 2010; see Figure 2.2 below). Prosperous One’s symbolic association here between the larger Akha World and a physical body along with his heightened concern to reassert the boundaries of and thereby purify the Akha body politic recall anthropologist Mary Douglas’ seminal work on purity and danger (Douglas 1966).



Figure 2.2: A PowerPoint slide from Prosperous One’s presentation to a group of roughly 60 Akha youth during the “First International Workshop for Young Akha Intellectuals on Akha *Zanr*” in July 2010. The slide shown here illustrates the different “viruses” that have infected the Akha World over the past 100 years. The large circle in the center represents the Akha World while the numerous other smaller circular, rectangular and triangular shaped symbols represent different “viruses” that have infected and divided the Akha World. Prosperous One used a combination of Akha and English scripts in his presentation. In terms of Akha language, he employed a particular version of the “Common Akha Orthography” (CAO) that has since roughly 2009 been associated with (Neo)Traditionalist Akha factions in the region as opposed to Christians. (Photo taken by the author on July 24, 2010.)

In July 2010 Prosperous One and MATA collaborated with several leading figures from the “Mekong Akha Friends Network” (*Naqkaq Aqkaq Dzoeqcawq Armavq*), hereafter referred to

as NADA, in organizing a five day workshop under the banner of the “First International Workshop for Young Akha Intellectuals on Akha Zanr” (*Khanqgm Aqkaq Siqzaq Ganryo Aqkaqzanr Dzaw-e Ardanqbae Pov*).<sup>31</sup> Much of MATA’s work on behalf of *Aqkaq Ghanr* beyond Myanmar has been facilitated by the co-founders of NADA, namely an international Akha couple consisting of Mi-ju Maw-lae-gu, a prominent female minority rights activist and community organizer from north Thailand, and Ayoe Nyaw-byae, a leading male scholar from southwest China.<sup>32</sup>

Some 60 Akha youth participated in the workshop, which took place on the grounds of a now defunct Akha development, and ironically, Baptist nongovernmental organization based in the northern Thai city of Chiang Rai. Notably, MATA financed the workshop, including travel costs for participants from beyond Thailand. My own invited participation in the workshop allowed for me to experience firsthand the intimate bonds of ethnic kinship or *communitas* that spontaneously arose among the participants at various moments during the gathering.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ayoe, the co-founder of NADA, has explained its purpose in the following manner: “The main vision and mission of NADA is to reaffirm Akha identity (by) revitalizing Akha cultural traditions” (Wang 2013:78).

<sup>32</sup> NADA is officially registered in Thailand under the Akha Network of the Chiang Mai based Association for Inter Mountain Peoples’ Education and Culture in Thailand (IMPECT). According to one of NADA’s co-founders, Ayoe (Jianhua Wang), NADA and MATA have since roughly 2008 worked together to, “develop and promote a common Akha writing system, (re)educate youth and Christian converts about their ancient and rich heritage as grounded in Akha Zanr, sponsor international gatherings, facilitate the creation of regional networks among leaders, and promote an overall sense of dignity and pride in being Akha (and carrying Akha Zanr)” (Wang, personal communication, June 11, 2010; In Morton 2013:43). The initial impetus for their collaborations, however, stemmed from the realization of their having a common underlying goal of decolonizing the larger Akha World by countering the longstanding efforts of initially, foreign, and more recently, Akha, Christian missionaries to not merely “convert Akha and thereby destroy Akha *Zanr* as well as promote numerous intra-societal divisions” but also mislead their subject-converts to reframe Akha *Zanr* as a “backwards and primitive form of demon worship” practiced by “lesser heathens” (cf. Nightingale, 1990; Wang, 2013, pp. 74-75; Wang, personal communication, communication, June 11, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> In brief, numerous participants later commented to me that there were certain times in the workshop when they “forgot about their distinct, national identities” and focused rather on their “shared, collective identity as Akha.” These moments, moreover, were variably marked by intense feelings of joy and sadness verging on catharsis. During these moments, many added, they felt themselves to be part of a larger, collective effort on behalf of “our Akha people” as a whole, regardless of the divisions of nation, clan, village and so forth. For many, these moments of *communitas* were experienced as moments of catharsis or emotional release, given their hitherto experiences of discrimination and denigration in the outside world on account of their very Akhaness. These participants noted, moreover, that they had come away from the gathering with a new sense of dignity and pride in being Akha for the

On the afternoon of the third day of the workshop, Prosperous One gave a lengthy address during which he referenced a series of PowerPoint slides vividly illustrating his views of how the Akha World had been “infected” or colonized by various foreign actors (see figure 2.2 above). He framed his address to the group in the following manner:

“In the past (our) Akha *Zanr* was very strong.  
All of our people adhered to it within their respective villages.  
We all followed the same *Zanr*.  
We were united.  
We were strong.

Beginning some 100 years ago, however, different groups of outsiders came and began working to convert our people to their *Zanr*.  
Over time they were successful and increasing numbers of Akha began converting to these foreign *Zanr*.  
As they did so our communities became divided and were no longer either united or strong.

These outsiders had planted viruses in our communities and they quickly began to spread from one community to another, making us weak and eating away at our *Zanr*.  
We were told that our *Zanr* was no good, that it was useless.  
We were taught to see our *Zanr* as backwards and uncivilized.

And yet we now know that these were all lies and tricks to deceive us into abandoning our own *Zanr* for those of foreign Others.  
We now know that our Akha *Zanr* is an ancient and rich *Zanr* given to us and us alone by the Supreme Creator and carried by our Ancestors for many generations.

And yet we have much work to do in order to rid ourselves of these viruses and divisions, to change our way of thinking so that we will be strong and resistant to these viruses, and reclaim our ancient and rich heritage, our Aqkaq *Zanr*.

At the same time, we need to look after and improve our *Zanr* so that it will be stronger than in the past,  
so that it can stand on its own against the *Zanr* of (more powerful) Others,  
Others who have long worked to look after and improve their *Zanr*...”  
(Prosperous One, ITAIA, July 24, 2010).

Prosperous One sees MATA’s primary goal as that of countering the long-standing efforts of various Christian missionaries to “brainwash their (Akha) converts into thinking of our

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first time in their lives. As a result, many added, they were determined to learn more about their Akha roots, to speak Akha more fluently, and work on behalf of their Akha people.

Ancestral Ways as a backwards form of devil worship, and then, like deadly viruses, infect our society with numerous conflicts and divisions” (Prosperous One, personal communication, July 24, 2010; Morton 2013:51). It is the current generation of indigenous Akha Christian missionaries, however, that Prosperous One and his disciples most strongly criticize for their “wrongdoings against their own people” and who should accordingly “know better” than their foreign, non-Akha predecessors (personal communication, July 24, 2010). MATA has framed the latter indigenous Akha missionaries as a particular kind of post-colonialist elite carrying out the imperialist objectives of their non-Akha foreign patrons.

Moreover, not unlike the framing of the indigenous Gikuyu religious movement in Kenya as described by Wamue (2001), these Akha elite reformers have further criticized Christian Akha elite more generally for the lavish lifestyles that they lead while preaching the gospel of poverty. In brief, in their decolonization efforts, Neo-Traditionalist elite have sought to counter the longstanding efforts of initially, foreign, and more recently, Akha, Christian missionaries to not merely “convert Akha and thereby destroy Akha *Zanr* as well as promote numerous intra-societal divisions” but also mislead their subject-converts to reframe Akha *Zanr* as a “backwards and primitive form of demon worship” practiced by “lesser heathens” (Wang, 2013, pp. 74-75; Wang, personal communication, communication, June 11, 2010).

Prosperous One is not alone in framing their efforts as a project of decolonization. Other influential figures in the movement hailing from China and Thailand in particular have referred to their project in a similar manner, albeit not merely in reference to either foreign or indigenous Akha Christian missionaries but also the national governments of their respective nation-states of residence.<sup>34</sup> It must be stressed, moreover, that Akha elites’ decolonizing discourses and methods

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<sup>34</sup> In contrast, Prosperous One has strongly stated on several occasions that he feels it is both “wrong (as well as unproductive) for us to criticize our national governments,” arguing rather that, “we should all show our utmost

variably echo, complement and challenge the either post-colonial or nationalist discourses and methods of certain nation-states in the region, including Myanmar, China, Thailand and to some extent Laos. This echoing or complementation is particularly the case in reference to China, Myanmar and Laos with respect to the position of foreign imperialists, especially Christian ones. Notably, Christian missionaries, inclusive of Akha from Thailand, have been officially banned from evangelizing in each of these countries since 1949 in the case of China, 1966 in Burma (Myanmar) (Sadan 2013:379), and 1975 in Laos.

I now turn to a discussion of the larger contextual frameworks in relation to which contemporary Akha identitarian politics have played out since roughly the late 1980s. In particular, I discuss the multiple and shifting positions of upland minorities in a cross-border and cross-area studies region that can perhaps least problematically be referred to as the Upper Mekong Region, the scope of which conveniently frames the Akha World in the making that is the focus of Neo-Traditionalist elites' crypto-nationalist project.

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respect towards them and do our best to work with them in pursuit of our goals" (personal communication, August 9, 2011).

## CHAPTER THREE

### Context: *Upland* Minorities in the Upper Mekong Region

#### 3.1 The Multiple and Shifting Ethnoscapes of Upper Mainland Southeast Asia and southwest China

Southeast Asia is a region with tremendous ethnic diversity characterized by continuous cross-cultural contact (Andaya 2006; Day 2002; Reid 1988, 1993). Historian Oliver Wolter adopted the Sanskrit term *mandala* to describe pre-modern Southeast Asia's multiple, shifting, and overlapping centers of power (1999). Wolter's initial conception of the *mandala*, however, portrayed upland ethnoscapes as literally and figuratively beyond the reach of lowland centers of power (1999). Political scientist-anthropologist James Scott has further expanded on this line of thought in his more recent portrayal of upland Mainland Southeast Asia and southwest China as an extensive and contiguous "non-state" space or "zone of refuge" framed in antithesis to lowland "states" and referred to as "Zomia" (2009).<sup>35</sup>

It was historian Willem van Schendel, however, who first referred to this region as well as neighboring parts of Central and South Asia as "Zomia" (2005[2002]:282-7). Van Schendel argued that while Zomia shares certain linguistic, religious, cultural, historical, political, and ecological traits that distinguish it from each of the four area studies units into which it has been rather arbitrarily divided, a lack of theoretical, institutional, and political support prevents it from obtaining recognition as a legitimate "area" in of itself (2005 [2002]:282-7). Thus contrary to Scott's (2009) efforts to frame "Zomia" as yet another bounded area studies region in of itself, Van Schendel's purpose was rather to challenge the very geographical and intellectual boundaries posed by area studies (2005[2002]).

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<sup>35</sup> Other scholars have variably referred to this region as the "Montane Zone of Mainland Southeast Asia" (Joo-Jock 1984) or the "Montagnard Domain in the Mainland South-East Asian Massif" (McKinnon and Michaud 2000). Joo-Jock (1984:1) as well as McKinnon and Michaud (2000:5), however, include the following additional areas within their conceptual reframing of the region: east Burma, central Vietnam, and east Cambodia.

Scott has further reframed Van Schendel's conception of "Zomia" on the premise that early state formations encountered major obstacles to their expansion in the form of reluctant subjects. Scott cleverly argued that the upland space of "Zomia" has, up until roughly the 1950s, served as a "zone of refuge" for communities that, far from being left behind the march of "progress" and "civilization," intentionally sought to avoid enlistment in the restrictive and overburdensome "civilizing" projects of early lowland states by "voting with their feet" (Scott 1998, 2000, 2008a, 2008b, 2009).<sup>36</sup> Scott has further argued that:

"Moving away, especially from Han expansion, into (Zomia), hill people are best conceived of as a 'state-effect.' Their social structure, agricultural practices, and cultural values make most sense in this light" (2008a).

Van Schendel, moreover, in spite of his divergent intentions for coining the term "Zomia," has argued more for continuity rather than discontinuity between uplanders' early practices of resisting "civilization" as framed from the perspective of lowland states and their more recent, post-1950s patterns of armed resistance towards nation state building projects in the region (2005 [2002]:285).<sup>37</sup> Van Schendel argues that in reference to the latter, post-1950s nation building projects:

"...upland peoples were often excluded from discourses of citizenship, and cast in the roles of non-nationals, alien elements, or poachers of the state's forestry resources who could be redeemed only by assimilating to the lowland 'mainstream.' All over Zomia, states implemented policies of population relocation, prevention of hill agriculture, land registration, logging, wildlife protection, dam building, watershed protection, and education in national languages that led to new forms of competition and tension. Such

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<sup>36</sup> On a side note, Scott's underlying critique of the civilizing discourse of modern nation states as well as his emphasis on state avoidance as a voluntary, political choice has resonated well with some Indigenous peoples and related advocacy groups in Asia – including one of my main Akha collaborators in the field, Ayoe Nyaw-byae (Jianhua Wang). An earlier and abridged version of Scott's argument was included in a 2008 joint publication of the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) based in Copenhagen, Denmark and the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact Foundation (IAPP) based in Chiangmai, Thailand entitled, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia: A Resource Book* (Erni 2008). In that volume, Scott's chapter was entitled, "Hill and Valley in Southeast Asia...or Why the State is the Enemy of People who Move Around ...or...Why Civilizations Can't Climb Hills" (2008b).

<sup>37</sup> In making this argument, however, Van Schendel draws on his extensive experience in a particularly volatile part of contemporary "Zomia," namely the borderlands of northeast India, Bangladesh, and Burma.

forms of ‘development’ did not act as an anti-politics machine. On the contrary, Zomia became characterized by a high incidence of regionalist and separatist movements, ‘non-state spaces,’ and discursive battles around concepts such as ‘tribe’ and ‘indigenous people’ ” (2005[2002]:285).

Certain scholars, however, have long challenged the paradigm underlying Scott’s representation of “Zomia” as a “zone of refuge.” For example, Andrew Walker’s analysis of nineteenth century trade patterns in the Upper Mekong Region further challenged the “myth of the subsistence economy” as initially elaborated on by Katherine Bowie (1988, 1992) in stressing the importance of “local and regional trade in consolidating lowland power, generating intra-state and inter-state conflict and maintaining international alliances” (Walker 1999:62).<sup>38</sup> Most significantly, Walker argued that these trading routes crisscrossed much of the mountainous region between north Thailand and southwest China, variably entangling uplanders in not only the regional caravan trade but also tributary relations with various lowland polities (1999:33,38).

Anthropologist Hjørleifur Jonsson (1998, 2002, 2010, 2012, 2014) has similarly sought to debunk the myth of these upland ethnoscapas as being “without history” (Wolf 1982). Jonsson has stressed, rather, that upland communities in the region have long reshaped their identities in response to shifting relations with various lowland centers of power prior to, during, and after the modern colonial and nationalist periods. Historian Victor Lieberman has similarly critiqued Scott’s notion of “Zomia” by bringing attention to the relations that “Zomians” have long maintained with external polities (2010). In this vein, the rugged, mountainous terrain spanning the Sino-Southeast Asian borderlands, extending from “the Central Highlands of Vietnam through most of Laos, southwest China, northern Thailand, northern Burma, and into

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<sup>38</sup> Walker thereby challenged the paradigm that lowland polities at the time were more concerned with the control of manpower than territory. An overemphasis on manpower in of itself, Walker argued, “may obscure the extent to which manpower (in the form of armies) was required to maintain control of trade routes” (Walker 1999:62-3).

northeastern India,” has been reconceived rather as a “contact zone” (Giersch 2006; Pratt 1991), contrary to popular representations of this region as a “cutoff zone” (Scott 2009).

Multi-ethnic caravan traders and migrants have long facilitated the exchange of commodities and information among the highland dwelling communities in this region and the centers of various lowland polities such as Chiangmai, Kengtung, Luang Prabang and Beijing (Chang 2009; Forbes 1987; Hill 1998; Toyota 2000).<sup>39</sup> Historian Anthony Reid has noted, moreover, the economic significance of upland-hinterland forest products towards the rise of lowland coastal cities in early modern Southeast Asia (1988, 1993). Upland communities in this region have long been intertwined with lowland polities either directly or indirectly via first, their involvement in the regional caravan trade as producers, traders, and caretakers of trading routes, (Giersch 2006:164-6; Walker 1999:33,38), second, tributary political alliances (Jonsson 1998:185; 2002), third, their roles, in the case of some autochthonous groups, in elaborate lowland state-court rituals (Evans 1998:145-6; Kraisi 1967; Swearer et al. 2004; Stuart-Fox 1993:114; Walker 1999:38), and, last, their involvement, particularly in southwest China, in local rebellions against Chinese Han expansion (Giersch 2006:49-50,53-4).

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<sup>39</sup> Toyota has noted the long-standing involvement of certain elite Akha business entrepreneurs from various parts of the region in the historical caravan trade that has crisscrossed much of the Upper Mekong Region for centuries if not longer (2000). These elite, she argued, have over time developed an affinity with certain non-Akha groups such as Yunnanese Chinese and Dai-Lue via historical patterns of intermarriage and adoption (2000). The latter argument of an affinity between Akha and Dai-Lue, however, contradicts the claims by numerous other scholars that Akha, more generally speaking, have long had contentious relations with and views towards lowland Tai groups in the region, particularly Dai-Lue (Cohen 2000; Stewart-Cox 1984; Geusau 2000a; Hansen 1999). Finally, Toyota has suggested that these historical patterns of trade and interethnic relations have their parallels in more contemporary patterns that have re-emerged in the post-Cold War era (2000). The latter argument has been made by other scholars focusing on the Dai-Lue, another transregional minority variably positioned throughout the Upper Mekong Region (Davis 2003; Wasan 2013).

### **3.2 The Modern Nationalist Period: Reframing the borders of belonging in ethnic fashion**

During the relatively recent period of modern nation states the regulation of territorial boundaries has made movement across national borders throughout the world increasingly difficult (Torpey 2000:162; Zolberg 1978:271). As in other parts of the world, the discourses of modern nationalism in the Upper Mekong Region have reframed unofficial migration and trade across borders as illegal migration and smuggling (Abraham and Van Schendel 2005:4; Horstmann and Wadley 2006:8; Tapp 1990:149-50, 2000). The rise of various colonial and nationalist projects has led to historical shifts in state strategies for managing ethnicity. Earlier tributary and in some cases ritualistic relations between highland groups and various lowland states in the region were undermined by various internal and foreign colonial projects and the subsequent rise of nation states (Evans 1998; Jonsson 2002; Thongchai 1994). As ethnicity became a more salient category in the minds of state administrators, state policies variously sought to integrate, assimilate, or exclude communities reframed as not only ethnic but also minorities.

In the Upper Mekong Region, national governments first became directly concerned with highland groups residing within and potentially transgressing their borders during the 1950s due to shifting geopolitics, the rise of the Cold War, and international pressure against opium production. State policies began to focus more intensively on surveying and policing borders as well as ensuring the loyalty of minority groups in border areas. Writing in the 1960s, U.S. anthropologist Peter Kunstadter notes:

“The tribes have become important because it is they who have intimate knowledge of the hill and border regions which have become strategically important and also because their fellow tribesmen are distributed on both sides of the borders” (1967:29).

Various scholars, however, have argued that “frontier” or “border” dwelling uplanders have long been of strategic importance to various pre-colonial lowland polities and modern nation states in the region (Renard 1987; McKinnon and Michaud 2000:11; Sturgeon 2005).<sup>40</sup> State concerns with first national security and more recently economic development have subsequently entailed the underdevelopment and marginalization of various highland minority communities in the region to peripheral border areas (Tapp 1990:162,167).

As a result of these state-making technologies the official boundaries of five nation-states were gradually, albeit unevenly, laid across the mountainous landscapes of the Upper Mekong Region, variably dividing upland communities into distinct nation-states within which they subsequently became ethnic minorities. It has been noted, moreover, that these boundaries, which tended to reify, cartographically at least, earlier buffer or frontier zones (established during the colonial period by British, French, Han Chinese, and Siamese alike), were arbitrarily drawn in relation to local communities’ historical, cultural, and linguistic affinities or lack thereof (see Wijeyewardene 1990, 1993). In spite of their initial arbitrariness, however, these boundaries have since become a reality that variably impacts the contemporary lives of uplanders throughout the region (see Tapp 1990:149).

### **3.3 Multiple and Shifting State Policies: Of assimilation, integration and exclusion**

From roughly the 1950s onward, uplanders throughout the Upper Mekong Region have been variably “drawn inwards toward the center of culture and power” within different states

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<sup>40</sup> Geographer Janet Sturgeon has described at length how two Akha “border chiefs” residing along the Thai-Burma and China-Burma borders respectively during the 1950s and 1960s were empowered by Chinese and Thai state officials to maintain order over their respective areas of control (2005:10, 25,101). Sturgeon has argued, moreover, that these local “border chiefs” both “manipulated the border-as-line with relations across it to control resource access and collaborated with state agents to include other villagers more securely in the realm of border-as-margin of the nation-state” (2005:10).

through ties of nationalism and citizenship (Wilson and Donnan 1998:3). The rise of modern nation states and border regimes constrained earlier connections maintained by upland communities via regional trade, tributary, migration, and kinship ties (Toyota 2000). The rise of the Cold War and imposition of the “Bamboo Curtain” between China and Southeast Asia made cross-border contact especially difficult (Geusau 2000b:1). As noted earlier, it was during this period that uplanders’ cross-border positioning, contacts and knowledge first made them of direct strategic interest to various governments in and beyond the region (see Kunstadter 1967:29).

Upland minorities throughout the region have subsequently been assimilated to varying degrees into five distinct nation-states, each with different minority policies. In general, the post-colonial governments of Myanmar (Burma) and Laos implemented a policy of “divide and conquer” (Gravers 2007a:vii,4-5; Evans 2003:214,217). In Myanmar, the military’s official recognition of 135 National Races in 1988 was geared towards undermining the power of the earlier British colonial construct of seven non-Burman ethnic categories comprising more than one-third of the overall population (Gravers 2007a:vii,4-5). In general, the Myanmar military’s minority and citizenship policies have been overtly assimilationist and restrictive towards highland and other minorities, many of whom lack full citizenship status (Smith 1994:18; Hinshelwood 2013).

In Laos, Grant Evans has argued that the government’s official recognition of 47 Ethnic Groups in 1988 was similarly oriented towards disaggregating an earlier tri-partite, ethnospatial system of ethnic categorization and making the country’s rather large minority population, representing more than one-third of the total population, appear less significant relative to the dominant ethnic Lao (2003:214,217). In contrast to Myanmar, however, the Lao government has

generally extended full citizenship status to minorities who have in turn been able to enjoy fairly good political representation relative to other parts of the region (Evans 2003:213; Kampe 1997:21). In fact, Asang Laoly, an Akha man originally from Phongsaly in northwest Laos, is currently a politburo member of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the Deputy Prime Minister. In addition, a Hmong woman, Pany Yathotou, is a politburo member and chair of the National Assembly.

The Hmong, however, who, after the Khmu, represent one of the largest minority groups relative to the ethnic Lao, tend to be first, the targets of ethnic discrimination by many ethnic Lao, second, targeted more often than other groups for resettlement projects, and, last, viewed by many members of the Lao elite "as potential or actual enemies of the state" (Ovesen 2004:231-237). In recent years, however, other minority groups such as the Akha have similarly borne their share of hardships from not only state enforced resettlement programs from the uplands to lowlands but also heightened efforts to eliminate shifting cultivation and opium production (Cohen and Lyttleton 2008). The military alliances of some Hmong factions with the Royal Lao Government and the United States against the Pathet Lao during the Secret War in Laos (1961-1975) as well as the continued presence of a small number of Hmong "insurgents" up until the present day have been the primary factors contributing to the Lao government's often heavy handed policies towards Hmong in general (Fuller 2007:A1; Ovesen 2004:235-236).

In contrast to the situation in Myanmar and Laos, the Chinese and Vietnamese governments developed a general policy of "unify and conquer" (Kampe 1997:24; Keyes 2002:1183; Mackerras 2003a:21; Yukti 2007). During the 1950s Han Chinese scholars, under the direction of the new Communist led government, consolidated more than 400 potential groups into an official 56 *minzu* or "ethnonationalities," inclusive of the Han majority (Keyes

2002:1183; Mullaney 2012[2011]:32-39). As a result of this massive and to some extent ongoing ethnic categorization project, groups identifying themselves as Akha and Hmong were officially (mis)recognized as members of the larger Hani” and Miao ethnonationalities respectively. In Vietnam, which has perhaps the largest and most diverse population of ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia (Kampe 1997:24), as of 1979 the government had officially acknowledged the existence of 54 Ethnic Groups, including Ha Nhi, the official group under which Akha were subsumed.<sup>41</sup>

With the exception of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Communist China has granted a limited degree of regional autonomy to the elite members of its official minority groups as well as endorsed their official, and, in many cases, state (re)constructed languages, cultures and histories (see Kaup 2000; Mackerras 2003a:21). For example, political scientist Katherine Kaup has argued in reference to the Zhuang in China that the Communist Party played a hegemonic role in their initial construction as a unified nationality with a common history, language, culture and limited degree of regional autonomy so as to control and integrate what had hitherto been a diverse group of peoples identifying either as Han or any one of “more than twenty local ethnic or tribal groups” residing in the southwestern border provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan (Kaup 2000:4).<sup>42</sup>

In general, highland minorities in China and Vietnam have had little or no problem gaining full citizenship status and political representation at nearly all levels of government (Rambo 2003:116,131; Mackerras 2003a:23; Sturgeon 2005:43,50). McKinnon, moreover, has noted a tendency for minorities in China and Vietnam to identify as members of one of the state-endorsed national minorities in order to access special privileges (1997a:286). Indeed, in China,

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<sup>41</sup> For a very basic introductory text on Ha Nhi in Vietnam see Vu (2010).

<sup>42</sup> The Zhuang are by far the largest *minzu* or “ethnonationality” behind the majority Han, numbering nearly 16 million as of 1990 (Kaup 2000:91).

at least, members of the majority Han have been known to seek official identification as national minorities to take advantage of these privileges, which have included exemption from the one child only policy, a certain quota of positions in the local and regional civil service as well as extra credit on university entrance exams.

In practice, however, state policies towards upland minorities in China, Laos, and Vietnam have resulted in their “marginalization through inclusion” or assimilation to a national community wherein they are viewed as primitives requiring the civilizing influences of the political majority (Evans 2003:214-15; Kaup 2000; Mackerras 2003a:21; Rambo 2003; Sturgeon 2005:51). McCaskill et al. further note that, “the tight de facto control (despite official policies and pronouncements otherwise) maintained over ethnic minorities in these countries leaves little room for the articulation of demands for ethnic rights, self-government, or autonomy” (2008:21).

In contrast, state policies towards upland minorities in Myanmar and Thailand have resulted in their marginalization through exclusion as second class citizens and illegal migrants (Chayan 2005; Gravers 2007a:vii,4-5; Keyes 2002:1183; Sturgeon 2005:51; Toyota 2007). Moreover, the Thai government has been rather unique in the region for downplaying ethno-religious diversity in its portrayal and indeed construction of a homogenous Thai-Buddhist nation (Thongchai 1994; Keyes 2002:1176). While the Burmese military and, more recently, civilian government have been preoccupied with undermining the autonomy of numerous border dwelling minority groups fighting for either full independence or self-determination within a federated system, the Thai government has until the early 2000s been concerned with supporting the “economic and social development” of highland minorities (Kampe 1997:15-17,23-4; Khachatphai 1972:6).

Compared to other highland minorities in the region, those in Thailand, especially the Hmong, have until recently received the most “development assistance from the government, international donors and development agencies, international and local NGOs, and the private sector” (Kampe 1997:23-4; Tapp 1990:151).<sup>43</sup> Yet, in spite of, or perhaps because of, this aid, which has often been administered in a strongly top-down and paternalistic or maternalistic fashion, highland minorities in Thailand have had very little political representation beyond the local levels of villages (Kampe 1997:23-24), and, more recently, sub-districts. In the following section I elaborate on the rather unique positions of highland minorities in Thailand relative to other parts of the region. Their unique positioning in Thailand is not merely attributable to their comprising less than one percent of the total population, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, the peculiarities of Thailand’s nation-building efforts as a post-crypto-colonial state (Herzfeld 2002:900; Harrison and Jackson 2010).

### **3.4 Thailand: From Assimilation to Selective Integration**

The Thai government has long downplayed ethno-religious diversity in its portrayal of a homogenous nation (Thongchai 1994; Keyes 2002:1176).<sup>44</sup> Ethnic categorization as a “rhetoric of control” emerged in Thailand during the 1950s when highland minorities, or “Hill tribes,” were first seen as “a problem” (Patya 1963; Pinkaew 2003:161,163). The notion of highlanders as a problem has been expressed in four historical discourses with complex roots that portray them as first, threats to national security by virtue of being borderlanders, second, Communists

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<sup>43</sup> This situation began to shift, however, following the end of the Cold War as various foreign governments and international organizations began to reallocate their funds towards development projects in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and, more recently, Myanmar, as each of these governments has shown signs of opening their borders to the global capitalist market.

<sup>44</sup> Katherine Bowie and others have shown that in actuality the forced resettlement of war captives in nineteenth century Lanna resulted in considerable ethnic diversity (1988, 1996; Ratanaporn 1989). These findings challenge nationalist (re)constructions of Thailand’s homogenous ethno-religious past.

and thus enemies of the nation, third, destroyers of forests and watersheds, and, last, producers of illegal narcotics (Patya 1963:14; Marks 1973; Pinkaew 1998; Gillogly 2004:117). During the Cold War government policies towards “Hill tribes” varied from integrationist to assimilationist (Khachatiphai 1972:7). More recently, however, government policies have become increasingly selective and exclusionary as a result of first, a post-1988 escalation in irregular migration from Burma to Thailand, second, the 1997 Asian economic crisis and current global financial crisis, and, last, a tendency for the state to view its “Hill tribe” residents and citizens as “illegal migrants” (Chayan 2005; Toyota 2007).

Highland minorities in contemporary Thailand possess a variety of legal statuses ranging from undocumented migrants to authorized migrant laborers, permanent residents, and citizens (Toyota 2005; Pitch 2007; Mukdawan 2009, 2013). The complexity of this situation has created significant challenges, first and foremost, for highlanders, but also for the Thai government. In recent years, moreover, the government has become increasingly reluctant to extend citizenship status to individuals belonging to any one of the officially recognized “Hill tribes.”<sup>45</sup>

The state’s reluctance to grant highlanders full citizenship status coupled with an increasing concern for governing and regulating them has led to the development of three types of “partial border citizenship” statuses for highlanders in 1990, 1999 and 2007 (Pitch 2007:177-

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<sup>45</sup> It was in 1959 when the term “Hill tribes” first entered official state discourse in Thailand with the creation of the Hilltribe Welfare Committee under the Ministry of the Interior (Kwanchewan 2006:362). At the time nine upland minority groups were designated as “Hill tribes” (Akha, Hmong, H’Tin, Iu-Mien, Karen, Khamu, Lahu, Lisu, and Lua) (Pinkaew 1998:103; Kwanchewan 2006:376). However, when the Tribal Research Institute (TRI) was officially established in 1964 its initial research mandate focused on what were at the time considered the “six main tribal groups” including the Akha, Hmong, Iu-Mien, Karen, Lahu and Lisu (Tannenbaum 2001:xvi). With the exception of the Karen these groups were at the time considered the main opium producing “Hill tribes.” In 1967 it was estimated that this circumscribed population of “Hill tribes” consisted of some 220,000 people (Kunstader 1967:297-398; Kwanchewan 2006:370). More recently, this list has expanded to include four additional groups (Kachin, Dara’ang [Palaung], Mlabri [Tong Luang] and Shan [Tai-Yai]), albeit under the slightly reworked designation of “Ethnic Hill tribes” (*klum chattiphan chao khao*) (Ethnic Affairs Institute 2011). As of 2004 this re-circumscribed category of “Ethnic Hill tribes” was estimated to include some 1,034,351 people (Ethnic Affairs Institute 2011, 2013:4-6).

179; Toyota 2005:122-123; Mukdawan 2009:116).<sup>46</sup> There have been several cases in which the state revoked the citizenship status of entire villages on suspicions of fraud in individual citizenship applications (Onnucha 2002). A 2008 survey by UNESCO and the Thai government found that at least thirty-eight percent of the then current “Hill tribe” population of roughly one million people lacked Thai citizenship (Calderbank 2008).

Thai scholars Kwanchewan Buadaeng and Panadda Boonyasaranai have argued that the Thai state’s policies towards and classifications of “Hill tribes” beginning in the 1950s, coupled with the spread of literacy, modern forms of telecommunication, and the agency of various “Hill tribe” leaders and organizations have all been instrumental in promoting an awareness among “Hill tribes” that they “are members of a distinct ethnic group with a shared identity” whose boundaries extend beyond the level of lineage or clan and local village (Keyes 1995:137; in Kwanchewan and Panadda 2008:61-2). Their argument, however, ignores a growing recognition by various scholars that the larger region has been characterized by ethnolinguistic diversity, competing polities, and struggles over natural and cultural resources long before the contemporary periods of colonialism, nationalism and globalization (Giersch 2006; Gillogly 2006:47-58; Jonsson 1998:185, 2002).

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<sup>46</sup> Both of these legal statuses pose serious constraints on their holders mobility outside the districts in which they are officially registered as well as ability to access rights guaranteed to Thai citizens – including but not limited to the universal health care system (see Harris 2013), land tenure, social welfare and educational opportunities beyond primary school. Between 1990 and 1991 the Thai government issued a sky-blue colored “Highlanders Card” to highland minorities living in upland areas (Pitch 2007:177-178; Toyota 2005:122). The uplands were officially defined as areas where “Hill tribes” resided with more than thirty-five percent slope or at or above 500 meters above sea level in 20 provinces (Pitch 2007:177). Following an additional survey between 1998-2000 a green colored card with a red rim called the “Community of Highlanders Card” was issued to highlanders that had not yet been issued any other status (Pitch 2007:179; Toyota 2005:123). In 2007, however, this multi-color coded scheme of “hill tribe” identification cards was officially replaced with one pink colored card to be issued to all “ ‘non-Thai’ ethnic minorities (excluding refugees and alien migrant laborers)” (Mukdawan 2009:116).

### **3.5 Euro-American Academic Framings of Upland Minorities in the Upper Mekong Region**

Ethnographic literature in English focusing on highland minorities in the Upper Mekong Region has until recently been dominated by scholarship on various groups situated in north Thailand. During the height of the Vietnam War era in the 1960s when attention first focused on highland border areas as sites of potential communist insurgency, anthropologists concentrated on simply understanding the economic and religious belief systems of particular highland villages (see Kunstadter 1965). Village-level studies persisted throughout the 1970s and 1980s with an expanded interest in how highland communities were being impacted by international opium-eradication development projects and government assimilation policies (see McKinnon and Vienne 1989). Much of the existing literature focusing on Akha communities has taken the form of village-level studies (Kammerer 1986; Lewis 1969a; Tooker 1988).

More recent work, however, has begun to address the historical and contemporary ties between highland minorities variably positioned throughout the larger region (Joo-Jock 1984; McCaskill et al. 2008; McKinnon and Michaud 2000; Prasit et al. 2008; Wijeyewardene 1990). This scholarly trend towards regionalism has paralleled and indeed been made possible by the post-1980s (re)opening of Southeast Asia's borders with China, Laos, and Vietnam (Evans et al. 2000:2). In the latter context, several scholars working with Akha began to explore the historical and contemporary nature of cross-border practices and identity politics among Akha in the region (Geusau 2000a; Panadda 2004; Sturgeon 2005; Toyota 1999, 2000). In the case of other highland minorities, particularly the Hmong/Miao and (Iu)Mien/Yao, scholarly pursuits have shifted from earlier village-level studies based largely in northern Thailand (see Geddes 1976; Miles 1974) towards a transnational focus on the Hmong/Miao and (Iu)Mien/Yao diasporas in

the West and Asia respectively (see MacDonald 1997; Michaud 2000; Schein 2004; Tapp et al. 2004; Vang 2008).

### **3.6 The Scaling-up of Highland Minority Identities in and Beyond the Region?**

John McKinnon and Jean Michaud have noted a recent trend among some upland minorities in the region, particularly the (Iu)Mien/Yao, Hmong/Miao, and Akha/Hani, to organize cross-border intra-ethnic conferences. For example, since 1993 a series of tri-yearly International Conferences on Hani-Akha Culture have been held largely in various parts of Yunnan Province in southwest China as discussed further in chapter nine. McKinnon and Michaud have argued, however, that the participants in these conferences are often met with “stronger divergent than unifying interests” (McKinnon and Michaud 2000:6-7). McKinnon has further argued that state interventions in the region have “deeply compromised” the basis on which ethnic solidarity might be constructed and that “proximity and common interest” rather than ethnicity are more likely “to serve as a rationale for group formation” (1997b:300).<sup>47</sup>

In reference to the Hmong, Michaud and Christian Culas have argued that as a stateless, kinship based society they “cannot readily organize into a political body based on either territorial claims or supra-clan ties” (2000:115-116). Evidence from the Hmong experience in Southeast Asia during the first half of the twentieth century and the contemporary U.S., however, shows that certain Hmong have in fact organized on supra-clan levels and to some extent

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<sup>47</sup> On a side note, an inter-ethnic coalition of “Indigenous peoples” is currently emerging in Thailand on the basis of both “proximity and common interest” as well as a sense of possessing a unique identity that differs from that of the majority ethnic Thai. Certain Akha and Hmong in Thailand are participating in this sub-national-level movement, which has further links to regional and global Indigenous peoples’ movements in Asia and beyond. The author is currently working with geographer Ian Baird on an article analyzing the historical roots and ongoing trajectory of this movement as it has been contextualized in Thailand.

expressed aspirations for a territorialized state of their own (Lee 2005; Chan 1996; Baird 2015:61-62).<sup>48</sup>

Michaud and Culas have further suggested that “support for a collective self-consciousness and, perhaps, some sort of political action,” may come from members of the western Hmong diaspora (2000:116). In this regard, Nicholas Tapp has argued that the flow of remittances and projections of Hmongness from the western diaspora are reshaping local economies and conceptions of Hmongness in Thailand and Laos (N.d.[2001]). Prasit Leepreecha has further argued that a unified Hmong orthography created by foreign missionaries in 1953 and increasingly used by diasporic Hmong in various media forms at present has promoted the growth of an “imagined” Hmong transnational community (2008:99, 111).<sup>49</sup>

Louisa Schein, moreover, has described the post-1990s “identity exchanges” that have developed between Hmong/Miao in the USA and China via the transnational flow of people, ideas, videos, and clothing (2004). Schein sees Chinese Miao involvement with transnationally mobile Hmong Americans seeking homeland connections as a search for resources that they have been increasingly denied in post-Maoist China due to declining state intervention on behalf of minorities (2004:286, 293). In the case of the Mien, Jeffery MacDonald has argued that their western diasporic community has played a key role in facilitating the growth of Mien transnationalism via their enhanced political-economic status and access to technology

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<sup>48</sup> Historian Mai Na M. Lee has documented the central roles of two kinds of supra-clan Hmong leaders – namely political brokers who collaborated with various colonial and indigenous authorities and messianic leaders – in Indochina’s political conflicts between 1893-1955 (2005:i). In addition, Sucheng Chan has noted that Hmong clan leaders in the contemporary U.S. have lost the power they once wielded in Laos and been replaced to some extent by younger, educated, English-speaking male leaders able to act as cultural brokers with the larger U.S. society (1994:52-53). More recently, geographer Ian Baird has brought attention to a small, supra-clan Hmong organization based in Minneapolis, Minnesota – the “World Hmong Congress” – that has as its primary objectives the reunification of the global Hmong community and establishment of a territorial Hmong state, “Hmong Land,” located in a region that is currently part of far northern Laos (2015:61-62).

<sup>49</sup> Prasit has been careful to stress, moreover, that the diasporic Hmong community he describes has no territorial ambitions whatsoever and is rather in the process of constructing a deterritorialized and imagined transnational community.

(1997:245).<sup>50</sup> Douglas Miles, moreover, has noted the significant role of Chinese Yao intellectuals-cadres in facilitating the development of an international Yao association based on a myth of origin and homeland centered in southwest China (Wijeyewardene 1993).

In contrast, there has not been and neither currently is any significant western Akha diaspora from which Akha in Asia may draw greater political and economic capital. There is an Asian diaspora, however, and building on Schein, it is possible to view the post-1990s expanding array of identity exchanges occurring between Akha within and beyond China as a result of a growing realization on the part of Akha beyond China as to the relatively better-off position of Akha in China economically and politically. Elder Brother A-heu (*Ar dov heeq*), a leading Akha representative from Thailand with a Protestant-Baptist background, once informed me:

“China wants its national minorities to be proud of their cultures,  
and the government and university scholars there are doing a lot in this regard.  
In contrast,  
Akha in Thailand are in a very poor position along with the Lisu and Lahu –  
although the Akha seem to be in the poorest position.  
Many Akha here (in Thailand) still have not obtained full citizenship status and are  
unable to access basic government services”  
(personal communication, January 18, 2010).

A-heu’s views of China as expressed above, however, must be understood in light of his disenchantment with the position of Akha in Thailand, causing him to perhaps idealize the Chinese model without realizing its downsides.

Not unlike the case of Hmong/Miao, however, Euro-American scholars working with Akha have unanimously argued that they have at all times and everywhere been a perennial minority lacking any sense of belonging or political identity beyond the village level (Kammerer

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<sup>50</sup> MacDonald elaborates his argument in the following manner: “It is highly unlikely that contact with Chinese Yao and the development of a transnational Mien social space could have occurred without the diaspora of the Laotian Iu-Mien to the West. Only by coming to the West could the Iu-Mien acquire the economic power and technology to make this contact possible. To my knowledge the Iu-Mien are the first Southeast Asian refugee group to make official contacts and visits to their ancestral groups in China (beginning in 1984). The Hmong, who have similar cultural and historical ties to China, did not make such contacts until the mid-1990s. Past contacts were mainly through informal visits by individuals” (1997:245-276).

1989:277; Tooker 1988:12, 2012:32; Geusau 2000a:143). In particular, Tooker has argued that as a result of a difficult terrain, their marginalization, and the demands of shifting cultivation:

“(T)he tribal identity of the Akha, like that of other hill minorities, is not linked to a unified, continuous territory larger than that produced at the village level” (1996c:326).

Yet, in spite of these claims of Akhaness as being contained within the spatial imaginary of isolated upland villages, Geusau has argued that:

“The Akha genealogical and kinship system and related ancestor service is the means for the Akha (and Hani) to recognize their roots, their history, and the manner of their survival. It is also a symbol of their unity, their ‘cultural citizenship’ in a situation of diaspora” (Li Xi Xian 1995; in Geusau 2000a:146,150).

Panadda has similarly argued that in spite of political, economic, and linguistic differences between Akha in the region, the Akha genealogical system has served as a focal point in the efforts of certain Akha to (re)construct a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging throughout the region (2004:189-190). Indeed, Neo-Traditionalist Akha elite and non-elite alike from various parts of the region have since roughly the early 2000s looked to their patronymic linkage system and related Ancestral services as the fundamental core of Akhaness amidst the vicissitudes of modernity (see Morton 2013:50).

In particular, the Neo-Traditionalist elite whose movement figures most prominently in this dissertation have sought to promote the transregional scaling-up of Akhaness by appealing first and foremost to the common Ancestral genealogy presumably shared by all Akha (and Hani) in the region. Akha (and Hani) trace their Ancestral roots back, in some cases over 60 known generations, to a common apical Ancestor, “Sm-mi-o” (*Smr Mir Or*). These elite have further sought to not only vitalize and rework these ancient ties of kinship but also document them in the written word as they have hitherto been confined to the domain of orality.

Since roughly the mid 1990s certain Akha and to some extent non-Akha figures based largely in north Thailand and southwest China have been collecting and in turn collating the Ancestral genealogies of Akha from various parts of the region into a master Ancestral genealogy of all Akha. These elite have employed several different versions of Akha orthographies in their documentation efforts. In addition, since at least the early 2000s a number of Hani scholars from Honghe in Yunnan, China have worked on a parallel documentation project, initially aimed at Hani in Honghe (Yang 2005) and more recently expanded to include Hani and Akha more generally both within and beyond China (Yang and Yu 2010).

These documentary efforts have served the further purposes of first, ensuring that Ancestral genealogies are not forgotten and, second, rendering elites' crypto-nationalist vision of a larger Akha World legible. In addition, a Neo-Traditionalist Akha scholar from southwest China, Ayoe Nyaw-byae (*Aryoeq Nyawrbyeivq* or Jianhua Wang), once referred to his Ancestral genealogy as an "Akha Passport" affording him both "smooth travel" as well as "warm hospitality" wherever and whenever he travels in the distinctly Akha World of the Upper Mekong Region.<sup>51</sup> Thus in their crypto-nationalist efforts, Ayoe and other Neo-Traditionalist elite have looked to their Ancestral genealogies as a powerful innate marker of membership within the larger Akha World through space and time.

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<sup>51</sup> Ayoe has explained Akha (and Hani) Ancestral genealogies more generally in the following manner: "It is generally agreed that these genealogies are composed of four parts: mythical genealogy (*naevq-tseevq*), national genealogy (*Dzoeq-tseevq-tavq*), chiefdom genealogy (*dzoeq-tseevq*), and patri-lineal genealogy (*da-tseevq*), which correspond to (the four major periods of Akha and Hani history)... The mythical genealogy is believed to consist of the names of heroes/heroines of tribes or great chiefs of chiefdoms of the Hani-Akha ancestors in the North Country *Nya-mir*... The national genealogy is composed of fourteen generations shared by all Hani-Akha groups possessing genealogies with some dialect variations. It is commonly agreed that the real Hani-Akha genealogies as a patronymic linkage system started from *Smr-mir-or* (Yang 2005; Wang and Huang 2008; Yotsaphong 2009; Yang 2010)... These fourteen generations are believed to be the rulers of ancient federated chiefdoms or states of the Hani-Akha ancestors in the Middle Country *Ghanr-mir* (Wang and Huang 2008, Yotsaphong 2009, Zhe 2010)... After the 27th generation, the genealogies of the Hani-Akha diverge into seven major branches and numerous minor branches. It is believed that the Hani-Akha polity split into seven chiefdoms after the death of the 26th great ruler *Dzoeq-Tanqpanq*, reflected in the seven branches of the genealogies since the 27th generation... The Hani-Akha genealogies diverge from the 27th generation and develop into hundreds of patrilineal lineages" (Wang 2013:31).

While some might dismiss Ayoe's views as a romanticization of the larger Akha World by an individual who may, when compared to many other Akha in the region, more easily navigate the various state regimes of border-line regulation in the region by having greater access to the very real and tangible materials of state-issued passports and visa stamps, there is nonetheless something very real and tangible about this Ancestral genealogical passport of sorts. It is by way of the latter that Akha from geographical regions as far apart as southwest China and north Thailand may literally, and not merely figuratively, determine exactly how far back in genealogical time their Ancestral lineages converge. As the recently deceased U.S. anthropologist Jane Hanks noted some forty years ago:

“Through genealogies the Akha see themselves as able to keep track of their scattered members across mountains, jungles, and national boundaries despite their seminomadic way of life, and feel oriented to places as well as to people. When a man is visiting a strange village, or meets a stranger, he may give his lineage in abbreviated form for identification. Such meetings may be quite lively, as they check out their relationships to each other, or even determine their last common ancestor. Ascertaining what clans are represented in the stranger's home village, a man may send a greeting to a clan mate or connection, even if the individual is not known to him personally... To these private and public ends we find that every mature man in the tribe must know his own patrilineage... The tribe is always united, whether living in scattered localities or dead, with no sense of people gone or disappeared. The panoply of lineages, renewed with each recitation, confirms the Akha conviction that they are a unique and homogenous entity. The recitation may be one of the devices that has retarded absorption not only into powerful and numerous peoples like the Lisu, Miao and Shan, but into the prestigious and magnetic vortex of Chinese culture” (Hanks 1974:119,122-123).

These Akha reimaginings of the borders of belonging bring attention to the crucial role of direct or face-to-face exchanges in cultivating an actual in addition to “imagined community” (Anderson 1991[1983]) that neither necessarily trumps nor is trumped by other forms of belonging ranging from the national to sub-group, language variety, clan, village and household. The Akha significance of the face-to-face was reflected in the remarks of an Akha woman from Kengtung, Myanmar during the closing ceremony of the Second International Conference on

Hani-Akha Culture held in north Thailand in 1996: “If you come often, we are like relatives; If you come rarely, we are like strangers” (Tooker 1996a).

In their unification efforts, Akha elite have further appealed to a common historical experience in building, maintaining and eventually losing an Akha dominated state or homeland referred to as “Ja-dae Mi-khanq” (*Jadae Mirkhanq*) and believed to have existed between the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. in part of what is today’s Yunnan Province in southwest China (Wang 2013:64). These contemporary productions of Akhaness past are further discussed in chapter eight. In brief, while Akha residing throughout the region have long held a mythical notion of a lost homeland past located on higher grounds to the north, recent identity exchanges with certain Akha from China and notions of Akhaness being forged in China are transforming this mythical sense of homeland into an actual homeland positioned in a particular time and place. These elite have thus striven to cultivate among other Akha in the region a sense of belonging to not merely the contemporary Akha World but also an increasingly historicized Akha community in the past and an aspired for Akha community of the future. Their representations of the Akha World as a *diasporic* one, however, have been complicated by the place and hence homeland remaking practices of local Akha communities in the region as further discussed in chapter five (cf. Tooker 1988, 2012).

Akha elites’ unification efforts are all the more significant given that the ethnic bonds of kinship evolving between Akha in China and Laos on the one hand, and those in Myanmar and Thailand on the other hand, are being formed either anew or for the first time. With the exception of Akha belonging to the minority “U-bya” (*Uqbyaq*) sub-group, Akha in Thailand and Myanmar have until rather recently been unaware of the continued presence of Akha in either China or Laos. The majority of U-bya Akha in present-day north Thailand and east Myanmar

descend from individuals that migrated from various parts of southwest China into east Myanmar and north Thailand fewer than three generations ago. In contrast, transregional patterns of residence, mobility, kinship, marriage, and trade have long connected many Akha in present-day Thailand and Myanmar.

Moreover, in their unification efforts Akha elite have increasingly had to deal with a range of issues generally encountered by aspiring states such as the need for a common orthography and standard language, the need to produce and distribute print and e-culture in support of the latter, the need for a standardized calendar, the need for a common crypto-nationalist identity, the need for some form of political representation, the need to render their crypto-nationalist community legible (Scott 1998),<sup>52</sup> and, finally, the need to resolve the demands of competing interest groups. In attempting to deal with these problems elite have both resorted to a variety of state making technologies (Scott 1998:78) as well as taken advantage of their particular sub-national positions where and when possible.

The Akha World in the making can thus be likened to a non-state formation nevertheless shaped in the likeness and image of a state. There are certain parallels, moreover, between this representation of Akhaness and that of Geusau who has argued that while Akha “never had a regular state system” of their own, they have nevertheless been a common people in a situation of “diaspora” by way of a “non-state-based Akha alliance system” as further explained in chapter six (Geusau 2000a:139-140). Akha elite, however, have unanimously stressed that their vision of a larger Akha World is a “non-territorial” and even “virtual” space equally molded by their common bonds of ethnic kinship and divergent experiences of national belonging (Ayoe, personal communication, November 29, 2011). This particular case further challenges the non-

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<sup>52</sup> Paralleling state administrators’ preoccupation with rendering the populations within their territorial boundaries legible by way of population censuses, Akha elite in the region have in recent years made increasing efforts to quantify the exact number of Akha residing throughout the Akha World.

state/state binary underlying James Scott's (2009:117) portrayal of upland Southeast Asia wherein Akha are tight cast as the quintessential "Zomian" anarchists (Fiskesjö 2010; Friedman 2011; Jonsson 2010, 2012; Lieberman 2010; Shneiderman 2010).

In conclusion, it has been on the basis of both proximity and common interest as well as ethnicity that certain Akha in the region have in recent years engaged in a concerted effort to imagine, negotiate, promote and indeed embody a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging or way of being framed in reference to the Akha World spanning the territorial boundaries of no less than five modern nation-states and centered on the upper section of the mighty Mekong River. After all, as Renato Rosaldo has argued, ethnicity tends to be both instrumental *and* expressive and theories opposing the two perspectives pose a false dichotomy (1988:162).

In this chapter I have discussed the multiple and shifting positions of upland minorities in a cross-border and cross-area studies region that can perhaps least problematically be referred to as the Upper Mekong Region, the scope of which nicely frames the Akha World in-the-remaking that is the focus of Neo-Traditionalist elites' project. Before delving any further into the historical complexities of Akha elites' reproductions of their Ancestral burden and by extension Akhaness, I now take a methodological detour and reflect on my multiple and shifting engagements in the everyday lives of certain members of the Akha transregional minority who were engaged in a contentious debate over the question of authenticity.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Methods: Collaborative and Contentious Engagements with Competing Akha Religiosities**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I reflect on my multiple and shifting engagements in the everyday lives of certain members of the Akha transregional minority who were engaged in a contentious debate over the question of authenticity. I discuss how my perception by various Akha as a (potential) believer/disbeliever, authenticator/de-authenticator and even Akha/non-Akha afforded deeper insight into Akha religiosity and contemporary identitarian politics. In brief, I describe a gradual process whereby I came to understand that these conflicting notions of Akhaness were grounded in profoundly differing conceptions of self and other as variably anchored in that which can only problematically be glossed as culture, religion and blood. I further note how my own subjectivity as a Catholic and anthropologist led me to identify with and indeed pursue certain aspects of Akha religiosity more than others. Last, I describe how my alignment with a faction of self-declared Neo-Traditionalists led the members of a competing Christian evangelical faction to distance themselves from me and Mi-suo Pyaw-gawn (Haiying Li), a self-declared Neo-Traditionalist Akha from southwest China and my spouse.

#### **4.2 The beliefs of the student of beliefs?**

Anthropologist Morton Klass has argued that the “issue of the beliefs of the student of beliefs...has been a major source of the problems in the field: problems of definition, problems of comparison, problems of explanation, and more” (1995:7). Klass notes that a majority of the data and analyses with which we have to work are the products of individuals who themselves are firmly entrenched in particular Western belief systems as well as advocates of Western scientific rationalism. As a result, he argues, many of these works are laden with judgments as to

the veracity or efficacy of the religious beliefs and practices of particular societies. In the interests of encouraging a more objective engagement with religion and moving the field beyond its current intellectual impasse, Klass advocates that the student of beliefs put aside their own beliefs in “look(ing) upon the content of a given religious system – beliefs, practices, myths, and whatever – as things in themselves...never ask(ing) whether they are ‘true,’ whether they really ‘work’ ” (1995:6).<sup>53</sup>

In stark contrast to Klass, anthropologists E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1965) and Victor Turner (1962) have suggested that it is only by virtue of one’s own personal experience of religious belief that the student of beliefs may gain true insight into the religious lives of Others (Engelke 2002; Craine 2013:12). In this case, Evans-Pritchard’s and Turner’s “own personal religious conversions to Roman Catholicism provide a bridge between themselves and their Others, a way of understanding their ethnographic cases” (Engelke 2002; in Bielo 2013:4). Note, however, that in this case the presumed religious boundaries between Self and Other, while bridged by way of a vicariously shared experience, nevertheless remain clearly delineated. Klass, after all, notes that, “of all the practices on which the anthropologist reports (with the possible exception of sex...), religion is most likely to raise suspicions that the anthropologist has gone native” (1995:2).

Other anthropologists, however, such as Hillary Crane go further in suggesting that the student of beliefs, rather than assume a fixed stance of belief or disbelief, “remain open to the possibility of truth and revelation in the religions that they investigate and allow themselves to be moved by them” (2013:12). Crane notes, moreover, that this stance, which she strove to maintain

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<sup>53</sup> In particular, Klass holds that, “if we can really achieve such objectivity, if we can really introduce some of the badly needed advantages of the phenomenological approach (in which one avoids addressing the issues of objective reality and subjective response), then the anthropological study of religion can indeed be as useful for our growing comprehension of human flexibility, variability, and potential for change as are our anthropological studies of art forms and child-rearing practices” (1995:7).

in her engagements with a proselytizing community, took the form of a rather disconcerting “dance of mutual pursuit and withdrawal, of revealing and hiding, of seeking and rejecting” (2013:22).

As noted earlier, moreover, Asad (1983, 1993) and Ruel (1982) have long questioned the validity of the preconceived notions of religion and belief that white Euro-American scholars bring to the study of the religious Other. White Euro-Americans, they argue, have often problematically and unwittingly framed the religious Other against the backdrop of their religious Self as a synthesis of Christian and modern secularist discourse. Other scholars have gone further in arguing that the very notion of religion, as a Western construct, is either inapplicable outside the West or laden with a view of the religious as “not quite modern” (Masuzawa 2005; Mahmood 2012:6).

In this chapter I discuss my efforts to grapple, albeit often haphazardly, with each of these issues – ranging from how I chose to position myself in relation to various religious Others to how I went about interpreting various religious practices as well as my very preconceptions of religion and belief - while conducting research among competing religio-political factions of Akha working to promote their particular visions of a larger Akha World.

In addition, as I have transitioned, albeit never completely so, from fieldwork to writing, I have continued to grapple with many of these issues while negotiating the politics of cultural representation or dare I say “invention” (Wagner 1980; in Clifford 1986:2). Finally, while fully aware of the centrality of our “personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy...to the research process” (Clifford 1986:13), I am of the further opinion that our “personal experience and empathy are in of themselves insufficient if they do not lead to (ethnographic) insight” of some sort or another (Heilman 1992:138-139). The latter claim,

however, begs the more crucial question of what ethnography is, should be and might yet become.

### **4.3 Thrown Into the Contentious Field of Akha Identitarian Politics**

Regardless of their religious affiliation, my Akha interlocutors generally apperceived, rightly I might add, that I was a Christian of one sort or another on the basis of my being a white foreigner from the United States or “A-me-li-ka.” This tendency to equate nationality and religion has earlier roots in what has been described as an “indigenous” Akha equation between religion and ethnicity (Kammerer 1990:278). When asked about my religious affiliation, as I occasionally was, I simply replied that I was Catholic. Some Akha, moreover, further apperceived, falsely, that I was a missionary with either ulterior motives or access to various kinds of funds and resources. I must admit, however, that I did have access, albeit limited, to various kinds of funds and resources that many of my interlocutors did not.

After all, I was preceded into the field by a long line of white Euro-American missionaries, many of them married couples, who had established the foundations for the prospering, albeit fractured indigenous Akha Christian missionary enterprises I encountered in contemporary north Thailand. I had also been preceded by a much smaller line of white Euro-American scholars. One of these figures, Leo G.M. Alting von Geusau, was a Dutch Catholic Priest turned anthropologist who settled in north Thailand in the late 1970s and eventually married an Akha woman from a Traditionalist household and community.

Geusau gradually came to play the roles of both an advocate for the Ways of the Akha Ancestors as well as antagonist of his various Euro-American Christian missionary contemporaries for some thirty odd years between the early 1980s and 2002 when he passed

away. Key among Geusau's antagonists was U.S. Baptist missionary-anthropologist Paul W. Lewis. Lewis and his wife, Elaine T. Lewis, were one of most prominent foreign Christian missionary couples to work among not only Akha but also Lahu in first, east Burma (Myanmar) and second, north Thailand from 1947 until 1989. Paul Lewis, moreover, played an instrumental role in developing one of the earliest Romanized orthographies for the Akha language in 1950s Kengtung, Burma that has since become the primary orthography used by non-Catholic Christian Akha in the Upper Mekong Region (see Morton 2010:112-113,132).

Following their retirement from the mission field in 1989, the Lewises settled in Claremont, California where Elaine later passed away and Paul continues to reside as of the present. In June 2013, I along with Ayoe and Mi-suo visited Paul Lewis in Claremont and talked with him at length about various issues relating to Akha language, history, and religio-politics. At the time of our meeting he was in his late 80s. Prior to and since that visit I had/have spoken with Lewis on several occasions about various aspects of his historical entanglements in various parts of the Akha World.

Regrettably, I never had a chance to meet Geusau in person. My own entrance into the Akha World was facilitated by way of several of Geusau's Akha protégés or students, including Ayoe and Mi-ju, who had since come to play instrumental roles in an indigenous Akha movement to work on behalf of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and promote unity throughout the larger Akha World. It was Mi-ju and Ayoe, moreover, who kindly arranged for me to use the Chiang Mai based home of Geusau's surviving widow and daughter, Deu-leu (*Derle*) and Anya Altung von Geusau, as a base camp during the first year of fieldwork in 2009-2010.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See Choopoh and Naess (1997) for more details on Deu-leu's intriguing life story as well as collaborations with Geusau and others on behalf of highland minorities, and, in particular, women's rights as told in her own words. Indeed, shortly after being introduced to Deu-leu in fall 2009 she proudly handed me a copy of the latter book chapter, suggesting I read it carefully so as to know her story.

Moreover, in September 2010, towards the latter part of my first year in the field, these protégés of Geusau initiated a long term cultural documentation project focusing on the Ancestral rites of an influential upland community of Old-Traditionalists in north Thailand with funding from none other than the U.S. State Department in the form of the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation.<sup>55</sup> The U.S. government's support for this project served in reworking or at the very least rendering problematic earlier assumptions among Akha that the U.S. government and its people were a unilaterally Christian nation supporting the spread of Christianity. For example, upon hearing of the project an elderly Old-Traditionalist grandfather expressed confusion as to "the mixed-messages being sent by your American people...variably condemning and then supporting our Ancestral Ways."

My own extensive involvements with Neo-Traditionalists more generally speaking along with my intermittent role as a documentary assistant (i.e. occasionally helping to take photographs or video footage of various rituals) in the above mentioned project served in positioning me on one side of the line in the increasingly contentious debate among Akha as to the question of religion, culture and authenticity. In spite of my efforts, perhaps in vain, to remain a detached participant observer, I found myself wedged into the position of an attached observer participant.

This positioning later provoked suspicion on the part of certain Akha Christian authorities who reacted with hostility towards my and Mi-suo's efforts to observe, discuss and participate in their Christian Ways. Moreover, certain Christian laypersons made a conscious effort to avoid us

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<sup>55</sup> The project was carried out by Akha associated with the regional Neo-Traditionalist organization, NADA, or the "Mekong Akha Friends Network" (*Naqkaq Aqkaq Dzoeqawq Armavq*). The U.S. State Department's official announcement of the award was publicized as the following: "Thailand, Documentation of Akha Cultural Traditions: \$77,928; To support the documentation of 18 animist ceremonies of the Akha people in Thailand. The project documents the contextual meaning of the rituals in KHAS, a new orthographic system for the Akha language, including offerings to ancestors and deities such as earth, sky, water, and rice, and life ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and naming of newborns. The project includes the publication of a book in KHAS, an Akha cultural calendar, and a DVD of rituals, songs, and games" (U.S. Department of State 2011:39).

whenever our paths crossed. In response to these discomfoting situations I often found myself wondering, “What exactly is at stake in these debates?”

#### **4.4 Collaborative, Suspicious and Contentious Encounters with the Religious Other**

Through research I variably engaged, albeit not always successfully, with a number of Akha factions working to promote a profoundly religious pan-Akha sense of belonging. First and foremost I engaged with certain members of a self-declared Neo-Traditionalist faction working to promote a pan-Akha sense of belonging that has built on and complicated an indigenous equation between religion and ethnicity or the Akha Religion and Akhaness. These Neo-Traditionalists have identified themselves in opposition to Akha converts to what are viewed as the religions of non-Akha Others, particularly Christianity.

They have further accused their Akha Christian evangelical antagonists of not merely working to bring Akha to Christianity but also bring about the very demise of the Akha as a distinct people with their own religion as given to them and them alone by the Supreme Creator and carried by their Ancestors from time immemorial. This Neo-Traditionalist faction has accordingly been working to “bring back” Akha converts from what are perceived as the religions of non-Akha Others to the Akha Religion in the (re)making. Their “work on behalf of the Akha Religion” is seen as synonymous with that “on behalf of the Akha people.”

During the early stages of fieldwork I decided to refocus my research from a broader analysis of contemporary Akha identitarian politics to a more detailed analysis of the efforts of this particular Neo-Traditionalist faction to reform and reshape their Ancestral Ways into THE Akha Religion as a fundamental means of anchoring an emergent pan-Akha sense of belonging. I thus inadvertently positioned myself from the very beginning as an ally if not advocate or

authenticator of sorts for this particular faction's stance in the increasingly contentious authenticity debates being waged in the Akha World. This positioning later led to the closure of some doors and the suspicious opening of others as I began to seek out additional perspectives beyond those of the Neo-Traditionalists with which I had become ever so familiar.

In seeking out these other perspectives I strove, albeit much less successfully, to engage with certain members of a Christian evangelical faction working to promote a larger Christianized Akha World. "It is God's will," I was often told, "that all of our people will one day bow down before him as his humble servants."<sup>56</sup> My engagements with Christian authorities, however, were often complicated as a result of both my prior affiliation with their Neo-Traditionalist antagonists as well as my suspect Christian authenticity.

A prominent Baptist missionary based in north Thailand once informed me that he attributed the work of his Akha antagonists to none other than "Satan" himself. "This is the only way," he explained, "that I can make any sense of their obstructions to the Christian witness among our people" (Sa-la A-jei, personal communication, June 11, 2012). My suspect Christian authenticity derived from my position as first, a Catholic and second, a perceived advocate of the "demon ways" of their fellow, "heathen" ethnic kin. Moreover, it was during our exchanges with the members of this particular faction that my own religion beliefs as well as those of Mi-suo were most frequently questioned.

Akha Christians have consciously disassociated religion from culture in claiming authenticity as Christian and Akha (Roy 2010). Their reformations of Akhaness have challenged other conceptions of Akhaness wherein religion and culture or the Akha Religion and Akhaness

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<sup>56</sup> In contrast, several of my Neo-Traditionalist collaborators informed me at various points during fieldwork that, "It is only a matter of time before all of our people will return to our Ancestral Ways. More and more Akha are coming to realize the futility of trying to carry the Ways of non-Akha Others, of trying to breathe through someone else's nose. As they come to this realization they are bound to return to our Ancestral Ways."

are equated. According to the logic of the latter conception, religious conversion is understood not simply as a process of religious but rather ethno-religious conversion. In this conception, Akha who “go down to and take on” Christianity effectively become non-Akha Christian Others who have historically been banned from continuing to reside within the same village gates as Traditionalists (Nightingale 1968:265; Nightingale 1990; Lewis 1957:229; Kammerer 1990:282).

#### **4.5 From Participant Observer to Observer Participant**

Throughout fieldwork I observed, documented and participated in numerous rituals ranging from Ancestral offerings to funerals, agricultural rites, healing ceremonies, house warming ceremonies, communal celebrations and church services. The decision to not merely observe as a participant but also more directly participate in various rituals when appropriate ranging from Old-Traditionalist Ancestral offerings to healing ceremonies was not a difficult one to make. Generally speaking, my Old-Traditionalist hosts warmly welcomed me to join their ritual observances alongside their household members, extended family and village elders.

In these contexts, joining implied being more than a detached observer who refrained from either partaking of the delicious ritual meal or tying black colored cotton strings around the wrist of someone experiencing an illness.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, had I decided somehow to maintain the

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<sup>57</sup> Mi-suo and I participated in numerous healing ceremonies held in honor of various individuals suffering from different illnesses. A key component of these rites involved a rather informal period during which each of the individual’s household members, extended family members and other guests, particularly village elders, in hierarchical as well as inside-outside order first, took a small amount of ritually prepared food and drink and offered it to the afflicted individual, second, tied a thin black colored cotton string around their wrist while offering them a non-scripted verbal blessing of sorts for good health, longevity and so forth, and, last, placed a small money bill in their outstretched palm. The Traditionalist Akha use of black colored cotton strings in this context contrasts with that of white colored cotton strings among their lowland, Dai speaking Buddhist neighbors throughout the region. In both contexts, however, these variably colored strings are used in order to either recall or bind one’s spirit(s) or soul(s) to their body as a means of healing and protection. When I first observed the above mentioned rites among Akha Traditionalists and later participated in them myself, I could not help but recall the Sacred Heart of Jesus

detached position of an observer vicariously participating as if a fly on the wall, I would have deeply offended my hosts and undermined my acquired status as a student of their Ancestral Ways. At the same time, however, I must admit that I remain unaware as to the full import of my participation in these rites to my Old-Traditionalist hosts.

It is clear, however, that many Old-Traditionalist elders attributed my interest and participation in their Ancestral Ways to my Catholic rather than Protestant-Baptist background. All of these elders were all too familiar with the heaviness of the taboos placed upon their Protestant-Baptist neighbors, relatives and in some cases household members against fully participating in their Ancestral rites. While these taboos were also theoretically in place for Catholics there was a very real sense that they were both less strictly enforced in practice as well as occasionally ignored.

At the same time, however, these same elders often spoke disapprovingly of individuals who were “fifty-fifty” or “half Christian and half Akha,” meaning that they did not firmly adhere to any single set of Ancestral Ways but rather “like the wind” and “depending on their needs and circumstances” freely jumped from one set to another. I gradually came to learn, moreover, that this disapproving reference to “fifty-fifty” individuals was especially salient in reference to (Akha) Christians who spoke condescendingly of Old-Traditionalists and yet often had to call on Old-Traditionalist ritual specialists in order to adequately address various problems that their Christian ways could not adequately resolve.<sup>58</sup> Elders spoke even more disparagingly of individuals who claimed to have no Ancestral Ways whatsoever, comparing them to (non-

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scapular that my devout Irish Catholic grandmother had given me to wear around my neck for protection as a college student and perhaps most importantly, in the Catholic context, as a means of guaranteeing my admission to heaven rather than hell in the case that I were to pass away prematurely.

<sup>58</sup> Certain elderly Old-Traditionalists, especially ritual specialists such as Shamans and Ritual Reciters, occasionally told me in one way or another that Akha converts to the Ways of non-Akha Others were bound to experience various misfortunes or illnesses that could only be adequately resolved by resorting to their own (Akha) Ancestral Ways which would allow for them to seek the necessary intervention of their (Akha) Ancestors.

human) “animals,” most commonly “dogs,” whose bodies end up rotting along the side of the road after passing away as they have neither any particular set of Ancestral Ways nor community to follow these ways in carrying out proper burial rites on their behalf.<sup>59</sup>

In 1990 U.S. anthropologist Cornelia Kammerer published an article discussing the various reasons behind rising rates of Akha Christian conversion in north Thailand during the 1980s. In her article Kammerer included a brief anecdote from an exchange that took place between her and one of her key interlocutors, a male elder blacksmith, during her initial period of fieldwork in the late 1970s. She described the exchange as a means of illustrating the “indigenous” Akha conception of collective identities. It can be further seen, however, as a brief but illuminating moment of inter-religious subjectivity between the ethnographer and her interlocutor:

“During my first period of fieldwork I never mentioned my religious background because there was tension between traditionalists and Christians and because, as a Westerner, I was liable to be taken for a missionary. Late in my research, however, my teacher asked me if I followed ‘Ye-zu-zanr,’ that is, ‘Jesus Customs,’ the Akha term for Christianity. When I answered that my parents are Christians but I do not practice, he was visibly upset. ‘Didn’t you listen to your parents?’ he scolded me. Despite the fact that this man was staunchly opposed to conversion to Christianity, he nonetheless thought that I should adhere to the ‘Customs’ of my parents and of their parents before them. From the Akha perspective, it is appropriate for people of each sort to adhere to their inherited traditional rules for proper action. This, then, is identity in action” (1990:281).

Among Old-Traditionalists, Mi-suo and I had numerous opportunities to observe and participate in various rites whereby they strove to adhere to their “inherited rules for proper action” as part of a deeply engrained desire or need for “the continuation of the lines” of Ancestral descent (Kammerer 1990:281; Geusau 2000a:146). Perhaps most significantly in this regard, we participated in numerous Ancestral rites taking place in various households and at

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<sup>59</sup> There are certain parallels between these views of Old-Traditionalists and the Christian, particularly Protestant-Baptist (*Kali*), reframing of their non-Christian Traditionalist counterparts as “lesser heathen primitives” (*Lawrji-zaq*). I am indebted to U.S. anthropologist Deborah Tooker for first pointing these parallels out to me during the 2013 meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago.

various times throughout the region. It is generally agreed that Old-Traditionalists make either twelve or nine offerings to their Ancestors (*Aqpoeq lawr-e*) per Akha calendrical year.<sup>60</sup>

In general, these rites involve male and female household heads playing distinct roles in preparing a ritually “pure” or “clean” (*xawr*) meal for their patrilineal Ancestors consisting of boiled chicken meat, steamed rice, pounded sticky rice, tea and fermented rice whiskey.<sup>61</sup> The Ancestral Ways prescribe that the meat come from a chicken ritually sacrificed by male household heads at the foot of their Ancestral shrines (*Aqpoeq pawvqlawvq*) which are located on the female side of their partitioned home interiors. It is the male household head, moreover, that places the Ancestral meal-offering at the foot of their Ancestral shrine once it has been prepared and assembled on a special, miniature table reserved exclusively for the Ancestors or “living dead.” Finally, once the Ancestors have been fed the male household head will take small amounts of the remaining food and feed first, himself, followed by his elders - if any are still among the “living living” - and then his wife and other household members and guests.

As Mi-suo and I joined these rites we were offered and willingly partook of the Ancestral offerings of pounded sticky rice and cooked chicken meat alongside of other household members and guests following the initial feeding of the Ancestors. As I observed and participated in these household level rites I often recalled my own Catholic experiences of Holy Communion. I was deeply moved by the profound ways in which Akha Ancestral rites represent and reproduce in pragmatic form an intimate bond of co-dependence between and among the “living living” and their Ancestors or the “living dead” (Friesen 2001:xxi; Ferea 2001).

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<sup>60</sup> Whether the annual round of Ancestral offerings is noted as either twelve or nine depends upon how one counts each of the actual offerings as three of the nine Ancestral services involve the making of two separate offerings.

<sup>61</sup> Males prepare the meat and pound the sticky rice. Females, in addition to gathering the pure water to purify the items used in preparing and offering the meal, also cook the rice and later mold the pounded rice into cakes.

I further reflected on the divergent roles of sacrifice as a real and deeply communal part of Akha Ancestral rites rather than a merely symbolic and deeply personalized part of the Catholic rite of Holy Communion wherein the bread and wine are ritually transfigured into the body and blood of Christ, the sacrificial lamb. Moreover, I was struck by the profoundly decentralized nature of Akha Ancestral rites wherein household heads play an authoritative role when compared to the highly centralized rites of the Catholic Church wherein a celibate priest plays an authoritative role.

In addition, I reflected on the parallel and yet profoundly distinct roles of on one hand, the intimate and personally known Ancestors in Akha Ancestral rites and on the other hand, the rather distant and impersonally known figure of Jesus in the Catholic rite of Holy Communion. Elsewhere, religious studies scholar, Stephen Friesen, has commented that:

“...Christianity forsakes the material, bodily relationships of family, preferring instead a spiritual kinship with heroes. These Christian ‘ancestors’ have no bodily connection with their ‘descendants’ ” (Friesen 2001:xxvi; Raitt 2001).

This contrast led me to recall the comments of a middle-aged Neo-Traditionalist woman, Mi-ju, to the effect that:

“Through my Ancestors,  
my own flesh and blood,  
I am blessed and sustained in all that I do.  
Who is this Jesus that the Christians speak of?  
He is surely no Ancestor of mine.

You know, it is difficult for me to understand how so many Akha in Thailand and Myanmar have come to abandon, to forget their Ancestors, the very source of their existence in this world, in favor of some foreign figure such as Jesus” (personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Mi-ju had expressed these thoughts to me after sharing an anecdote involving an earlier exchange that took place between her and three leading male Akha Christian missionaries. They

had come together along with numerous other Akha elite in north Thailand to consider the possibility of organizing an interdenominational celebration of Akha culture that for various reasons never materialized. During lunch their informal discussions somehow ventured into the inevitable realm of religio-politics as one of the missionaries matter-of-factly referred to Akha Ancestral veneration as a form of “demon worship.” Mi-ju responded by cleverly turning the tables on her interlocutors and asking:

“Please tell me, my elder brothers,  
 how are my Ancestors and your Jesus any different from each other?  
 Both were once alive like you and me, and then at some point passed away and moved  
 onto some other place.  
 Moreover, while I pay respects to my deceased Ancestors you similarly pay respects to  
 your deceased Jesus.  
 So please, tell me, how are they any different from each other?”  
 (Mi-ju, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Mi-ju’s comments implied that if her Ancestors were truly “demons” then so was their “Jesus.” These comments, she noted while laughing, brought an abrupt end to both the conversation as well as the meal as her interlocutors seemed to have lost their appetite.

#### **4.6 “You can come as long as you don’t speak badly of us!”**

In stark contrast to our experiences as described above, Mi-suo and I occasionally felt uneasy when it came to participating in certain Protestant or Baptist rituals as they occurred in various settings in north Thailand. I can recall one especially discomfoting experience that occurred in reference to the Christian “Eating of the New Rice Ceremony” (*Hawq/Caer-xeevq dzaq-e*) that took place one Sunday morning in late November. At the time, we were in a large upland village with deep, historical fractures along the lines of religious or ethno-religious affiliation, depending on one’s position and vantage point within the Akha World.

Strongly aligned with an influential Old-Traditionalist faction in the village we had become increasingly aware of the need to more closely consider the ways in which the predominantly Christian Akha in the village had reframed Akhaness in a Christian context (or vice versa, how they had reframed Christianity in an Akha context). On a side note, many of our Old-Traditionalist hosts were perplexed upon hearing of our interest in the ways of their fellow Christian villagers. Nevertheless, we had come to learn through the grapevine that the largest non-Catholic Christian church in the village would be observing their annual “Eating of the New Rice Ceremony” the following Sunday. This church was operating under the larger, umbrella evangelical organization known as the Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF).

The Christian “Eating of the New Rice Ceremony” represents a synergistic melding of non-Christian Traditionalist and Christian ritual practices and beliefs that fundamentally revolve around the cultivation of upland rice. In the non-Christian Traditionalist context, this particular ceremony marks the annual inauguration of the new rice harvest in roughly November. During this rite male householders venture beyond the village gates in the early hours of the morning to a special section of their fields where they maintain nine pure rice bushes from which they pluck three pieces of rice ears (heads) and remove a small amount of rice grain (see Wang 2013:132).

Upon returning to their homes the three new rice ears are offered to the Ancestors by way of their placement directly under the Ancestral shrine. Meanwhile, the new rice grain is transfigured into pounded sticky rice cakes that are subsequently offered to the Ancestors as part of a special meal further consisting of rice whiskey and ginger tea. In this manner, the Ancestors or “living dead” are given the honor of being the first to partake of the new rice harvest of their descendants or the “living living.” In this way, the “living living” not only express their gratitude to the “living dead” for the blessings and prosperity they have bestowed upon them in the form

of abundant crops but also inform them of the relative abundance of the harvest (see Li 2013:133).

In the Christian context, however, the all important figure of the Ancestors has been trumped by the figures of God, Jesus, and, in the Catholic context, “Mother Maria” (*Aqma Malia*), all of whom are offered gratitude for their blessings in the form of intangible prayers and songs of praise rather than tangible food per se. In further contrast to non-Christian Traditionalists, moreover, Christian celebrations of the ceremony occur within the centralized domain of the church rather than the more decentralized domains of individual households.

Mi-suo and I subsequently decided to visit the church during the early part of the evening just prior to the day of the ceremony to introduce ourselves and see if it would be alright to participate. As we arrived at the grounds of the church we encountered a large group of youth putting up decorations on the church’s interior and exterior. Inside, a number of youth were busy decorating the area in front of the altar with a large variety of newly harvested crops such as corn, pumpkins, squash and peanuts along with several large sacks of rice grain. The latter decorative items, which had all come from various members of the church’s congregation, would eventually end up in the home of their local pastor (*saqlaq*).

Meanwhile, several slightly older men and women sat chatting on the church’s front porch. Assuming that they were church related staff of some sort, Mi-suo and I approached the latter group and introduced ourselves. We then proceeded to inquire about their ongoing preparations, hoping that they might invite us to join the ceremony without having to ask. However, it gradually became clear that an invitation was not forthcoming. Mi-suo subsequently decided to directly ask if it would be alright for us to join the ceremony. In response one of the staff members abruptly replied:

“You can come as long as you don’t speak badly of us!”

Caught off guard, Mi-suo replied, “What makes you think that we would do such a thing?” Receiving only blank stares in response to her question we decided it was best for us to leave, feeling uneasy as we did after have encountered such an unwelcome gesture. After much deliberation, however, we nevertheless decided to join the service the next day during which we were treated with an at best lukewarm reception. As a result, we decided to slip away directly following the service as a large communal meal was being prepared for the congregation and their guests from other nearby villages and towns. In this particular context it was clear that we would for the time being at least remain strangers at best.

#### **4.7 Becoming Akha?**

By virtue of my marriage to Mi-suo, I was occasionally told by elderly Old-Traditionalists that if I so chose I could take a further step and “become Akha” (*Paq dawvq dawvq-e*) by initiating a genealogical line, having a son, establishing a household Ancestral altar and following the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, no small order to go (see Wang 2013:67). These comments nearly always evoked laughter from me and all of those who were present. I generally replied by noting that I could barely even speak Akha, let alone know all that would be required of me according to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors.

Throughout my engagements in various parts of the Akha World I invariably encountered individuals who had indeed either become Akha within their lifetime by way of this very tradition or descended from a non-Akha male Ancestor who had become Akha at some point in the near or distant past. The latter was evidenced by their rather short Ancestral genealogies going back in some cases just five or six generations to the “Primal Ancestral Mother” (*Tanq*

*Panq Aqma* or *Dzoeq Tanq Panq*) when compared to more typical genealogies extending back over 60 generations. Wang, who translates “*Paq dawvq dawvq-e*” as “genealogy grafting,” notes that this long-standing tradition has first and foremost entailed the grafting of a distinct partilineal genealogy from *Dzoeq Tanq Panq* as a prerequisite for being able to establish a household Ancestral altar and begin making Ancestral offerings (2013:67).

This tradition is often cited, moreover, by Old and Neo-Traditionalists alike in support of the claim that Akhaness is fundamentally grounded in the practice of “carrying” the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, and particularly the making of Ancestral offerings. For example, during an exchange one sweltering afternoon with a prominent male Akha Christian missionary, Sa-la Luka (*Saqraq Lurkaq*), Mi-suo referred to this traditional of “genealogy grafting” to explain, in her words, “the Traditionalist stance that Akhaness is fundamentally grounded in the carrying of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors ” (personal communication, April 30, 2012). In response, Sa-la Luka interjected:

“Well, in this way he *may* be able to become Akha in terms of *culture or tradition*, but *not* in terms of blood.”

This missionary’s reframing of Akhaness as something inherent or innate to Akha bodies in the form of blood or genetics challenges both Old/Neo-Traditionalist claims of Akhaness as fundamentally grounded in a distinct set of externalized practices as well as the related suggestion that I, as a non-Akha, could in fact become Akha.

Interestingly, the Neo-Traditionalist Prosperous One and his disciples have similarly reframed Akhaness in essentialist fashion, albeit with the end result that religion, reconceived of as separate and apart from culture, is regarded as the litmus test for Akhaness. In brief, Prosperous One and his disciples have re-anchored the grounds of Akhaness from customs, understood as extrinsic markers of peoplehood that may be swapped under certain conditions, to

religion, understood as an immutable and “intrinsic (ethno)racial characteristic, revealing the inner essence of a people” (Wenger 2009:85). This essentialized reframing of Akhaness explains Prosperous One’s regular inquiry each time that we met during fieldwork, “So, are you Akha?” It further explains his comments on one occasion to the effect of, “Even if you were to become Akha I would still only be able to trust you about 75 percent.”

#### **4.8 My Search for the Authentic, Non-Christian Other**

As I reflect on my early engagements with Akha in various parts of the Akha World I now realize that my search for an authentic, non-Christian Other led me to initially ignore or dismiss the predominantly Christian portion of the Akha community in north Thailand and east Myanmar as somehow unauthentic Akha tainted by the influence of that which I was all too familiar with and hence sought to leave behind in the West. Moreover, I found myself all too ready to buy into the claims of my Neo-Traditionalist interlocutors that Akha who had abandoned their Ancestral Ways and “gone down to and taken on” Christian ways were at best “no longer like Akha” and at worst “no longer Akha” whatsoever.

Moreover, as I began to engage with MATA’s or Prosperous One’s and his disciples’ reworkings of the Akha Religion, I began to recognize just how deeply Christianized they were. It was after all to the ideal model of Christianity that Prosperous One and his disciples were looking in large part in their efforts to “look after and improve” their Ancestral Ways so that they might better withstand the very predation of Christian missionaries likened to “wolves and bears.” As a result of these realizations I grew suspicious of Prosperous One’s religious discourse and reproductions as somehow unauthentic and tainted by foreign, non-Akha influences.

I was not alone, however, in harboring these suspicions. For example, other certain Neo-Traditionalists expressed concern with Prosperous One's rather heavy borrowings from Christianity and worried that his reproductions of the Ancestral burden might serve in alienating a small but influential faction of elderly Old-Traditionalists from their movement. At the same time, certain Christian elite accused Prosperous One of creating a "new religion" altogether that was neither Christian nor Traditionalist.

Elsewhere, U.S. anthropologist Luke Eric Lassiter has commented on a similar predisposition that initially kept him from paying closer attention to Kiowa Christian experience in the U.S. in spite of the fact that Christian churches were among, "the largest institutions in Indian country and many Kiowas...saw their Christian experience as uniquely Indian (and) a key facet of (their) communities" (2005:108). Lassiter notes, moreover, that he had initially followed the lead of most scholars in dismissing Christian experience as:

"...less different and therefore 'less Indian.' As a product of assimilation, it was perceived as closer to being 'white' than 'Indian,' and thus as unimportant" (2005:108).

As noted earlier in chapter one, moreover, Keane has noted a growing realization among scholars that Christianity is "no longer just a story about the West: it has become central to understanding the world after colonialism" (Keane 2007:30; see also van der Veer 1996, 2014:31). From this vantage point, MATA's efforts to "look after and improve" their Ancestral burden is a distinctly post-colonial project wherein the tools of the colonizers, in this case initially white Euro-American and more recently Akha Christian missionaries, have been appropriated and turned against them in highly creative ways. MATA's religious reproductions thus represent not merely a simple syncretic combination of different religious ideals and practices but rather a complex synergistic transmutation of the latter, the ever evolving end

product of which has been variably perceived by Akha in the region as the “Akha Religion,” “Christianity,” or something altogether “new.”

#### **4.9 Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter I have reflected on my multiple and shifting engagements in the lives of various Akha who were engaged in a contentious debate over the question of authenticity as framed within the religious domain of social life. In particular, I discussed how my perception by Akha as a (potential) believer/disbeliever, authenticator/de-authenticator and even Akha/non-Akha afforded deeper insight into contemporary Akha identitarian politics. Against this backdrop I now turn to an extended discussion of the Old- and Neo-Traditionalist discourse equating Akhaness and the carrying of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors as fundamentally grounded in the act of “remembering and honoring” the Ancestors.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Old-Traditionalists: “We do as our Ancestors have done before us”

“We now understand that our religion is a priceless heritage passed on to us by our Ancestors from time immemorial.

We are reclaiming this inheritance and building up our resistance to the viruses that have long eaten away at our religion, our people”

(Prosperous One, personal communication, July 24, 2010).<sup>62</sup>

“(W)e are all descendants. We all have many ancestors who make powerful claims on our lives. Ancestry is a fundamental fact of life and should be a fundamental category in religious studies...The other facet of our common experience is this. We all live in the aftermath of contact between Euro-American powers and other civilizations. If there is a defining feature of the world today, it is a structure of life set in motion by these unequal and unjust meetings of cultures. This structure of life is not uniform, nor is it static, but it is our common inheritance. Thus, ‘post-contact religion’ should not be mistakenly applied only to the so-called indigenous religions. All religions today are in their post-contact phases” (Friesen 2001:xx).

“It is my belief that the present state of restlessness that traps the modern individual has its roots in a dysfunctional relationship with the ancestors. In many non-Western cultures, the ancestors have an intimate and absolutely vital connection with the world of the living. They are always available to guide, to teach, and to nurture. They represent one of the pathways between the knowledge of this world and the next. Most importantly – and paradoxically – they embody the guidelines for successful living – all that is most valuable about life. Unless the relationship between the living and the dead is in balance, chaos results. When a person from my culture looks at the descendants of the Westerners who invaded their culture, they see a people who are ashamed of their ancestors because they were killers and marauders masquerading as artisans of progress. The fact that these people have a sick culture comes as no surprise to them” (Somé 1994:9).

### 5.1 The Ancestors or “Living Dead”

In this chapter I begin by discussing the all-important position of the Ancestors or “living dead” for Old- and Neo-Traditionalists alike. I then focus on the Ancestral practices of one Old-Traditionalist household in setting the stage for further exploration of Neo-Traditionalists’ reworkings of the Ancestral burden. Neo-Traditionalists have shifted the locus of their Ancestral

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<sup>62</sup> Prosperous One’s words as quoted here were addressed to a group of roughly 60 Akha youth from different parts of the Akha World during the “First International Workshop for Young Akha Intellectuals on Akha Zanr” held in north Thailand in July 2010 as noted earlier in chapter two and further discussed in chapter seven.

Ways from the deeply grounding local contexts of villages and households to the upwardly unifying translocal Akha World in the making. Indeed, the deeply grounding local practices of the Old-Traditionalists highlighted below have posed significant obstacles toward Neo-Traditionalists' crypto-nationalist project to re-center the Akha World.

The Ancestors are an integral part of the ways in which Akha Traditionalists lead and make sense of their everyday lives. By virtue of their integral roles in the lives of the living, the Akha Ancestors are better conceived of rather as the “living dead” than the dead per se. Over the course of the roughly two and a half years during which I interacted with a diverse range of Akha in the Upper Mekong Region I gradually came to learn of the deep, multiple, and shifting ways in which the “living dead” and “living living” continue to be in relation with each other.

I gradually learned of how the past, present, and future were all bound together in the fabric of Akha society. For the Ancestors once took form among the living, the elders at present will one day in the near future enter into the Ancestral domain, and the young will gradually take their place as elders and in turn be replaced by those yet to enter the realm of the living. Tying or threading all of these together is a diverse set of practices by which the living dead and the living living interact; by which the young honor their elders; by which the path of the young towards becoming elders in their own right is lain; and most significantly via which the fortunes, well-being and sense of purpose of the living living are all inextricably bound to those of the living dead.

Foremost among these practices is that of naming. Shortly after an Akha child is born, a ceremony is carried out by their elders, during which they are given a genealogical name beginning with the second syllable of their father's genealogical name. The same was done for their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents before them, forming in many cases a line of

known Ancestry extending back over 60 generations. By receiving their genealogical name, the newborn becomes fully human and is inducted into a community whose boundaries run as deep into the past as 60 or more generations and as vast as the Akha diaspora numbering some 730,000 people residing throughout the mountainous Upper Mekong Region and beyond.

The elders, furthermore, are careful to choose a name that has not been used before in their Ancestral lineage – including those of not only paternal fathers, grandfathers and so on but also each of their in-marrying wives. In cases where this is overlooked the child may at some point experience prolonged illness or misfortune as a sign of the Ancestors' displeasure, calling into play the intervention of a "Shaman" (Nyi-pa; *Nyirpa*) possessing the unique ability to enter and see the otherwise unseen and yet very real land of the Ancestors and determine the cause of the child's illness as well as negotiate for their recovery, which often entails the child's renaming.

In many parts of the contemporary Akha World, moreover, it is both a sign of maturity as well as a necessity for Akha, especially males, to know all of their paternal Ancestors by name as well as their three closest maternal Ancestors. This internalized body of knowledge, referred to by one Akha intellectual as an "Akha passport," is the basis by which Akha orient themselves to others residing throughout the larger Akha World. At some point in the near or distant past the names of the Ancestors overlap, revealing near or distant ties of kinship that evoke affinities of the heart and great displays of hospitality.

This knowledge is also an essential means by which the Ancestors are called upon to intervene in the lives of the living and the recently deceased. For example, the Ancestors will be called upon by Shamans to assist in identifying the causes of illness or misfortune among their descendants; causes, which while invisible to the living living, are visible to the living dead and

Shamans. Ancestors are also called upon by name to guide the spirits of their recently deceased descendants to the Ancestral village.

Ancestral services, however, are perhaps the most fundamental as well as necessary means via which the intimate ties between the living dead and living living are maintained, affirmed, and consecrated. These services, seemingly oriented exclusively towards remembering and honoring the Ancestors, are in actuality more similar to a communal meal shared between the living dead and the living living, a meal nevertheless during which the living dead are fed first, as is likewise done in deference to elders at other times who both eat first and initiate the meal. That which is offered to the living dead, moreover, is subsequently offered to the living living.

As I joined various Ancestral services being carried out by different households at varying times of the year, I gradually came to realize the extent to which these services reinforce a deep sense of continuity, relationship, obligation, as well as hierarchy in terms of the relations between as well as among the living dead and living living. Each time that I was present during a household's offering I was treated like an extended family member and invited to partake of the offerings once the Ancestors had had their fill. In terms of continuity, I was told again and again of how all that I was experiencing at the moment had long been carried by numerous generations of Akha in the past. My Akha collaborators, particularly elders, stressed that they were doing as their Ancestors had done before them.

In terms of relationships, the services provide a fundamental means by which the living living fulfill their obligations to the living dead. The living dead are in turn expected to fulfill their obligations to the living living. In terms of hierarchy, the services clearly articulate the hierarchical ordering of the Akha World with the Ancestors being fed and honored first followed

by the feeding of their descendants from the same offering. In this hierarchy the Ancestors and elders, themselves soon to be Ancestors, occupy a senior most position.

All of these practices serve in ensuring that the Ancestral order remains intact and of moral and ethical significance for the living living. These practices ensure, furthermore, that the living dead are neither forgotten nor dishonored. Ancestral practices and their interpretations, furthermore, are continually made sense of by Akha in relation to events taking place within the realm of the living living - past, present, and future. For example, throughout my time in the region I overheard various individuals interpret or make sense of either their current circumstances or those of others by reference to how the living dead had been treated either in the past when they were elders among the living living or thereafter as they entered the domain of the living dead. Blessings and good fortune were nearly always attributed to the interventions of the living dead in the lives of the living living.

In contrast, misfortune was attributed in large part to the failure of the living living to have met their filial obligations – relative to both their Ancestors and soon to be Ancestor-elders - with the result that the Ancestors no longer continued to intervene on behalf of their descendants. In the latter case, the living living could no longer benefit from either the blessings of the living dead or their protection from various malevolent and unseen forces. In this respect, the Akha philosophical outlook is akin to a synthesis of the notion of karmic retribution with Confucianism in terms of its emphasis on hierarchy and filial piety (“Karmic Confucianism”).

In the following sections of this chapter I highlight the contemporary Ancestral practices of an Old-Traditionalist household from an upland and predominantly Akha village in north Thailand (Law-ja Village). The Ancestral practices that are highlighted were carried out in the context of the annual “New Year’s Ancestral Service” (*Kartanr Aqpoeq lawr-e*) both celebrating

the previous year's harvest as well as marking the transition to a new year and a communal birthday of sorts.<sup>63</sup> My aim in the subsequent sections is to allow for these contemporary practices and their practitioners to speak for themselves in highlighting the subtle and not so subtle ways in which they represent continuity and rupture with the past.

## 5.2 Carrying the Ancestral Burden



Figure 5.1: In this image Grandfather Law-gaw (*Aqbawr Lawqgawq*), on the lower right hand side, crouches while placing a small amount of the Ancestral offerings-meal into the outstretched and open palms of one of his daughter-in-laws as Grandmother Shaman (*Aqqiq Nyirpa*) sits to the side watching from her stool.

Shortly after waking to the crisp morning air and having a hearty breakfast of mountain rice, vegetable soup and leftover pork from the previous evening, Grandfather Law-gaw called Elder Brother Pa (*Ardovpa*) on his cell phone from his home down below to let Mi-suo and me know that he and Grandmother Shaman (*Aqqiq Nyirpa*) were awaiting our arrival before

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<sup>63</sup> This particular Ancestral Service is more accurately translated as the “Transition from the Old to New Year’s Ancestral Service.” However, for the sake of brevity I have chosen to translate it simply as the “New Year’s Ancestral Service.”

beginning preparations to make their Ancestral offering. Several days prior as we were visiting their home, we had asked Grandfather Law-gaw and Grandmother Shaman if we could come and see as well as document their Ancestral offering marking the transition from the old to new year. In reply, they warmly welcomed us to join them – reflecting, on one hand, a more general disposition attributed to Akha Traditionalists of taking great pride in their Ancestral practices (see Kammerer 1986:63-64), and, on the other hand, an assumption that their Ancestral practices would be of interest to non-Akha Others such as myself.<sup>64</sup>

This disposition, however, which I clearly observed among certain Old-Traditionalists in various parts of north Thailand during field work, exists side by side with that of a similarly widespread perception that their Ancestral practices are gradually and inevitably being lost to the passage of time. Their interest in the documentary process could thus be further explained by a sense of the impending loss of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and subsequent desire, at the very least, to show their yet to be born descendants how they had carried their Ancestral practices before them in the past. Moreover, many Traditionalist Akha from younger generations that had little or no time to learn much of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors from their elders often commented half-jokingly to Mi-suo and me that in the future they might have to turn to us for the knowledge of how to carry these practices.<sup>65</sup>

At the same time, Grandfather Law-gaw's and Grandmother Shaman's avid interest in having us document one of their household's Ancestral offerings may have been a reflection in

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<sup>64</sup> Kammerer has noted: "Often Akha say 'Akha customs are many' and 'Akha Customs are difficult.' These observations are made both proudly and deprecatingly. For Akha, to complain that Customs are vast and demanding is not only to account for their position vis-à-vis others, including dominant lowlanders, but also to praise the richness of the ancestors' bequest and to celebrate their own loyalty to that legacy" (1986:63-64).

<sup>65</sup> On a side note, Aju, a middle-aged Neo-Traditionalist Akha male from north Thailand, once informed me that in the past as the U.S. Baptist missionary Paul Lewis was leading Akha in Myanmar and Thailand to abandon their Ancestral ways for Christianity he was simultaneously documenting and collecting as much information and material culture as he could related to their Ancestral Ways. "Eventually," he bitterly added, "Lewis ended up selling our traditional culture back to us as well as to (non-Akha) others in the form of numerous books and cultural artifacts."

part of their desire to be included in a more extensive and at the time ongoing documentation project being conducted within their village, Law-ja, by the regional Neo-Traditionalist organization NADA as noted earlier in chapter four.<sup>66</sup> The latter documentation project was geared towards recording the Ancestral practices of Law-ja's Old-Traditionalists in visual, audio and written form. The project focused on a plethora of rites carried out according to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors at numerous levels ranging from the individual to household and larger village community of Old-Traditionalists.

Moreover, in terms of household level rites the documentary team focused on the all important annual sequence of Ancestral Services. In doing so, however, the team had focused largely on the practices of one particular household – namely that of a “Kha-ma” (*Khavma*) or highly respected male elder with extensive knowledge of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. By focusing exclusively on the Ancestral Services of this particular household, however, NADA's documentation project necessarily overlooked the diversity within this domain of Ancestral practices as carried by different households not only within but also beyond Law-ja Village. In this manner, NADA's documentary productions of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors have tended to represent the latter in a monolithic and standardized form that fails to reflect the diversity found throughout the larger Akha World.<sup>67</sup>

### **5.3 Background on the Old-Traditionalist Stronghold of Law-ja Village**

“Law-ja Pu” (*Lawcavq Pu*) is the indigenous Akha term for the largest upland and predominantly Akha village in north Thailand. Indeed, among Akha in Thailand, Law-ja is often

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<sup>66</sup> To reiterate, NADA stands for the “Mekong Akha Friends Network” (*Naqkaq Aqkaq Dzoeqcawq Armavq*).

<sup>67</sup> Indeed, on one occasion in March 2010 as NADA's co-founder, Ayoe, discussed their then ongoing documentation project in this particular village with a number of other Neo-Traditionalist elite from various parts of the larger Akha World, one of the leading financiers of MATA expressed the concern that by focusing on this one particular village they would be presenting *their* Ancestral Practices as those of all Akha more generally.

referred to as the “Akha City” (either “Akha Meu” [*Aqkaq Meq*] in Akha or “Muang Akha” in Thai). The village is situated at an altitude of 1,800 meters above sea level. It is dominated, moreover, by Akha of the Loi-mi subgroup with married women adorning their signature headdresses with large, flat silver panels in the rear and a string of golf ball sized silver balls draped over each side.<sup>68</sup>

As of 2013, three main ethnic groups resided within the larger Thai administrative village, namely Akha, Lisu and Yunnanese-Chinese (Jin-haw). Akha first began to permanently settle in the area of the present-day village over 30 years ago (Tooker 1988:23-36). Since that time the Akha residents have grown to comprise over 80 percent (554 households) of the total population of 6,000 people (730 households) (Li 2013:1).<sup>69</sup>

Reflecting both the numerical dominance of Akha as well as the political dominance of Akha Traditionalists, moreover, the current life-long headman of the village (“Jo-ba” in Akha; “Phu Yai Ban” in Thai language) is a middle-aged Akha male of the largely Traditionalist Sae-du clan (*Saeduq guq*). In addition, at the time of my fieldwork Law-ja was one of several centers of power in the larger Akha World of Old- and Neo-Traditionalists alike. Yet, in spite of, or perhaps because of the latter, the larger administrative village of Law-ja was at the time divided into no less than eight different socio-spatially defined religio-political communities including

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<sup>68</sup> Tooker notes that, “ ‘Loi-mi’ is the name of a large mountain in the Shan state of Kengtung in Burma. The name is Tai-derived, as one can tell from the *oi* vowel sound which is absent in Akha. This area was described to me as between the Chinese border (from which it is one day’s walk) and the city of Kengtung (from which it is also one day’s walk). There are no towns nearby and at least some of the Loimi Akha worked hill terraced rice fields with water buffalo, supplemented by opium and possible swidden fields. Villagers could remember at least four generations that had worked the land before they were forced to migrate because of the presence of warring factions in the area” (2012:34).

<sup>69</sup> Of the remaining 176 households in 2013, 156 were Lisu while 20 were Yunnanese-Chinese (Li 2013:6).

five distinct Christian communities, two Traditionalist communities, and one Buddhist community (Li 2013:1).<sup>70</sup>

This designation of Law-ja as a stronghold of Old-Traditionalists, however, is not meant to suggest in any way that the Ancestral Ways of the latter have remained either static or reified through time. To the contrary, the Old-Traditionalists of Law-ja have consciously adapted and reworked their Ancestral Ways in response to a variety of local, national, regional and global pressures *as well as* opportunities as further explained below. A key pressure and opportunity, moreover, has been the heightened presence of the Thai nation state and global capitalist economy since roughly the mid to late 1980s (see Tooker 2004).

In 1983 Thai and foreign staff of the Thai-German Highland Development Project first introduced breeds of Arabica coffee to the village as part of then ongoing crop replacement efforts for opium (Renard 2001:95-97; Li 2013:3). While the initial results of these efforts were unremarkable, through time the villagers of Law-ja have come to increasingly depend upon Arabica coffee as their major source of income. As a result, the majority of villagers' upland fields at present are planted with perennial Arabica coffee plants rather than seasonally rotating crops such as rice, corn, beans, tomatoes, and, in the past, the lucrative cash crop of opium.

Since the early 2000s, moreover, the coffee grown in the vicinity of the village has acquired national and international acclaim as a premium coffee (Doi Chaang) due to the interventions of a well connected Sino-Thai from Bangkok and a wealthy Canadian investor (Ong-art 2008). Since that time a small number of mostly Akha households have formed networks with different Thai and foreign investors and established independent coffee processing

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<sup>70</sup> Akha scholar Mi-suo Pyaw-gawn (Haiying Li) has noted that as of 2013 the seven different Christian churches located in Lawcavq Pu were affiliated with five different Christian organizations ranging from the Italian Catholic Church to four Protestant-Baptist groups including the Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF), the Akha Church of Thailand (ACT), the Lisu Church of Thailand, and an independently operating South Korean missionary (2013:6).

factories on the outskirts of the village. Several of these factories have elaborate roasting machines imported from Europe. Most of the factory laborers are landless Shan (Tai-Yai) and Akha migrant workers from Myanmar.

Apart from the coffee beans grown in their own expansive fields and picked by their hired laborers, moreover, each factory depends upon a particular network of intra-village households that supplies it with additional beans from their respective fields. These networks, however, are neither static nor reified and can and do shift during the height of the coffee bean harvest between roughly November and February. During this period, inter-factory competition for coffee beans in order to meet quotas for various domestic and international buyers results in nearly daily fluctuations in the buying price. All of this is to say that the contemporary village of Law-ja has long been anything but a marginal and isolated space in the mountains of north Thailand.

Ironically, moreover, the somewhat unprecedented wealth generated from coffee has resulted in a cultural vitalization of sorts among certain Old-Traditionalist households in the village, particularly those of the Sae-du clan as noted earlier. This vitalization has taken place in the form of elaborate funerary rites for elders involving the sacrificial offerings of no less than three water buffaloes, the maximum number that contemporary “Ritual Reciters” (Pi-ma [*Pirma*]) are able to offer by way of their internalized ritual texts.<sup>71</sup> As is the case throughout much of upland *and* lowland mainland Southeast Asia, moreover, water buffaloes (a-nyo

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<sup>71</sup> Akha oral texts refer to a time in the distant past when Ritual Reciters, often working in tandem, were able to recite the ritual texts required to offer no less than ten buffaloes to the deceased. Through time, these texts inform us, the knowledge of these elaborate ritual texts has been gradually lost with the result that only three such buffaloes can be offered at present.

[*aqnyoq*]) have long been of great value in the highly intertwined material and symbolic domains of Akhaness (see Wang 2013:117-118; Baird 2013a:5,14).<sup>72</sup>

Law-ja's Traditionalist vitalization has been further manifest in the heightened observance of other elaborate rites such as the initiation of "White-Skirted Women" (Ya-yae A-ma [*Yayaer Aqma*]) as elaborated on in chapters eight and nine. In brief, this initiation rite is performed on behalf of married, post-menopausal women that have at least one surviving son by virtue of whom they may become a venerated Ancestor. During the ritual the initiate is fully aligned with the patrilineal descent group of her husband through the incorporation of her genealogical name.

My use of the term elaborate here refers not merely to the great financial expenses incurred in carrying out these rites but also the extensive knowledge and range of ritual specialists required to fully and properly carry them out. For example, while the initiation rites for White-Skirted Women are not necessarily a heavy economic burden, they nevertheless require the recitation of a lengthy and esoteric oral text that few contemporary Ritual Reciters have adequately learned in conjunction with a similarly intricate series of practices. Law-ja's Old-Traditionalists, moreover, have explicitly used their material wealth as a means of building up and maintaining the ranks of their resident ritual specialists, especially Ritual Reciters.

For example, the village's current senior most Ritual Reciter, Pi-ma Geu (*Pirmakev*), has only resided in Law-ja Village since the early 2000s. Hailing from not only a different Akha village in north Thailand but also sub-group, namely the U-lo (*Uqlor*), Pi-ma Geu and his family

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<sup>72</sup> Wang notes that Akha have long employed water buffaloes not only as the sole plowing animal in localities where they possess irrigated rice fields, but also as the most prestigious sacrificial offering for elders who have died a "good" or "natural" death (2013:117). In reference to the latter, the final words that Ritual Reciters speak to the deceased before their burial and departure to the land of the "living dead" highlight the Akha stress on the parallels between the domains of the "living living" and the "living dead": "The buffalo sacrificed for you will make your house steady; the buffalo sacrificed for you will make your house long standing; the door of your house will be closed by the buffalo" (Hansson 1983:289).

decided to resettle in Law-ja after being offered land and money to do so by several male elders from the village. These elders had made this offer sometime after having observed Pi-ma Geu skillfully officiate over the sacrifice of no less than three water buffaloes for an elder who had passed away in another village in north Thailand (see Li 2013:90-92). At the time, moreover, Law-ja's senior most Ritual Reciter, Pi-ma Tsa (*Pirmatsa*), was quickly gaining in years and his senior most apprentice had yet to adequately learn the oral text for offering three water buffaloes.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to stress, moreover, that this cultural vitalization of sorts has occurred not in isolation from but rather part and parcel with the village's multiple and shifting entanglements in a variety of socioeconomic and political processes occurring on national, regional and global scales. Elsewhere in relation to the coastal Mekeo of Papua New Guinea, anthropologist Jonathan Friedman has commented that:

“It appears that their income (derived from their virtual monopoly over the betel-nut market in the capital of Port Moresby) was sufficient for them to maintain their machinery and their Western imports, their fine Sunday clothes and their transistors, as well as their costly traditional architecture. The ‘bush’ Mekeo who lived further inland and had no access to the urban market had tin roofs instead (of the enormous traditional thatch-roof houses). Many of them were wage laborers in town or among their wealthier coastal cousins. *It might be suggested, paradoxically, that the connection between local production and the larger market preserved the traditional trappings that had disappeared in more remote areas*” (1994:8).

With some modification for the particular context of Law-ja, Friedman's comments, particularly his final remark as italicized above, may similarly apply to the Old-Traditionalists of contemporary Law-ja in north Thailand.

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<sup>73</sup> Pi-ma Tsa subsequently passed away in November 2010 at the ripe old age of 97. Pi-ma Geu presided as the senior most Ritual Reciter in Pi-ma Tsa's funerary rites during which he received the highest honor of not merely three water buffaloes but also an ornately decorated horse. The horse, however, was not sacrificed but rather used as a temporary vehicle for transporting the soul of the deceased to the realm of the living dead. While doing so, moreover, Pi-ma Geu was accompanied by two junior Ritual Reciters who thereby gained further knowledge of the required ritual texts by both listening alongside of Pi-ma Geu as well as chanting various sections of the texts themselves.

As noted earlier, moreover, the Old-Traditionalists of Law-ja have reproduced their practices of the Ancestral Ways or Akhaness not in isolation but rather in response to a range of socioeconomic, religious, and political transformations that have occurred through time. For example, while most villagers' agricultural fields at present are planted with perennial coffee plants, Old-Traditionalist households have nevertheless continued to cultivate at the very minimum a tiny plot of upland rice for use in various rites relating to rice cultivation and Ancestral Services (see figure 5.2 below). This is not surprising given that the Ways of the Akha Ancestors fundamentally revolve around the highly intertwined acts of cultivating rice and making Ancestral offerings in which rice figures prominently, whether in the transfigured form of steamed rice, porridge, or pounded sticky rice.

These villagers have tended to purchase rice for everyday household consumption from either nearby villages where significant amounts of upland rice are still being cultivated (including one Lisu village and several Akha villages) or the market in the nearest lowland town of Maesuai where a range of mostly lowland rice varieties are available. At the time of fieldwork, the latter market was located roughly an hour's drive from Law-ja Village along a narrow and poorly paved road. At the same time, a small number of Old-Traditionalists in Law-ja continue to cultivate enough upland rice to not only meet their own consumption and ritual needs but also sell to outsiders (see figure 5.3 below).



Figures 5.2 & 5.3: Figure 5.2 on the left is of a very small plot of upland rice (enclosed by mesh) being cultivated by a Traditionalist Akha household from Law-ja for exclusive use in annual rites relating to the cultivation of rice and Ancestral Services. Figure 5.3 on the right is of a relatively large plot of upland rice being cultivated by another Old-Traditionalist household in Law-ja in part for self-consumption, ritual use and sale to outsiders. The ripening beans of several coffee plants figure prominently in the foreground. Both photos were taken by the author.

These Old-Traditionalists have reworked a number of other domains of Akhaness part and parcel with their modern reproductions of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. First, they have modified their Ancestral practices relating to the annual renewal of their three main village gates (lawn-kang [*lanrkanq*]) in response to the heightened presence of the Thai state in the form of an official ban on logging since the late 1980s. This communal rite, moreover, referred to as “Lawn-kang um-eu” (*Lanrkanq mr-e*), is carried by male householders exclusively. While the rite generally entails the construction of new, ornately decorated wooden gates and human figures just beyond each of the previous year’s gates – a necessary component of which entails cutting fresh wood of a certain species from the surrounding forests - the Old-Traditionalists of Law-ja

have, since the early 1990s, relied upon more permanent gates and human figures constructed out of concrete rather than wood (see figure 5.5 below; Li 2013:74-78; Wang 2013:100-102).

Traditionalist Akha generally bound off and thereby protect their villages from their surroundings by way of anywhere from two to four village gates of varying degrees of significance depending on their positioning on higher or lower ground and orientation towards either the east or west. The particular number of gates varies depending on sub-group affiliation and locality of residence. The Akha term for these gates, “lawn-kang” (*lanrkanq*), is composed of the root word “lawn” (*lanr*), meaning “fortified, bounded, protected.” The gates serve in demarcating the *inside*, human domain *within* the village from the *outside*, spirit domain *beyond* the village, thereby ensuring the proper flow of life giving energy towards rather than away from the inside (see Tooker 1988, 2012).

Law-ja’s Old-Traditionalists have further modified their ritual practices relating to the gates by annually renovating rather than reconstructing each gate along with their accompanying human figures (see figures 5.4 & 5.5 below). In Law-ja Village this particular rite entails the renovation of each respective gate in hierarchical fashion beginning with the upper gate (*dzanrhu lanrkanq*), followed by the lower gate (*dzanrdanq lanrkanq*), and culminating with the main gate (*garjawq lanrkanq*) (see Li 2013:74-75).<sup>74</sup> The all important figure of the “Village Leader” (*Dzoeqma*), moreover, leads the other male householders in each stage of the renovation. The description of Law-ja’s annual renewal of their village gates that follows is drawn primarily from my participation in and observation of the rite as carried out in May 2011.

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<sup>74</sup> The upper gate is located at the upper end of the village in the vicinity of the “Village Swing” (*Lavqceq*) and “Village Gathering Grounds” (*Daekhanq*). The lower gate, which is located at the lower end of the village, faces towards the west and the village cemetery. Villagers generally only pass through the latter gate en route to and from the cemetery to bury their deceased. Last, the main gate, which is located at a mid-point between the other two gates, is used more frequently by villagers exiting and entering the village. In contemporary Law-ja Village, however, a series of concrete roads bypass the older paths over which each of these gates are positioned around the village’s perimeter. As a result, the majority of traffic into, through and out of the village by foot, motorcycle, or truck, bypasses each of the gates.

Other scholars have translated the intra-village level position of Dzeu-ma (*Dzoeqma*) as “village founder-leader” (Kammerer 1986), “village founder-ruler” (Tooker 2012), and “traditional greater village chief” (Wang 2013:102). The position is a hereditary one wherein the religious and secular aspects of leadership are deeply intertwined. Of utmost importance, moreover, is that the hereditary lines of Dzeu-ma lack any kind of impurity in the form of unnatural or violent deaths and births as well as other taboo violations. In the context of modern nation states, however, the position of Dzeu-ma, which I have chosen to translate as Village Leader, has been variably supplanted, undermined or complemented by that of state appointed Village Heads. For example, in reference to 1980s north Thailand, Kammerer noted that:

“The Akha polity has a dual nature (that is implicit within customs): within a community the village founder-leader (Dzeu-ma) represents the ordinating principle of the village as microcosm, while the village headman links the village to the dominant political authorities in the region” (1989:277).

In terms of Law-ja’s annual renewal of the village gates, the Village Leader initiates the rite by leading the other villagers in first, trimming back any vegetation that has grown over the area since the previous year, second, removing and discarding all of the previous year’s ornamentals from the gate, human figures, and surrounding trees, third, cleansing the concrete gate and human figures with pure water (*ir/ur/eer-xawr*) brought from the village source of pure water (*ur/ir/eer-xawr lawrkhawvq*), and, fourth, redecorating the gate, human figures, and surrounding trees in turn with freshly cut and carved ornamentals made of wood and bamboo (see figures 5.4 and 5.5 below).

On a side note, other scholars have translated *ur/ir/eer-xawr lawrkhawvq* as “holy water well” (Wang 2013:106) or “sacred water source” (Tooker 2012:107). Tooker notes that the “village sacred water source” is a key source of “potency” linked to the “fertility of the village as a whole,” whether in relation to humans or rice (2012:107-108). Wang further notes that the

water from the “holy water well” is considered “holy” as it is believed to flow from the stream of the Supreme Ancestor God Mi-yae (*Aqpoeq Miqyaer Lawrgawv*).

Taking the form of either a natural spring or human-made well, each village’s source of pure water is generally located opposite from and upstream to the communal cemetery (Wang 2013:106). In addition, as in the case of numerous other communal rites, it is the Village Leader that initiates the annual rites that take place either at or in conjunction with the village source of pure water. For example, it is the Village Leader who initiates the annual rice sowing season in roughly May as the rains begin by purifying his household’s first rice seeds to be planted with pure water taken from the village source of pure water. Thereafter other households follow suit.



Figures 5.4 & 5.5: Figure 5.4 on the left is of the Village Leader (adorned a baseball cap) carrying out the final rite for inaugurating the lower gate by using a special machete to symbolically chop along the wooden crossbar placed along the ground beneath the gate from left to right three times. Figure 5.5 on the right is of the main gate following its renewal. Both photos taken by the author in May 2011.

We will now return to the previous discussion of Law-ja's annual renewal of the village gates. Shortly after the Village Leader initiates the rite of renewal by leading the other villagers in a number of acts as described above, he begins a series of additional acts that culminate in the inauguration of the new-old gate. First, he uses a special hoe to dig up a small amount of earth from the inner side of each gate post. In the meantime, one of the elders cuts and carves a roughly meter long wooden crossbar (*lanrkanq lanrbarr*) that is marked with charcoal in zigzag fashion and then positioned on the ground parallel to the gate's crossbar. Thereafter, the Village Leader takes a specially prepared branch and sweeps along the wooden crossbar on the ground from left to right three times. He then takes a special machete and symbolically chops along the same wooden crossbar from left to right three times (see figure 5.4 above). Finally, the Village Leader refills the small holes of earth that he had removed earlier from the inner side of each gate post. With the latter act, each gate is inaugurated and the group departs for the next respective gate until all three have been renewed.

In addition, while the Old-Traditionalists of Law-ja Village continue to maintain and carry out an annual rite of renewal in relation to their village source of pure water, some of them no longer rely solely upon the latter for gathering pure water for use in their household level rites. Rather, in recent years some of these households have elected to gather this pure water from the convenience of their own homes. An extensive network of blue colored PVC pipes now brings fresh spring water for drinking, cooking, and bathing directly to nearly all households in the village. In spite of the latter, however, more conservative Old-Traditionalists continue to rely solely upon the village source of pure water for gathering the pure water used in their household level rites. In their efforts to do as their Ancestors have done before them, Grandfather Law-gaw and Grandmother Shaman fall into the latter category of more conservative Old-Traditionalists.

#### 5.4 Ritual Invocations of the (Spirit) Owners and Fortune Readings

Before returning to Grandmother Shaman and Grandfather Law-gaw's observance of the New Year's Ancestral Offering, I want to discuss one additional communal level rite generally observed by not only Akha but also Hani Traditionalists residing throughout the Upper Mekong Region. This particular rite, the "Ritual Offering to the (Spirit) Owners of the Earth, Water, and Sky" (*Mirsanr Lawr-e*), is carried out annually on behalf of the village by male householders (see Lewis 1969a:256-261; Kammerer 1986:280-282; Li 2013:78-81; Wang 2013:104). The rite occurs towards the end of the dry season in roughly April-May, shortly after the annual renewal of the village gates. The "Ritual Offering to the (Spirit) Owners of the Earth, Water, and Sky" entails the sacrificial offering of a pig, hen, and cock along with certain other items to each of these (Spirit) Owners in order to ensure plentiful crops during the approaching growing season as the rainy season begins and preparations are made for cultivating upland rice.

This particular rite generally takes place just beyond the village gates in the surrounding forests within a small grove designated as the abode of the "(Spirit) Owner of the Earth" (*Mirsanr sanqcu*) and often demarcated around its perimeter by a bamboo fence. Within this grove, moreover, is an altar that is either used more permanently from one year to the next or dismantled and constructed anew onsite with freshly cut bamboo each year. In the case of Law-ja Village a new altar is constructed each year.

The main parts of the ritual process as they unfolded several days prior to the annual renewal of the village gates as described above - on May 6, 2011 to be precise - began with the gathering of some twenty male householders (mostly middle-aged and elderly) at the household of the Village Leader during the latter part of the morning. As in the case of numerous other communal and household level rites observed in Law-ja Village throughout the year, it was the

Village Leader who played the all important role of initiating most if not all of the main stages in the ritual process as further described below. Once all of the roughly twenty male householders (mostly middle-aged and elderly) had gathered at the Village Leader's household and assembled all of the necessary ritual paraphernalia, our group departed on foot for the "(Spirit) Owner of the Earth."

On this particular occasion, however, two outside Akha women - one from China and another from Thailand - were in our group, namely Mi-suo and Mi-sheu. Mi-suo and Mi-sheu were at the time involved to varying degrees in NADA's efforts to document the full round of Ancestral practices carried by the Traditionalists of Law-ja Village. The male elders had permitted them to join the ritual on the condition that they refrained from partaking of the communal meal that would be prepared later that morning at the abode of the "(Spirit) Owner of the Earth." The elders had accordingly arranged for a precooked meal to be brought from the village for the women instead.

Upon arrival at the grove the men intuitively separated into different divisions of labor. Some began to prepare an area to the side for cooking over a wood fire. Others began to clear the grove by cutting down unwanted branches, removing old debris, and dismantling the previous year's altar and ornaments. Yet others started cutting fresh bamboo for fashioning various items such as a new altar, chopsticks, small offering baskets, small bracelets, long dangling chains, and star-shaped symbols (*darlaer*) for placement around the grove and altar so as to demarcate the ceremonial space and ward off any malevolent spirits (see figure 5.6 below).<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Each of the following items were eventually placed on the new altar: four bamboo bracelets, three candles, four small pieces of flat tiles, three betel nuts, whole rice kernels, husked rice kernels, and some cotton. Two of the bamboo bracelets and flat tiles were painted with lime to represent silver pieces while the remaining two of each kind were left unpainted to represent gold pieces (see Li 2013:78).

Shortly after the main section of the altar was completed and while the grove was still being refurbished, several of the men worked together to sacrifice the pig, hen, and cock in turn in front of the altar by skillfully slitting the pig's jugular vein with a sharp knife and hitting the hen and cock over the head with a small but sturdy stick. Thereafter, the bodies of the lifeless animals were skillfully cut into different sections of meat subsequently prepared along with various spices as part of the meal to both be offered to the "(Spirit) Owners of the Earth, Water, and Sky" as well as partaken of by the ritual participant-laborers. Just prior to each sacrifice, however, one of the men poured a small amount of pure water that had been gathered earlier that morning from the village source of pure water over the knife's blade, stick, and body of each animal. This act of purification was done exactly three times on the then struggling bodies of the pig, hen, and cock in turn.

The numeral nine, moreover, as a common multiple of three is especially auspicious in the Traditionalist Akha context and pervades much of the ritual process in terms of practice and symbolism. For example, as part of the reconstruction of the altar to the (Spirit) Owner of the Earth, a male elder carefully carved and constructed a small bamboo ladder with exactly nine steps that was positioned from the ground to the top of the altar (see figure 5.8 below). The Akha word for nine, "*ghoeq*," has the additional meaning of "fully enclosed and protected" (Wang 2013:101; Li 2013:77). It is important to stress, moreover, that this emphasis on the common multiples of three as well as the numerals of three and nine, in particular, is found among a diverse range of upland and lowland peoples residing throughout Mainland Southeast Asia.

As a small group of men prepared the meal off to one side, however, the others engaged in two activities that afforded them a glimpse into their collective fortunes during the coming agricultural year. First, several elders gathered around and carefully examined the liver of the

freshly killed pig. In particular, they considered and consulted with each other as to the liver's size, coloration and texture. After several minutes of deliberations they announced to the larger group that the liver reading was positive and that they would experience good fortunes in the coming year.

Shortly thereafter, the right thigh bones or femurs of the hen and cock respectively were brought to the elders for examination by way of placing toothpick sized bamboo sections into the naturally occurring holes in the bones and then comparing the angles at which the bamboo sections ran outward from each. The results of this reading were similarly positive, albeit in relation to the particular domain of hunting. These readings left everyone in good spirits.



Figures 5.6 & 5.7: Figure 5.6 on the left is a photo of some of the men engaged in various kinds of work to prepare the altar and surrounding grove for making their annual offering to the “(Spirit) Owners of the Earth, Water, and Sky.” Figure 5.7 on the right is a photo of the village’s senior Ritual Reciter, Pi-ma Geu (far left), and Knowledgeable Eder (*Khavma*), A-baw Ha (middle), directing their rather young Village Leader (lower right hand side) as he places various kinds of food and drink offerings on the altar for the (Spirit) Owners. Both photographs were taken by the author.

As in the case of other communal and household level ceremonies carried according to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, moreover, the Village Leader initiated various aspects of the

ritual process. For example, it was the Village Leader who tied the very first ornamentals onto various parts of the newly constructed altar and surrounding trees after which other villagers followed suit. It was also the Village Leader who placed various food and drink offerings on the altar throughout the rite and initiated the communal meal by partaking of the first bite (see figure 5.7 above).<sup>76</sup> Just prior to the Village Leader's initiation of the meal, however, Pi-ma Geu, Law-ja's senior most Ritual Reciter, directed a few words to the (Spirit) Owners represented by three human-shaped paper figures draped over the top of the altar (see figure 5.8 below). Seated and facing the altar, Pi-ma Geu took a small piece of freshly cooked meat in his chopsticks and called out to the (Spirit) Owners of the Earth, Water, and Sky:

“We ask you to bring all good things to the village and the villagers,  
and take away all of the bad things.  
We ask that you keep us from getting ill,  
and that you bless our crops and livestock.  
We ask that you may cause the bad things to be good,  
and cause the good things to become even better”  
(personal communication, May 6, 2011; in Li 2013:79).

Following the meal, moreover, the men engaged in one final activity that afforded a further glimpse into their collective fortune during the coming agricultural year. First, several men gathered all of the used chopsticks and washed them off. Thereafter, several others began to arrange the chopsticks in pairs on the ground in an overlapping manner resembling a ladder (see figure 5.9 below). One man then began to count each pair by alternating between the words “rice” (*hawq*) and “meat” (*xiq*), eventually ending on “meat” with the final pair. In contrast to the prior two auspicious readings, this particular reading was not so welcomed. Several of the men questioned whether the first man had counted correctly and proceeded to recount the pairs themselves, eventually ending on the same reading of “meat.”

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<sup>76</sup> The food and drink offerings placed on the altar in addition to the materials noted earlier included small portions of each of the freshly cooked meat dishes, precooked rice brought from the village, freshly brewed tea, and rice whiskey also brought from the village.

One gentleman then got the brilliant idea of counting all of the men that had actually partaken of the meal to see if that figure corresponded to the number of chopstick pairs. Shortly thereafter, it was discovered that one more pair of chopsticks had been counted than men, suggesting that the chopsticks of one of the two women present had been included by mistake. Thereafter, one of the chopstick pairs was removed and Pi-ma Geu proceeded to tally up the final count, ending on “rice” to the relief as well as laughter of everyone present. “Rice” was interpreted as the more auspicious reading given its centrality to both the diet as well as Ways of the Akha Ancestors.



Figures 5.8 & 5.9: Figure 5.8 on the left is a photo of Pi-ma Geu calling upon the (Spirit) Owners prior to the group’s partaking of a communal meal. Aju records the event from just behind the altar as part of a then ongoing project jointly sponsored by NADA and the villagers to document their annual round of communal and household rites in visual, audio, and written form. In figure 5.9 on the right one of the men carefully counts each pair of chopsticks used in the communal meal as others watch.

### 5.5 Contested Readings of the (Spirit) Owners of the Earth, Water, and Sky in Ethnohistorical-Regional Perspective

Earlier Euro-American scholars' depictions of this particular rite are unanimous in attributing its origins among Akha to cultural diffusion from the Shan.<sup>77</sup> For example, in volume one of his 1969 publication, Ethnographic Notes on the Akhas of Burma, Paul Lewis writes:

“(The offering to the ‘lords and rulers of land and water’) is certainly borrowed from the Shans. Akhas all recognize this. They even tell me that it used to be they just joined the Shans in this offering, and contributed money and liquor as their share in it. One of the men from Ba<sup>h</sup> jeh<sup>h</sup> village told me that it was during his grandfather’s time that the Akhas started doing it on their own. To this day, however, there are some Akhas who make the offering completely in Shan. There are others who call the ‘lords and rulers’ in Shan, and then switch to Akha for the actual offering...” (1969a:256-257).

Other scholars such as Geusau and Kammerer have noted the peculiarities of this particular rite when compared to the plethora of other rites carried out according to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors (Geusau 1983:250; Kammerer 1986:281). It is important to note that Geusau and Kammerer worked primarily among Akha of the U-lo sub-group in post-1980s north Thailand.

In particular, Geusau and Kammerer have noted that, in seeming contradiction to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, the Akha whom they observed carrying out the ritual removed their turbans, bowed their heads three times, and placed their palms together in the conventional Thai gesture of respect (to “wai” in Thai) when offering their words of invocation to the “(Spirit) Owners” (Geusau 1983:250; Kammerer 1986:281). Geusau further argues that these invocations, which, “are in either Shan or Thai...clearly acknowledge (either Shan or) Thai political power over (the) territory” in which Akha have resettled as a result of their historical migrations (Geusau 1983:250; Kammerer 1986:281).

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<sup>77</sup> The Shan are a largely Buddhist, Tai language speaking group who reside mainly in east Myanmar, north Thailand, and southwest China. Myanmar’s 1989 population census estimated the number of Shan at 2.8 million (Takatani 2007:182).

These observations, however, do not fit with my own as described above in relation to the ritual practices of Traditionalist Akha villagers of the Loi-mi subgroup in contemporary north Thailand (see also Li 2013:81). In short, at no point during the ritual process did any of the latter villagers remove their hats, bow their heads, “wai” in Thai fashion, or speak in either Shan or Thai languages. Ayoe, moreover, strongly disagrees with both Lewis’ assertion as well as Geusau’s and Kammerer’s suggestions that the Akha “Ritual Offering to the (Spirit) Owners of the Earth, Water, and Sky” was at some point in the past borrowed wholesale from the Shan. In refuting these claims Ayoe stresses first and foremost that many non-Akha Hani in contemporary southwest China continue to practice this rite in much the same manner as Akha in other parts of the region and yet in the absence of any historical or contemporary exchanges with either Shan or other Tai speaking groups such as the Dai Lue who are simply not present in non-Akha Hani dominated areas.

This historical fact coupled with the discrepancies noted above in terms of the actual ritual practices of different Akha sub-groups in Thailand let alone other parts of the region has led Ayoe and me to conclude that while Akha and Hani throughout the region have long observed this particular rite, different communities have gone about adapting and modifying it in divergent ways depending on the particular political and economic contexts in which they have gone about constructing their life worlds. Ayoe further attributes the aforementioned (mis)interpretations of Akha ritual life to the tendency for scholars to generalize about THE Akha on the basis of their engagements with specific communities positioned in particular places and times.

## 5.6 Carrying the Ancestral Burden (continued): Grandfather Law-gaw's and Grandmother Shaman's New Year's Ancestral Offering

The particular Ancestral offering that Mi-suo and I would be experiencing at Grandfather Law-gaw's home later that morning in late December was one of a series of two offerings made within a space of several days in conjunction with the transition from the old to new year.<sup>78</sup> The offering that we would experience that particular morning would mark the end of the old year. A few days later another offering would be made to mark the beginning of the new year and the collective birthday of everyone in the village. While observing these rites, moreover, the villagers are generally expected to remain within the village gates and thereby refrain from working in their fields located beyond the village gates.

These offerings are part of a series of twelve annual offerings made by male householders at the foot of their Ancestral altars.<sup>79</sup> While the offerings take place at the level of individual households, they are synchronized at the village level by a council of elders who decide upon the

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<sup>78</sup> The first offering during the New Year's Ancestral Service also marks the end of the farming or rice cultivation-harvest season, which generally runs from sometime in May-June to November-December, roughly paralleling the beginning and end of the rainy season. The second and final offering further marks the beginning of the non-farming season of relative leisure when various ceremonial activities pertaining to the "living living" may be carried out, including marriages and new housewarmings. Traditionalist Akha, moreover, divide a year into two periods pertaining to the spatial domains of the "inside" (*lavq nyir*) and "outside" (*lavq khoer*) respectively. The "inside" domain pertains to the realm of the "living living" within both the village gates and also their agricultural fields, all of which are associated with life giving forces and fertility. In contrast, the "outside" domain pertains to the realm of the "invisible spirits" (*naevq*) located beyond the village gates in all surrounding areas other than villagers' agricultural fields, all of which are associated with potentially dangerous and life draining forces (see Tooker 2012:157-214; Wang 2013:87-88, 152-153). Akha ritual practices, moreover, are fundamentally oriented towards maintaining the spatial and temporal boundaries between these two domains so as to ensure the retention and proper flow of life giving energy (*geeqlanq*) on the "inside" (see Tooker 1988, 2012). The transition between these two domains is marked more precisely by the carrying out of two Ancestral Services other than the New Year's Ancestral Service. First, the "Rice Sowing Ancestral Service" (*Caerka Aqpoeq lawr-e*), which occurs at the very beginning of the rainy season in roughly May-June, marks the transition to the "outside" domain and a period of intense agricultural labor and fertility. Thereafter, the "Rice Flowering Ancestral Service" (*Karyaev Aqpoeq lawr-e*), which occurs during the early part of the dry season in roughly October-November, marks the transition to the "inside" domain and a period of relative leisure. As Wang has noted, however, since the agricultural work is not entirely finished until all of the crops, especially rice, have been harvested, appropriately dried, and safely stored, the "inside" period does not fully begin until after the New Year's Ancestral Service in roughly December (2013:152-153).

<sup>79</sup> It is generally agreed that Old-Traditionalists make either twelve or nine offerings to their Ancestors per Akha calendrical year. Whether the annual round of Ancestral offerings is noted as either twelve or nine depends upon how one counts each of the actual offerings as three of the nine Ancestral Services involve the making of two separate offerings.

auspicious day for their Village Leader (*Dzoeqma*) to initiate the offerings by carrying out his household's Ancestral offering. Thereafter other households follow suit. There is some variation, however, in terms of both the design of Ancestral altars as well as their associated ritual practices at the levels of households and clans.

In addition, different kinds of Ancestral offerings are supposed to be made on particular animal days considered more auspicious than others. The indigenous Akha calendar is organized around a cycle of twelve animal days and years with some regional variation in terms of the kinds of animals (Kammerer 1986:255-256; Wang 2013:313).<sup>80</sup> It is on the auspicious day of the water buffalo, moreover, that villagers generally make the first of their two New Year's Ancestral Offerings. It is not uncommon, furthermore, for village-level councils of elders to initiate their particular village's observance of the New Year's Ancestral Offerings one or more cycles of the twelve animal days prior to or after that of other nearby or distant villages so as to allow them to participate in each other's communal festivities. These translocal practices reflect a distinctly Akha religio-political cosmopolitanism characterized by multiple and shifting regional networks of communication and exchange whereby Akha have long asserted and shaped their collective identities on a variety of spatial scales ranging from the local to transregional.

As Mi-suo and I walked down and then up to Grandfather Law-gaw's home along a shape-shifting path snaking through various sections of the village – first, a concrete road just wide enough for a single truck to pass and then a narrow walking path made of dirt leading to a small bamboo bridge traversing a tranquil mountain stream, and, finally, a wider concrete road – we noticed that most of the other villagers in this particular section of the village were still at home. As we passed the home of Younger Brother A-sawn (*Aqnyir Arsanq*) at the bottom of the

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<sup>80</sup> The sequence of animals includes the dragon or rabbit (*lanq*), termite or ~ferrit (*xaer*), horse (*manq*), sheep (*yawr*), monkey (*myovq*), rooster/chicken (*ha/gha/za*), dog (*keeq*), pig (*ghavq/zavq*), rat or rodent (*ho*), buffalo (*nyoq*), tiger (*khaqlaq*), and rabbit or mule (*tanqlav*).

steep concrete road, we encountered a small group of young men - A-sawn's relatives and peers - seated around a table merrily drinking whiskey while eating mountain rice and various dishes prepared from the meat of a small black colored pig that they had slaughtered earlier that morning.<sup>81</sup>

A-sawn excitedly called us over to their gathering and began pouring shots of whiskey for Mi-suo and me. As we approached the party I asked A-sawn, "Have you finished making your Ancestral offering?" He replied, "My Grandfather did so earlier this morning" (personal communication, December 24, 2011). After struggling to down two shots of the fiery liquid, we managed to convince a slightly inebriated A-sawn that we had to leave for now but would surely be back before the end of the day.

On any other day of the year when the Ways of the Akha Ancestors were not being observed, most of these villagers would have left their homes for their coffee fields in the case of working age adults or the local elementary school in the case of children between the ages of roughly six and fourteen. The elders would remain at home to look after their pre-school aged grandchildren and carry out various kinds of work such as weaving baskets, drying seeds, pickling vegetables, and feeding chickens and pigs. In other adjacent and yet clearly bounded sections of the village where most residents had discarded the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and "gone down to and taken on" Christianity in its either Protestant-Baptist or Catholic form, villagers were expected to refrain from work beyond the village on Sundays and attend the communal services taking place outside their homes in their particular church of affiliation. The movement of the latter groups of villagers, dressed in their working clothes, throughout the

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<sup>81</sup> On a side note, during fieldwork in various parts of the Akha World I gradually came to learn and experience firsthand that the closely related Ways of the Akha Ancestors and the Akha palate prefer black colored pigs over pigs of any other shade or coloration. To some extent, moreover, this preference for raising, consuming and ritually offering black colored pigs to the Ancestors serves as an ethnic boundary marker in relation to lowland, Dai speaking Buddhists in the region who Akha perceive as preferring white/pink colored pigs.

village as they traveled by foot, motorbike or truck to and from their fields throughout the day, distinctly marked them as Christians no longer either bound or defined by the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and hence as separate and apart from the Traditionalists who remained at home.

As we approached the gated entrance to the large compound where Grandfather Law-gaw, Grandmother Shaman and various members of their extended family resided in separate households, we met Grandmother Shaman, who, decked out in her finest Akha wardrobe, was cleaning and hosing down various sections of the large concrete yard and car park located in the center of the compound. In her usual fashion, she greeted us and then continued her work, shortly thereafter joining us on the second story veranda of their home where we sat around a table chatting with Grandfather Law-gaw over steaming hot tea. Grandfather Law-gaw was similarly dressed in his finest Akha wardrobe.

Just prior to joining us, however, Grandmother Shaman vanished into the home for a quick second, after which she reappeared with a plastic bag of various items used in either smoking tobacco or chewing betel nut. She removed a long and narrow bamboo pipe with a clay bowl from the bag and placed a small amount of tobacco into it. She then called to one of her daughter-in-laws who brought out a plastic lighter by which she lit her mother-in-law's pipe. I later noticed, however, that, unlike the other extended family members, this particular daughter-in-law refrained from partaking of the Ancestral offering-food (*Aqpoeq lawrdzaq*) that Grandfather Law-gaw offered to their Ancestors later that morning. Not wanting to inquire as to what was surely a sensitive issue, I assumed that their daughter-in-law had refrained from doing so on account of being Catholic, and hence forbidden to either participate in the rituals or partake of the ritual offerings of non-Christians.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> The daughter-in-law's decision to assist her in-laws in making various kinds of preparations for their Ancestral offering and yet refrain from either being present during the offering or partaking of the offering reflects at a deeper

Shortly thereafter Grandfather Law-gaw vanished into the home and returned with his own pipe – consisting of a much larger, conspicuous metal pipe attached to a bowl carved out of a dried tuber root – albeit merely for show rather than use. Sometime after finishing her pipe, Grandmother Shaman decided that it was time to begin the preparations for making their Ancestral offering. Their Catholic daughter-in-law subsequently moved to the inside of the home and the kitchen where she began to rebuild a wood fire over the hot coals in the cooking hearth consisting of a square area of earth marked from the rest of the room by a wooden frame. A round, iron cooking tripod was positioned over the hearth to hold various cooking pots and pans.

On a previous occasion several elders had informed us that a certain amount of the earth forming the base of their cooking hearths had been brought from the hearths of their Ancestors' villages going all the way back to the time of Ja-dae (*Jadae*) when all Akha lived as one in their Ancestral homeland. In this way, we were told, they had long maintained a direct connection with their Ancestral homeland. We also learned that for more practical purposes the coals in the hearth of each household are never allowed to completely die out so that a cooking fire can be easily restarted by adding new wood and blowing on the coals.<sup>83</sup>

As Grandmother Shaman gradually began to go about various preparations for making their Ancestral offering she first removed from her feet the black, factory made rubber sandals that she had previously been wearing to buffer her feet from late December's crisp morning air.

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level a reconceptualization of the social wherein clearly delineated boundaries have been drawn between the religious (taboo) and cultural (permissible) dimensions of social life – a reconceptualization grounded equally in language and praxis that is a historical product of the Christian conversion process. Mi-suo later told me, however, that on a previous occasion when we had visited in private with their Grandmother Shaman's daughter-in-law at her home located beyond her in-laws' village on the outskirts of the lowland, urban center of Chiang Rai, she had informed Mi-suo that when she was in her in-laws' village she followed them in adhering to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and that when she was beyond their village she followed the Catholic Ways according to her upbringing in a different village in nearby east Myanmar.

<sup>83</sup> On a side note, in one of his early textual reproductions of Akhaness, Prosperous One, the charismatic Neo-Traditionalist prophet and reformer discussed earlier in chapters one and two, refers to the three legs of the round, iron cooking tripod found in the hearths of nearly all Akha homes in the region as symbolic of first, the "Akha People" or "Ethnic group" (*Aqkaq Tsawrjeq*), second, the "Akha Religion" (*Aqkaq Ghanr*), and, third, the "Akha Language" (*Aqkaq Dawq*) (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion [MATA] 2010).

She later explained that throughout the entire process of preparing, making and partaking of the Ancestral offerings, “we do as our Ancestors have done before us,” a part of which involved not only “doing” but also “being like the Ancestors” in the tangible sense of wearing neither socks nor shoes. Grandfather Law-gaw later explained, “Our Ancestors had neither of these to wear” (personal communication, December 24, 2011).<sup>84</sup> At another point as she turned down an offer of hot steaming tea from Mi-suo, Grandmother Shaman explained that this state of “being” as the Ancestors further entailed refraining from food and drink until having partaken of the Ancestral offerings.<sup>85</sup>

As her daughter-in-law stoked the fire in the cooking hearth, Grandmother Shaman began to gather a variety of items for use in preparing and making the offerings that would not be ready in their entirety for another one and a half hours or so. Three long, dried gourds of various sizes and blackened on the exterior from many years of use stood off to the side of the hearth. As noted earlier, the numeral three is an auspicious number pervading much of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. These gourds were filled to the brim with pure water that Grandmother Shaman and Grandfather Law-gaw would use to purify each of the items used in preparing their Ancestral offerings. Much earlier that morning, Grandmother Shaman, like numerous other middle-aged and elderly Old-Traditionalist women in the village, had carried these then empty gourds in an intricately woven bamboo basket positioned over her upper back down to the

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<sup>84</sup> I must admit, however, a certain degree of ambiguity on my part as to exactly when, how, where and with whom the ritual process surrounding Ancestral offerings began and ended. For example, the actual preparations for making the offering had begun much earlier that morning as Grandmother Shaman and various other women in the village walked to the village source of pure water to collect pure water for use in the ritual. Moreover, for the remainder of the day or so following the feeding of the Ancestors and inside household members as explained below, male and female householders continue to feed their remaining Ancestral offerings to outside relatives and guests that visit from other villages and locales near and far.

<sup>85</sup> It is important to note here, however, that many Akha, particularly Old-Traditionalists, tend not to distinguish either temporally or spatially between “doing” and “not doing” as the Ancestors have done before them as might be expected from a Euro-American derived notion of the binaries between both the religious and secular as well as traditional and modern. Rather, in this particular case, it is more accurate to say that there are certain times and places wherein a greater, more concentrated effort is made to do as the Ancestors have done to the greatest extent possible, particularly in relation to Ancestral Services

village source of pure water where she filled each gourd to the brim with pure water and then returned back up to her home with a much heavier load.

The very first task that Grandmother Shaman now went about was continuing to prepare the upland rice seed (*caer*) that would subsequently be transfigured by first, the application of fire, water and air into pure, steamed rice (*hawq xawr*), and, thereafter, pounded and shaped by human hands into rice cakes (*hawq tanq*). This rice seed, in the transfigured forms of pure, steamed rice and rice cakes would occupy a prominent position in the Ancestral offering alongside of tea with ginger (*lawrbawq*), fermented rice whiskey (*jirba*), and select pieces of cooked meat from a freshly slaughtered chicken (*yacivq*). On this particular day, moreover, Grandmother Shaman prepared the rice via a much older, more involved, and slower method that has in recent years been largely replaced by the use of factory made electric rice cookers from transnational companies such as Toshiba.

Grandmother Shaman's preparations to transfigure the rice seed first began the night before when she had left it to soak overnight in pure water obtained from the village source of pure water on an earlier occasion. She now used a ladle constructed out of a dried gourd to pour pure water from one of the gourd water vessels into a large, metal pot that was deeply blackened on the outside from years of use. She then placed the pot on the iron cooking tripod over a now crackling wood fire. She was careful, moreover, to first, purify each and every item used in preparing the offerings by pouring pure water over them while wiping them with her bare hands. As the morning wore on, the wooden floor boards surrounding the cooking hearth became increasingly soaked and darkened with this cleansing and purifying water.

Next, Grandmother Shaman purified a wooden rice steaming bowl with a porous bottom into which she placed the rice seed from the night before, now soaked through and through with

pure water. She firmly secured the bowl over top of the metal pot on the cooking tripod by applying a cotton cloth around the lower edges so as to prevent steam from escaping rather than traveling upwards towards the rice seed. Last, an intricately woven bamboo basket was securely fashioned over top of the bowl and the entire apparatus was left to do its work. Some thirty minutes or so later she would return to the hearth to remove some of the still steaming rice in order to prepare pounded rice cakes, the pounding of which would be done by Grandfather Law-gaw outside of the home by use of a large wooden mortar and pestle as described below.

Meanwhile, Grandmother Shaman turned her attention towards the task of purifying a number of additional items that would play various roles in preparing the offerings. The latter items included a small wooden mortar to be used in grinding down black sesame seed and white rice seed as part of preparing the pounded rice cakes that would be made later in the morning as well as a large, round bamboo winnowing tray to be used in shaping and then holding the latter. As she doused each of these items with pure water and wiped them with her hands, her daughter-in-law entered the kitchen and added several pieces of wood to the fire.

Next, Grandmother Shaman entered the main body of the house located immediately adjacent to the kitchen and accessible via a nearly always open doorway. The second floor of the home was divided into two equally sized rooms by way of a wooden dividing wall covering roughly two-thirds of the room's width. This wall divided the home into the separate sleeping quarters of Grandfather Law-gaw and Grandmother Shaman respectively. The room immediately adjacent to the kitchen and furthest from the front entrance was where Grandmother Shaman slept on a raised bed consisting of an elevated frame and mattress placed just in front of and some three feet or so below the Ancestral altar (*Aqpoeq pawvqlawvq*) (see figure 5.10 below).

The dark brownish wooden walls and edges of Grandmother Shaman's side of the home's interior were nearly completely covered with a colorful collage of items either hung from the wall on nails or resting on the floor adjacent to the wall. Moreover, the floor itself, consisting of wooden beams running parallel to each other, was laminated with a plastic sheet emblazoned with a blue and white colored pattern of triangular and circular shapes – so as to block the chilled winter winds that normally circulate through the small gaps in the floor boards, this being even more so the case in the less commonly found homes with bamboo floor boards and walls.

These items, far too many to identify in full, included numerous jackets and bags – both traditional Akha-style shoulder bags and modern synthetic backpacks – hanging from numerous nails along the walls; a diverse collection of plastic, bamboo, and rattan baskets storing items such as medicinal herbs and pharmaceuticals, sewing tools and fabric, as well as betel nut and tobacco; a collection of mostly black colored clothes and bright blue and pink colored bath towels hanging from a string running parallel to a small section of the wall; and last, a yellow medium-sized plastic container and large reused synthetic sack of animal feed sitting along the floor in one corner, each filled to the brim with various items. A number of the items hung throughout the room formed the tool box of Grandmother Shaman's Shamanic trade.

Upon close examination, however, one could decipher a hierarchical spatial arrangement wherein the latter seemingly chaotic arrangement of items was spatially marked off from a number of items associated more directly with the Ancestral cult as centered on the Ancestral altar. For example, the Ancestral altar, chair and miniature table were all hung at higher vertical positions along the walls than most of the other items. Moreover, the section of the wall where the Ancestral altar was positioned was left free of any other items with the exception of an indigo dyed shoulder bag holding various items used in preparing the Ancestral offering-meal. The

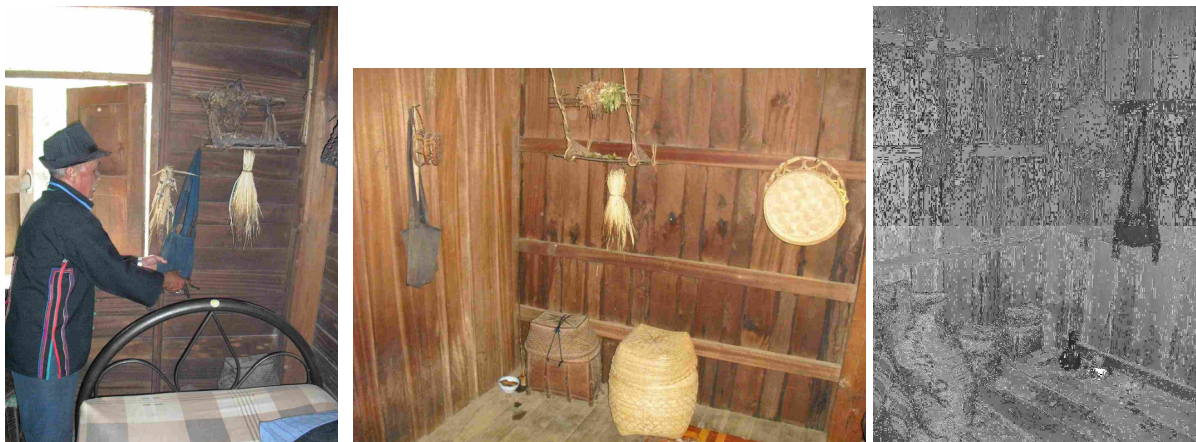
household's large rattan woven Ancestral basket and its smaller companion were further positioned along the edge of the room just below and adjacent to the Ancestral altar. Each of these items, which are directly associated with the Ancestral cult, were further set apart from the others by virtue of being used exclusively in preparing and offering the Ancestral meal.

The Ancestral altar, as in the case of other Old-Traditionalist households, was positioned in the more interior side of the home associated with women, furthest from the more exterior side of the home associated with men and located adjacent to the main entrance (see Tooker 1988, 2012; Kammerer 1986, 1998).<sup>86</sup> Moreover, in the case of extended households the oldest male and female members sleep closest to the dividing wall on their particular side and hence the Ancestral altar – with the eldest female member, in this particular case Grandmother Shaman, sleeping directly below and to the front of the Ancestral altar. Generally speaking, these household members are responsible for making offerings to the Ancestors on behalf of their other members.

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<sup>86</sup> Tooker (1988, 2012) and Kammerer (1986, 1998) have elaborated on the gendered dimensions of Ancestral offerings and the positioning of the Ancestral altar among different Akha sub-groups in north Thailand. For example, Tooker notes that, “the inside/outside distinction is also related to a gender distinction. The ancestral shrine is located on the female side of the central partition. This may strike some as unusual since the Akha are patrilineal. This location is appropriate, however, in that it is the most ‘inside’ (interior) part of the house, females being connected with inside-ness more than males in some oppositional contexts, as has been noted for other parts of Southeast Asia...In fact, the female side, the most internal of the two sides, is called the ‘main house’ side (*nymrma pawvq*), paralleling a similar Northern Thai usage. Opposite the ancestral shrine, on the male side, is the place where hunting rituals take place. Being an activity of the forest, hunting is an ‘outside’ activity...When outside visitors enter an Akha house, they enter the male chamber, not the female chamber...Patrilineality of the ancestral shrine is not the determining factor in its location...This structuring has more to do with gender oppositions than it has to do with the nature of the descent system. The association of males with ‘outsideness’ reflects their social roles as members of Akha society who deal with outsiders (non-Akha and Akha from other villages)” (2012:129,141-143).

## 5.7 The Ancestral Cult



Figures 5.10, 5.11 & 5.12: Figure 5.10 on the left is of Grandfather Law-gaw standing next to his household's Ancestral altar located just above Grandmother Shaman's bed on the female side of the home's interior. Figure 5.11 in the middle is of the Ancestral cult from another household of the same clan (Sae-du) and village as Grandfather Law-gaw. Figure 5.12 on the right is of the Ancestral cult from another household from the same village and yet different clan (Weu-zeu [*Ghoeqzeeq*]). All photos were taken by the author.

As briefly noted earlier, some variation exists among members of different Akha supra- and sub-clans as to the spatial positioning and design of Ancestral altars. For example, members of the Ajaw supra-clan, who reside predominantly in Xishuangbanna (Sipsongbanna), China, (have) maintained a single Ancestral altar at the village level in the households of senior members of particular clans who carry out Ancestral offerings on behalf of their junior clan members. In general, however, during the early periods of Communist collectivization (1950s) and especially later during the Cultural Revolution (1960s and 1970s), the Ancestral altars of many Akha in southwest China were forcibly dismantled and destroyed as part of a state driven effort to eradicate what were and to a large extent continue to be seen as the superstitious customs of primitive non-Han minorities (Wang 2013:75,202). Nevertheless, I learned of a number of cases wherein households were able to either hide their Ancestral altars from the gaze of local authorities, many of whom were their fellow Akha villagers, or continue carrying out

Ancestral offerings in secretive fashion and often in spite of being forced to destroy their actual altar.

In contrast to the Ajaw supra-clan, members of the Jeu-weu (*Jeqghoe*) supra-clan, which have formed the dominant supra-clan in Thailand and Myanmar, have generally maintained Ancestral altars at the level of each and every individual household. As members of the Jeu-weu supra-clan, Grandfather Law-gaw and Grandmother Shaman as well as their fellow Old-Traditionalist villagers have adhered to the latter spatial positioning of Ancestral altars in a more diffuse as well as de-centralized manner when compared with members of the Ajaw supra-clan. However, we later came to learn that at the time of our field work the household of one of Grandfather Law-gaw's younger sons, who was married to a Thai woman from the northeast of Thailand, had not yet established their own Ancestral altar and were rather sharing the altar of Grandfather Law-gaw and Grandmother Shaman.

At the sub-clan level, moreover, variation exists in terms of the actual design of Ancestral altars which carries over in part to Ancestral practices in a more pragmatic manner (see Tooker 2012:127).<sup>87</sup> For example, the Sae-du and Weu-zeu sub-clans comprise a majority of the Old-Traditionalist households in Grandfather Law-gaw's village. The Ancestral altars of Weu-zeu clan members have consisted of a single bamboo section attached parallel to either the wall on a slight diagonal tilt in the case of the more common homes with wooden walls and tiled roofs or the rafter in the increasingly less common case of homes with bamboo walls and grass thatch roofs (see figure 5.12 above). The Ancestral cult of Weu-zeu clan members appears to be similar to that as described for members of the U-lo sub-group more generally by Kammerer:

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<sup>87</sup> Elsewhere, Tooker has noted that, "There is sublineage variation in the form of ancestral shrine, either a long cylindrical bamboo section (*jm banq*) or a flat bamboo shelf (*jm geer*). In some sublineages, the 'shelf' form can only be erected if the household has a (Ya-yae A-ma) or 'fertility mother.' In others, it may be erected without such a figure in the household" (2012:127).

“Each ancestor offering is made at the ancestor cult center in the women’s half of the house...(T)his tripartite center includes the ancestor bamboo section, the ancestor basket, and the husked rice container considered the ‘companion’ to the ancestor basket. The ancestor paraphernalia is stored in a drawstring cloth sack or shoulder bag either in the ancestor basket or tied to a rafter above that basket. These items include a miniature woven table, a small stool, and five tiny cups for ‘ancestor offering food.’ As Lewis (1982:92) observes, the ancestor basket holds at least one bamboo tube of fermented rice for liquor. In addition, a capped gourd containing rice seeds for ceremonial first planting is stored inside the basket. During part of the year, this basket also houses the ‘pillow of leaves from the si-ma tree,’ which figures in the yearly rice rituals” (Kammerer 1986:155,161).

Grandfather Law-gaw’s altar was similar in design to that of the members of the Sae-du clan from which Grandfather Law-gaw descended and to which Grandmother Shaman was linked via marriage along with more than 100 other households in their village. Their altar consisted of a simple bamboo platform roughly square in shape oriented perpendicular from the wall and supported by two bamboo pieces on each side running diagonally upwards to a bamboo support beam attached to the wall (see figures 5.10 & 5.11 above). A small section of a dried and darkening leafy branch from the beu-seu tree (*boeqsoev arbawr*), a tree of great ceremonial significance for Akha, hung from the latter support beam, draping down over part of the platform (see Lewis 1989:84).<sup>88</sup>

A dried bundle of rice stalks prominently hung from underneath the platform, parallel to the wall. The brilliant and yet slowly fading golden hue of the bundle of rice stalks attested to its recent renewal at the Ancestral altar complex during the previous Ancestral offering when the Ancestors were fed the first of the annual rice crop harvested by the household from their upland rice plot. The latter “Eating of the New Rice Ancestral Offering” (*Caerxeevqdzaq-e*) was briefly

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<sup>88</sup> The presence of this leafy branch from the beu-seu tree was an indication that at some point in the past a Ritual Reciter had carried out some sort of ceremony at the foot of their Ancestral altar, during part of which the branch, then vibrantly green, had been attached to the altar so as to purify the latter.

described earlier in chapter four.<sup>89</sup> In reference to these bundles of rice stalks, Tooker has argued that:

“The main component of the ancestral section...is the bundle of rice stalks preserved from each harvest year after year. The Akha draw a parallel between the fertility and continuity of the family ‘line’ and the fertility and continuity of the line of rice seeds. Indeed, there is a sense in which Akha society can be considered one that practices a rice cult since it’s most important rituals are carried out here” (2012:129).

A number of additional items comprising the Ancestor cult center in Grandmother Shaman’s household were stored throughout various parts of the female side of the house, variably surrounding the Ancestral altar. For example, a small bamboo container of fermented rice (*jirba jirsiq*) was kept in the Ancestral basket (see Lewis 1989:22). The latter is prepared anew each year in conjunction with the “New Rice Ancestral Offering” (*Hawqxeevq Aqpoeq lawr-e*). In addition, a thin bamboo straw (*jirba jirtevr*) was stored in an indigo-dyed cotton shoulder bag hung by a nail from the wall just below and to the right of the Ancestral altar (see Lewis 1989:222). This straw would later be used to first, suck up pure water to mix with the fermented rice, and, then, suck up the resulting fermented rice whiskey for offering to the Ancestors.

Moreover, two intricately woven rattan baskets of differing size were positioned on the floor just below the altar. The larger of the two baskets, referred to as the Ancestor basket, is generally used to store a number of items such as a “miniature woven table, a small stool, and five tiny cups” for holding the Ancestral offering food (*Aqpoeq lawrdzaq*) as noted above by Kammerer (1986:155). The smaller of the two baskets, referred to as the companion to the Ancestor basket, generally holds the first husked rice from the household’s most recent rice

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<sup>89</sup> Like most of the villagers in Law-ja at present, Grandfather Law-gaw’s extended family has planted the majority of their agricultural fields with the lucrative cash crop of coffee. Like most other Old-Traditionalist villagers, moreover, they have nevertheless continued to cultivate a very small plot of upland rice amidst their expansive coffee bushes for exclusive use in various rites related to rice and Ancestral offerings (see figure 5.2 above).

harvest (Kammerer 1986:155). By the time Mi-suo and I had arrived at Grandmother Shaman's home to experience their Ancestral offering, Grandmother Shaman had already removed a number of the above items from the Ancestral basket such as the Ancestor's seat and table (*Aqpoeq lawrjae*), both of which she had subsequently hung by nails from the upper section of the wall adjacent to the wall on which the Ancestral altar was positioned.

### **5.8 Returning to the Ongoing Ritual Process**

Upon entering the female side of the home's interior as noted above, Grandmother Shaman carefully removed a number of items that had been stored either in various positions hanging from nails on the wooden walls or in one of several intricately woven rattan baskets positioned on the floor directly beneath the Ancestral altar and behind her bed. These items would later be used not in preparing but rather offering the Ancestral meal to the Ancestors. The items ranged from a small metal bowl for holding select pieces of boiled meat from a freshly killed chicken to two small porcelain cups for holding either tea with ginger or fermented rice whiskey, as well as two small bowls intricately woven from bamboo for holding either pure, steamed rice or pounded rice cakes.

All of these items of food and drink would form the meal offered first, to the Ancestors or "living dead," and, then, their descendants or the "living living." Grandmother Shaman brought all of the items for holding the Ancestral meal into the kitchen, laid them on the floor and proceeded to purify each of them in turn by applying pure water from the village source of pure water while washing them with her bare hands. Shortly after purifying each of the latter items, Grandmother Shaman carried them back into the adjacent female side of the home's interior where she placed them on a wooden platform suspended from the roof perpendicular to the

central partition and directly above the female hearth. These items would remain on the platform until the final preparations for feeding the Ancestors were completed.

Grandmother Shaman then carried out the same process of purification with a special seat and miniature table reserved for the Ancestors that she brought into the kitchen from the adjacent room housing the Ancestral altar. Next, she brought out and purified a miniature metal pitcher, blackened through and through on the exterior via the application of fire, into which she subsequently placed a small amount of dried tea, freshly cut ginger and pure water. She carefully placed the pitcher along the edge of the cooking tripod next to the large pot of steaming rice.

Grandmother Shaman then brought out a green plastic sprite bottle from which she poured some dried black sesame seed into a small metal cooking pot that she subsequently heated for several minutes by placing the pot directly on the fiery coals at the hearth. She then gathered a small wooden mortar and pestle set – purified earlier that morning – which she used to grind down and combine the now heated sesame seed along with some rice seed. Once the ingredients had attained a certain texture and been thoroughly mixed together, Grandmother Shaman called to Grandfather Law-gaw as she gathered a large winnowing tray onto which she dumped the now ground sesame-rice seed mixture. As Grandfather Law-gaw entered the kitchen from the adjacent covered porch where he had been sitting, drinking tea and chatting with various relatives and neighbors for most of the morning, Grandmother Shaman informed him that the steamed rice was now ready to be further transfigured into pounded rice.

After removing some of the steamed rice from the wooden rice steaming bowl, Grandmother Shaman handed the bowl with the remaining rice to Grandfather Law-gaw. She subsequently took down one of the two small bamboo holders from the raised platform above the hearth in the female side of the home, filled it with some of the remaining steamed rice and

placed it back on the platform. Meanwhile, Mi-suo and I followed Grandfather Law-gaw as he carried the steamed rice in the bowl into the second floor of the home, down the steps to the first floor and then outside to the open yard. As we emerged into the open yard we became the center of attention for various groups of individuals sitting, drinking tea, and chatting in various parts of the compound - including three of Grandfather Law-gaw's sons and daughter-in-laws, one of their daughters, some relatives visiting from other villages and several neighbors.

Grandfather Law-gaw began to remove small amounts of steamed rice from the wooden bowl, place it into a large wooden mortar, and repeatedly pound it with a large pestle, further transfiguring the soft, steamed rice into hard, pounded rice. The mortar that he used was carved out of the center of a large tree trunk roughly two feet in diameter and the pestle from a long tree branch some five feet in length. I stood just to the side of Grandfather Law-gaw taking photographs and some video footage of the next stage in the transfiguration of the rice to be offered initially, to the Ancestors, and, later, to their descendants.

As Grandfather Law-gaw pounded the steamed rice it became more and more thickened and viscous in consistency, increasingly sticking to the pestle and making it ever so difficult for him to continue lifting the pestle out of the mortar and pounding the rice. Grandfather Law-gaw's struggles, evinced by way of his ever slowing movements up and down with the pestle, elicited a gentle laughter on the part of all of us who were standing around watching from various vantage points. A moment later, Grandfather Law-gaw called aloud for Grandmother Shaman to come down from the kitchen as the first batch of pounded rice had reached the right consistency for further molding into rice cakes, a task which would fall on Grandmother Shaman and one of her daughters.

Grandmother Shaman momentarily emerged from the lower floor of the home, carrying the large circular winnowing tray onto which she had evenly spread the grounded mixture of black sesame and rice seed. Resting the winnowing tray on top of the tree trunk mortar, she began to remove clumps of the pounded rice that had adhered to the bottom of Grandfather Law-gaw's pestle with her bare hands. As she did so, however, she covered her hands in the grounded mixture of sesame and rice seed so that she could more easily remove the pounded rice as well as add some seasoning. This process whereby Grandfather Law-gaw pounded the steamed rice until properly thickened and then Grandmother Shaman removed the pounded rice onto the winnowing tray continued for several more cycles until all of the steamed rice had been transfigured into pounded rice.

Once completed, Grandmother Shaman carried the pounded rice on the winnowing tray back up and into the home where she subsequently sat just below and to the side of the Ancestral altar and began to mold the large mass of pounded rice into smaller, pancake-sized rice cakes with her bare hands. She set aside the very first rice cake that she made and placed it into a small bowl woven out of bamboo, which she subsequently placed on the wooden platform suspended from the roof just above the female hearth alongside of the four additional bowls and cups used to hold the various components of the Ancestral meal or offering in the making. Grandmother Shaman then called to Grandfather Law-gaw, who, after arriving at the hearth of the female side of the home, went about preparing the meat offering for the Ancestral meal.<sup>90</sup>

First, Grandfather Law-gaw kneeled at the female hearth and carefully poured some pure water from the smallest of the three gourd water vessels into a small metal bowl resting on the hearth. He then walked some six feet to the area just below and to the front of the Ancestral altar

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<sup>90</sup> Notice the association here of males with meat-hunting and females with vegetables-agriculture, further echoing that of males with the outside and females with the inside as elaborated on by Tooker (1988, 2012).

where he picked up a healthy, medium-sized hen with no physical abnormalities that had been placed there in a porous bamboo basket sometime earlier that morning, its legs securely fastened with thin bamboo ties. Holding the hen by its legs with his left hand, Grandfather Law-gaw returned to the hearth, picked up the small metal bowl of pure water with his free hand and proceeded to pour the water over the body of the hen three times. Thereafter he picked up a small sturdy stick with his right hand, stood to face the Ancestral altar, and quickly struck the hen over its head. Following a momentary fluttering of its wings the hen succumbed to the blow.

Grandfather Law-gaw then took the lifeless body of the hen to the inside of the kitchen where he sat down just next to the now open cooking tripod and hearth on a low stool made of rattan. As he did so, Grandmother Shaman brought out a section of a fresh green banana leaf which she placed on the wooden floor in front of Grandfather Law-gaw. She then brought out a small wooden cutting board and long metal knife with a wooden handle that she placed on top of the banana leaf.

Grandfather Law-gaw proceeded to cut off both of the hen's wings which were shortly thereafter hung from the bamboo drying-curing rack suspended from the ceiling roughly one and a half meters directly above the cooking hearth. When asked about the purpose of these severed wings, Grandfather Law-gaw replied, "The Ancestors will use them to fly back down to our home and partake of their offerings." Elsewhere, Kammerer has noted that for members of the U-lo subgroup of Akha the severed wings are meant "to serve as fans for the visiting ancestors" (1986:159). Meanwhile, Grandmother Shaman removed the miniature metal pitcher holding the Ancestral offering of tea and ginger along with a metal spoonful of fiery coals from the cooking hearth and placed them each on the female hearth in the adjacent room housing the Ancestral

altar. As she did so her daughter stoked the fire at the main cooking hearth by adding several medium-sized pieces of wood.

Grandfather Law-gaw then began a gradual process of stripping the feathers from the hen's body by first placing a particular part of its body over the fiery coals and then plucking out the singed feathers in that area by hand. This process was carried out until all of the feathers were removed. Towards the end of this process Grandmother Shaman reemerged from the adjacent room and brought out a metal cooking pot, deeply blackened on the outside from countless wooden fires, which she first purified with pure water and then placed directly beside the cooking hearth. As she did so, I noticed Grandfather Law-gaw accelerate the pace at which he was plucking the remaining feathers from the hen's body – with the result that at one point he accidentally dropped the hen's body on the wooden floor for a moment after which he quickly picked it back up and finished the task at hand.

Shortly thereafter, their daughter entered the kitchen from the adjacent covered porch just outside the home, added some more wood to the fire and then joined Grandmother Shaman in the female side of the home's interior where they molded the remaining pounded rice into medium pancake-sized rice cakes. Each of the finished cakes was placed on a separate rattan winnowing tray covered with several banana leafs. Once they had finished molding all of the cakes, they placed the tray on top of the large Ancestor basket positioned just next to the partially opened window below and to the left side of the Ancestral altar.

Back inside the kitchen, Grandfather Law-gaw was carefully and systematically cutting the hen's de-feathered body into smaller sections of boned meat and removing the innards. Towards the end of this process, Grandfather Law-gaw reached over for the now purified metal cooking pot that Grandmother Shaman had earlier placed beside the hearth and filled it a quarter

of the way full with pure water. Next, Grandfather Law-gaw placed all of the now divided sections of chicken meat into the pot, which he then carefully balanced on the iron tripod over the fire where it remained for a short time until thoroughly cooked in collaboration by the elements of wind, fire, water and earth.

As the pot of chicken meat began to cook, Grandfather Law-gaw took the remaining raw chicken breast into the female side of the home's interior and attached it to the end of a long, thin bamboo section fastened to the bottom of the small wooden platform suspended from the roof directly above the female hearth. The latter section of meat, also considered a part of the Ancestral offering-meal, would be cooked sometime later and offered to either inside household members or outside guests that might come to visit during the time of their New Year's Ancestral Service.

At this point, all of the other preparations were complete and the pace of activities slowed for a while as the final component of the Ancestral meal cooked over the main hearth. Mi-suo and I took advantage of this lull and began to chat with Grandfather Law-gaw about various aspects of the ritual process – asking for clarification as to various stages of the preparations already completed, those yet to be carried out as well as the final composition of the Ancestral meal-offering. During this lull, Grandmother Shaman sat just outside on the adjacent covered porch chatting with various relatives and neighbors. At one point, one of their neighbors, an elderly grandmother, came up to their home to ask Grandfather Law-gaw for some medicine to apply to her infected foot, the result of being bitten by a naughty cat several days earlier.

We later learned that while all of the sections of meat were cooked together in the same pot, only certain sections would actually be incorporated into the Ancestral meal. The non-chosen meat, however, would not be discarded but rather consumed by the “living living” at

some point following the Ancestral meal-offering, as would also be the case with the actual meat offered first to the Ancestors and directly thereafter to their descendants. Moreover, we learned that different sub-clans or patrilineages offer different sections of meat to their Ancestors. Hence, Akha, more generally speaking, do according to not merely the Ways of the Akha Ancestors but rather the Ways of their particular Patrilineages.

Sometime thereafter Grandfather Law-gaw informed Grandmother Shaman that the meat was thoroughly cooked. In response, Grandmother Shaman retrieved a small section of pine wood from a plastic bag hanging on the wall just above the female hearth, which she took into the kitchen and lit over the fiery coals in the main hearth. She then carried the pot of cooked chicken meat along with the now lit pine torch into the female side of the home and placed the pot on top of a green banana leaf on the floor just beside the female hearth. She knelt down on the floor just beside the female hearth and silently held the lit pine torch as Grandfather Law-gaw joined her and, also in silence, began to carefully remove certain select pieces of now cooked chicken meat-bone from the pot with a pair of bamboo chopsticks reserved exclusively for this purpose and place them into the small metal bowl purified earlier that morning by Grandmother Shaman.

Grandmother Shaman later explained to Mi-suo and I that she had lit the pine torch according to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors so as to ensure that both the Ancestors as well as Grandfather Law-gaw and her could see more clearly. "Seeing" for the Ancestors meant that they would be able to find their way to their meal-offering. For Grandfather Law-gaw and Grandmother Shaman this implied being able to more clearly distinguish between the various pieces of meat that were to be included in the Ancestral meal-offering. With only one small and

partially opened window, the interior of the female side of the home was quite dark. The latter is generally the case with Akha homes throughout the region.

Sometime prior to Grandfather Law-gaw's selection of the appropriate sections of meat to be offered to the Sae-du Ancestral lineage, Grandmother Shaman had taken and arranged the Ancestral chair and miniature table on the floor of the female side of the home just beside her bed. She had further taken and arranged on the table each of the four other bowls and cups of food and drink to be offered to the Ancestors in addition to the nearly prepared bowl of cooked chicken meat, which Grandfather Law-gaw now carefully positioned on the table, thereby completing the last and final touch to the Ancestral meal. I had been quietly observing and videotaping the various activities taking place since the time that Grandmother Shaman had brought the pine torch and pot of cooked chicken meat to the female hearth. I had assumed that the actual ritual that we had been so eager to observe was *now* about to be carried out before our very eyes, betraying my further assumption that much of what had transpired throughout the earlier part of the morning was somehow not a part of the actual ritual process.

As Grandfather Law-gaw was positioning the metal bowl of chicken meat on the table, Mi-suo asked him to briefly clarify which particular section of chicken meat they had included in the offering, momentarily interrupting the now building momentum of the nearly completed ritual process. Grandfather Law-gaw quickly replied to Mi-suo's inquiry, and then began to bend his knees and swing his arms to pick up the Ancestral chair and table in unison. He paused, however, in mid-action and turned towards Mi-suo and me, quickly going through a verbal inventory of each of the items included in the Ancestral meal for our sake, simultaneously pointing to each of the items in turn with his right forefinger: "This is rice cakes, this is the chicken, this is...fermented rice whiskey, this is steamed rice, this is tea." The color and texture

of the whiskey and tea, both of which were placed in small, white porcelain cups, were quite similar; hence the hesitancy with which Grandfather Law-gaw initially identified the whiskey.

Grandfather Law-gaw then resumed his formerly incomplete action of bending and picking up the Ancestral chair and table in unison - the chair with his left hand and the table with his right hand – and carrying them several feet across the floor of the room in the direction of the Ancestral altar. He then repositioned the chair and table on the floor just below and to the side of the Ancestral altar and began to take each item one by one from the table and place them up on the platform of the Ancestral altar until all five of the offerings were arranged side by side; first, the metal plate of chicken meat followed by the bamboo cup of rice cakes, the porcelain cup of rice whiskey, the bamboo cup of steamed rice, and, last, the porcelain cup of tea.

Once the items had all been placed on the altar, Grandfather Law-gaw stepped backwards a few feet, ever so slightly lowered his head, bent his knees, and crouched on the floor just in front of the Ancestral table for a brief period lasting some eight seconds. The entire time he was silent with his body oriented towards the direction of the Ancestral altar. Thereafter he stood and retrieved each of the offerings from on top of the Ancestral altar in reverse fashion and placed them back down on the Ancestral table in the same order as they had been arranged earlier; first, the porcelain cup of tea followed by the bamboo cup of steamed rice, the porcelain cup of rice whiskey, the bamboo cup of rice cakes, and, last, the metal plate of chicken meat.

With each of the items now repositioned back down on the Ancestral table, Grandfather Law-gaw crouched down once again on the floor, however, this time a few feet further back from his former position relative to the Ancestral altar and used both hands to slide the Ancestral chair and table backwards toward himself. For a brief moment he glanced back at Grandmother Shaman and silently motioned with his right arm and an excited expression on his face in the

direction of the Ancestral table. Thereafter, he resumed his orientation towards the Ancestral altar and ever so slightly lowered his head while continuing to crouch on the floor just in front of the Ancestral table for a brief period lasting some six seconds.

Thereafter, Grandfather Law-gaw glanced back over his shoulder and called to Grandmother Shaman, “Come and eat, elder sister,”<sup>91</sup> shortly thereafter reaching down onto the table and with his right hand gently tearing off first, a small piece of the rice cakes followed by some chicken meat and finally steamed rice while holding each cup or bowl with his left hand. Meanwhile, Grandmother Shaman stood and walked towards Grandfather Law-gaw from her earlier position at the foot of the female hearth, grabbed a rattan stool sitting along the side of the room and sat down just to the side of Grandfather Law-gaw and the Ancestral chair and table, similarly facing the Ancestral altar. As Grandmother Shaman did so, Grandfather Law-gaw turned to Mi-suo and I and excitedly exclaimed, “This is for the wife (of the household)” (*Miqzaq lar hmr*). However, as Grandfather Law-gaw began to offer Grandmother Shaman her share of the Ancestral offering-food that he held in his right hand, Grandmother Shaman abruptly asked him, “Have YOU eaten yet?,” in response to which Grandfather Law-gaw realized that he had forgotten to do so and proceeded to quickly partake of the Ancestral offering-food in his hand.

Grandfather Law-gaw then once again reached down onto the table with his right hand and gently tore off first, a small piece of the rice cakes, followed by some chicken meat, and, finally, steamed rice while holding each cup or bowl with his left hand as he moved through the sequence. Grandmother Shaman cupped her hands together, palms facing upwards, and held them out in front of her as Grandfather Law-gaw finished preparing her share of the offering.

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<sup>91</sup> Grandmother Shaman was Grandfather Law-gaw’s senior by several years, hence his use of the term elder sister to refer to her.

Grandfather Law-gaw then carefully placed the Ancestral offering-food into Grandmother Shaman's cupped hands with his right hand, directly thereafter preparing another round of Ancestral offering-food. Grandmother Shaman's outstretched hands – cupped with the palms upwards – into which Grandfather Law-gaw placed the offering that she then brought to her mouth and consumed, all reminded me of my own distinct Catholic rite of Holy Communion.

Thereafter, Grandfather Law-gaw called to Mi-suo to come and eat. At this point, however, Mi-suo humbly declined, suggesting rather that he first feed the remaining inside members of his household and extended family, in response to which Grandfather Law-gaw replied, “Oh, it's no problem...” Meanwhile, Grandmother Shaman yelled out for her daughter, “A-su, oh! A-su...come, come! And eat...!” Up until this time their daughter along with several other relatives and neighbors had been sitting outside of the home on the adjacent covered porch.

Shortly thereafter their daughter quietly entered the female side of the home's interior and knelt down on the floor in front of her father with her hands cupped together, palms facing upwards, in order to receive her Ancestral offering-food. As Grandfather Law-gaw placed the food into her hands he said, “This is for the daughter (of the household)” (*Aqbur lar hmr*). The daughter then raised the food to her mouth and consumed it before standing and returning to the outside porch as Grandmother Shaman yelled to her, “Tell your elder brother to come!” Meanwhile, Grandfather Law-gaw prepared another round of Ancestral offering-food. During the lull between Grandfather Law-gaw's preparations and their son's arrival, Grandmother Shaman bent forward and extended her right arm towards the Ancestral table beside her, dipping her right forefinger into the small porcelain cup of tea and then touching her lips with her tea soaked finger.

Meanwhile, we overheard laughter and some comments from the adjacent room as one of their sons, just prior to entering the female side of the home's interior, grabbed a makeshift cover for his head in the form of a bright green detachable hood from a factory made raincoat. He then entered the room, briefly glanced in our direction with a humorous expression on his face, and bent down on his knees in front of his mother and father, at the same time cupping his hands together, palms upwards, and stretching them out in front of his body to receive his share of the Ancestral offering-food. Thereafter, Grandfather Law-gaw placed the food in his son's hands and the latter quickly brought the food to his mouth and ate almost simultaneously as he stood and exited the room. As their son was being fed, Grandmother Shaman yelled out, "Come for the Ancestral offering-food...many blessings..." ("*Aqpoeq lawrdzaq lar-e...geeqlanq...heeq deeq deeq nya...*"). Meanwhile, Grandfather Law-gaw prepared another round of Ancestral offering-food.

A minute or so later, one of their daughter-in-laws entered the room. In her late forties, she was dressed much like her contemporaries in the village. She wore a long, patterned Burmese style skirt or "longji" extending down to her ankles, a pink, short-sleeved polo t-shirt and green plaid cotton shawl wrapped around and covering her long black hair, exposing a thin line of dark, black hair on the upper contours of her head, much in the fashion of the older, more traditional female headdress adorned by her mother-in-law sitting just beside her. After receiving and consuming her Ancestral offering-food, the daughter-in-law left the female side of the home's interior and returned to the adjacent covered porch.

Affirming that those on the inside who were present had now all been fed, Mi-suo and then I in turn, as outsiders, partook of the Ancestral offering-food from the hands of Grandfather Law-gaw as Grandmother Shaman observed from the side of the room. Just prior to receiving her

food, Mi-suo carefully wrapped her hair in a long, red scarf that had up until that point been draped around her neck. She then slowly bent down to her knees in front of Grandfather Law-gaw, stretched out her cupped hands before her, and received her Ancestral offering-food. Thereafter she solemnly closed her eyes and brought the food to her mouth before reopening her eyes and resuming her standing position by the female hearth. The deep and solemn nature with which Mi-suo partook of the Ancestral offering-food reflected both a lack of experience in doing so given her position as an Akha from southwest China as well as a new found sense of appreciation for and interest in the Ways of the Akha Ancestors as (re)discovered in north Thailand.

As I prepared to receive my food I had no need to borrow a cover for my head as I had been wearing a simple, dark brown baseball cap for the entire morning. I had picked up this habit part-way through fieldwork. As I moved throughout various parts of the Akha World, I gradually came to learn that Akha men wear hats at all times and in all places.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, all Akha, regardless of either gender or age, are generally expected to cover their heads when either partaking of Ancestral offering-food or participating more generally in a rite carried out according to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. Indeed, during field work I noticed that many households kept an extra hat on reserve specifically for this purpose. By way of this reserve hat, the occasional household member, relative or guest who was hatless at the time could

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<sup>92</sup> The hats of elderly men roughly 50 years of age and upward have generally taken the form of Stetson or broad-brimmed high-crowned felt hats reminiscent of the predominant style in the U.S. during the 1920s. Adult men below 50 years of age have tended to prefer baseball style caps; with older men in this range wearing more conservative style caps (unicolored and with little or no emblems or writing) and younger men wearing more racy, colorful style caps. A similar situation has applied to women of adult age. Elderly women roughly 60 years and upward, particularly non-Christian Traditionalists, have generally adorned older-style headdresses representing a materialized synthesis of the traditional and modern or the old and new. Women between roughly 60 and 40 years of age have tended to prefer covering their heads with plaid patterned shawls of varying colors. Contrary to young men, however, young women between the ages of roughly 20 and 40 have tended to prefer not to cover their heads at all, often letting their long, black hair - occasionally dyed reddish brown or yellowish in the fashion of lowland, urban Thai or Chinese youth - dangle down over their shoulders in everyday life.

temporarily cover their heads in order to either receive their Ancestral offering-food or participate in other rites such as healing ceremonies requiring them to tie strings around the wrists of their ill relatives.

For me, the act of receiving the Ancestral offering-food from Grandfather Law-gaw and other villagers gradually became endowed with a number of meanings varying shaped by first, my Catholic roots as noted earlier, second, my more recent and in many ways Akha inspired realization as to a lack of communion between myself and my own Ancestral lineage let alone extended family, and, finally, an ever expanding appreciation of the profound ways in which participation in these household level rites grounds and defines individuals as part of a larger, more universal whole in the forms of both an often deep Ancestral lineage extending back in time some 60-70 generations as well as an extensive extended family unit. The act of honoring and remembering the Ancestors, I gradually came to learn, was about far more than simply the Ancestors or “living dead.” Rather, the Ancestral meal, of which the descendants or “living living” directly partake, albeit after the Ancestors, was and is just as much about the “living living” as the “living dead.”

As I write these words I recall the oft quoted phrase, “Those who eat together, stay together.” The Akha Ancestral offering-meal ultimately serves in reproducing in tangible form the intimate bonds between and among the living dead and living living. Moreover, the distinct roles or positions of the living living in the context of preparing, offering and partaking of the meal simultaneously reflect and reproduce the hierarchical ordering of Akha society wherein those who are closest to the Ancestors are both the most highly respected as well as knowledgeable persons in terms of their ability to guide their juniors according to the Ways of

the Akha Ancestors. In this manner, it is the Ancestors who are fed first, followed by their descendants beginning with the elders who are closest to the Ancestors and so on.

The elders, moreover, hold the knowledge of what must be done in order to meaningfully shape and mold newcomers and the young into human beings and persons at various stages of the life cycle. It is in this manner that the elders call into action a series of rites and associated narratives that serve in maintaining an accord rather than discord between the embodied or physical and spiritual or mental aspects of the ageing process. Within this particular ontological state of being or becoming Akha, there is no space for the deeply rooted Euro-American assumption of a great divide between the mind and body or mental and physical.

Shortly after I partook of the Ancestral offering-food from Grandfather Law-gaw's hands, Grandfather Law-gaw and Grandmother Shaman began to put away each of the items used in making the Ancestral offering-meal. First, each of the bowls and cups holding the Ancestral offerings were placed back up on the small wooden platform suspended from the roof directly above the female hearth. Throughout the remainder of the day as well as their observance of the New Year's Ancestral Service, other relatives, neighbors and guests that visited their home would be offered the remaining Ancestral offering-food as a means of further extending the household's receipt of blessings and prosperity from the Ancestors.

Grandmother Shaman returned the Ancestral chair and miniature table to their former positions hanging from the upper section of the wall just across from the Ancestral altar. Finally, Grandfather Law-gaw returned the small bamboo container of fermented rice to the Ancestral basket and the long, thin bamboo straw used for sucking up pure water to mix with the former in creating fermented rice whiskey to the indigo dyed cotton shoulder bag hanging from a nail adjacent to the Ancestral altar. In several days time each of these items would be brought out

once again to make the second and final Ancestral offering associated with the New Year's Ancestral Service and marking the beginning of the new year and the collective birthday of everyone in the village.

Shortly thereafter Mi-suo suggested that we have our photos taken with Grandfather Law-gaw and Grandmother Shaman separately, which we proceeded to do while still inside the home on the female side where the Ancestral offering-meal had been enjoyed by the living dead and living living alike. Grandmother Shaman and then Grandfather Law-gaw sat on the rattan stool where Grandmother Shaman had sat as she and then her other household members each received their Ancestral offering-food from Grandfather Law-gaw. Mi-suo and then I squatted down in turn next to each of them on the floor to have our photos taken.

Thereafter, we retired to the outside covered porch adjacent to the home and kitchen where we sat and chatted for the remainder of the afternoon as various relatives and neighbors from near and far came to visit. As we sat and chatted on the porch we drank hot steaming tea and partook of the remaining rice cakes that had been prepared alongside of those offered in the Ancestral offering-meal. Sometime thereafter we overheard a slow, continual pounding coming up from the concrete yard below.

Walking to the edge of the porch we found one of Grandfather Law-gaw's sons and daughter-in-law engaged in their own household level efforts to prepare rice cakes from steamed rice prepared earlier that morning. Grandfather Law-gaw's son stood pounding the same long wooden pestle that his father had used earlier that morning into the same mortar carved out of a large tree trunk, while his wife, not unlike Grandmother Shaman before her, stood nearby holding a large rattan winnowing tray and waiting for the steamed rice to be pounded into the right consistency before removing it from the pestle onto the tray for further molding into rice

cakes within the interior of their home. As we watched their son and daughter-in-law carrying out the same actions that Grandfather Law-gaw and Grandmother Shaman had carried out earlier that morning, I thought to myself, “This indeed is the way in which traditions are carried from one generation to the next. This is the carrying on of tradition in action.”<sup>93</sup>

## 5.9 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have highlighted the Ways of the Akha Ancestors (*Aqkaqzanr*) as carried by the Old-Traditionalists of one upland village in north Thailand in the context of their annual household level New Year’s Ancestral Service. In doing so I have set the stage for chapter seven wherein I further explore Neo-Traditionalists’ reworkings of the Ancestral burden in a manner that shifts the locus of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and in turn Akhaness from the deeply grounding local contexts of villages and households to that of the upwardly unifying translocal Akha World in the making. Indeed, the deeply grounding local practices of the Old-Traditionalists highlighted in this chapter have posed significant obstacles toward Neo-Traditionalists’ crypto-nationalist project to (re)center the Akha World. First, however, I turn to a broader discussion of Akha identitarian politics in historical and contemporary perspective.

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<sup>93</sup> This is a play on Kammerer’s earlier comments along the following lines: “From the Akha perspective, it is appropriate for people of each sort to adhere to their inherited traditional rules for proper action. This, then, is identity in action” (1990:281).

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Akha Identitarian Politics in Historical Perspective**

“We...obtain the strong impression from Akha historical records that (*Aqkaqzanr*), culture and customary law, as we know it today, originated in and is an adaptation to the Akha diaspora, a multi-ethnic, and ‘non-territorial’ situation. The structural constant in this situation is that it is primarily Tai dominated... It could be argued that the Akha have had, and continue to have a strong sense of ethnic identity...We have to investigate the Akha cultural system itself in order to explain this remarkable cultural unity. Given important differences between Hani and Akha, I shall limit myself here to Akha” (Geusau 2000a:143).

#### **6.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I highlight a variety of representations of Akhaness and the Ways of the Akha Ancestors that have been made by certain foreign, non-Akha-demics since the early 1980s. These representations offer an additional baseline from which to consider how Neo-Traditionalists’ more recent reformations of Akhaness and the Ways of the Akha Ancestors exhibit continuity and discontinuity with the near and, to some extent, distant past. I also discuss the shifting nature of Akha identitarian politics since the early 1980s as a result of first, the heightened integration of upland Akha villages into expanding lowland states throughout the region, and, second, rising rates of religious conversion to various denominations of Christianity in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma). It is against this backdrop of rising religio-political factionalism that Neo-Traditionalist elite from throughout the region have come together to imagine, negotiate, and actualize their crypto-nationalist project of the larger Akha World.

#### **6.2 Akha Migratory Histories and Identitarian Reformations**

Foreign scholars working with different Akha communities in the region have generally concluded that Akha originated in either northern Yunnan or Tibet, from where different clans

migrated further south into southern Yunnan and Peninsular Southeast Asia at different periods of time (Geusau 2000a:141; Cohen and Lyttleton 2008:118; Lewis 1992:208; Sturgeon 2005:14-15). Geusau has noted, moreover, that Akha oral traditions indicate:

“...that (their) migrations happened gradually, clan by clan, and over a long period. This notion is expressed in the story of migrants leaving traces in their path, by cutting banana leaves and scattering the carcasses of crabs, in order to indicate the road to be followed by the next party of Akha. The intervals were too long however, and the traces disappeared, thus providing an explanation for the migration of the Akha in different directions” (2000a:141).

Not unlike other highland minorities in the region, Akha migrations have taken place in response to a variety of historical circumstances including but not limited to the following: overpopulation and scarcity of cultivable land (Schrock et al. 1970:878); rampant intra-village sickness and death (Hanks et al. 1964); intra-village power struggles and ritual protocol in response to taboo violations (Tooker 2012:108,113); political and economic subordination in southwest China as a result of in-migrations by first, Tai-speaking groups between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., and, second, Han (Chinese) between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Geusau 2003b:3; McKinnon and Michaud 2000:10); ongoing violence and political unrest in east Myanmar since 1948 (Grinfeld 1982:127-132; in Kammerer 1986:74-5); violence between various Nationalist and Communist forces throughout the region in the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries (Lewis 1957:224; Geusau 2003b:3); disruptive state policies and violence in Communist China during the periods of first, Collectivization in the 1950s, and, second, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (Wang, personal communication, June 12, 2008); as well as an increasingly stagnant economy in post-1980s Myanmar coupled with a rising demand for cheap, “unskilled” labor in Thailand and China.

The earliest documented presence of Akha communities in north Thailand, the southern extreme of these migrations, dates from 1909 (Davies 1970[1909]:362; in Kammerer 1986:73).<sup>94</sup> Toyota, however, has argued that multi-ethnic caravan traders, including Akha leaders and hired hands, were traveling between southwest China and areas as far south as Chiang Mai during much of the nineteenth century if not earlier (2000:207-8). In addition, Geusau has drawn from what he refers to as “Akha Internal Historical Records” in arguing for a presence of certain Akha communities in a region that has since been incorporated into the northern territory of Thailand as early as the middle part of the nineteenth century (2000a:150).

Kammerer, who conducted fieldwork between 1979 and 1981 in a Traditionalist upland Akha village in north Thailand, learned of a segment of ritual chanting that she translates as the “Descent of the Dwelling Places” (1986:68-72). While used in multiple ritual contexts, she notes that the chant was used most prominently during funerary rites for adults. The chant recalled the southern migration of the particular community in north Thailand with which she worked from Yunnan (China) to Kengtung (Myanmar), Maesai (Thailand) and so forth until the nearby river from which their village took its name was reached. Kammerer elaborates:

“...the lineage of dwelling places (recalled via recitation of the ‘Descent of the Dwelling Places’) links a village to those which preceded it in time and space on the journey south from China and thereby links its residents to Akha in all other present and past villages. The path of the ancestors leads through history from China down to Thailand; the path to the ancestors leads after death from Thailand up to China” (1986:72).

Geusau has further noted that the information retained within this particular ritual text, which he refers to as the “Recitations of the Roads and Origins,” is the means by which the “souls of the

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<sup>94</sup> This is not to ignore, however, the more recent, albeit largely temporary, migrations of Akha even further south into parts of Malaysia and Singapore for primarily work and in some cases educational and kinship related purposes. In addition, an ever growing number of Akha men and woman from Thailand have in recent years joined Thailand’s large community of transnational villagers laboring in places such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Macau. At the same time, a much smaller privileged group of young Akha men and woman primarily from Thailand have been studying abroad in countries such as Australia, the U.S. and China.

deceased” are guided along the same road back up to the “original ancestral village” (2000a:132-133). “The final parts,” he adds, “are thus specific to each village and group, but the roads taken long ago are often similar” (Geusau 2000a:132-3).

The two overarching themes of migration and marginalization, moreover, figure prominently in each of these historical representations of Akhaness. In brief, Geusau has argued that what he identifies as the cornerstone of Akhaness, namely *Aqkaqzanr*, in its contemporary form “originated in and is an adaptation to the Akha diaspora - a multi-ethnic, and ‘non-territorial’ situation” (2000:143). Kammerer has further argued in reference to north Thailand that:

“...having reached the end of the mountain ranges extending southwards from China and given, (first), their present technology, (second), the expanding highland population, and (last), increasing competition for scarce land from valley farmers, loggers, and the Forestry department, (Akha have concluded) that withdrawal from incorporation into the state system of dominant lowlanders is no longer a viable possibility” (1986:421).

Last, Tooker has further elaborated on this theme via reference to what she refers to as the transformation of *Aqkaqzanr* from a more “holistic” to “compartmentalized” marker of Akhaness during the 1980s in response to a heightened state presence and expanding global capitalist system in the uplands of north Thailand (2004, 2012).

### **6.3 Of *Aqkaqzanr* and Akhaness: Past and present articulations**

Kammerer has argued that Akha define themselves on the basis of descent from a “single apical ancestor” and “adherence to a specific set of ‘Customs’ ” (1986:394-6). Geusau has further argued that Akha maintain “a remarkable unity in their (*zanr*)” or “system of customary law,” in spite of their historical dispersal across multiple geopolitical borders and interactions

with numerous ethnic Others (2000a:123).<sup>95</sup> Geusau attributes this unity in *Aqkaqzanr* to the distinct “genealogical system and related ancestor service” found at its core (2000a:146,150). As noted earlier in chapter three, he holds that:

“It is the (Hani/)Akha genealogical and kinship system and related ancestor service (*Aqpoeq lawr-e*), underlying (the traditional) lines of (knowledge transfer), which ultimately explain the striking unity of (*zanr*)...between Akha groups, and which are at the core of their structural unity and survival...This ancestor service...is the means for the Akha and Hani to recognize their roots, their history, and the manner of their survival. It is also a symbol of their unity, their ‘cultural citizenship’ in a situation of diaspora” (Li 1995; in Geusau 2000a:146,150).

For Geusau, *Aqkaqzanr* comes very close to representing the *Volksgeist* or historically particular “organic spirit” manifest by and in turn animating the Akha collectivity or “nation” (cf. Herder 1793; Barnard 2003:27-28; Hamilton 2011; Schmidt 1956:409). Geusau, not unlike Johann Gottfried Herder in relation to Pan-Slavism, can in certain respects be considered an “intellectual godfather” of pan-Akhaness.

Geusau, moreover, has not been without his critics. John McKinnon, for example, has argued that Geusau tends towards both “essentializing the people amongst whom he has spent the last 30 years” as well as downplaying “the degree of divergence among and/or between Hani/Akha” (McKinnon 2001:190). The same can be said in part of the Neo-Traditionalist Akha elite that have since the late 2000s been working to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging throughout the region. Yet, the divergent positions of these elite throughout the Akha World along with their overall status as a minority have ensured a certain degree of multivocality in their efforts to frame and actualize a common vision of a larger Akha World.

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<sup>95</sup> Geusau defines *Aqkaqzanr* as “a *system* of customary law and an educational *network*” that has long been orally transmitted from one generation to the next (Geusau 2000a:146). This definition largely parallels those provided by Kammerer (1986:63-7) and Tooker (1988, 2004). More recently, however, Tooker has defined the more general Akha conception of *zanr* as “ancestral tradition” (2012:37).

In his few publications, moreover, Geusau has in fact noted a number of political, socioeconomic, and linguistic differences among and between Hani and Akha (2000a:127).<sup>96</sup> For Geusau, however, these differences, which he argues can be explained by divergent historical experiences, are of less empirical interest than that which Hani/Akha continue to share in common, namely their *zanr* or “system of customary law” (2000a:123). He was of the further opinion, moreover, that *Aqkaqzanr* was in grave danger of being lost forever due to an expanding inter-generational gap among villages throughout the larger Akha World.

Geusau subsequently devoted the latter twenty-five or so years of his life to documenting certain aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* relating to Ancestral genealogies, ritual oral texts, and ritual practices. Towards this end he played an instrumental role in establishing a pioneer non-governmental organization based in north Thailand that worked to facilitate both the transmission of *Aqkaqzanr* to Akha youth as well as regional exchanges on the increasingly critical question of “looking after and improving” various aspects of *Aqkaqzanr*. The latter organization, the “Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand” (AFECT), was officially established in 1989 as an offshoot of the “Mountain Peoples’ Culture, Development and Education Foundation” (MPCDE). Geusau and several prominent Thai scholars and social activists, including Sulak Sivaraksa and Chupinit Kesmanee, officially established MPCDE in 1989. Geusau’s work in this regard represented a blend of Boasian salvage anthropology and Sol Taxian action anthropology. Each of these projects, furthermore, has continued until the

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<sup>96</sup> These forms of difference include clan/lineage affiliation, locality of residence, socioeconomic status, language variety, and customary law (Lewis 1989:6-7; Geusau 2000a:127; Kammerer 1986:207-224; Tooker 2004:243-288, 2012:87-88; Toyota 2000). In terms of sociopolitical divisions, Akha and non-Akha scholars have generally acknowledged three major divisions with “substantial differences in customary law” and language variety (Geusau 2000a:127). In terms of language, Paul Lewis has suggested that there are between seven and thirteen dialects (or language variants) of Akha spoken in the region (1989:6-7). In addition, in Thailand, scholars have noted three major subdivisions of Akha (U-lo, Loi-mi, and U-bya), differentiated on the basis of women’s headdresses, the historical period(s) during which they migrated south from China, Laos, and Burma into Lanna/Siam/Thailand and their status as either merchants, agriculturalists, or landless laborers (Geusau 2000a:127; Kammerer 1986:207-224; Tooker 2004:243-288; Toyota 2000).

present day under the direction of an ever expanding network of Akha organic intellectuals first brought together by Geusau prior to his passing in 2002.

In further descriptions of *Aqkaqzanr*, moreover, Kammerer has argued that in contrast to Western religious practices, it is a “Maussian total social fact rather than a discrete institutional realm” (1986:67).<sup>97</sup> From another vantage point, Geusau has argued that:

“To translate (*zanr*) as religion is misleading, as Akha insist that they do not worship or adore (*uqduq tanq-e*, literally bow the head) a higher God or being, nor any spirits... Akha traditional knowledge...is extremely pragmatic. The Akha sense of history and identity is not so much based upon descent from gods or heroes, but is rather based upon ‘tradition’ in its most direct sense, the survival experience of a long line of ancestors, accumulated and transmitted from generation to generation. It is not static; this core of Akha experience is a continuous adaptation to changing circumstances, threats, and challenges. There is no idealization of heroes or kings. The Akha do, however, display an almost obsessive need for ‘the continuation of the lines’; the texts warn ‘take care lest the lines break or are interrupted’ ” (2000a:143,146).

Building on a premise of Akha as a “perennial minority,” Geusau has argued that *Aqkaqzanr* in its contemporary form “originated in and is an adaptation to the Akha diaspora - a multi-ethnic, and ‘non-territorial’ situation” (2000a:143). The Akha sense of history and identity, he further argued, derives from the processes of historical mnemesis and interiorization as well as the highly pragmatic nature of Akha traditional knowledge (Geusau 1983, 2000a:143).

Geusau and Kammerer have further stressed that *Aqkaqzanr* is not static and can and does change as Akha adapt to different historical circumstances - especially the deteriorating economic situation of highland minorities in general (Geusau 1983:25-6, 2000a:143; Kammerer 1986:394-6). For example, Kammerer has noted that, “whereas in the past more than one buffalo

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<sup>97</sup> Kammerer elaborates: “My understanding...is that although Akha religion may well encompass *zanr*, Akha *zanr* does not encompass religion. This understanding is based upon the way in which Akha talk about *zanr* as behavioral rules, including ritual procedures, and as orally transmitted ceremonial texts. To know Customs (*Zanr*) is to know the behavior and the words believed to have been passed down by the ancestors. Finally, I do not gloss *zanr* as religion because, unlike religion as practiced by most Westerners, it is a Maussian total social fact rather than a discrete institutional realm. Akha carry the burden of Customs every day in both ritual and non-ritual contexts to obtain blessings. Proper enactment of Customs links ancestors and descendants; scrupulous observance is crucial to the cosmos” (1986:66-67).

had to be sacrificed at the funeral of a Village Headman” before a live and ornately decorated horse could be left at their grave to accompany them to the Ancestral domain, “nowadays a single buffalo suffices to permit the offering of a horse” (1986:115,396).<sup>98</sup>

In addition, Paul Lewis, writing during the late 1960s and in reference to the particular Akha World of east Myanmar and southwest China, noted a significant reworking of *Aqkaqzanr* by the members of a sub-group referred to as “turban Akha” (*Uq dzanq Aqkaq*) by his informants and who largely resided on the Chinese side of the border (1970b:758). Lewis elaborates:

“They themselves say that they have ‘gaq si si-e,’ which evidently means they have had a change of religion. The term may come from ‘free’ (kair shin) in Chinese.<sup>99</sup> This group of Akhas used to observe the ancestor offerings just as other Akhas, although I believe they may have spent a longer time observing ceremonial abstinence during the offerings than other Akhas observe.<sup>100</sup> When they realized that they spent so much time on their ancestor offerings that they could not work their fields properly, and saw the weeds take over the paddy fields, they cut the number down to three: ‘ka-yae’ (*kar yaevr*), ‘mi-shu do-eu’ (*miq xuq dovr-e*) (pitch-pine burning ceremony), and a third (which my informants forgot). They felt that the second ceremony was borrowed from the Chinese, or perhaps from some Lahu who sometimes do it. They have borrowed much more Chinese in their daily speech than other Akhas have, although they still speak Akha...” (1970b:758).

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<sup>98</sup> Kammerer explains that, “According to (Akha) Customs, only men who have been given (the title of Village Headman by external, non-Akha authorities) are entitled to receive a particularly esteemed funeral offering, the sacrifice of a horse” (1986:115; see also Kammerer 1998:661). During fieldwork in November 2010, however, I observed such an offering being made on behalf of a highly respected, elderly Ritual Reciter (Pi-ma [*Pirma*]), Yae-saw-gu Pi-ma A-tsa (*Yaesawqguq Pirm Artsaq*), from the influential Old Traditionalist village of Law-ja in north Thailand. During Pi-ma A-tsa’s funerary rites a pair of Ritual Reciters and their assistants ritually sacrificed no less than three buffalos, one at a time over a period of two days, leading up to the ceremonial procession of his coffin and an ornately decorated horse to the village cemetery where his coffin was buried and the horse released to run, ideally, towards the north and the direction of the Ancestral abode. Kammerer, moreover, much in the vein of earlier scholars such as Lewis and Geusau, attributes the invention of this particular “Custom” among Akha to the influence of neighboring and presumably more powerful lowland Shan communities in Shan State: “Throughout the highlands horses are associated with the pomp of powerful valley princes. Sumptuous state processions in Kengtung, like the one described by Cushing (1870:52; see St. John 1912:77) in which the prince, riding an elephant adorned with a red harness and silver plates upon its head, was preceded by four ponies wearing gilded saddles decorated with red woolen tassels, could be seen by Akha attending the city’s bazaar. The Akha practice of leaving a horse at a Village Headman’s grave may derive from a similar Shan practice: sometimes Shan dedicate a horse to the Buddhist temple after being ‘led in the funeral procession’ ” (Milne 1970[1910]:93; In Kammerer 1986:115-116).

<sup>99</sup> Lewis is most likely referring to the Chinese term, “*kai xin*,” which is more accurately translated as “happy.”

<sup>100</sup> Here Lewis is referring to the various kinds of restrictions imposed upon all those residing within the village gates when observing each of their annual communal level rites revolving around Ancestral Services and rice cultivation. For example, all villagers are generally expected to remain within the village gates and hence refrain from traveling to and working in their fields when observing Ancestral Services.

While Lewis' background as a U.S. Baptist missionary (and only later anthropologist) most likely encouraged his equating of this "religious change" with becoming "free," his comments are nevertheless interesting in two regards.

First, he notes a rather pragmatic decision on the part of this particular group to reduce their Ancestral offerings that most likely reflects the larger context, largely ignored by Lewis, of post-1949 Communist China and the ongoing implementation of policies geared towards collectivization and the uprooting of what were deemed "superstitious" and "wasteful" traditions (Wang 2013:75,202). Second, in their reworkings of *Aqkaqzanr*, this particular group decided to reduce their Ancestral Services from either twelve or nine, depending on how they are counted, to only three. In their more contemporary reworkings of *Aqkaqzanr*, Neo-Traditionalist elite from various parts of the region have similarly negotiated a reduction of their Ancestral burden to three annual Ancestral Services as further discussed in chapters seven and nine.<sup>101</sup>

As of the mid-1980s, moreover, Kammerer suggested that in northern Thailand, at least, "the limits of adaptability of (*Aqkaqzanr*) as a coherent, cosmologically-grounded cultural system could well be reached in the not so distant future" (1986:394-6). Tooker in turn has argued that the limits of *Aqkaqzanr* as such were indeed reached during the mid 1980s (2004, 2012). In particular, she drew on extended research with a particular community of Loi-mi (*Loimi*) Akha in north Thailand in noting a reframing of the indigenous equation between *Aqkaqzanr* and Akhaness.

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<sup>101</sup> In post-Maoist, 1980s China various Akha communities began to "revive" certain of these Ancestral Services, albeit under the guise of "festivals," with support from their local governments. To date, three such "festivals" have been revived –namely the "Red Egg Ancestral Offerings" (*Khmqxeevq Aqpoeq*), "Swing Ceremony Ancestral Offerings" (*Yaerkuq Aqpoeq*), and "New Year's Ancestral Offerings" (*Kartanr Aqpoeq*) (see Wang 2013:77). In addition, in 1987 the Xishuangbanna Prefectural government of Yunnan, China declared the latter "festival" of the "New Year's Ancestral Offerings" an official local-public holiday to be held annually between January 1-4 (Wang 2013:77).

Tooker argued that the community's heightened integration into the Thai state and capitalist economy beginning in 1985 brought about the "compartmentalization" or relegation of *Aqkaqzanr* to "special occasions and social domains" (2004:243). Prior to 1985, Tooker notes, *Aqkaqzanr* was a more "comprehensive, holistic form of collective identity permeating multiple dimensions of everyday life" (2004:243).<sup>102</sup> Tooker has further argued that the "compartmentalization" of *Aqkaqzanr* produced a situation where in a rising number of Akha converts to Christianity, formerly considered the *zanr* of non-Akha Others, were able to remain Akha (2004:249-50).

In contrast to many other upland minorities in the Upper Mekong Region such as the Chin (Sakhong 2007), Hmong (Tapp 1989a), Lahu (Walker 1992:60-61), Kachin (Sadan 2013), and Karen (Gravers 2007b), Akha strongly resisted conversion to Christianity until as recent as the 1980s, in spite of sustained efforts by white Euro-American missionaries dating back to the late 1800s (Kammerer 1990:277; Wang N.d.:15). For example, prior to the 1980s, Australian and U.S. Christian missionaries working independently with Akha in north Thailand and east Myanmar commented on the strong resistance of Akha to "the good Word" and the Traditionalist regulation requiring Christian converts to move beyond the village gates (Nightingale 1968:265; Elaine Lewis 1957:229; Kammerer 1990:282). For example, in 1957 Elaine T. Lewis - a U.S.

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<sup>102</sup> In response to this argument, Jonsson has criticized Tooker for relying upon what he claims is a dichotomous view of the relations between tradition and modernity and thereby assuming that Akha "tradition precedes their modernity" (Jonsson 2004:676). Jonsson argued, rather, that in actuality communities continually construct tradition through "engagements with modernity and modernization" (2004:676). Tooker (2012:23), however, more recently responded with the following clarification on this matter: "I realize that using the term 'modern' has inherent pitfalls and risks misunderstanding because it has multiple meanings and can refer to a discourse and rhetoric that valorizes the West (or a superior ethnic group) and places the non-West in an inferior position as 'traditional.' However, I am using the term in a specific manner here to refer to the political-economic changes, happening on a global scale, that come with the expansion of nation-state control and a capitalist economy (see also Tooker 2004). I in no way mean to imply that, prior to 1985, the Akha had an unchanging timeless 'tradition' that was unaffected by historical and political-economic circumstances...I realize that others have used the terms 'modern' and 'globalization' in other ways but the reader should keep in mind my specific usage of those terms"(Tooker 2012:23).

Baptist missionary to Akha and Lahu in Burma along with her husband, Paul W. Lewis - lamented a disinterest among Akha relative to Lahu in accepting the Gospel:

“For some reason which we do not fully understand, the religion of the Lahus presents fewer serious obstacles to the Gospel than that of the Akhas...[T]he religion of the Akhas has stood as a formidable barrier to the Christian witness among that race” (Lewis 1957:229).

Kammerer attributed this resistance to an indigenous equation among Akha between religion and ethnicity in general and Akha “traditional religion” and Akhaness in particular (1990:278). She further noted that during the early 1980s Akha in Thailand were generally reluctant to modify *Aqkaqzanr*, preferring rather to adopt what they viewed as an entirely different set of ethnic customs in the case that they could no longer carry *Aqkaqzanr* (Kammerer 1990:284-5, 1998:268-273). Kammerer (1990:282-283) also stressed that the gradually rising numbers of Akha converts to Christianity during the post-1980s were not motivated by “the quest for literacy” that had been critical among early Hmong and Karen converts (Tapp 1989a:77-78; Keyes 1977:55; Hovemyr 1989).<sup>103</sup> Hence, the more recent post-2000s rise of competing “quests for literacy” (in Akha) among Akha Christians and Neo-Traditionalists as discussed in this dissertation is a reflection of the shifting nature of Akha identitarian religio-politics since the 1980s.

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<sup>103</sup> Kammerer (1990:282-283) elaborates: “During fieldwork I encountered no evidence that the quest for the written word, so critical to early Hmong converts, has motivated Akha converts. Paul Lewis (personal communication, 1989), who served as a missionary to Akha for 40 years, confirms that the ‘desire for *literacy*,’ identified by Tapp (1989a:75) as the key to Hmong conversions, is not a primary impetus in Akha conversions. According to the Akha legend about the loss of writing, long ago the creator gave an Akha a book written on buffalo skin, but on the way home the man got hungry and ate the book (Lewis 1970b:787-789). In another variant, the book is written on a rice cake, which, like the buffalo skin is consumed. Although in the version reported by Lewis the loss of literacy is associated with the ‘right to rule,’ no mention is made of the anticipated return of either one. While other highlanders were awaiting the return of their book and sometimes also their king, Akha were content with their excellent memories, said to result from their having ingested the written word. Admittedly, the Akha myth is not alone in attributing cleverness to having eaten the book; the parallel Hmong myth, for instance, does the same (Tapp 1989a:77). Yet Akha may well be alone when they conclude their myth with an expression of satisfaction with their present cleverness rather than anticipation of future literacy and future kings. This self-satisfaction is in keeping with their avowed allegiance to their ethnic identity.”

Kammerer argued that when foreign Christian missionaries first came to Thailand to convert Akha in the 1950s they failed to see that *Aqkaqzanr* was a cultural subsystem equivalent to what anthropologists term ethnic identity, and did not realize the implications of conversion for Akha” (1990:281). As a result, they encouraged their converts:

“...to retain their culture by keeping their language and their traditional clothes. But for Akha themselves language and clothing are not central to their ethnic identity; what is central, the core of Akha-ness, is (*zanr*)” (Kammerer 1990:281).

In short, Kammerer has argued that to be Akha is to carry *Aqkaqzanr* and conversion to the *zanr* of non-Akha Others, whether Lisu, Christian, or Buddhist, is understood not simply as a religious but rather an ethno-religious conversion process entailing the swapping of one completely separate and distinct cultural identity for another. A parallel may be found in Clifford Geertz’s descriptions of Balinese in 1960s Indonesia for whom, “to become either Christian or Muslim would be tantamount...to (not only) ceasing to be Balinese, (but also abandoning) Bali, and perhaps reason, itself” (1973:181-182).

During the early to mid-1980s, however, Traditionalist Akha generally lost their earlier authority to either force converts to move outside the village gates or strongly resist Christian conversion. As noted above, Tooker has attributed these developments in Thailand to the heightened incorporation of Akha villagers and upland border regions more generally into the Thai state and an expanding capitalist economy – ultimately resulting in the loss of their earlier semi-autonomous position in the uplands (2004:243,249-250, 2012:22). Kammerer has similarly argued that Akha in north Thailand at the time no longer viewed withdrawal from the Thai state as feasible given their technology, population pressure, and competition for land from Thai lowlanders and the Royal Forestry Department (1986:421).

In short, during this time period Akha more generally speaking experienced a heightened degree of “dislocation in (their) pattern(s) of ‘traditional’ life” (Geertz 1973:173). Local communities, households, and individuals responded to this dislocation in multiple and shifting ways so as to both make sense of their transformed experiences of modernity as well as position themselves in relation to new opportunities provided by various external patrons ranging from national governments to Euro-American missionaries and ethnic minority advocates. Conversion, however, to “more socially expansive and doctrinally formalized religions, including those today identified as ‘historic’ or ‘world’ religions” (Hefner 1993:3), particularly Christianity, was the most pronounced response of Akha in north Thailand and east Myanmar beginning in the 1980s and accelerating in the early 2000s.

As of June 2014 more than eighty percent of Akha in Thailand and Myanmar (roughly 240,000 people out of a total regional population of 730,000) had become either Catholics or Protestant-Baptists, largely Protestant-Baptists in Thailand and Catholics in Myanmar. In Thailand, moreover, many official upland villages had in fact been fractured into multiple religio-politically defined sub-villages. As noted earlier, moreover, as of 2013 the upland Akha village of Law-ja was divided into eight distinct socio-spatial-religious communities including five Christian communities, two Traditionalist communities, and one Buddhist community (Li 2013:6). Numerous tensions and divisions have arisen with this transformed experience of modernity characterized more by religio-political diversity than unity.

These tensions have arisen from several factors. First, many Traditionalists, particularly middle-aged and elder villagers, continue to hold a view of Akhaness as being fundamentally grounded in *Aqkaqzanr*, albeit it in a more or less modified form depending on time and place. Second, until very recently, Christian elite, particularly Protestant-Baptists, and their

congregations have expressed a very clear and public disdain for Traditionalists whom they derogatorily refer to as “People of the Flesh, Heathens” (*Lawrciv-zaq*).<sup>104</sup> Last, the community of Akha Christian elite in north Thailand has been riddled with internal strife as a result of ideological differences and most importantly competition for external patrons.

Throughout my research, furthermore, I learned that the leaders of at least several upland villages in north Thailand had continued to enforce the taboo against households converting to the *zanr* of “non-Akha Others .” More generally, however, I found that numerous other communities had variably either modified or reintegrated this taboo into their communal life by way of splintering or fragmenting their formerly unitary villages into multiple religio-politically defined sub-communities, in spite of their recognition as one official village by the Thai state for administrative purposes. I also found that certain Akha elite, namely those affiliated with the Neo-Traditionalist faction, were in the process of transforming the indigenous equation between religion and ethnicity, or *Aqkaqzanr* and Akhaness, to a more powerful and supra-local discourse extending far beyond the village gates to the larger Akha World in the remaking.

The Akha Worlds of the Upper Mekong Region have from their various inception undoubtedly been characterized by multiple and shifting theories and practices of Akhaness and its antithesis of Other-ness or non-Akhaness. However, in contrast to the at least recent if not distant past, Akha contemporary theories and practices of Akhaness have been increasingly framed in reference to an experience of modernity characterized by religio-political diversity and factionalism. In other words, religion has become the primary idiom in which contemporary Akha identitarian politics have been framed throughout the region.

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<sup>104</sup> In his 1989 Akha-English-Thai Dictionary, Lewis defines the Akha term “law-ji za” (*lawrcivq zaq*) as, “heathen, non-Christians, animist (Tai) ศาสนาพุทธ (Buddhism)” (1989:273). When asked about the meaning and history of this term, one Akha interlocutor suggested that it was a relatively recent Akha adaptation and transliteration of the Pali and in turn Thai term, “lo-ki” (โลกีย์), referring to “of the world; of the flesh.”

Some Akha, particularly conservative as well as reformist Traditionalists (i.e. Old-Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalists), have continued to conceive of Akhaness as inextricably entwined with *Aqkaqzanr*. There is an ongoing debate, however, both between as well as within each of these respective groups as to which aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* are essential to defining Akhaness. These debates have been most salient in relation to the increasingly transregional efforts of Neo-Traditionalist elite to “look after and improve” and thereby rework *Aqkaqzanr* into the Akha Religion as a means of promoting their crypto-nationalist vision of a larger Akha World.

A major point of contention within these debates has stemmed from divergent experiences and understandings of *Aqkaqzanr* that range between two extremes. From the perspective of Old-Traditionalists, *Aqkaqzanr* has been practiced and understood as an entire and yet particular way of life most similar to more holistic anthropological conceptions of culture as grounded in the Boasian tradition (Boas 1928:11-17; Kuper 1999:56-72). From the vantage of Neo-Traditionalists, however, *Aqkaqzanr* has been experienced and understood as religion, narrowly defined as a distinct part of social life, separate and apart from culture, ecology, economics, politics and so forth.

In their efforts to reform *Aqkaqzanr*, moreover, individuals more akin to the latter Neo-Traditionalist position have sought not so much to “disassociate” as filter out or distill religion from culture by identifying certain elements of that which is perceived as the traditional as more essential to Akhaness than others (see Roy 2010). They have carried out this filtering process, furthermore, in reference to a range of local and global norms regarding religion and peoplehood (cf. Friedman 1994; Anderson 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Individuals subscribing to this position have in turn reconstructed a particular vision and indeed version of *Aqkaqzanr* in

the form of THE Akha Religion, which is both more universal in doctrine and ritual practice as well as exclusive in its framing relative to Akha and Akha alone.

In contrast, as increasing numbers of Akha have become Christians in Thailand and Myanmar their Christian leadership has increasingly worked to reformulate the indigenous Akha equation between religion and ethnicity by way of “disassociating” religion from culture in claiming authenticity as both Christian and Akha (Tooker 2004:243; Roy 2010; Maclachlan 2012; Ono 2012). This identitarian work has further involved the reconceptualization of *zanr* as religion in contrast to culture wherein the latter is associated with the presumably non-religious aspects of their past, particularly language, dress, food, and in some cases proverbs.<sup>105</sup> Within this new cultural logic, moreover, conversion to the *zanr* of non-Akha Others has been reframed as the replacement of a lesser, pseudo-religion (i.e. *Aqkaqzanr*) with the one and only true religion, namely Christianity.

This religious conversion process has been linguistically resignified by the adoption of the self-referential term “Christians” (*Kali-zaq*) in the case of non-Catholic Christians and “Catholics” (*Kovqdawq-zaq*) in the case of Catholics.<sup>106</sup> The Christian Self in turn has been further defined in opposition to the non-Christian Other who has been linguistically resignified as “People of the Flesh, Heathens” (*Lawrciv-zaq*). As a result, the term “Akha” (*Aqkaq-zaq*) has been relegated to the domain of culture, separate and apart from religion, where it can equally be claimed by all Akha, regardless of religion.

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<sup>105</sup> In reference to proverbs, however, I learned from Paul Lewis that when he first began working to document and publish a series of volumes in Akha language on archaic Akha proverbs (see Lewis and *Mah Po`Gu`* 1989a, 1989b), he was accused by his young Akha missionary protégés of writing the ‘devil’s bible’ (*Naevq-e Jarlivq*). The latter volumes were published in a Christian Akha orthography that Lewis played an instrumental role in developing while in the mission field of 1950s Kengtung, Burma (see Morton 2010:112-113,132).

<sup>106</sup> My understanding is that both of these terms represent Akha transliterations of the English terms for “Christian” and “Catholic” respectively with the latter “-tian” and “-lic” dropped.

Finally, a growing number of younger Akha between their twenties and thirties in Thailand and Myanmar as well as a minority of Christian elite in Thailand have reconceived of Akhaness as inhering in something more or deeper than either religion or culture altogether, namely in their “blood” and “genes” as passed onto them via their Akha Ancestors. From this standpoint, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Traditionalist, or for that matter, non-religious Akha are all Akha by virtue of sharing the same Akha blood that inheres in their body and can neither be washed away nor diluted. In contrast to North American Indian “blood politics” (Garrouette 2003; Sturm 2002), however, the question of blood quantum has to date been of little or no significance to contemporary Akha authenticity debates.

The views of these youth and minority Christian elite have reflected in part a particular hybridity born of their experiences navigating multiple and shifting worlds ranging from their natal upland Akha villages, to lowland non-Akha dominated urban centers, as well as more distant global cities where they may have ventured as students, laborers and, increasingly, tourists. Ayoë, however, has attributed their perspectives on Akhaness to the influence of, in his words, “Western liberal views of religion as a largely insignificant and ever changing marker of identity,” views, he added, that he strongly disagrees with (personal communication, October 5, 2010). In Thailand, furthermore, many Akha under fifty years of age have spent significant amounts of time, particularly as youth, in one or more Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic centers where they received housing and educational opportunities often lacking in their natal upland villages. As a result, many of these individual’s life experiences have been characterized by a heightened degree of religious plurality and hybridity.

One individual, Elder Brother Gawn-sa (*Ardov Ganqsar*), an Akha male in his early forties who recently completed an M.A. in Cultural Studies at Maefahluang University in north

Thailand, has gone further in identifying “Akha blood” not only with Akhaness but also *Aqkaqzanr*, a view held by few others:

“*Anyone* with Akha blood flowing in their veins is essentially carrying *Aqkaqzanr*, regardless of whether they may identify themselves as Traditionalist, Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim.

Religion is only one small part of *Aqkaqzanr*.

At the same time, *Aqkaqzanr* is and always has been a dynamic and fluid marker of our identity.

It’s constantly changing,

and you could think of conversion to Christianity or Buddhism or *whatever* as one of the ways in which it has changed.

At the same time,

the very concept of *Aqkaqzanr* is unique to Akha and Akha alone.

And it’s *ridiculous* to try and translate it into any other language – whether as culture, religion, or *whatever*.

It is certainly much *more* than religion,

but *also* much more than culture.

It’s in our genes,

our blood,

our unique disposition towards the world...”

(Gawn-sa, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

These racialized understandings of not only Akhaness but also *Aqkaqzanr* as embodied in the very blood of all Akha, however, have been highly contested by individuals subscribing to the indigenous equation between religion and ethnicity or *Aqkaqzanr* and Akhaness. In refuting these claims, a number of self-declared Neo-Traditionalists have referred to the custom whereby non-Akha males may become Akha and reside within the Akha village gates following their marriage to an Akha woman and the birth of a son as noted earlier in chapter three. According to *Aqkaqzanr*, it is only by virtue of having a son that one may become an Ancestor as it is the responsibility of sons to not only perform Ancestral Services but also “carry” the line of patrilineal descent via a “genealogical patronymic linkage system” found more commonly among Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples in the region (Lo 1945).

This practice of becoming Akha, referred to as Pa-daw-daw-eu (*Paq dawvqdawvq-e*), entails the incorporation of the non-Akha male into the master Akha genealogy by way of either their initiation of a new lineage or incorporation into an existing lineage. Additional requirements include giving up their former ethnicity, acquiring fluency in Akha language, establishing an Ancestral shrine, and learning as well as following Akha customary law (Geusau 2000a:147). This practice has often been cited by Neo-Traditionalists in support of the claim that it is the carrying of *Aqkaqzanr* and not Akha blood per say that is at the core of Akhaness. From a similar vantage point, Geusau has compared this process to that of, “a change of nationality status in the contemporary world” (2000a:147-148).

In the case of non-Akha females marrying into Akha households, and, by extension, villages, moreover, a similar kind of logic applies whereby brides switch not only their ethnicity from non-Akha to Akha but also their affiliation from the descent group of their non-Akha father and/or mother depending on their natal descent patterns to that of their Akha husband (Kammerer 1986:165).<sup>107</sup> According to Akha history, moreover, the very first Akha bride was a formerly “wild,” non-Akha female “spirit” from the forests beyond the village gates that was gradually “domesticated” and made “human” through a series of material and bodily transformations such as the clothing of her naked body and severing of her fangs. This particular story is further elaborated on in chapter eight (see sub-chapter 8.8).

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<sup>107</sup> Based on fieldwork in various parts of the region between 2009 and present, I would argue that the practice of non-Akha females marrying into Akha households, and, by extension, villages, is much more common currently than that of non-Akha males. Moreover, while a majority of in-marrying non-Akha females have been Yunnanese (Chinese), particularly in southwest China, followed by Lahu, Shan, Lisu, and, to a lesser extent, Thai from various parts of Thailand, a majority of in-marrying non-Akha males have been first and foremost Yunnanese (Chinese), especially in southwest China, followed by Thai from various parts of Thailand. In addition, while many of these inter-ethnic marriages have taken place in various lowland, urban centers throughout the region, they have also increasingly taken place in a number of lowland and upland Akha villages in region that have in recent years experienced economic prosperity as a result of a regional boom in rubber and coffee prices.

As Kammerer has noted, however, while *Aqkaqzanr* prescribes that a married couple reside in the household of the husband's father (patrivirilocal) and brides switch affiliation to their husband's line of descent:

“...a woman's link to her natal patrikin—a link established and evidenced by her (own) patronymic genealogical name—is never completely severed...An interesting aspect of Akha offerings to patrilineal ancestors is that the ancestors who are fed include male forebears in the direct patriline as well as the women married to those men. Thus, patrilineal ancestors are ascending husband and wife pairs, not just the men whose names are memorialized in genealogies...(Moreover, an Akha woman's)...bond to her natal patrilineage and family remains unbroken not only for herself, but for her husband and their children, and, indeed, for their sons' sons and their sons' sons' sons after them. Since she needs her brother's blessing to have children, her husband is dependent on his brother-in-law for the son who will continue his lineage. A wife-taker therefore relies on his wife-giver for the perpetuation of his own patriline through direct descendants” (1998:663,665).

In this respect, the Akha gender ideology has much in common with that of the Lahu, a closely related Tibeto-Burman speaking group residing throughout much of the Akha World.

Anthropologist Shanshan Du has described the Lahu gender ideology in the following manner:

“The Lahu ideology of gender unity is deeply rooted in the dyadic worldview that is expressed by the common saying, ‘Everything comes in pairs; aloneness does not exist’...The dyadic principle focuses on the wholeness of the pair and highlights the similarities and harmony between the two components, which identify with each other through their shared membership and joint function in the whole” (2002:29-30).

It is important to stress, furthermore, that from this vantage point, becoming Akha, residing within the Akha village gates, and carrying *Aqkaqzanr* are all parallel markers of Akhaness as distinct from non-Akhaness. Most of the Neo-Traditionalist elite that have worked to “look after and improve” *Aqkaqzanr* in the interest of promoting a larger pan-Akha sense of belonging, however, no longer reside within the gates of upland Akha villages but rather in the urban landscapes of various lowland towns and cities throughout the region wherein they have become one of a variety of other minorities. As a result, many of the amendments that these elite have proposed and ratified in reference to *Aqkaqzanr* have effectively made it both possible as

well as lighter and yet more meaningful to carry beyond the village gates in the larger Akha World in the remaking.

#### **6.4 *Aqkaqzanr* and “the Voice of the Common People”?**

Mika Toyota has challenged the representations of Akha by Geusau, Kammerer, and Tooker as being overly preoccupied with *Aqkaqzanr*, which she has argued is largely the domain of upland village elite and ritual specialists (Toyota 2003:306). As a result, she argued, their representations ignore “the voice of the common people” (Toyota 2003:306). Toyota’s research focused on certain Akha divergently positioned beyond the upland Akha village gates in various parts of the Upper Mekong Region. Drawing on this body of research she argued that the ethnic representations and practices of Akha more broadly speaking were much more dynamic, flexible, ambiguous, situational, and multiple than claimed by either Geusau, Kammerer or Tooker (Toyota 2000:205).

In this respect, Toyota’s argument largely echoed and reinforced those of earlier scholars who had long portrayed the ethnoscares of upper Mainland Southeast Asia as inherently fluid, shifting, and dynamic (Keyes 1979; Leach 1954; Lehman 1979; Moerman 1965). Toyota argued that certain Akha, particularly elite business entrepreneurs and non-elite transregional laborers, strategically used and modified their ethnic identity and perceived image thereof in order to better position themselves in different contexts and in relation to various non-Akha Others.<sup>108</sup> In doing so, she argued, these Akha variably identified and represented themselves as Akha, Shan, and Yunnanese Chinese (Toyota 2003:316).<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> These two groups of Akha largely fell beyond the scope of the ethnographic frames of Geusau, Kammerer, and Tooker alike.

<sup>109</sup> Employing the notion of “trans-local identities,” Toyota noted that throughout field work she came across individual Akha, who, on the one hand, “when in Thailand, claimed they were ‘Akha,’ but in Burma called

Toyota's largely instrumentalist approach towards ethnicity, however, tends to first, ignore its often equally significant *expressive* dimensions (Rosaldo 1988:162), and, second, overlook the extent to which Akha ethnoscaples, namely the multiple upland and increasingly lowland Akha villages dotting the Upper Mekong Region, have informed individual's everyday conceptions and representations of Self. Toyota's claim, moreover, that *Aqkaqzanr* has been largely the domain of village elite and ritual specialists was probably more a result of her skewed focus on lowland based entrepreneurs and migrants rather than the numerous upland Akha villages wherein practices of *Aqkaqzanr* have both depended upon as well as animated a much larger collectivity beyond simply elite and ritual specialists.

In addition, as noted earlier, in their efforts to reproduce and claim a modern and authentic Akhaness, an expanding regional network of Neo-Traditionalists has been reworking *Aqkaqzanr* so as to make it both possible as well as lighter and more meaningful to carry beyond the village gates in the various lowland, urban settings in the region where an expanding number of Akha have settled in recent years. I would venture to guess, moreover, that certain of these Neo-Traditionalist elite, particularly those of the U-bya (*Uqbyaq*) sub-group originally from southwest China and that have long been involved in regional patterns of trade, were among Toyota's interlocutors. As such, my findings suggest that circumstances in the region have changed to the extent that certain Akha elite as well as non-elite have increasingly identified as not only Akha but also Traditionalist by way of reframing the indigenous equation between *Aqkaqzanr* and Akhaness in a more essentialized and static rather than constructed and dynamic fashion.

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themselves 'Shan,'" and, on the other hand, "who were recognized as 'Yunnanese Chinese' in Thailand but project(ed) themselves as 'Akha' in China, and so on" (2003:38).

### **6.5 Concluding Remarks: Of multiple and shifting religio-political borders of belonging**

In conclusion, the religio-political diversity that has since the 1980s come to characterize the Akha Worlds of initially north Thailand and east Myanmar (and may yet come to characterize those of southwest China and northwest Laos in the near future) has resulted from numerous historical factors bringing about the uneven transformations of local Akha communities and spaces in the region. Most notably, the relatively recent rise of nation-states in the region has brought about the gradual re-ordering of the extensive and rugged mountainous landscape that Akha and numerous other uplanders have called home for centuries – variably dividing and uniting Akha on the basis of older as well as newly reworked forms of belonging such as clan affiliation, village of residence, religion, nationalism and, of course, ethnicity as a reworked co-production of modern nationalist formations. These borders - as channels of friction and connectivity - have loomed large in the imaginings and practices of Akha Neo-Traditionalist elite working to promote a pan-Akha sense of belonging throughout the larger Akha World.

Religion, moreover, has, since roughly the late 1980s, been the primary idiom in which contemporary Akha identitarian politics have been framed. This is not to say, however, that Akha religio-political factionalism has not been grafted onto earlier divisions defined more along the lines of clan and sub-group affiliation, socioeconomic status, and locality of residence. For example, family and kinship networks have tended to exert a strong influence on the highly meshed material and spiritual matters of life and death. The particular religious tradition being carried by most if not all of the members of a particular clan has often been as much a reflection of a strong desire to be together both in the now and hereafter as their political maneuvering in relation to a variety of opportunity structures at the village level and beyond.

Contemporary Akha identitarian politics have been further characterized by a certain degree of essentialism with deeper roots in a cultural logic whereby ethnicity and religion are equated. Prior to the 1980s, the operation of this equation, as a result of the semi-autonomy enjoyed by upland Akha communities in Thailand and Myanmar, explains the high degree of resistance posed by Akha to foreign Christian missionaries. This resistance, however, began to wane during the 1980s as a result of the heightened incorporation of these particular Akha Worlds into lowland state formations and the expanding global capitalist market.

In order to make sense of their transformed experiences of modernity a growing number of Akha in Thailand and Myanmar decided, for various reasons, to “go down to and take on” the “ethno-religious” identity of non-Akha Christian Others. As more and more Akha converted, moreover, the scale of power began to shift in the favor of an emerging Akha Christian elite who subsequently went to work reconfiguring the conceptual domain of Akhaness so as to claim authenticity as both Akha and Christian. A key part of this work involved reframing *Zanr* from the more holistic domain of culture to that of religion, understood as separate and apart from culture. However, this conceptual work has been highly contested by certain Akha communities that have continued to both see themselves as carrying the Ways of the Akha Ancestors as well as equate the Akha religion and Akhaness.

A number of tensions and divisions have arisen throughout various parts of the Akha World as a result of these multiple and shifting responses to varied experiences of modernity. The latter divisions and tensions have been most acute in relation to not only the question of what it means to be, and, indeed, become Akha in the contemporary world, but also the very scale and extent of the larger Akha World in the making. These tensions have become particularly salient in relation to the more recent efforts of Neo-Traditionalist elite from various

parts of the region to promote a pan-Akha identity of a profoundly religious and yet modern nature.

Neo-Traditionalist elite have reproduced the indigenous equation between religion and ethnicity or *Aqkaqzanr* and Akhaness in the form of a more powerful, supra-local discourse extending far beyond the village gates throughout the reimagined boundaries of a larger Akha World or crypto-nation in the making. In their refashionings of Akhaness these elite have worked to anchor their notions of peoplehood in the more fundamental domain of religion, particularly that which has been reframed as THE Akha Religion both in the singular as well as separate and apart from culture. Elite have employed a variety of decolonizing methods in order to actualize their crypto-nationalist vision of a larger Akha World. These methods – arranged roughly in the order in which they are discussed in the following four chapters – have included:

1. the reformation and standardization of Akhaness in the form of the one and only authentic Akha Religion;
2. the documentation, “vitalization” (Smith 1954:122) and reworking of pre-existing genealogical ties of ancient kinship;
3. the transformation of the Akha Religion from an oral to a literate based tradition by way of the negotiation and production of a unified and distinctly Akha orthography;
4. the production of a written and standardized historical narrative wherein Akha figure front and center;
5. the invention of transregional traditions or annual ceremonial gatherings;
6. and, finally, the creation of numerous material and immaterial productions of translocal Akhaness in the form of an Akha flag, musical and theatrical productions, modern forms

of dress, embodied markers of authentic Akha masculinity, and artistic representations of the Akha cosmos.

In their crypto-nationalist imaginaries and practices, moreover, elite have exhibited varying degrees and kinds of cosmopolitanisms reflecting national, regional, and, indeed global discourses and norms regarding notions of peoplehood, religion, culture, language, and history (cf. Friedman 1994; Anderson 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Elite have encountered these discourses via direct and indirect engagements with other Akha and Hani from different parts of the region; their respective national governments, publics and scholarly traditions; and foreign, largely Euro-American scholars, missionaries, and minority rights advocates. In the following chapter I discuss the everyday *and* extraordinary ways in which these elite have variably reframed the boundaries of belonging within the Akha World or crypto-nation in a profoundly religious fashion.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Neo-Traditionalists' Deeply Lightened Reproductions of the Ancestral Burden

Late one evening over dinner Prosperous One turned to me and rhetorically asked:

“What do you think of our efforts on behalf of the Akha Religion?

Do you agree with what we are doing?

Is it wrong for us to carry our own religion, rather than that of Others?

You know, we have never looked down on the religions of Others and yet Others, especially Christians, have often looked down on and despised our religion, incessantly working to convert us to their religion by giving us all sorts of handouts.

Yet, in spite of their efforts many Akha have refused to convert and remained steadfast in their determination to be Akha.

I am very proud of these people.

They give me great hope.

In contrast to these Christian Others, we are only encouraging *our own* people to return our religion, the religion given to us and us alone by God (*Aqpoeq Miqyaer*) long ago and that has been carried by our Ancestors ever since.

Our religion is a great religion on par with other religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and so forth.

Yet, our religion has been at a disadvantage when compared to these other religions.

Over the past hundred years, moreover, increasing numbers of Akha have been led to discard the Akha Religion and go down to and take on the religions of non-Akha Others, particularly Christian Others.

Why? Because no one ever worked to look after and improve our religion in the past.

No one ever worked, moreover, to unite our people across the divisions of local villages and clans.

As a result, our Ancestors had no means of defense against the foreign Catholic and Baptist missionaries that came from Italy and America to convert them.

Our Ancestors' religion could not compete with the powerful religion of the missionaries.

We had no Bible (laughs).<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> During subsequent exchanges I came to learn that Prosperous One and many of the other elite within the reformation movement have perceived of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors as “weak” relative to Christianity, in particular, by virtue of being both oral rather than written as well as disunited, decentralized and diverse rather than unified, centralized and standardized. In contrast, Christianity has been perceived as “strong” by virtue of being a

There were no disciples to work on behalf of our religion.

It is this very situation that we are now working to rectify by looking after and improving our religion and uniting our people so that neither will ever cease to be.

Foremost, we are working to defend our people from the (missionary) bears and wolves that have long preyed on them.

As a result, the missionaries are very upset with us.

In fact, the Pope, by way of the bishop of Kengtung (in Myanmar), has branded me a demon riding on five dragons...”

(Prosperous One, personal communication, November 28, 2011).<sup>111</sup>

### 7.1 Reformations of Akhaness: From Deeply Grounding to Upwardly Unifying

In their unification efforts, Prosperous One and his disciples (hereafter referred to as MATA)<sup>112</sup> have worked to reorient Akhaness from a focus on the local as reflected in deeply grounding household Ancestral practices and village communal rites to the supra-local by fostering upwardly unifying Ancestral beliefs and regional communal rites. Historically, Ancestral practices have been centered at Ancestral altars located within the households of either individual families or senior most clan members in particular villages (Geusau 1983:274; Tooker 2012:32; Wang, personal communication, November 15, 2009). While Akha knew that their fellow villagers carried out offerings to their respective Ancestors, there was no immediate consciousness that all Akha per se shared a common apical Ancestor linked in a shared hierarchy.

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textual tradition (i.e. the Bible) that was further presumed to be more strongly unified, centralized and standardized – all of which was further equated with power and modernity.

<sup>111</sup> Later, in a separate exchange with Ayoe, I learned that he had also been branded by the Bishop of Kengtung, albeit as a lesser demon riding on three rather than five dragons (personal communication, November 29, 2011). As he spoke of this branding, however, Ayoe noted with a mixture of irony, defiance and pride that while Christians associate the dragon with the devil and evil, Akha, not unlike the Chinese, associate the dragon with power and authority (personal communication, November 29, 2011).

<sup>112</sup> As noted earlier in chapter two, MATA is the acronym for a formally registered organization in Myanmar referred to as the “The Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion” (*Mam Mirkhanq Aqkaqghanr Tawq-e Armavq*). Based in the Myanmar-Thai border town of Tachilek, this organization has been led and financed by a core group of seven Akha males in addition to Prosperous One. These leading figures have hailed from various parts of east Myanmar and had diverse backgrounds in the Myanmar national military and government, business sector as well as civil society.

In addition, the household Ancestral shrines of villagers in the region have long been their primary points of contact with their particular Ancestral lineages. The recipients of household's Ancestral offerings have been their closest and most intimately known generations of Ancestors referred to as "Peu-pi Jm-ma" (*Poeqpiq Jmma*). The latter Ancestors are generally considered to be within seven generations of their descendants (Wang 2013:86).<sup>113</sup>

In the movement to forge a modern authenticity and larger Akha World, MATA has recast the near and intimately known Ancestors as a primal link to a distant and impersonal "Supreme Creator-Deity" referred to in Akha as "A-peu Mi-yae" (*Aqpoeq Miqyaer*). In this manner, MATA has looked to Akha Ancestral genealogies, which often extend back in time over sixty known generations to a common apical Ancestor, as the definitive markers of their unique relationship with the Supreme Creator-Deity. Hence, not unlike the Jews, to whom Prosperous One often referred in buttressing his claims of the centrality of the Akha Religion to Akhaness, the claim has been made that Akha are a chosen people of sorts, albeit it in relative rather than absolute terms.

MATA has further worked to transform the "living dead" in a manner that has not only reflected but also informed and made sense of the changes taking place in the everyday lives of the "living living" (Friesen 2001:xxi; Ferea 2001). They have reframed the "burden" of the past via a process of "creative production and ethical judgment" ensuring that the Ancestors remain of moral significance for the "living living" (Lambek 2003). As such, their engagements with tradition have been as much about the present *and* future as the past (Strathern and Stewart 2004:6).

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<sup>113</sup> In reference to this particular category of Ancestors, Ayoe has written the following: "Those spirits of immediate ancestors—usually within seven generations—are termed as *poeq-piq jm-ma*. Twelve offerings are given to these immediate ancestors annually at the ancestor shrine located at the middle post of each house called *jm-gher* or *jm-zer*, by each family during nine annual religious festivals/rituals in traditional Akha societies" (Wang 2013:86).

## 7.2 Macrocosmic reproductions of Akhaness: “Our Supreme Creator-Deity and the Christian God are One and the Same”

Prosperous One has held that A-peu Mi-yae and the Christian God are one and the same, hence his claim that, “We (Akha) have our own religion” rather than “God” per se. On one occasion as we talked about Christian resistance to MATA’s work “on behalf of the Akha Religion,” Prosperous One informed me:

“I believe that the Christian God and our A-peu Mi-yae are one and the same. If the Christian missionaries really took the time to learn about our religion then they would not be so determined to convert us...”  
( Prosperous One, personal communication, December 14, 2009).

At another point during the same exchange our conversation shifted to the topic of the afterlife. Prosperous One’s face lit up as he began a long treatise describing the fundamental framework of the Akha cosmos as grounded in the genealogical “stairway to heaven” unique to Akha and Akha alone. At one point he took out a blank piece of white paper from his black briefcase, laid it on the table before him and began to sketch out a simple schema illustrating his views. In the top center of the page he wrote the term “A-peu Mi-yae” (*Aqpoeq Miqyaer*) using the particular version of the Common Akha Orthography endorsed by MATA and their Neo-Traditionalist affiliates throughout the region. He then proceeded to write his own genealogical name, “Za-lawn” (*Zalanq*), at the bottom center of the page.

Prosperous One then sketched out a stairway of sorts running upwards from his name, “Za-lawn,” and directly linking with that of “A-peu Mi-yae” at its apex. He explained that each of the steps represented the individual names of his Ancestors (*Aqpoeq Aqqiq*). “It is by way of our Ancestors,” Prosperous One stressed, “that we have our own unique connection with A-peu Mi-yae” (personal communication, November 28, 2011). At this point he proudly declared that there were no less than 90 Ancestors, all of whom he could recall by name, between him and A-

peu Mi-yae. He further stressed, however, that the four closest and most intimately known generations of Ancestors (*Poeqpiq Jmma*) were of special significance in terms of maintaining a direct line of communication with A-peu Mi-yae.<sup>114</sup>

I subsequently asked, “And so how does this compare or differ in relation to Christianity?” Prosperous One responded by drawing a different and yet parallel line running from his name, “Za-lawn” at the bottom of the page to “A-peu Mi-yae” at its apex. He then wrote in the term “Jesu” (Jesus) roughly mid-way up the line connecting his name and that of “A-peu Mi-yae,” all the while commenting that it is by way of Jesus that Christians have their own unique line of communication with A-peu Mi-yae. At this point he commented:

“Our (Akha) Ancestors,  
not unlike Jesus for Christians,  
are our direct link to A-peu Mi-yae.  
It was A-peu Mi-yae after all who originally gave each people in the world their own  
unique religion to carry”  
(Prosperous One, personal communication, December 14, 2009).

Prosperous One then continued by informing me that in the pre-Christian context of Judaism the Jewish people maintained a genealogical tradition similar to that of Akha. As he spoke the names of various apical Ancestors in the Jewish tradition - Abraham, Isaac and so forth - he drew in a series of check marks on the page running downwards from and connecting “A-peu Mi-yae” at the apex with the name of “Jesu” (Jesus) at the mid-way point along the corresponding Christian “stairway to heaven.”<sup>115</sup> He then reminded me, as he had done on several prior occasions, of the similarities between the Akha and Jewish people in terms of their

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<sup>114</sup> As noted earlier, these particular generations of Ancestors are the ones that are called to partake of Ancestral Offerings made at the household level by male householders and clan patriarchs throughout the Akha World. It is perhaps no coincidence that many of the living living most likely knew these particular Ancestors when they were still elders and had yet to pass onto the realm of the living dead.

<sup>115</sup> The next day as I was jotting down field notes based on our exchanges I dug out my pocket sized version of the New American Standard Bible, browsed through the Old Testament and located the primal Ancestral genealogy for the Jewish people, starting however, not with Abraham but rather the first (hu)man, Adam, as recorded in The First Book of Chronicles (1995:393).

deeply intertwined ethnic and religious identities. Prosperous One further added, however, as on previous occasions, that the Jewish people have been able to more successfully maintain their peoplehood when compared to Akha by virtue of having their own state of Israel.<sup>116</sup> As discussed earlier, Akha elites' heightened consciousness as to their lacking any state of their own along with their strong denial of having any ambitions for such a state mark their vision of a larger Akha World as a distinctly crypto-nationalist formation.

Prosperous One's claim of the Christian God and Akha A-peu Mi-yae as being one and the same, moreover, variably harkens back to and complicates similar kinds of claims made by early U.S. and more recently Akha Christian missionaries. For instance, in an article entitled, "Basic Themes in Akha Culture," U.S. Baptist missionary-anthropologist, Paul W. Lewis, wrote the following:

"Another important theme in the Akha culture has to do with a supreme being (a\_poe\_mi\_yeh), a term which, for want of a better one, I will translate as 'God.' In Akha, the first part of the term can be translated as either 'grandfather' or 'ancestor.' The second part of the term has no meaning that I can find, unless it might imply 'great power'... The Akha conception of 'God' is very different from the Western Judeo-Christian concept which is why in this paper I use quotation marks when I refer to the Akha concept of a\_poe\_mi\_yeh" (1992[1982]:217-219).<sup>117</sup>

In his 1989 Akha-English-Thai Dictionary, Lewis included two entries under "God," the first referring to "(Akha usage) A\_poe\_mi\_yeh" and the second referring to "(Christian usage) Mi\_yeh, A\_da Mi\_yeh" (1989:569). He further defined "A-peu Mi-yae" as "'God,' a deified ancestor figure, considered all-powerful" (Lewis 1989:60). These Christianized reframings of "A-peu Mi-yae" as either "Mi-yae" (Mi\_yeh [God]) in its non-Catholic form or

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<sup>116</sup> Ian Baird informed me that the Hmong, another upland minority group hailing from the Upper Mekong Region and lacking any state of their own, have been known to make similar kinds of claims in reference to the Jewish people and Israel (personal communication, November 26, 2014).

<sup>117</sup> In this excerpt Lewis employs the particular Romanized Akha orthography that he played an instrumental role in developing as a young missionary in 1950s Kengtung, Burma (see Morton 2010:112-113,132). Since that time this particular Akha orthography has become the primary one used by non-Catholic Christian Akha in the Upper Mekong Region.

“A-da Mi-yae” (A<sub>da</sub> Mi<sub>yeh</sub>; God the Father) among Catholics are geared towards purifying the term “A-peu Mi-yae” as well as that which is perceived as the Akha religion more generally, of its “worldly” elements and refocusing it rather on the “otherworldly.”

The Lewises’ characterization of *Aqkaqzanr* as religion was multi-layered. In her earlier referenced comments, Elaine T. Lewis suggests that “the religion of the Akhas” posed a “formidable barrier” to their missionary work in 1950s Kengtung, Burma (1957:229). Moreover, in countering claims such as, “Animistic peoples are easy to win to Christianity because they have no organized religion to hold them,” (or) ‘Christianity (in contrast to other religions) is not a religion, but a way of life’ ,” Elaine Lewis argued that:

“These statements have not been found to be true of the Lahu and Akha cultures, with which we have been most intimately associated for nine and a half years. The Akha culture especially is highly complicated, and is so deeply ingrained into every fiber of their beings that it is a cataclysmic experience for them to break away and accept a new way of life....We are inclined to believe that every religion is a ‘way of life’ (*speaking now only of the earthly life*), and that is certainly true of the religion of animistic peoples. Indeed, Christians are likely to make more definite divisions between the ‘secular’ and the ‘sacred’ than animistic peoples are. It has been our experience that to animistic peoples all of life is religion, and all of religion is life. There is no separation of the two” (1957:228-229; italics mine).

While the Lewises recognized the existence of something akin to religion among Akha, it was nevertheless perceived as being entirely of the material world and thus false, temporal and inferior in comparison to Christianity. Those who adhere to this worldly religion are further apperceived as being in a state of “bondage” to their parochial tribal customs, the chains of which may only be thrown aside by way of “accept(ing) the freedom found in Christ”:

“...There are no doubt some Akhas who are sincerely anxious to break away from the bondage of their highly demanding religion and accept the freedom that is found in Christ. As they hear the Gospel of love and grace, some recognize how vastly superior it is to the life offered to them by their tribal religion” (Lewis 1957:229-230).

In purifying the term “A-peu Mi-yae” of its worldly elements, moreover, Lewis and his predecessors fixated on the central figure of the “Ancestors,” either misunderstood or

reinterpreted as being embodied solely within the term “A-peu” (*Aqpoeq*) as separate and apart from “Mi-yae” (*Miqyaer*). Indeed, Lewis largely sidestepped the all important position of the “Ancestors” in his above referenced article purported to have highlighted the “three most important themes” in Akha culture:

“There are many salient themes in the Akha culture, but in this chapter I have restricted my focus to three of the most important ones: rice, ‘God’ and the ‘holy.’ If these three themes were magically removed from the Akha culture, it would no longer be Akha ” (1992[1982]:223).<sup>118</sup>

Not surprisingly, each of these “themes,” which reflect a particular kind of Christianized reading of Akhaness that perhaps stems from Lewis’ relative openness to the enculturation of Christianity when compared to more fundamentalist Christians, are more or less compatible with a Christian Akha identity that has been purified of its “worldly” dimensions as rooted first and foremost in the all important position of the “Ancestors.” Hence, the Christianization of Akhaness, particularly in the non-Catholic context, has in large part entailed a process of de-ancestralization (or de-dematerialization of the Ancestral domain) whereby the near and intimately known Akha Ancestors were supplanted by the distant and less intimately known figure of Jesus as both intermediary and also personification of a distant and yet omnipotent and all-knowing God.<sup>119</sup> Indeed, as noted earlier in chapter four, Friesen has stressed that:

“Christianity forsakes the material, bodily relationships of family, preferring instead a spiritual kinship with heroes. These Christian ‘ancestors’ have no bodily connection with their ‘descendants’ ” (Friesen 2001:xxvi; Raitt 2001).

<sup>118</sup> In contrast, as noted earlier, Kammerer among others has stressed the all important position of the “Ancestors” in arguing that Akha define themselves on the basis of descent from a “single apical ancestor” and “adherence to a specific set of ‘Customs’ ” (1986:394-6).

<sup>119</sup> Indeed, as noted earlier in chapter six, as increasing numbers of Akha began to convert to Christianity in post-1980s Thailand and Myanmar they simultaneously began to rework the Akha lexicon in a manner that (re)framed non-Christians or those still “in bondage (to) their highly demanding (tribal) religion” as “*law ci za*” (*lawr civq zaq*), a term that Lewis defined as “heathen, non-Christians, animist,” in contrast to both “*Ka-li za*” (Ka-li is an Akha transliteration of “C-hri[st]” and *za* refers to “people”; *Kali zaq*) or non-Catholic Christians and also “*Gu/o daw za*” (Gu/o daw is an Akha transliteration of “Ca-tho[lic]” and *za* refers to “people”; *Kovq dawq zaq*) or Catholics (1989:273,535,537). Note, moreover, that while Lewis capitalized “*Ka-li za*” and “*Gu/o daw za*” as proper nouns he did not do the same with “*law ci za*.”

Prosperous One's claims in turn of sameness between the Christian God and Akha A-peu Mi-yae - wherein the term "A-peu" has been restored to its position alongside of "Mi-yae" – have variably appropriated, reworked and challenged these earlier Christianized reworkings of Akhaness and the Akha cosmology. In making these claims on behalf of the Akha Religion, moreover, Prosperous One has asserted both its equality with and also distinction from Christianity (and Buddhism). Akha, he has argued, are a chosen people that have been given their own religion to carry by "God/A-peu Mi-yae" and it is only by carrying (as well as believing in) this Religion and this Religion alone that they are Akha.

These claims, moreover, have been made in reference not merely to the land of the "living living" but also that of the "living dead." For example, on several occasions as Prosperous One and his disciples engaged in village-level outreach work "on behalf of the Akha Religion" in various parts of north Thailand, he invariably addressed the following words to his audiences:

"We (Akha) have our own afterlife and it is only by way of carrying our own religion that our Primal Ancestral Mother (*Tanq Panq Aqma*) will grant us entrance to this afterlife when we pass away.

And what do we make of those Akha that have, for various reasons, abandoned our religion for that of white Christian Others?

Do they truly believe that as Akha they will ever be granted entrance to the afterlife of these white Christian Others?

Surely not, as we (Akha) can neither escape our dark, Akha skin nor speak the language of these white Christian Others.

How, then, could we ever expect to be granted entrance to the afterlife of white Christian Others by their white gatekeepers who will neither be able to speak our Akha language nor recognize us as one of their own?"

(Prosperous One, March 10, 2011).

In Prosperous One's views, moreover, it is the all important figure of the (Akha) Ancestors that both undergird the very essence of the Akha Religion and in turn Akhaness as well as mark Akha as a distinct people with their own direct link or line of communication with "God/A-peu

Mi-yae.” At the same time, however, Prosperous One’s (re)imaginings of A-peu Mi-yae have differed in certain ways from those of numerous other Akha religio-political factions in the region. First and foremost, Prosperous One’s claims of sameness between the Christian God and Akha A-peu Mi-yae have been highly contested by numerous Christian and non-Christian Traditionalist factions alike.

For many Christians, A-peu Mi-yae, as separate and apart from either Mi-yae or A-da Mi-yae as explained above, has been intimately associated with the “heavy” and “heathenish” past from which Christianity has “freed” them. On the other hand, many non-Christian Traditionalists have conceived of their Ancestral Ways as well as those of others, whether they be non-Akha Christians, Buddhists or Hmong for that matter, as mutually exclusive ethno-religious markers of group identities that should be fully and properly adhered to as well as never “mixed.” The latter line of thinking is reflected in the following comments of Kammerer:

“To be Akha is to uphold the prescriptions and proscriptions of Akha (*zanr*). Akha is as Akha does; and what Akha should do is follow the behavioral rules handed down from parent to child through the roughly 60 generations memorialized in the patrilineal genealogies of all Akha. Similarly, to be Lahu, for example – this is from the Akha, not the Lahu point of view – is to follow whatever (*zanr*) has been handed down from one generation to the next since the creator distributed (*zanr*) to Lahu” (Kammerer 1990:281).

### **7.3 The Akha Bible: Becoming a People of the Book**

MATA has further worked to transform the Ways of the Akha Ancestors from an oral tradition to a written and hence “proper” or “modern” religion. Keenly aware of the power of the written word, MATA published an Akha language text entitled, The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion, in December 2011 (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011). During several of our exchanges prior to, during as well as after the text’s publication, Prosperous One half jokingly referred to it in English as the “Akha Bible.” Indeed, in their

efforts to simultaneously literize, modernize and ultimately religiousize their Ancestral Ways, these elite have challenged Christianity's hegemonic hold on the modern and Religion proper wherein the written word is a key signifier of both.

The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion is simultaneously a rhetorical statement on the centrality of the Akha Religion to Akhaness and a manual of sorts for either "returning" to or continuing to "carry" a deeply lightened and modernized version of the Akha Religion. I use the seemingly incongruous descriptives of "deepen" and "lighten" here to stress that MATA has simultaneously worked to render their Ancestral burden less complicated and financially burdensome as well as more meaningful in relation to a shifting experience of modernity increasingly framed in relation to life beyond the village gates in various lowland towns and cities throughout the region.

In their Neo-Traditionalist refashionings of the Ancestral burden, moreover, MATA has sought to both encourage Akha to consider the larger Akha World over their particular sub-group affiliations as well as standardize local practices of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. For example, in their textual reproductions of Akhaness, MATA admonishes their various congregations in the following manner: "Do not distinguish between the Jeu-jaw (*Jeqjawr*) and Jeu-weu (*Jeqghoeq*) supra-clans" (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:24-25).<sup>120</sup> As noted earlier in chapter five, Old-Traditionalists, generally speaking, do according to the Ways of not merely the Akha Ancestors but rather their particular Patrilineages.

MATA has distributed a limited number of hard bound copies of The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion throughout various parts of the Akha World, most notably to certain Akha "VIP" that have either "returned" to or continue to "carry" the Akha Religion. I must stress, however, that a rather small, albeit gradually expanding, number of Akha are literate in any one

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<sup>120</sup> In the original Akha this reads as: "*Jeqghoeq jeqjawr taq tseirpav.*"

of several largely Romanized Akha orthographies developed by various actors – Akha and non-Akha – since the early twentieth century (see Morton 2010:132-133).<sup>121</sup> The relatively low rates of literacy in any one of these Akha orthographies both complicates Benedict Anderson’s positioning of “print culture” as central to the construction of “imagined” or “imagining communities” (Anderson 1991[1983]; Tanabe 2008) as well as stresses the sustained significance of orality in relation to contemporary identitarian formations at various levels ranging from the local to national, regional and global (see George 1990; Lewis 1997; Yukti 2007). Nevertheless, one must consider the possibility that as forms of visual or material culture in of themselves, The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion along with the distinctly Neo-Traditionalist Akha orthography emblazoned on its pages have played a more or less salient role in promoting the imaginary of a larger, distinctly (Neo)Traditionalist Akha World in the making.

#### **7.4 “Do not forget the Ancestors”: (Re)Materializing the Ancestral Burden**

MATA has further carried out this process of literization in relation to both the Ancestors in of themselves as well as the materialized space or Ancestral altars located within households that serve as the temporary seat of the closest and most intimately known generations of Ancestors referred to as “Peu-pi Jm-ma” (*Poeqpiq Jmma*). It is the latter Ancestral generations, usually within seven generations of the living living (Wang 2013:86), who male householders and clan patriarchs call to partake of the offerings of freshly prepared food and drink that they have placed on a small Ancestral table at the foot of their Ancestral altars some twelve times per year. In their efforts to look after and improve the Ancestral burden, MATA has simultaneously

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<sup>121</sup> In 1982, Lewis estimated that between 2,500 to 3,000 Akha in Burma and 100 to 150 in Thailand were literate in the particular Romanized Baptist Akha orthography that he and several Akha collaborators had developed during the 1950s in Kengtung, Burma (1992[1982]:210).

literated and thereby rematerialized the Ancestral domain in a manner that significantly departs from its earlier and contemporary articulations.

First, MATA has reworked the actual names of the Ancestors from a more private, internally remembered and transmitted oral tradition to a more public, externally recorded and transmitted written tradition.<sup>122</sup> They have (re)documented and (re)memorialized the Ancestors' names in the written and materialized form of "Ancestral Genealogical Pictures" (*Aqkaq Tseevq Arbar*) as further explained below (see figure 7.2 below). In brief, these materialized productions of the Ancestral burden have served as salient markers of MATA's efforts to promote their pan-Akha crypto-nationalist project. Thus in this particular Akha context we might speak of "the political lives of the names of the dead" (cf. Verdery 1999).<sup>123</sup>

What has hitherto been a purely internalized oral tradition has in this fashion been reworked into an externalized written tradition wherein orality nevertheless continues to be of paramount importance. For example, the living living must ultimately call upon the living dead by reciting their names one by one in order to ensure that their deceased loved ones may find their way "back up to the ancestral village/homeland" (Hanks 1974; Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:35-45).

A fear of forgetting the Ancestors, moreover, has long been a major impetus behind the efforts of not only MATA but also those of earlier organizations, such as AFECT, to document the Ancestors and their names in the written word.<sup>124</sup> These concerns grew in urgency during the

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<sup>122</sup> It is possible, however, that this has only been the case for those who are literate in Akha and can thus read (rather than recite) the names of the Ancestors.

<sup>123</sup> This is a play on the title of U.S. anthropologist Katherine Verdery's (1999) ethnography entitled, "The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change."

<sup>124</sup> As noted earlier, AFECT, the Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand, was officially established in 1989 as an offshoot of the Mountain Peoples' Culture, Development and Education Foundation (MPCDE) which was founded by Geusau and several prominent Thai scholars and social activists. From roughly the mid 1990s until Geusau's passing in 2002, a small number of Akha intellectuals from southwest China and north Thailand worked with AFECT to collect and then collate the Ancestral genealogies of Akha residing in various parts of the Akha

latter part of the twentieth century as it became increasingly apparent that the new generation of Akha youth educated in various national school systems throughout the region were coming to rely more upon the written than oral word (Tooker 1996a). It remains to be seen, however, as to whether this ongoing exercise of reducing the Ancestors to the external form of the Akha alphabet rather than the internal form of Akha memories will indeed fend off the forgetting of the Ancestors. As Socrates, in Plato's Phaedrus, decreed long ago:

“The discovery of the alphabet will create forgetfulness in the learner's souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. You give your disciples not truth but only the semblance of truth; they will be heroes of many things, and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing” (In McLuhan et al. 1967:113).

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World into a master Ancestral genealogy of all Akha (and Hani). In their documentation efforts, these elite employed an earlier version of the Akha orthography that has since been modified and endorsed by the transregional network of Neo-Traditionalists under MATA and NADA. In addition, some Hani scholars based in the Honghe area of Yunnan, China have since at least the early 2000s been involved in a similar genealogical documentation project, initially aimed at Hani in Honghe (Yang 2005) and more recently expanded to include Hani and Akha more generally both within and beyond China (Yang and Yu 2010).



Figures 7.1 & 7.2: Figure 7.1 on the left is a photo taken by the author of an Old-Traditionalist Grandmother-Shaman going about preparations to carry out her household’s Ancestral Offering. The Ancestral Altar can be seen in the top, right side adjacent to the central post of the home. Figure 7.2 on the right is an image downloaded by the author with permission from MATA’s facebook page entitled, “*Poeqpiq Jmma gar mr ghar*” or “Workers on behalf of the (Akha) Ancestors.” The image is of a literalized, pictorial representation of the master Ancestral genealogy shared by all Akha framed against the backdrop of the cosmos. Ancestral names are written in the Neo-Traditionalist Common Akha Orthography.

Second, MATA has shifted the locus of the Ancestral cult from simple wooden and bamboo structures of varying form and size positioned at the central post on the more private, female side of household interiors (Wang 2013:86) to a literized, pictorial representation of the master Ancestral genealogy more variably positioned throughout households that are often no longer partitioned into distinct female and male sides (see figures 7.1 and 7.2 above). In these rematerialized representations of Akhanness, the master Akha Ancestral genealogy is positioned front and center as a direct link or line of communication between Akha and A-peu Mi-yae and further framed against the backdrop of the cosmos.

Referred to as the “Akha Ancestral Genealogy Picture” (*Aqkaq Tseevq Arbar*), this particular version of print culture has taken the form of a computer generated rendering of an

expansive mountainous landscape and sky framing a vertically and centrally arranged written list of the names of the twenty five Ancestors shared by all Akha.<sup>125</sup> These Ancestors' names are written in the particular Common Akha Orthography endorsed by MATA and their affiliates as follows:

*“MqMavq  
 MqGhanr  
 GhanrNeiq  
 NeiqZawvq  
 ZawvqZev  
 ZevTor  
 TorMa  
 MaYawr  
 YawrDaevq  
 DaevqBae  
 BaeSmr  
 SmrMirOr  
 OrToeqloe  
 ToeqloeDzm  
 DzmMawqYaer  
 MawqYaerCav  
 CavTiqSiq  
 TiqSiqLir  
 LirPawqBaev  
 PawqBaevUv  
 UvNyqZaq  
 NyqZaqTsawr  
 TsawrMawqOer  
 MawqOerDzoeq  
 DzoeqTanqPanq”*

This list of Ancestral names emerges upwards out of a series of arrangements of blue covered tiles, an initial seven larger tiles and then some ninety-six smaller tiles at the base. In addition, a dark red sun from which brilliant yellow rays emanate is positioned at the apex of this centrally

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<sup>125</sup> I have noticed slight variations in both the total number as well as actual names of the Ancestors included in this particular sequence of the master Ancestral genealogy shared by all Akha (and Hani). For example, Ayoe includes one additional Ancestor in this sequence for a total of 26. In a particular section of this sequence referred to as the “Mythical Ancestral Genealogy” (*Naevq-Tseevq*), MATA and Ayoe’s version differ in the following: MATA’s version reads “*MqMavq...MaYawr, YawrDaevq, DaevqBae...*” and so on, while Ayoe’s version reads “*MqMa...MaCawr, CawrYawr, YawrDaevq, DaevqBae...*” and so on (Wang 2013:31-32).

positioned written list of Ancestral names. At the base of the image the following words are written on a bright yellow banner:

“We ask/beg/pray for the blessings of A-peu Mi-yae and our Ancestors”  
 (“*Aqpoeq Miqyaer hawr-e Aqdee-eq Poeqqiq Jmma-anr Tanqyar Ma*”)

The seven larger tiles – pentagonal in shape and pointing up towards the heavens - branch out and downwards from Ancestor “Dzeu-Tawn-Pawn” (*Dzoeq Tanq Panq*), the very last and thus nearest Ancestor shared by all Akha (and Hani). Ancestor Dzeu-Tawn-Pawn has been memorialized in Akha oral and written historical texts as both “Primal Ancestral Mother” (*Tanq Panq Aqma*) and the “last common (shamanistic) chief/king” of an ancient Akha (and Hani) polity pre-dating Jadae (Wang 2013:32-33,48).<sup>126</sup> Ayoe has argued that following the death of Dzeu-Tawn-Pawn this early Akha (and Hani) polity divided into seven chiefdoms as reflected in the seven major genealogical branches from which all Akha (and Hani) genealogies have hence diverged into hundreds of patrilineal lineages (Wang 2013:32-33). The ninety-six smaller, blue and square shaped tiles forming the base of the Akha Ancestral Genealogy Picture represent the latter ever-expanding Ancestral lines.

This pyramidal or phallic-shaped representation of the master Akha Ancestral genealogy naturally draws one’s gaze from its broad, monotonous base framed against a mountainous landscape upwards toward its narrow, distinctly marked tower of Ancestral names framed against an expansive sky and crowned at its apex with a brilliant red sun. According to MATA representatives, this sun symbol simultaneously represents A-peu Mi-yae or the “Supreme Creator-Deity” and the Akha Ancestral homeland-state of Jadae, wherein the latter is understood

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<sup>126</sup> Ayoe has elaborated on these points in the following manner: “Dzoeq Tanq-panq (was self proclaimed) as the reincarnated common ancestral mother Tanq-panq Aqma, who is believed (to have been) a great mother of not only human beings but also spirits... The Hani-Akha genealogies have been conventionally believed to be patronymic linkage systems, but recent studies reveal that it contains some female or maternal names, particularly in the mythical part; at least the first figure Mq-ma (Aoq-ma) is believed a female (Yang 2010; In Wang 2013:31)... It is also speculated that the Akha ancestors were living in a matrilineal society when they were hunter-and-gatherers” (Yang 2010; In Wang 2013:48,142-43).

as both the point of origin for Akha as well as the place to which Akha and Akha alone return upon passing from the realm of the living living to that of the living dead.

As the Primal Ancestral Mother of all Akha, moreover, it is Ancestor Dzeu-Tawn Pawn that Ritual Reciters (Pi-ma [*Pirma*]) ultimately call upon during the latter part of funerals to guide the deceased along the final stretch of their journey back up to the land of the living dead or Ancestors. Ritual Reciters are only able to guide the deceased as far as the place in the Akha Ancestral Cosmography where Ancestor Dzeu-Tawn-Pawn resides. It is here in the Ancestral Cosmography that Ritual Reciters call upon Ancestor Dzeu-Tawn-Pawn to guide the deceased along the remainder of their journey. In MATA's religious-ized reproductions of the Ancestral Ways, they advise their adherents to call upon Ancestor Dzeu-Tawn-Pawn in the following manner:

“We strongly believe that you are the one who waits for our deceased at the gate from where you guide them back up to the house of A-peu Mi-yae and ensure that they may reach the house of A-peu Mi-yae without any worries” (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:42).<sup>127</sup>

MATA has further mass produced these modern standardized and generic versions of the Akha Ancestral Genealogy Picture in a printed and laminated form for distribution throughout various parts of the Akha World, albeit most prominently east Myanmar (and Na-ba [*Nabaq*]) followed by north Thailand, northwest Laos, and, finally, southwest China. These images have subsequently made their way into various households in the form of either newly adopted Ancestral Altar centerpieces in the case of both returnees to as well as adoptees of the Akha Religion in its presumably improved version or wall adornments variably placed in the homes of those who continue to practice the Ways of the Akha Ancestors.

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<sup>127</sup> In the original Akha this phrase is written in the following manner: “*Aqkaqzaq deq PoeqpiqJmma jawrgar ghovq leir ngaie, neezanq maqdawvq, xaq zanq ma mr-aer ghovq leir nya ni, gartsmr-anr lovq-awr Aqpoeq Mq mavq Smqbae Aqpoeq Miqyaer-e ir kanr-anr xeqha naeq leir-e ghaq mae laer jan-e ma.*”

Moreover, as Prosperous One and his disciples have engaged in their transregional outreach work on behalf of the Akha Religion, they have personally distributed these mass produced versions of the Akha Ancestral Genealogy Picture. In particular, at the very end of their orchestrated gatherings, Prosperous One ceremonially distributes these pictures to each individual participant while greeting them with a warm handshake and a few brief words. As he does so, one of his disciples snaps a quick digital photograph. Finally, a larger group photograph is generally taken at the very end of the gathering as everyone is asked to either stand or sit while prominently holding their Akha Ancestral Genealogy Picture in front of them.<sup>128</sup>

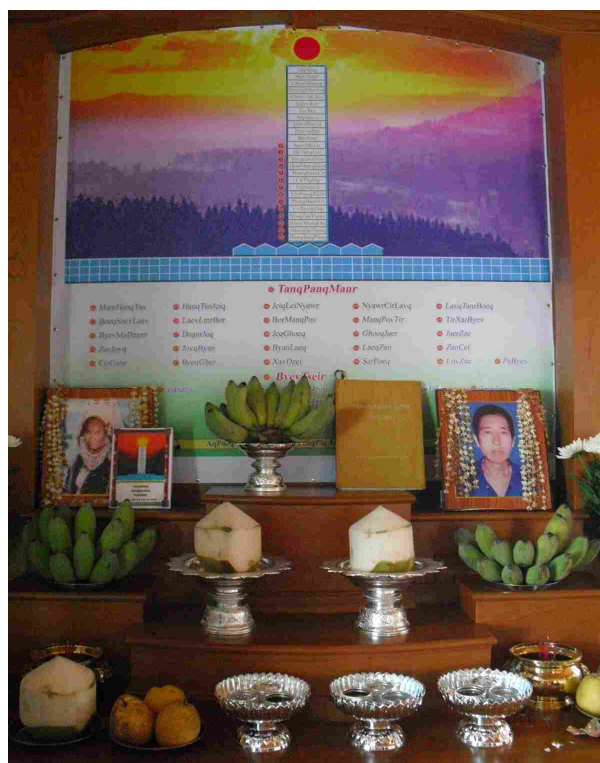


Figure 7.3: This is a photo taken by the author of the refashioned household Ancestral Altar of one of the main financiers of MATA, a middle-aged man from Tachilek, Myanmar holding a lucrative position with the official immigration and customs units of both Myanmar as well as Thailand in the urban cross-border towns of Tachilek-Maesai. The wood forming the base of the altar is none other than teak.

<sup>128</sup> A number of these individual and group photos have made their way into MATA's pictorial displays of their historical efforts "on behalf of the Akha Religion" in the context of a regional New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration that they have organized in Tachilek, Myanmar on an annual basis since December 2008. The latter pictorial displays as well as New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebrations are discussed in chapter ten.

MATA has further prepared and presented a select number of more personalized and elaborate framed versions of these Ancestral altar centerpieces to certain VIP Akha residing in various parts of the region (see Figure 7.3 above). MATA has modified the latter, custom-made pictures, by including, in written form, the names of the particular Ancestral lineage of the individual for whom the gift is prepared. In this manner, their engraved Ancestral genealogy begins at the very bottom of the picture with their own genealogical name as well as those of their descendants, if any, and then rises upwards and links directly into the master Ancestral genealogy positioned above via one of the seven descendant branches from the apical Ancestor Dzeu-Tawn-Pawn.

Third, by way of The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion, MATA has worked out a simultaneously literized, materialized and standardized version of a hitherto complex and diverse array of orally transmitted practices associated in part with the calling of the Ancestors' names, the knowledge of which is embedded in the collective memory of the members, especially elders, of particular lineages and villages (see Kammerer 1986:9; Tooker 2012:38).<sup>129</sup> For example, the authors of The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion have informed their adherents:

“Do not worry about how to carry the ancestral offerings. All of the information you need to do so is contained within this book” (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:33).<sup>130</sup>

In this manner, MATA has shifted the locus of Akhaness from that which can only problematically be interpreted as an elaborate and all-pervading system of customary law ([Aqkaq] *Ghanr Sanr Khovq*) to a Religion ([Aqkaq] *Ghanr*) as further explained below.

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<sup>129</sup> Kammerer (1986:9) writes, “Akha justly have a saying that ‘One person alone cannot know all of Akha Customs.’ Not only are ‘Customs’ intricate and vast, but knowledge of them depends upon the community. In fact, Customs stipulate that at feasts male elders should discuss Customs. Together they recollect and preserve inherited knowledge.”

<sup>130</sup> In the original Akha, this is written as: “*Lawr-e xaer-e pawnae, neezanq maq dawvq ni, Poeqlawr dzarteir mrjeiq mr kawv pardmq-anr cawtae-awr lawrnaeq nya mae.*”

As noted earlier, MATA has fundamentally reframed the Akha Religion and in turn Akhaness around the Ancestors and A-peu Mi-yae or God according to Prosperous One. Within this framing, the Ancestors are understood as the primal, exclusive, and direct line of communication between Akha and A-peu Mi-yae. Toward this end, MATA has positioned the Ancestors front and center in The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion.

MATA has accordingly redefined what it means to “fully and properly carry” the Akha Religion as centered on the single act of “remembering and honoring the Ancestors.” They have further shifted the primary domain for “remembering and honoring the Ancestors” from the “carrying” of exteriorized (ritual) practices to interiorized (and to some extent idiosyncratic) “beliefs” (*neejan*).<sup>131</sup> As a result, their religious productions relocate Akhaness in the domain of belief or orthodoxy more so than practice or orthopraxy as previously claimed by various Euro-American scholars and further discussed below (see Lewis 1969a:95; Kammerer 1990:281; Tooker 1992:800, 2012:38).

### **7.5 “Identitarian Plasticity”: “You are still Akha as long as you make at least one Ancestral offering per year”**

MATA has further introduced a certain degree of plasticity into their reworkings of the Ancestral burden and, in turn, Akhaness. By the term “identitarian plasticity” I am referring to the capacity of a particular community to mold or alter certain markers of their collective identity in response to shifting needs and interests framed in reference to contexts ranging from the local, national and global.<sup>132</sup> There are always limits, however, to the degree of plasticity of a particular

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<sup>131</sup> While the authors include prescribed words to ask or pray for blessings from the Ancestors throughout the text, the reader is ultimately informed: “You may ask/pray for blessings in whichever manner you prefer to do so” (“*Yawqha kharmawvq-e jeiq jir ni xarnya mae*”) (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:22).

<sup>132</sup> The concept of “identitarian plasticity” builds on Janet Sturgeon’s concept of “landscape plasticity,” which she used to refer to “the ability to adjust complicated land uses over time in response to local needs, state plans, and border possibilities” (2005:9). A key part of the latter, moreover, entails being able to “imagine landscape(s) differently and plan the transition to a new mosaic of land uses” (Sturgeon 2005:9).

community's collective identity. These limits are variably framed according to local notions of that which must be retained to warrant recognition as "our collective identity" or the "collective identity of our Ancestors."

First and foremost, MATA has reworked the boundaries of Akhaness in a manner that reflects their seemingly contradictory aims of "lightening" and yet "deepening" the Ancestral burden. As noted earlier, in their efforts to filter out THE Akha Religion from that which is understood as their Ancestral Ways and associated with culture, MATA has fundamentally reframed Akhaness as a state of being and indeed becoming (or coming into being) centered on the sole practice of remembering and honoring the Ancestors and by extension, A-peu Mi-yae, with whom the living living maintain a vital and fundamental link by way of the living dead.

MATA has accordingly honed in on the ritual practice of making Ancestral Offerings (*Aqpoeq lawr-e*) as the fundamental means by which individuals not only properly "remember and honor the Ancestors" but also assert or authenticate their very Akhaness (as opposed to non-Akhaness). At the same time, however, MATA has significantly reworked the ritualized domain of Ancestral Offerings according to a particular narrative of modernity framed around the issues of authenticity, race (biology), morality (moral imperative), power (decolonization) and development. It is generally held that Akha households that 'fully' carry the tightly woven and heavy laden basket of Ancestral Ways carry out either twelve or nine Ancestral offerings per year in addition to a series of rites relating to the cultivation of rice and larger village community (Kammerer 1986:252,259; Tooker 1988:313; Geusau 2000:149).<sup>133</sup>

In The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion, MATA has included a highly simplified, abbreviated and standardized section instructing its adherents on how and why to observe each of

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<sup>133</sup> As noted earlier, whether the annual round of Ancestral offerings is noted as either twelve or nine depends upon how one counts each of the actual offerings as three of the nine Ancestral Services involve the making of two separate offerings.

these annual Ancestral offerings (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:22-23). At the end of this section, however, they include the following remarks:

“Those Akha who are able to follow our Ancestors in making all twelve of the annual Ancestral offerings are greatly blessed. However, those who are no longer able to make all of these offerings may choose to make only three or one per year. Actually, it is not so much the number of offerings that is important, but rather that you make each offering to the best of your ability and think of the words as outlined above while doing so. If we make the offerings in this manner then the Ancestors will be happy and proud of us and will shower us with their blessings and peace” (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:22-23).<sup>134</sup>

MATA’s argument as stated above clearly reflects their more general position that the means or ritual process whereby one goes about the act of remembering and honoring the Ancestors is of less importance than the ultimate ends, thereby emphasizing the ends over the means. As explained below, moreover, MATA has further reframed the act of remembering and honoring the Ancestors from being centered on the exteriorized domain of practice towards being oriented more within the interiorized domain of belief. MATA has accordingly viewed the plethora of rules and regulations underlying the earlier and contemporary practice of making Ancestral Offerings as highly malleable and indeed expendable in many cases.

MATA has further intentionally omitted a large number of rites that do not involve the carrying out of Ancestral Offerings per se and are thus believed to be of little or no significance towards the fundamental act of remembering and honoring the Ancestors, around which they have framed the Akha Religion. These omitted rites revolve on the one hand around the maintenance of harmonious social relations, reproduction of communal space, healing of

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<sup>134</sup> In the original Akha, the statement reads as: “*Aqkaqzaq deq-aq, Poeqzir Dazir-anr nae PoeqqiqJmma-anr, lawrnaeq xaernaeg kaleviq-e lovq-aer, tiqkhovq 12 poeq lawrleev xaerleev naeq nya-e deq-aq, geeqlanq baw deede taevq-a. Aqpoeq 12 poeq aqyawvq aryamq-anr, aqyawvq maqlawr maqxaer leevnya-aer kevlei ngae tiqjawr, 3 poeq maqnger nar, 1 poeq nataevq-aer pargha lawr naeq paq-aer khawvqni tsaqlar nya taevq-a, Armyav poeq taevq-aer pargha lawr naeq-eq khawvq ni, PoeqqiqJmma neekhanr xir-awr, aqdee jir geeqlanq maqteiq paq-aer Aqpoeq 12 poeq-e dawqtseevq-anr noeq kev-awr, lawrnaeq xaernaeg yawq...(Aqkaqzaq deq, PoeqqiqJmma-anr, noeqmawr taqheeq-awr lawrleev xaerleev naeq-eq lovq-aer, PoeqqiqJmma khae nae neesar ovq-e geeqlanq tiqbyan tiqlovq kevlei taevq-a.)*.”

illnesses as well as the transition of villagers through various stages of the life cycle. All of the latter rites take place within and in some cases along the borders of the village gates. On the other hand, these omitted rites revolve around the cultivation of upland rice and reproduction of protected forests located just beyond the village gates. Some of these rites have been described earlier in chapters four, five and six. For further descriptions of the various annual rites carried by Traditionalist Akha see Kammerer (1986:252-295), Tooker (2012:157-211,245-269), Wang (2013:148-154,311-315), and Li (2013:53-84).

As might be expected, moreover, the few exceptions to the above omitted rites that MATA has incorporated into its reproductions of the Akha Religion revolve around the very beginning and final stages of the human life cycle – namely the rites of first, giving newborns a genealogical name (*Zaqmyanrmyanr-e*), and, second, properly guiding the deceased back up to the land of the living dead (*Xirghanr Mr-e*). In this vein, MATA has stressed not merely the importance but also the necessity of one having a genealogical name as both an indicator of their authenticity as Akha as well as their golden ticket for riding the Akha stairway to heaven.

MATA accordingly devoted an entire final section within The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion to outlining, albeit in a highly simplified and standardized form, each stage of the all important funerary rites whereby the deceased may be “properly guided back up to the house of A-peu Mi-yae.” As noted earlier, it is the Primal Ancestral Mother Dzeu-Tawn-Pawn whom Ritual Reciters call upon during the latter part of funerals to guide the deceased along the final stretch of their journey back up to the land of the Ancestors. MATA has informed their congregants to call upon Dzeu-Tawn-Pawn in the following manner:

*“Oh, Ancestor Tawn-pawn, The deceased person that we are now sending back up to you is an authentic Akha person. The deceased has a genealogical name descending from*

*Mqmavq, Mqghanr, Smrmirror and Dzoeqtanqpanq...*” (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:50).<sup>135</sup>

Ultimately, in their religious-ized reproductions of the Ancestral Ways, MATA has reconceived of and relegated a large number of rites as noted earlier to the conceptual domain of culture or practice as separate and apart from that of religion or belief. It is in THE Akha Religion in the remaking, moreover, that MATA has sought to anchor an emergent modern, authentic and translocal sense of being and indeed becoming Akha. In this sense, MATA has sought to reframe the locus of Akhaness from that of the divergent and parochial sets of cultural practices carried within the gates of particular upland villages to that of the more common and universal system of religious beliefs carried among all Akha in the larger Akha World. The more universal nature of the Akha Religion, however, has been tempered by its exclusive framing in reference to Akha and Akha alone.

### **7.6 The Dangers of Messing with the Ancestral Burden: Old-Traditionalist resistance to MATA’s religious reinventions of Akhaness**

MATA’s religious reinventions of Akhaness have not sat well among certain elderly and middle-aged Akha who see themselves and are perceived by others as more or less carrying the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. In this dissertation I have chosen to refer to Akha representing this particular religio-political stance as Old-Traditionalists. In brief, Old-Traditionalists have fundamentally resisted MATA’s reconceptualization of Akhaness as grounded purely in religion as separate and apart from culture. Yet, representatives of these two seemingly disparate religio-political factions have found a common ground in the Akha Ancestors. The several thousand Akha or so that have directly participated in the various negotiations that have occurred between

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<sup>135</sup> In the original Akha, this statement reads as: “*Aqpoeq Tanqpanq-or, Nymr-mr, nawr jawrgar, nga mavq xeq ha lar-eq he ghaq-aq, Aqkaq zaqmar tiqghaq mae. Mqmavq Mqghanr Smrmirror, Dzoeqtanq panq-anr, nae tseevq baw-e tiqghaq mae.*”

these factions since 2008 represent a significant portion of the roughly 66 percent of Akha in the region or some 462,000 people that I have categorized as Traditionalists falling along a gradient from more conservative to moderate, reformist, revolutionary and revivalist.

Ayoe - a leading Neo-Traditionalist intellectual from southwest China - has collaborated extensively with MATA in their efforts “on behalf of the Akha Religion” and often played the crucial role of mediator between various interest groups that he identifies as falling somewhere along a gradient from more “conservative Traditionalists” to more “reformist (Neo)Traditionalists” in terms of their views on the often contentious issues of if and how to rework their Ancestral Ways (personal communication, August 15, 2008; Morton 2010:109).<sup>136</sup> On one occasion as we discussed MATA’s, and, in particular, Prosperous One’s views of the Akha Religion, Ayoe informed me:

“For Prosperous One the rituals are simply a means of honoring the Ancestors, an act that he sees as being at the very heart of the Akha Religion and thus fundamental to Akha identity.

He believes that the rituals in of themselves are not important and that they can be modified as needed - as long as their primary purpose of honoring the Ancestors is retained.

However, more conservative Traditionalists, particularly elders, tend to be strongly attached to these rituals.

They feel that it is of the utmost importance that they carry their Ancestral rituals in a manner as closely as possible to their Ancestors before them and take great pride in doing so.

This doesn’t mean, however, that they haven’t modified these practices.

In many cases, they have and are quite conscious of having done so.

Yet, they still hold their Ancestral practices in great regard and strive to the best of their ability to carry them as their Ancestors have done before them.

And this is not merely in terms of the rituals directly related to the Ancestors (i.e. Ancestral Offerings) as emphasized by Prosperous One, but also the closely linked cycles of household and village-level rites relating to the growing of (upland) rice, maintenance of village space as well as healing and purification practices.

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<sup>136</sup> Ayoe further identified the additional category of “revolutionary Christians,” whom he argued had “completely abandoned” their (Akha) Ancestral Ways and “taken on” an entirely new and foreign religious system (personal communication, December 21, 2010).

Moreover, most importantly, for them it is the carrying of their Ancestral practices in this manner that determines their effectiveness as revealed in the continual receipt of blessings from the Ancestors”

(Ayoe, personal communication, December 21, 2010).

These Old-Traditionalists, referred to as “conservative Traditionalists” by Ayoe, have tended to view MATA’s reproductions of Akhaness as an overly simplified, watered down and in some cases even foreign, non-Akha version of their Ancestral Ways with little or no meaning in relation to their contemporary conceptions and practices of Akhaness. Indeed, many Old-Traditionalists have yet to recognize MATA’s reproduction of THE Akha Religion as a legitimate marker of Akhaness, viewing it rather as a marker of some other kind of collective identity resulting from the dangerous and improper mixing of Akha, Chinese and Christian (i.e. White Foreigner) Ways.<sup>137</sup>

Another significant factor that has contributed to Old-Traditionalists’ resistance to MATA’s version of the Akha Religion has been their longstanding emphasis on the importance of not merely continuing the Ancestral lines but doing so in a manner as closely as possible to the Ancestors. This emphasis on continuity carries over into each stage of the ritual process. As a result, Old-Traditionalists have long held that if a mistake is made in any part of the ritual process then it must be remedied as quickly as possible or else the household holding the rite will experience some misfortune of one form or another. These beliefs are strongly supported, moreover, by no lack of anecdotal evidence attesting to the misfortunes resulting from improperly carrying the Ancestral Ways.

For example, on one occasion I sat and listened to a village headman from northwest Laos tell several prominent leaders within MATA of a recent incident involving a middle-aged

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<sup>137</sup> These views have their parallels among certain Akha Christian elite, one of whom made the following comment to me in reference to Prosperous One’s religious reproductions: “I think that if anyone follows him, then they will end up starting a NEW religion (laughter). Yet, he doesn’t know this himself, that he has created a new religion. It’s not Akha, it’s not Christian, it’s not Catholic” (Lu-ka, personal communication, April 30, 2012).

householder male from Laos who had made and subsequently failed to rectify a grave but unspecified mistake when carrying out the funeral rites for his deceased father. Within less than a month of his father's funeral, the headman told us, this man suddenly dropped dead for no apparent reason. From the headman's words it was clear that he and his fellow villagers associated the man's death with the latter's failure to rectify the mistake that had been made during his father's funerary rites (personal communication, August 7, 2011).

In addition, I overheard numerous other anecdotes involving individuals that had, for various reasons, violated any one or more of the taboos underlying the Ancestral Ways. One such taboo, which MATA officially abolished in its reworkings of the Ancestral Ways, has held that a full and proper funeral may only be held for individuals that have died a natural and peaceful death within the village gates, and are therefore qualified to make the return journey up to the Ancestral homeland (Wang 2013:41; Tooker 2012:114).<sup>138</sup> In contrast, individuals who have drowned, been murdered, committed suicide and so forth – all of which are considered unnatural and violent deaths – may generally only receive highly simplified funerary rites after which they are buried in a particular section of village cemeteries set aside for the bodies of

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<sup>138</sup> Upon passing away, the spirits of the deceased may be guided by Ritual Reciters along one of three different paths depending on both their status at the time of death as well as the nature and location of their death (Wang 2013:43; Tooker 2012:114). “Nm” (*Nmq*) refers to the “path to the original ancestral homeland where ancestral spirits live happily forever, while (‘sha’ [*xav*]) (refers to) the path to a land of death with no hope of reincarnation and a world full of evil spirits who cannot go back to their ancestral homeland” (Wang 2013:41). In following each of these paths, the spirits of the deceased become one of three different kinds of “nae” (*naevq*) or “free spirits who act as the watchful lawpersons of the world,” namely “A-peu A-pi” (*Aqpoeq Aqpiq*), “nae” (*naevq*) and “sha-shi” (*xarxir*) (Wang 2013:86). “A-peu A-pi” are the spirits of one’s Ancestors who have first, passed away naturally and peacefully within the village gates (“nm-shi” [*nmq-xir*]), and, second, been married and left behind at least one surviving son to carry out Ancestral offerings on their behalf. Their names will further be memorialized in the ever continuing genealogy of their patrilineage. “Nae” (*Naevq*) are the spirits of those who have first, passed away naturally and peacefully within the village gates, and, second, were either single or married without any surviving male offspring to carry out Ancestral offerings on their behalf. This type of death, also identified as “nm-shi” (*nmq-xir*), differs in that while the spirits of the deceased are permitted to journey back to the Ancestral homeland, their status once there is on a lower order than “A-peu A-pi” by virtue of their names not being incorporated into the partilineal genealogy and their being unable to receive Ancestral offerings. Last, “sha-shi” (*xar-xir*) refers to the spirits of those who pass away from unnatural and violent deaths such as drowning, murder, suicide and so forth, whether within or beyond the village gates. Moreover, in contrast to the benevolent spirits of “A-peu A-pi” and the neutral ones of “nae,” those of “sha-shi” are considered malevolent towards the living living (and could thus) “be translated as demons or evil spirits” (Wang 2013:86).

those who have died under similar kinds of circumstances.<sup>139</sup> In addition, the latter kinds of deaths, referred to as “monstrous deaths” by Tooker, further require the carrying out of certain rites within the village gates so as to purify and thereby protect the living living from the life-draining forces ushered in by such a death (Tooker 2012:114).

The Akha headman from northwest Laos as noted above further told me and a number of MATA leaders of an incident involving a mentally ill young man without any surviving family members that had stolen the cellular phone of another villager. When accused of the theft, however, the young man fled into the nearby jungle. Several days later the villagers found the young man’s lifeless body in a small hut that he had constructed from branches and leaves. He had killed himself by overdosing on some kind of chemical fertilizer, the empty bottle of which lay at his side. Given the unnatural and violent nature of the young man’s death, however, all but one of the villagers, a middle-aged male, refused to hold any funerary rites on his behalf.

Shortly after having doing done so, however, the host of the young man’s highly simplified funerary rites was killed in a motorcycle accident involving himself and a passenger. Strangely enough, the deceased had no apparent physical wounds while his passenger walked away scot-free. It was clear, the headman added, that the man’s death resulted from his violation of the Ancestral Ways (personal communication, August 7, 2011). From my vantage point, however, it was not exactly clear as to which particular taboo the man had violated.

These beliefs have carried over to the all important ritual domain of Ancestral Offerings. The most compelling as well as disconcerting of these anecdotes of misfortune revolved around the act of discarding the basket of the Ancestral Ways and “going down to and taking on” those

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<sup>139</sup> In certain cases, a purification rite may be held after which the deceased may receive a full and proper funeral as well as burial befitting their status while among the living living. Ian Baird informed me that a similar practice of setting aside a special section of village cemeteries for the bodies of those who have died unnatural or violent deaths can be found among the ethnic Brao in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia (personal communication, November 26, 2014).

of foreign, non-Akha Others (i.e. Christian [White Foreigners], Buddhist [Tai], Lahu, Chinese and so forth). The gravest of these anecdotes of misfortune, however, revolved around the unimaginable act, from the vantage point of Old-Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalists alike, of taking down, discarding and, especially, burning the household Ancestral Altar (*Aqpoeq pawvq lawvq*), as is generally required on the part of Christian converts by their Akha and non-Akha evangelists.

For example, a group of Old-Traditionalist elders from one upland Akha village in north Thailand once told Mi-suo and me in somber and hushed tones of an incident involving one of the formerly more prominent households in the village. In brief, we were told that some 20 years ago all three of the household's sons, then in their early teens, were led by a white foreigner, namely Paul Lewis, to convert to Christianity. At the time the sons were residing beyond the village gates in a Christian boarding school in the lowland town of Chiang Rai where they attended a government school. Given both the centrality of sons to the carrying on of the (Akha) Ancestral lines as well as increasing pressure from his sons to convert to Christianity, their father eventually decided, albeit reluctantly, to convert to Christianity, permitting one of his sons to take down, discard and burn their Ancestral Altar.<sup>140</sup>

Not long thereafter, the elders informed us, their father accidentally fell from the roof of their home while attempting to harvest some type of fruit from a nearby tree and was instantly killed. To make matters even worse, they added, their mother shortly thereafter lost her sanity and henceforth failed to recognize the faces of even her own children. Finally, the elders stressed that each of the household's three sons had in their own way more or less similarly forgotten

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<sup>140</sup> In the Traditionalist context sons inherit the responsibility for making Ancestral Offerings from their fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers and so forth before them. Indeed, it is only by way of having a son among the living living that the deceased may become Ancestors in terms of both having their genealogical names incorporated into the genealogy of their patrilineage as well as receiving Ancestral Offerings from the living living. In addition, it is through fathers that the patronymic tradition is carried from one generation to the next.

their elders and failed to carry their filial responsibilities. This anecdote further reinforced my growing awareness of the deep and profound sense of continuity that these elders identified between the carrying of filial responsibilities to elders on the one hand and the carrying of offerings to the Ancestors on the other hand.

Similar kinds of anecdotes of misfortune surrounded the act, not of discarding, but rather of lightening or modifying the basket of Ancestral Ways by reducing the number of annual Ancestral Offerings. Elderly Old-Traditionalists, in particular, have strongly resisted the idea of reducing the number of their own annual Ancestral Offerings while, in principle, endorsing others to do so according to their particular needs and circumstances and in line with MATA and NADA's official declarations on behalf of *Aqkaqzanr*, variably conceived as either the Ways of the Akha Ancestors or the Akha Religion.

On one occasion the figure of none other than Prosperous One himself told me and several prominent leaders within MATA of an incident involving a highly respected middle-aged male from a village in east Myanmar who had decided to "carry the responsibility" (*uq du pir-e*) for leading his fellow villagers in looking after and improving their Ancestral Ways by reducing their Ancestral Offerings from twelve to only three per year. Not long after having done so, Prosperous One explained, the man and then his wife in turn developed cerebral palsy. Prosperous One, clearly perplexed by this situation, added that he had never advised his fellow Akha to carry out only three Ancestral Offerings per year per se, but had rather stressed that the Ancestors would surely be happy to receive as many offerings per year as possible. He further noted that he had encouraged Akha to make as many offerings as possible given their particular circumstances and wherewithal to do so (Prosperous One, personal communication, August 7, 2011).

Those communities, moreover, that have been most receptive to MATA's religious reproductions of Akhaness have largely been return converts from the religions of non-Akha Others, particularly Christianity. As noted earlier, since 2009 roughly 400 such households in various parts of east Myanmar have returned to the Akha Religion under the guidance of Prosperous One and MATA (Morton 2013:42; Wang 2013:78). In contrast to the Old-Traditionalists noted above, however, these returnees to the Akha Religion have neither reduced nor modified their Ancestral practices per se but rather adopted wholesale an already reduced and modified version of their Ancestral Ways.

Indeed, it is the lightened nature of the latter that has both enticed as well as made it even possible for these communities to return to the Akha Religion. In so doing, moreover, they have not lost anything per se but rather gained as reflected in what can be likened to a Neo-Traditionalist Akha gospel of prosperity that has been circulating throughout the Akha World ever since these return conversions began in 2009. This particular narrative of return conversion holds that as these communities have returned to the Akha Religion, and most importantly to their Ancestors, they have experienced unprecedented blessings and prosperity in their everyday lives, especially in the form of abundant harvests of rice, coffee, rubber and so forth.

### **7.7 Upping the Ante on Ancestral Offerings: Fetishized Reproductions of the Ancestral Ways?**

In addition to reducing the number of required annual Ancestral offerings from twelve to an absolute minimum of one, MATA has further encouraged individual households to make as many additional annual offerings as they would like. They have also expanded the range and kinds of permitted offerings – on the one hand reducing the economic burden of what many consider to be expensive blood sacrifices of black pigs, goats, dogs, chickens or water buffaloes

depending upon ritual context while on the other hand permitting what are considered to be more elaborate offerings of “new” or “modern” foods such as golden pears from China and durian from Southern Thailand. “In the past,” one Neo-Traditionalist from Myanmar told me:

“we did not even know about these foods,  
 let alone have a chance to enjoy them.  
 Today, however, things have changed.  
 We have access to a much greater variety of foods,  
 especially fruits from various parts of the world.  
 Moreover, our elders, who will sooner or later become the next generation of Ancestors,  
 really enjoy these foods and would surely be pleased to continue receiving them in the  
 form of Ancestral offerings”  
 (personal communication, June 12, 2012).<sup>141</sup>

The latter relaxations on the upward limits as well as kinds of offerings may in the near future contribute to the fetishization of the Ancestral cult. At the same time, it is already apparent that these modifications are allowing for more conspicuous displays of wealth and status within the reformed and modernized domain of Akha religiosity (compare figures 7.1 and 7.3 above). To some extent, moreover, these modernized ritual displays of wealth and status are less financially burdensome than those of Old-Traditionalists requiring expensive blood sacrifices of various kinds of animals as noted earlier.

Moreover, in their textual and discursive reproductions of the Akha Religion, MATA has further made it a moral imperative for Akha to offer the very best that they have to the Ancestors. For example, within The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion MATA included a section entitled, “Essential knowledge for carrying out Ancestral offerings” (*Aqpoeq lawrngae ghasiq nyataq-e jeiq*) wherein the following is written under the sub-heading, “Ancestral Offerings” (*Aqpoeq lawrjeiq*):

“(Ancestral offerings) refers to all of the items such as various kinds of delicious foods and fruits that are prepared and offered to the Ancestors.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> As Tooker has noted, Akha tend to see their offerings to the Ancestors as a “continuation of the respect paid to elders during their lifetime” (1988:313).

These items can be prepared and offered based on the households' wishes.

In preparing the offerings, if you are able to, you can offer some cooked chicken meat (some households offer three small pieces of chicken meat while others offer five small pieces of chicken meat), one cup of rice whiskey, one bowl of pure rice, one cup of pure tea with some ginger in it, and some pounded rice cakes. In addition, feel free to offer any other items you would like to in addition to these offerings.<sup>143</sup>

If you are not able to fully carry out the offerings (as noted above), then you can do so based on your own wishes and ability to do so" (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:9).<sup>144</sup>

These rather subtle textual suggestions to elevate Ancestral offerings and in turn Akha religiosity to a higher level have been accompanied by more overt declarations in the form of both an emerging public discourse espousing the moral imperative to elevate Akha religiosity to new levels as well as more private displays of what the latter might look like in practice (see figure 7.3 above). Through these discursive practices, Neo-Traditionalist elite have sought to rework the religious domain of Akhaness in a fashion that reflects not only their shifting political and economic circumstances but also transforming notions of person/people-hood. In particular, Neo-Traditionalist elites have conceptually reframed their notions of personhood as, on one hand, grounded more so in the individual rather than collective conscience, and, on the other hand, framed in reference more so to the interiorized domain of biology and beliefs than the exteriorized domain of practice.

As noted earlier in chapter two, in July 2010 MATA and NADA jointly organized a five day long multi-national gathering of more than sixty Akha youth on the grounds of a now defunct Baptist affiliated Akha development foundation in Chiangrai, Thailand. The meeting was

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<sup>142</sup> In the original Akha, this section reads as: "Aqpoeq lawrjeiq-aq, PoeqpiqJmma-anr lawrnaeq xaernaeg-e laer, laeqhmq taq-e dzaqdzaq dawrdawr, arsiq arlu, dzar keeq dzarmyaer, deq-anr kur-e mae."

<sup>143</sup> In the original Akha, this section reads as: "Aqpoeq lawr jeiq laeqhmq ngaie aq, ghae nya nar ghaciv xaqqir (smrjaevq maqnger nar-aq, ngarjaevq maqnger nar-aq mawrpuvq) jirbaqtihmq, hawqxawr tihmq, (tsawqteevq anr-e) lawrbawq yawxawr tihmq, hawqtanq hawr-e dzeir-e yawqha neekhanq anr-e jeiqnae lawrnaeq nya mae."

<sup>144</sup> In the original Akha, this section reads as: "Aqpoeq lawrjeiq laeqhmq ngaie, kharlawr ka leivq-eq lovq-aer maq mr byan nya ngaie jawr-aq yawqha neekhanr kharxir-e lovq-aer lawrnaeq nya mae."

officially referred to as the “First International Workshop for Young Akha Intellectuals on Aqkaq Zanr.” At various points throughout the gathering several leading figures within MATA and NADA encouraged the participants to both consider their “much better economic status” when compared to their “much poorer Ancestors in the past” as well as consider whether they shouldn’t accordingly make offerings of a greater quantity and quality to their Ancestors.

For example, at one point during the gathering Prosperous One passionately implored his fellow Akha to consider the following:

“...In the past when we made offerings to our Ancestors during the New Year’s Ancestral Service we prepared rice cakes.  
 Today, however, things are different from the past.  
 We are in a much better position.  
 It is right then for us to continue giving the same kinds of offerings to our Ancestors?  
 Shouldn’t we give more considering that we have so much more to offer?  
 Shouldn’t we offer our Ancestors all of the wonderful things that our elders are able to freely enjoy at present and that they find so pleasing?”  
 (personal communication, July 25, 2010).

Shortly thereafter, Prosperous One asked Elder Brother Law-gaw (*Ardov Lawqgaw*) to read aloud from a small, soft back Akha language publication entitled, The Akha People, Akha Religion, and Akha Language.<sup>145</sup> Law-gaw, a middle-aged male householder hailing from an upland Akha village in north Thailand, has been one of the key organic intellectuals and scribes behind much of the production of The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion. During the gathering, Law-gaw was asked to read aloud a particular section of the publication included under the heading, “Ancestral offerings.” However, just prior to doing so, he addressed the following words to the gathering:

“Today things are different from the past.  
 Our Ancestors were much poorer in the past and yet they gave the very best that they could.

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<sup>145</sup> In the original Akha script the title read as *Aqkaq tsawrieq, Aqkaq zanr, Aqkaq dawq*. This text, which was first published in May 2010 and credited to none other than Prosperous One, represented an earlier and much condensed version of The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion, which was first published in November 2011.

For example, they gave pounded sticky rice and other items. Today, however, we enjoy so many more things in our lives such as expensive clothes and foods. So why don't we consider offering more to the Ancestors? Why don't we offer several pigs rather than just one?" (Law-gaw, personal communication, July 25, 2014).

### **7.8 Mass Mediated Assertions of Akhaness as Grounded in the Akha Religion**

In March 2011 I had an opportunity to participate in one of MATA's outreach activities on behalf of Akhaness and the Akha Religion as it unfolded in the upland Akha village of Phayaphrai-Litu in far north Thailand. Once the local congregation of some 100 middle-aged and elderly Akha villagers had gathered in the village's meeting hall, several MATA representatives from Thailand and Myanmar directed their attention to a small television positioned in front of the hall and began to show a short film entitled, "Akha Area" (*Aqkaq Area*) (2011). The film, three and a half minutes in length, consisted of a slideshow of photographs that one of MATA's main digital producers, Elder Brother A-ju (*Aqjur Dzoeqbaw*), had taken of various Akha communities and activities taking place throughout the Upper Mekong Region between roughly 2009 and 2011.

The visual slideshow was accompanied with audio consisting of various natural sounds such as song birds and an approaching rain storm intermingled throughout an extended narration by Elder Brother A-tu (*Ar dov Artuq Pudee*), a middle-aged male village head from an Akha village in east Myanmar who, at the time, had only recently returned to the Akha Religion from Christianity. A full translation of the narration is included below. Since March 2011, MATA has distributed this film throughout various parts of the Akha (Virtual) World in the form of not only VCDs and DVDs but also YOUTUBE and Facebook. As the narration clearly shows, the

underlying purpose of the film is to encourage a pan-Akha sense of belonging under the banner of their presumably “one and only true religion (*Aqkaq Zanr*).”

“I am a member of the Poo-deu clan.  
My genealogical name is So-ja.  
People call me A-tu.

I recently decided to return back up to, pick up and carry our *Zanr* once again after carrying the *Zanr* of (non-Akha) others for ten years.  
At the same time, it is NOT for me to say that the *Zanr* of others are bad.

HOWEVER, when I think of and recite the names of my parents on down to myself I feel pity and sorrow.

In the past, there was no one working to look after and improve our *Zanr*.  
As a result, when my mother gave birth to (my younger twin siblings) we had to leave our village and go down to and take on the *Zanr* of non-Akha Others.<sup>146</sup>

For the past 19 years I have been the head of my current village.  
In this position I have carried the responsibility for looking after and improving our *Zanr*.

Recently, the Akha leaders from my country (Myanmar) gathered together and worked out an agreement to look after and improve our *Zanr*.

This is TRULY wonderful.

After thinking very deeply about this issue I have come to realize how GREAT our *Zanr* truly is.

If it were not good, then why would our Ancestors, elders and parents have carried it ever since the time that the sky and earth were created?

I immediately decided to return to our *Zanr* after realizing its great value and importance.

By doing so I have come to see just how very good our *Zanr* truly is and I encourage all of our Akha people to return as well.

We did not CHOOSE to be Akha, NOR was this decided for us by our rulers.

Rather, we were created as Akha by A-peu Mi-yae at the same time as all of the other groups of people in the world.

Moreover, our *Zanr* was not given to us by our rulers, but rather by A-peu-Mi-yae at the time of (our) creation.

A-peu Mi-yae created Akha *Zanr* for us.

It is TRULY a wonderful *Zanr*.

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<sup>146</sup> Until roughly the 1980s or so Traditionalist Akha throughout the region considered the birth of human twins a highly inauspicious event that required both infanticide as well as the banishment of the parents to the forest surrounding the village for a brief period of time after which an elaborate set of purification rituals had to be carried out before they could return.

My Akha brothers and sisters,  
 please do not feel heavy anymore about carrying our *Zanr*.  
 Please no longer worry about other people coming to attack and destroy our *Zanr*.  
 Our *Zanr* is a peaceful *Zanr*.  
 It exists in harmony with others, our leaders and A-peu Mi-yae.

I will now sing a song that praises and honors the Primal Ancestral Mother Tawn-Pawn:

Oh, Primal Ancestral Mother Tawn-Pawn!  
 We cannot see you and yet you are always near us and can always hear us.

Oh, Za-ni<sup>147</sup> people,  
 all of my brothers and sisters,  
 please seriously consider this issue.

Oh, Primal Ancestral Mother Tawn-Pawn!  
 We cannot see you and yet you are always near us and can always hear us.  
 You bless us with a long line of descendants.  
 You bless us with an abundance of land and prosperity.

Primal Ancestral Mother Tawn-Pawn,  
 you have blessed us with an abundance of wise women,  
 you have blessed us with an abundance of wise men with braided topknots.

Oh, Za-ni people, our brothers and sisters!  
 Who among us can justly claim that they do not descend from our Primal Ancestral Mother  
 Tawn-Pawn?  
 Who among us can justly claim that they do not descend from our Primal Ancestral Mother  
 Tawn-Pawn?

We are all the grandchildren of our Primal Ancestral Mother Tawn-Pawn.  
 We all descend from our Primal Ancestral Mother Tawn-Pawn.  
 All of the Za-ni people are all our siblings, our family.

Let us honor and respect our Primal Ancestral Mother Tawn-Pawn.  
 Oh, Za-ni people, our siblings!  
 Let us honor and respect Tanq Panq Aqma.  
 The Za-ni people are all our siblings, our family”  
 (Akha Area [*Aqkaq Area*] 2011).

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<sup>147</sup> “Za-ni” (*Zani*) along with “Ya-ni” (*Yani*) are archaic terms of self-reference for groups identifying today as Akha and Hani alike (Wang 2013:27). It is the term “Za-ni” or “Ya-ni,” moreover, rather than “Akha” that Ritual Reciters continue to use today when reciting their archaic oral texts in various ritual contexts.

## 7.9 From ‘Culture’ to ‘Religion’?

Prosperous One and his disciples have conceptually repositioned the locus of Akhaness from an elaborate and all-pervading system of customary law (*[Aqkaq] Ghanr Sanr Khovq*) to a Religion (*[Aqkaq] Ghanr*). The former conception of customary law is a complex and all-pervading system of intertwined cultural practices and religious beliefs promoting a particular kind of community work at the village level and to some extent beyond. In contrast, the latter conception of the Akha Religion represents more of an intrinsically shared system of beliefs rooted in the all-important figures of the Ancestors and A-peu Mi-yae (or God according to Prosperous One) and promoting a different kind of community work at the trans-local level of the larger Akha World. In their religious reproductions, moreover, MATA has introduced a certain degree of individualism into Akhaness that may potentially challenge and undermine the authority of village based practitioners of the Ancestral Ways.

Indigenous conceptions of the Ancestral Ways (*Aqkaq Ghanr Sanr Khovq*) locate Akhaness in an elaborate and distinctly Akha system of customary law whereby a council of village elders regulates relations both within the village (inclusive of the living living and living dead) as well as between villagers and various “invisible forces” located beyond the village gates (Wang 2013:149-151). These village-level councils regulate these relations according to a calendar revolving around the cultivation of upland rice and adapted to local conditions and needs. This system of customary law is first and foremost a kind of community work whereby the all important binary of the inside and outside domains of Akha social life is maintained so as to ensure that the living living continue to receive the blessings of the Ancestors in the form of a long line of descendants, abundant harvests, as well as general well-being and prosperity in their everyday lives.

In contrast, MATA's reproduction of the Akha Religion (*Aqkaq Ghanr*) anchors Akhaness in THE Akha Religion, understood first and foremost as a system of interiorized "beliefs" (*neejan*) according to which individuals are obliged to "remember and honor" the living dead who serve as a primal link to A-peu Mi-yae and hence conduit of blessings for the living living. As noted earlier, MATA has fundamentally reframed the Akha Religion around the central figure of the Ancestors. In this manner, MATA's reworkings of the domain of Akhaness exhibit a certain degree of continuity as well as rupture from earlier and contemporary conceptions and practices of Akhaness.

In terms of continuity, Tooker has argued that, "the set of annual ancestral offerings...is the central set of offerings that marks Akha identity as a whole" (1988:312). As noted earlier, moreover, Geusau has further suggested that:

"(The) Akha (and Hani) ancestor service is the ideology and the backbone of (their) ethnic alliance system...the means for (them) to recognise their roots, their history, and the manner of their survival. It is a symbol of their unity, their 'cultural citizenship' in a situation of diaspora" (Li Xi Xian 1995; in Geusau 2000a:149-150).

At the same time, however, Tooker has stressed that the annual Ancestral offerings, "are integrated into the annual ritual cycle and the rice growing season" (1988:312). In this regard, Kammerer has noted the following:

"Like many agriculturalists, Akha have an annual cycle of rites which regulates labor in the fields and contributes to the fruitfulness of that labor. The fecundity of the fields depends not only on the rice rituals but also upon ancestor offerings and what can be called community ceremonies. Rites of these three types are interwoven in a fixed sequence through the two seasons of the Akha year" (1986:252).

In addition, as discussed in chapter six, Geusau and Kammerer have argued that to translate *Aqkaqzanr* as religion per se is misleading as it is rather a highly pragmatic system of customary law encompassing an entire way of life as opposed to merely one domain of social life (Geusau 2000a:143,146; Kammerer 1986:66-67).

MATA's reproductions of the Akha Religion have served in first, decoupling Ancestral Offerings from the larger ritual cycle relating to communal reintegration, spatial reproduction and agricultural activities (upland rice-related) centered in particular upland villages. MATA has conceptually relegated the latter kinds of community work to the domain of culture or practice as separate and apart from that of religion or belief. MATA has subsequently reworked the ritual domain of the Ancestors in reference to the lowland, urban non-Akha dominated contexts beyond the village gates where increasing numbers of Akha throughout the region, inclusive of elite and non-elite, have resided in recent years and pursued a wide array of livelihoods.<sup>148</sup>

Yet, religion, as reframed within MATA's productions of Akhaness, diverges from dominant white Euro-American conceptions of religion in that the Akha Religion, far from being relegated to the private domain of individual conscience, has remained integral and indeed inherent to being or becoming Akha in the contemporary world. In equating Akhaness with the Akha Religion, MATA, not unlike Old-Traditionalists who have long equated Akhaness with the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, has essentially reproduced the Akha Religion as a fundamental and all-pervading aspect of Akha social life. Hence, this particular Akha case further defies the Euro-American imaginary of the division between church and state or religion and politics. In this particular case, rather, the religious and political domains of social life are more dynamic and interrelated than static and in opposition (see Asad 2003).

## 7.10 Conclusions

In this chapter I have highlighted MATA's efforts to reproduce the indigenous equation between religion and ethnicity or *Aqkaqzanr* and Akhaness in the form of a more powerful,

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<sup>148</sup> Moreover, since roughly the 1980s the economies of many upland villages in the region have increasingly shifted away from the cultivation of rice towards various cash crops such as coffee and rubber.

supra-local discourse extending far beyond the gates of particular villages and encompassing the larger Akha World or crypto-nation in the making. MATA has further reworked this indigenous equation by fundamentally anchoring their understanding of Akhaness or peoplehood in the domain of religion, namely THE Akha Religion in both the singular as well as separate and apart from culture. In envisioning and forging THE Akha Religion, moreover, MATA, and Prosperous One in particular, have variably drawn on as well as challenged the (neo)colonial legacies of certain Euro-American Christian missionaries and their Akha protégés. As such their crypto-nationalist project has from its very inception been predicated on the basis of an inherent cosmopolitanism.

Religion, however, has not been the only domain in which MATA and their Neo-Traditionalist allies have worked in reimagining the boundaries of Akhaness and the larger Akha World. For example, certain Neo-Traditionalist elite have in recent years been working to construct a historical buttress for anchoring their emergent Akha World in the making. It is to this arena of identitarian work that I turn in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Mining the Vaults of Ancestral Memories: “The Akha spirit survives”

#### 8.1 Introduction

Since the early 2000s a small circle of Akha intellectuals from southwest China have worked to mine the vaults of their Ancestral memories in penetrating a period in the distant past when it is believed that their genesis as a distinct people occurred. During this formative period of Akhaness the borders of belonging were framed in reference not to their more recently acquired status as a “perennial minority” within multiple polities dominated by non-Akha Others but rather their position as “a people of the center” within a homeland-state referred to as “Ja-dae Mi-khawn” (*Jadae Mirkhanq*). In their efforts to mine the Ancestral vaults, these elite have challenged other and hitherto more dominant representations of Akhaness as an ahistorical, peripheral and disaggregated state of being. Akha elite have further sought to legitimate their revisionist histories by way of reference to science in the form of new genetic studies involving Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples (including Akha and Hani) from various parts of the Upper Mekong Region.

While Akha from throughout the region have long conceived of their long lost Ancestral homeland, Ja-dae, as located somewhere to the north on higher ground, recent direct and indirect exchanges with certain Akha cadres and intellectuals from China have gradually transformed these earlier notions of homeland as embedded in oral traditions and ritual practices into an actual homeland-state positioned in a particular place and time. Thus, in their efforts to construct a revisionist history of Akhaness wherein Akha figure front and center, these elite have variably contributed towards the scaling-up of Akhaness present among a growing number of Akha in the

region. In this manner, their identitarian productions, while deeply invoking a reworked sense of the distant past, are, in Stuart Hall's words:

“...actually...about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we might become, how we might have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (Hall 1996b:4).

## 8.2 Akha History Lessons: Reconstructing the past, navigating the present

“We (Akha) share a common origin in Jadae. While at present we may speak different national languages, carry different religions, hold different national citizenships, and practice different livelihoods, we are all Akha and neither Chinese, Burmese, Lao, nor Thai. We all share ancestral roots in our former homeland state, Jadae, and are a part of today's Jadae diaspora. It is in the latter sense alone that the full range of meanings of being Akha throughout our history - ‘people at the center,’ ‘people in-between,’ and ‘people at a distance’ – are embodied. Our oral traditions, particularly those related to Jadae state, continue to be fundamental sources for us in reconstructing our collective identity” (Wang N.d.:22).

One sunny afternoon during the early part of the dry, cool season in November 2009, Ayoe and family came for a visit to Deu-leu's home on Nantharam road in urban Chiang Mai.<sup>149</sup> At the time, I was in the very early part of field work and had been staying at Deu-leu's home for roughly a month. As Mi-ju and Deu-leu sat inside avidly discussing their ongoing plans for building a lowland Akha village on the outskirts of the city, Ayoe and I sat conversing outside under the cover of an upland-style field house made of bamboo, wood, and grass thatch. A gentle breeze blew across the bamboo floor on which we sat, rustling the thatch on the roof above us and the leaves of the numerous trees surrounding and overarching the pavilion. The gentle sound

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<sup>149</sup> At the time of these exchanges Ayoe was a dissertator in anthropology at the University of California-Riverside in the USA. He was also beginning to emerge as a key organic intellectual and middleman among Neo-Traditionalist Akha in the larger Akha World in the making. Ayoe has since completed his Ph.D. and obtained a position as assistant professor at the Yunnan Provincial Institute for Ethnic Studies, Yunnan University of Nationalities in Kunming, China. His dissertation, which focuses largely on the historical dynamics of natural resource management among certain Akha communities in far southwest China between roughly 1949 and the late 2000s, also provides an extensive revisionist account of Akha history that incorporates a variety of sources ranging from Akha oral texts to Chinese imperial records, Euro-American scholarly accounts of the region, and modern day ethnographic analogues drawn from the extant ritual practices of certain Akha communities in the region (Wang 2013).

of the breeze was occasionally broken by the roar of a motorcycle or car racing along the narrow but busy urban road located just beyond the brick walls of Deu-leu's private garden.

As I sat, avidly listening and jotting down notes, Ayoe talked passionately and at great length about his work along with several other Akha scholars from China to uncover the formative period of Akha history as it is believed to have unfolded in various parts of what is today's Yunnan Province in southwest China during the eleventh and thirteenth centuries C.E. While different versions of this history were first documented by certain Han Chinese, Hani, and Akha scholars in China during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Yunnan Provincial Office of Publication and Planning for Ethnic Minorities' Archaic Texts 1986; Shida and Ahai 1992), it was only during the 2000s that certain Hani, Akha and foreign scholars in China and Thailand began to more systematically document as well as situate these histories in relation to the larger region (Geusau 2000a, 2003b; Yang 2005; Huang 2007; Jiang 2007; Wang and Rongsheng 2008; Yang 2010; Zhe 2010; Wang 2013).

It was not until the late 2000s, however, that members of the general Akha and Hani populations in the larger region began to learn of these particular versions of their historical ethnogenesis and subsequent patterns of migration and settlement. As a result, their hitherto notions of the Ancestral homeland as embedded in extant oral traditions and ritual practices have been gradually transformed into an actual homeland-state positioned in a particular place and time. Akha throughout the region, moreover, have expressed a broad interest in these revisionist histories regardless of their positioning in different religio-political factions and nation states.

At one point, Ayoe, in his usual manner, took out a piece of paper and began to draw a map illustrating the early history and settlement patterns of Hani-Akha in various parts of the region. After labeling several major centers of power and significant bodies of water that formed

the backdrop against which this history unfolded, Ayoë brought my attention to an extensive valley located between the Red and Black Rivers (see figure 8.1 below).

“It was here in the valley of Yuanjiang that the Akha as a distinct group came to be following their branching off from the Hani.

It was here that Akha built their beloved homeland-state of Jadae during the eleventh century.

Jadae eventually collapsed, however, due to the treachery of a small group of envious and self-serving Akha and Dai-Lue leaders.

Today’s diaspora of Akha is the result of Jadae’s demise.

As Jadae fell, Akha were scattered throughout different parts of the region and have ever since been in the position of a minority, whether in Myanmar, China, Laos, Thailand, or Vietnam.

Yet, in spite of all this,

the memory of Jadae, our beloved homeland,  
has forever remained in our hearts and minds”

(personal communication, November 15, 2009).

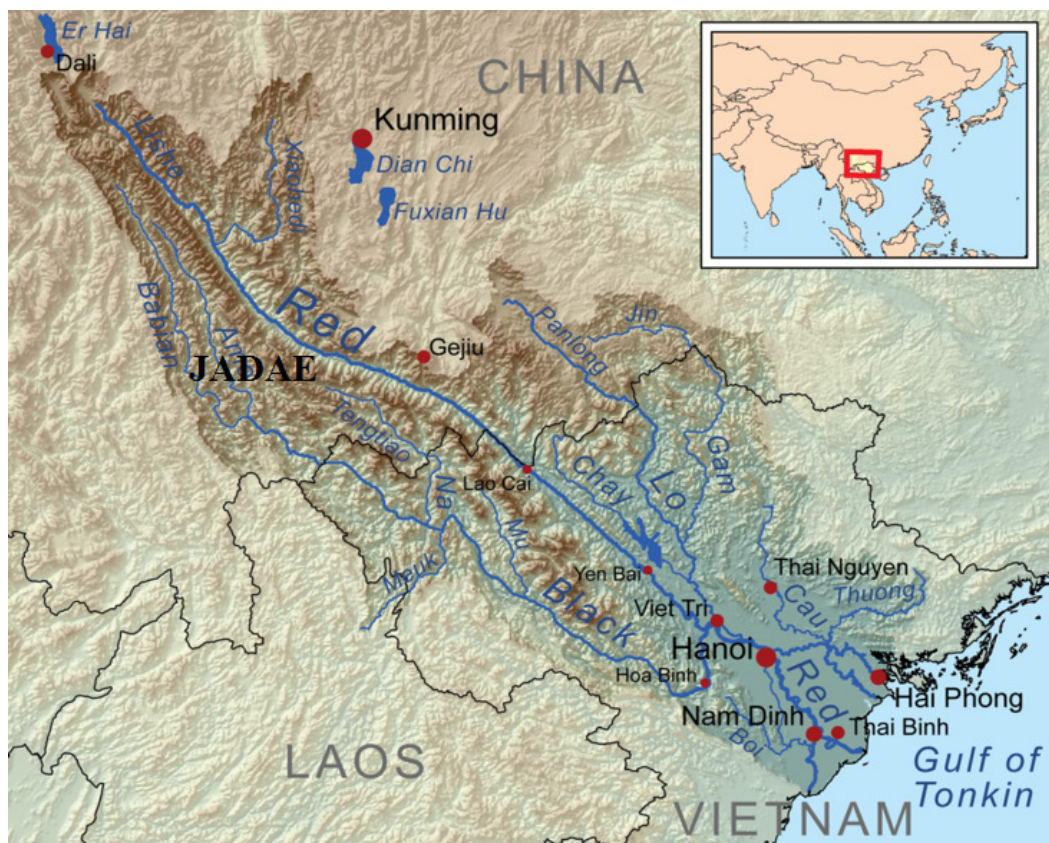


Figure 8.1: Map illustrating the hypothetical location of Jadae in Yuanjiang Valley.

(“[File:Redriverasiemap.png](#)” by [Kmusser](#) is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#) [<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Redriverasiemap.png/>] Modified by addition of the label “JADAË”).

Ayoe then went on to note that his and other's work to uncover the formative period of Akha history was unprecedented. "This topic," he stressed, "has until now been either neglected altogether or misunderstood and misrepresented by various non-Akha scholars" (Ayoe, personal communication, November 15, 2009). The conversation then seemingly shifted direction as Ayoe began to talk of his then recent awakening to his ancient Akha roots, an awakening which he directly attributed to his initial discovery and then ever deepening engagements with *Aqkaqzanr* or the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. This discovery, Ayoe noted, first took place when he was in his mid-twenties as he began to interact with certain Akha communities residing beyond China:

"In fact, it was here in north Thailand that I first met Akha who were continuing to carry much if not all of *Aqkaqzanr*. As you may know, in China most Akha have abandoned *Aqkaqzanr*, and so I previously had little or no opportunity to learn about it" (Ayoe, personal communication, November 15, 2009).

It has only recently occurred to me that my sense of our exchange at this point as having shifted from history to identitarian politics was grounded in my biased view of history as purely of and in the past, rather than deeply implicated in the present and ongoing states of being and becoming. Indeed, Ayoe's simultaneous explorations of Akhaness past, present and future challenge the artificial boundaries that are often imposed between, on the one hand, the traditional and historical, and, on the other hand, the modern and contemporary. In his multi-temporal and spatial explorations of Akhaness, rather, Ayoe has pushed against "the artificial barrier between the 'traditional' (Akha) and their own sense of modernity" (see Sadan 2013:29).<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Sadan has noted in reference to the Kachin that: "(T)here is a vibrant, complex and modern world in which ideologies of being and becoming Kachin continue to be produced out of dynamic sets of relationships, although influenced by local, regional, and global pasts. Yet making connections between the historical 'Kachin' and their modern selves has proved problematic in academic representations up to now" (Sadan 2013:14-29).

In these engagements with Akhaness, moreover, Ayoe has most eagerly looked to the extant ritual texts and practices of Akha continuing to carry much if not all of *Aqkaqzanr*. “Our traditional ritual oral texts, practices, and symbols,” he told me, “are the primary means by which our history has been encoded and passed from one generation to the next” (Ayoe, personal communication, November 15, 2009). He further stressed the urgency of the need to both document as well as validate this rich corpus of Akha oral and visual history by way of reference to the all important written histories of more dominant, non-Akha Others. It is the latter task that Ayoe has felt to be one of his greatest callings in life, especially given the widespread belief among Akha that their Ancestral traditions have gradually been lost over time and will one day in the not so distant future altogether vanish from the face of the earth.

Ayoe has in turn looked primarily to Chinese language historical records in his efforts to validate or cross-check the historical experiences of Akha as embodied in their extant oral and visual traditions. In these efforts, however, Ayoe has drawn mixed reactions of approval and suspicion from scholars variably positioned within and beyond China. First, in relation to the Han Chinese dominated academy in China, Ayoe, in the position of a minority scholar aligned with other Hani/Akha intellectuals in Yunnan Province, has sought to legitimate Akha history by way of reference to the dominant Chinese historical record. In this manner, one must question if and to what extent Ayoe’s reconstructions of Akha history might be constrained by pre-existing nationalist historiographies constructed by Han scholars in post-1949 China and that portray China as a harmonious, unified and multi-ethnic nation existing from time immemorial (see Tooker 2012:30-31).<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Tooker notes the following in reference to this issue: “In post-1949 Chinese reconstructive histories, Akha society replays the socialist evolutionary-historical trajectories from slavery to feudalism to liberation with little empirical information. There have been some recent attempts using Chinese historical records to reconstruct Akha

At the same time, however, Ayoe has drawn criticism from certain Han Chinese scholars and Hani elite within China. These criticisms have been aimed at Ayoe's efforts to (re)construct a history of Akha that highlights their formation as a distinct people, separate and apart from Hani, following their branching off from the latter during roughly the eleventh century C.E. These criticisms have been further aimed at Ayoe's historical engagements with various Akha communities within and most importantly beyond China in the interest of developing a common Akha orthography and vitalizing Akha culture. In particular, a certain Han Chinese anthropologist of Yunnan University in Kunming has verbally dismissed Ayoe's efforts as not only "worthless given the "inevitable" and indeed "necessary" loss of Hani-Akha language and culture as Hani-Akha society continues to undergo material and economic "progress" in unilinear fashion towards the Han Chinese ideal, but also as dangerous given the presumed challenge his efforts pose to the Chinese state.

Recall that Akha have been officially (mis)recognized as part of the larger Hani "ethnonationality" (*minzu*) in Communist China. During the 1950s, moreover, the Chinese state further constructed an official Hani orthography that has, for a variety of reasons, differed from the more recent Akha orthography negotiated by Ayoe and his Akha collaborators from within and beyond China between 2008 and 2009 (see Morton 2010:120-123,132-133). As a result, certain Han Chinese scholars and Hani elite have accused Ayoe of promoting Akha secession from the Hani "ethnonationality" and challenging the authority of the Chinese state.

From yet another vantage point, Ayoe's reconstructions of Akha history have offered formally educated Akha youth from various parts of the region a more 'tangible' and 'historical' sense of their roots that is tied to particular places and times as well as legitimated by reference

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history (see Wang N.d.). The most reliable sources, perhaps, are the Akha's own oral tradition" (Tooker 2012:30-31).

to the written word, particularly Chinese historical records. In other words, the so-called myths or legends that that many youth have been told by their elders regarding various aspects of their past have been given a more convincing or rational grounding. It is important to note, moreover, that in his efforts to reconstruct Akha history, Ayoe has been careful to distinguish between that which he identifies as “purely folklore” and “actual history.”

The receptivity of Akha youth to these reconstructed Akha histories must be understood against the backdrop of a heightened concern as to their position as a minority largely omitted from official nationalist histories, particularly in Thailand and Myanmar.<sup>152</sup> A concern among youth as to their minority status and often (mis)representation in mainstream society has developed part and parcel with their heightened engagements, relative to older generations, with the national on various fronts. These engagements with the national have taken the form of schooling in national educational systems, entrance into the national workforce, and the consumption of mainstream media.

In his position as an indigenous Akha anthropologist working among other Akha, Ayoe has had to negotiate a complex web of multiple and shifting allegiances and accountabilities (see Smith 1999). Ayoe has had to continually navigate this web as he has gone about efforts to not only reconstruct Akha history but also promote unity throughout the larger Akha World, represent Akha and Indigenous peoples more generally in relation to various national and international organizations in Thailand and beyond, as well as position himself as a legitimate scholar within various academic communities ranging from Han Chinese and Hani-Akha

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<sup>152</sup> Note that while Akha have tentatively been written into the nationalist histories of China, Laos, and Vietnam, it has not been so as Akha but rather under other terms of (mis)recognition such as Hani in the case of China, Ha Nhi in Vietnam, and “Upland Lao” (*Lao Sung*) in Laos. Nevertheless, in stark contrast to Thailand especially and Myanmar to a lesser extent, Akha in China, Laos and Vietnam have experienced little or no difficulties in obtaining legal citizenship and land tenure. In northwest Laos, however, certain Akha communities have experienced increasing difficulties in relation to land access as a result of state-enforced resettlement programs from upland to lowland settings (Cohen and Lyttleton 2008).

scholars in China to multiple scholarly communities positioned beyond China. Each of these respective communities has placed particular demands upon Ayoe, who, while feeling a foremost responsibility towards other Akha, has endeavored to meet each demand in turn.

At the same time, however, Ayoe's imaginings and productions of Akhaness past, present and future have been forged on the basis of a heightened cosmopolitanism or worldly outlook rooted in his multiple and shifting engagements with each of these communities – ranging from other Akha (and Hani) from various parts of the Akha World to different national governments, publics, and scholarly traditions as well as foreign and largely Euro-American scholars, missionaries, and minority rights advocates. Ayoe's ever evolving notions of Akhaness have been framed in reference to the various discourses and norms circulating within and between these respective communities as to notions of peoplehood, religion, culture, language, and, indeed, history.

### **8.3 Akha as a “People without History”?**

Euro-American scholars that have worked with Akha in various parts of the region have generally agreed that Akha have everywhere and always been a “perennial minority” lacking any sense of belonging to a larger Akha community or polity beyond the village level (Geusau 2000a:143; Kammerer 1989:277; Tooker 1988:12, 2012:32).<sup>153</sup> These claims have often been made in spite of having access to Akha oral histories attesting to a time in the distant past when such a polity may have in fact existed. It has been Geusau's representations of Akha as a

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<sup>153</sup> In sharp contrast to most Euro-American as well as Thai scholars, however, Han Chinese and indeed Hani scholars within China have constructed a space for Akha, albeit as Hani, within the dominant narrative of Chinese history as being that of a multi-ethnic nation from time immemorial. Within this larger nationalist narrative, Hani have been memorialized, not as a disaggregated “perennial minority,” but rather as a “strong and united nationality” that once governed their own independent kingdom (see Yunnan Provincial Office of Publication and Planning for Ethnic Minorities' Archaic Texts 1986; Shida and Ahai 1992; Yang 2005; Bai 2012).

“perennial minority,” moreover, that James Scott has especially capitalized on in his reframing of the mountainous, cross-border region where Akha and other upland minorities reside as the “non-state” space of “Zomia” (Geusau 1983, 2000a; Scott 2009).<sup>154</sup>

In addition, many, but not all, of the above mentioned scholars have been ambivalent to engage with the vast corpus of Akha oral texts retained in the memories of certain members of the communities with which they have worked as legitimate records of the past, preferring rather to look to the written word. Ayoe, moreover, has been acutely aware of the hegemony of the written word in his efforts to legitimate Akha oral histories by way of reference to Chinese written histories. Unlike most of the Euro-American scholars of Akha before him, Ayoe, by virtue of his fluency in Mandarin Chinese, has been able to access a vast corpus of Chinese historical records in his efforts to reconstruct Akha history.

During one exchange with Ayoe in December 2009 I informed him that there were in fact a number of prominent anthropologists working in the U.S. that had variably challenged the hegemony of the written word (and artifactual remains) and endorsed the use of oral traditions to reconstruct both the recent as well as distant past (see Bowie 1988; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006:149-50; Echo-Hawk 2000; Ferguson 1996; Fiskesjo 2000; Hall 1993, 1997; Hodder 2003; Jonsson 2002; Salzer 1993; Rajnovich and Salzer 2001; Watkins 2003; Whiteley 2002). I further informed him of the work of Hjorleifur Jonsson, in particular, as an example of a scholar that had seriously grappled with the oral traditions of Mien (Yao) - another upland minority group residing in various parts of the Upper Mekong Region - in constructing a

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<sup>154</sup> When I first met Scott in Chiangmai, Thailand in November 2010 during the Second International Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network, I asked him if he had ever met Geusau. Scott replied that he had once gone to “pay homage” to Geusau a few years prior to his death in 2002. He noted that he had spent the afternoon listening to Geusau talk about his life and work. Finally, he suggested that I search out the writings of an Englishman named Verrier Elwin, whom, he noted, not unlike Geusau, was a former clergyman who spent much of his life living with and working on behalf of the rights of highland minorities, albeit in India rather than Thailand.

complex historical narrative of shifting Mien relations with non-Mien Others through time and space (2002). On a subsequent occasion I presented a copy of Jonsson's (2002) book to Ayoe as both a gift of appreciation as well as to show him an example of how he might consider engaging with Akha oral traditions in his own work.

In this publication, Jonsson has argued that claims that upland oral narratives and ritual performances are merely myths of little or no historical value, "locate historicity with the state, whose chronicles have a format that matches western notions of 'real' history – dates, places, named peoples and events," and are thus inherently political in nature (2002:157).<sup>155</sup> Oral narratives or "myths," he argued, are rather "particular construction(s) of identity and history" by certain groups of people through time and space that should be interpreted alongside of and in relation to conventional historical records emanating from political "centers" (Jonsson 2002:157).

Jonsson further challenged dominant portrayals of historical upland-lowland relations in the Upper Mekong Region as being of little or no significance on one hand (Geddes 1976) or lowland-biased on the other (Leach 1954). In challenging these portrayals, Jonsson brought attention rather to long term patterns of interaction between certain upland and lowland groups in the region, particularly upland Lawa (Lua) and Mien on the one hand and lowland Chinese and Tai tributary states on the other. Lawa and Mien, Jonsson argued, were constituted first, as tributary groups and only later as ethnic groups as a result of shifting engagements with early

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<sup>155</sup> Jonsson's (1998, 2002) work has seriously challenged dominant views of highland minorities in the region as being "without history" (Wolf 1982) prior to the arrival of various European colonial powers, modern nation-states and economic globalization. Jonsson has argued, rather, that highland minorities in general and Mien (Yao) in particular, have long been engaged in political, economic, and sociocultural relations with lowland centers of power and vice versa" (1998:12). He further argued that it is rather "the formation of the historical record (in Southeast Asia)" that has accounted for the disappearance of "hinterland populations" (Jonsson 2002:185). Moreover, in order to bring the hinterlands back into the historical framework, Jonsson called for theories "that can explain the recorded history and its omissions" (2002:185). On a related note, historian Thongchai Winichakul has called for the "writing of history at the interstices," at the literal and symbolic margins of a nation, so as to expose "the limits of (that) nation as an entity" and contribute towards the de-construction of dominant nationalist histories (2003:12).

lowland polities and emerging nation-states (2002:41). He has further argued that the “untamed,” forested uplands in the region, where supposedly wild, non-subjects of the state resided, were constructed in opposition to the increasingly controlled and legible lowlands where civil subjects of the state resided (Jonsson 2002:34-35).

Lowland polities, Jonsson has argued, indirectly regulated the “settlement, movement, identities, and status(es)” of upland Lawa and Mien in the region as early as the thirteenth century (2002:34). He has stressed, however, that the extent of this regulation was limited until recent times, particularly in relation to upland cultural and agricultural practices (Jonsson 2002:39). In the past, he argued, there were limits to “state” hegemony and certain uplanders, particularly chiefs, were able to “claim prominence” over other communities on the fringe by “drawing simultaneously on the state and on their social and ecological separation from (the state)” (Jonsson 2002:39). Sturgeon has similarly argued that as recently as the late twentieth century certain local Akha “border chiefs” in the Thai-Myanmar and China-Myanmar borderlands:

“...both manipulated the border-as-line with relations across it to control resource access and collaborated with state agents to include other villagers more securely in the realm of border-as-margin of the nation-state” (Sturgeon 2005:10).<sup>156</sup>

As noted earlier, moreover, Aye and several other Akha scholars from southwest China, in particular, have recently engaged in a similar and yet distinct process of historicizing the Akha and thereby challenging earlier representations of Akha as a people not only without history but also without a history of their own. These scholars have collectively worked to construct a

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<sup>156</sup> Sturgeon has brought much needed attention to both the larger sociopolitical contexts within which local Akha identitarian and livelihood politics took place during the second half of the twentieth century as well as the unique positions of Akha communities residing in the Thai-Myanmar and China-Myanmar border regions. In particular, Sturgeon highlighted the negotiations of power that took place between representatives of the central Thai and Chinese states respectively and certain local Akha “border chiefs” appointed and empowered to maintain control over border regions and communities beyond the direct administrative grasp of each respective state until roughly the 1980s, thereby noting historical continuity in local forms of indirect rule over “frontier” or “borderland” regions (Sturgeon 2005:10,25,101).

historical narrative in which Akha occupy a position front and center on the stage. The main backdrop for this stage has been a short-lived Akha state believed to have been located in part of what is today's Yunnan Province in southwest China between the eleventh to thirteenth centuries C.E. In their efforts, moreover, these scholars have variably built on and complicated the multi-ethnic nationalist historical narrative constructed by Han scholars in post-1950s China.

It is not my purpose here to argue either for or against the historical validity of whether or not Akha as such did or did not develop their own lowland state at some point in the distant past. Rather, my purpose is to bring attention to the divergent representations of Akha history as previously constructed by certain Euro-American scholars and those more recently constructed by certain Akha scholars. In so doing, I am primarily concerned with highlighting the various ways in which the latter reconstructions of Akha history have variably figured into contemporary Akha imaginings and practices of Akhaness throughout the region.

In particular, I aim to discuss how certain Akha elite have mobilized these revisionist histories in their efforts to promote a pan-Akha sense of belonging. I also aim to address in part the nature and extent to which various Akha publics have engaged with these revisionist histories in their everyday lives, exchanges, and imaginings. Last, if the various Euro-American scholars cited earlier are indeed correct in claiming that the particular communities of Akha with whom they worked were lacking in any supra-village Akha sense of belonging, then the more recent efforts of certain Akha elite to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging in the region are historically unprecedented and thereby offer a unique vantage point from which to consider how and why ethnic consciousness may arise among groups positioned across multiple geopolitical borders in the contemporary world.

#### 8.4 Akha as the Quintessential “Zomians”?

“The Akha” figure prominently on the stage in James Scott’s most recent text, The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia (2009). They appear, however, largely by way of reference to Geusau’s earlier scholarship on Akha. Geusau’s scholarship drew on over twenty years of research largely with Akha of the U-lo (*Uqlor*) or “pointed head” sub-group in north Thailand, the southern extreme of Akha regional migrations.<sup>157</sup> Based on this research he interpreted contemporary Akha culture as a product of the historical encapsulation of Akha as a perennial minority forever striving to maintain both their independence from external polities as well as their own internal egalitarian political structure (Geusau 1983, 2000a).

Indeed, throughout his treatise on “Zomia,” Scott referenced a number of Akha oral histories, as documented and interpreted by Geusau, in noting the existence of a “would-be Akha king,” Jaw-ban (*Jawrban*), in part of what is today’s southwest China during the thirteenth century C.E. This “would-be Akha king,” however, upon attempting to consolidate his power and “institute a census (the iconic tax and state-making move!)...was slain by his own people” (Scott 2009:176-177). Scott further cited Akha oral histories explaining the loss of writing in support of his perhaps most controversial claim that various “Zomians,” such as the Akha, may have actually abandoned their earlier writing systems so as to render themselves “illegible” and thereby resist incorporation into early lowland polities (2009:221-224; Geusau 2000a:130-131).<sup>158</sup> In short, Scott argued in reference to “the Akha” that, “It would be hard to imagine a

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<sup>157</sup> The pointed head sub-group is referred to on the basis of the distinctive headdress of mature women, which “comes up to a point” (Lewis 1989:23). Note, however, that Ayoe has argued that this particular means of intra-group differentiation on the basis of female’s headdress is first, a relatively recent development and second, unique to Akha in Thailand and Myanmar. Ayoe has argued that in other parts of the region, such as China, intra-group variation is marked rather by language variety and master clan membership.

<sup>158</sup> Drawing from Akha oral traditions Geusau has argued that at one point in time Akha possessed a script but later “lost” it as part of one of many strategies promoting their “ecological and psychological ‘encapsulation’ ” following

people whose oral history, practices, and cosmology represented a more comprehensive rejection of states and permanent hierarchies” (2009:177).

More recently, Tooker has argued that her own findings on space and the production of cultural difference among Akha in north Thailand are consistent with Scott’s stress on “the creative resistance abilities of ‘state-less’ societies” throughout the region (Tooker 2012:22, 1996c). Tooker has further suggested, however, that Akha were able to maintain a certain degree of autonomy as a “state-less” people until as recent as the mid-1980s, extending far beyond the temporal threshold of World War II as rather abruptly declared by Scott. She has also refined Scott’s argument in considering the roles that other factors in addition to the political and economic – namely ritual, cosmology and social arrangements - have played in the construction of Akha collective forms of identity (Tooker 2012:22).

Drawing from my more recent research with the mostly Traditionalist (i.e. non-Christian and non-Buddhist) villagers of several upland Akha communities in north Thailand, I would argue that at least some contemporary Akha communities in the region have continued to follow certain religio-spatializing practices that have afforded them a certain degree of autonomy over their particular communities and clans. At the same time, however, their oral histories and contemporary practices attest to historical continuity in terms of establishing relations with representatives of various lowland states, whether in the context of southwest China, east Myanmar, northwest Laos, or north Thailand, in order to negotiate for certain benefits.

These benefits, which Scott has largely overlooked in his focus on the burdens of lowland states, have varied through time from silver to salt, protection, official titles, legal citizenship,

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their marginalization by various in-migrating Tai groups (2000a:130-131). In particular, he has argued that, “Akha and Hani societies are ‘post-literate’ in the sense that they stem from highly developed Yi-Chia groups which possessed a script, as their histories tell us. (At the same time, however,) they are ‘pre-literate’ in that they had ‘lost’ their script; they say ‘they ate their books of buffalo-hide when they were hungry’ ” (Lewis 1969a:35; Yang Wanzhi 1991; in Geusau 2000a:130-1).

land tenure, infrastructural projects, formal education, healthcare, and agricultural support (see Jonsson 2012). Moreover, drawing on my research I would argue against the overly sharp distinction that Scott has drawn between “non-state” and “state” spaces. In so doing, Scott has fallen into the trap of framing his work in relation to yet another binary that exists only in theory and rarely in praxis.

### 8.5 A Perennial Minority Group?

Geusau was unique among Euro-American scholars working with Akha in terms of his willingness and, indeed, enthusiasm to mine the vaults of Akha oral traditions as legitimate sources of history in of themselves. Based on his readings of certain Akha oral histories alongside of a limited range of Chinese written records, Geusau has argued for the existence of a lowland-based “shamanic Akha chiefdom,” referred to as Tmlang in Akha and Mo-jiang in Mandarin, lasting for just three generations in part of what is today’s southwest China at the time of the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 C.E.) (2000a:137,139). Geusau has provided the following picture of this particular chapter of Akha history:

“As for the Akha, it can be confirmed historically, that a short-lived shamanic Akha chiefdom endured for three generations in Tmlang, a fortified city close to the watersheds of the Black River. These are Tibeto-Burman names which were later changed to the current Mojiang (Liu Qibuyan 1989; Huang Shirong 1991). We have the impression that in a power vacuum in the south-western areas between a weakened Nanchao and the Han Chinese during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 AD) several local vassal states sought greater autonomy (Backus 1981:163)...Stories give the impression that (Jawban) tried to unite the Akha chiefs of several clans in order to gain military power. He married a daughter of Abaw Mazeu, leader of the older Akha clans. He and his son systematize (*Aqkaqzanr*), or customary law. He claims a shamanic type of seizure of power, together with claims of direct orders from Heaven. His son Bang Dzjui rides the shamanic horse to heaven every night. It is a kind of charismatic leadership, looking for direct justification from Heaven; a war-lord phenomenon of a type which still frequently occurs in the region. It was short-lived, however, and never led to state-formation. (Jawban) was killed by his own people. Bang Dzjui perishes, as his shamanic horse (one broken wing mended with beeswax) fell to the ground, the wax melted by his flying too high, as in the Hellenic story of Icarus. The

third generation of Dzjui Im sees the collapse of Tm-lang/Mojiang as the result of wars (Mojiang Editorial Committee 1983). The way the story is told, in a ‘flowery,’ exaggerated way, clearly shows an aversion to hierarchical chiefdom and state-formation. The moral is clear, though there is a contradiction between boasting that an Akha once achieved this kind of power, and rejection of unequal division of power. It leads us to conclude that the Akha never had a regular Akha state system. On the contrary, it seems to justify: (i) the fact that Akha live in a diaspora; and (ii) the origin of a non-state-based Akha alliance system” (Geusau 2000a:139-140).

Geusau further argued that in the context of Tmlang, “we can see the origin of...the Akha ‘genealogical and alliance system,’ and the formative period of a unified Akha customary law system (or *Aqkaqzanr*), as we know it now” (2000a:139). Moreover, it was in Tmlang, he argued, that, “the Akha as a distinct ethnic group split off from other Hani groups...during a power vacuum prior to the Mongol invasions of the mid-thirteenth century” (Geusau 2000a:151). Geusau has further noted, however, his suspicion that the particular Akha clan that assumed leadership during this period, namely the A-jaw (*Arjawr*) clan to which the either famous or infamous would-be Akha king (Jawban) belonged, was “originally more closely related to the Hani lords of the area, who were at the time already well established in the Honghe and Red River terraced highlands” (Geusau 2000a:140).<sup>159</sup>

Geusau drew from two lines of evidence in suggesting that the Ajaw clan was “originally more closely related to Hani” (Geusau 2000a:140). First, he drew on the work of French scholar Pascal Boucherie, who had conducted historical genealogical research with Hani and Akha in various parts of southwest China during the early to mid-1990s (Boucherie 1995). Second, he noted that Akha in north Thailand generally felt that the contemporary language of Ajaw clan members was more closely related to Hani than Akha (Geusau 2000a:140). Thus, in line with his prevailing view of Akha history as a history of marginalization, Geusau ultimately argued that

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<sup>159</sup> Geusau did not clarify, however, the exact nature of relations between the A-jaw clan and the Hani lords with which he claims they were “originally more closely related” (2000a:140). It is unclear, for example, as to whether or not he believed the A-jaw to be more Hani than Akha in terms of identity or rather in a tributary position to one or more of these Hani lords.

the position of Akha at the time of Tmlang was that of “ ‘refugees of war’ in a Hani dominated, class-based corvée system” (2000a:140).<sup>160</sup>

Geusau has argued in turn that subsequent incursions of in-migrating Tai groups led to the demise of this short-lived shamanic Akha chiefdom and the subsequent subordination of Akha to the surrounding uplands where they have remained ever since. As a result, he argued, the sociopolitical structure of Akha communities was transformed from what “Akha believe (to have been a) warring group or state system” with acknowledged military leaders to a marginalized, “perennial minority” positioned among numerous other ethnic groups throughout the region (Geusau 1983, 2000a:137-8).

It is further held that following the demise of Tmlang, different Akha subgroups and clans began their centuries-long migrations further south into a mountainous buffer-frontier zone that has only recently been formally, albeit arbitrarily, incorporated into the national territories of Myanmar, China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The majority of Akha at present, however, continue to reside in a relatively small tri-border region that may very well represent the last remaining frontier or buffer zone in the Upper Mekong Region. This mountainous, tri-border region centers on the upper branch of the mighty Mekong River and encompasses the contiguous borderworlds of southern Xishuangbanna (Sipsongbanna) Prefecture in China, eastern Shan State in Myanmar and Muang Sing District in northwest Laos.

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<sup>160</sup> This particular reading of Akha sociopolitical history, however, to some extent parallels that of the dominant Chinese state’s nationalist narratives wherein the histories of various minority groups have been grafted onto an unilineal evolutionary trajectory from slavery to feudalism and eventually liberation following the rise of the Communist Party and modern China in 1949. Certain minorities, moreover, particularly those considered “more raw” and hence “less civilized” and ungovernable, including the Akha, were portrayed as being oppressed by certain other minorities, such as the Dai-Lue in the Akha case, prior to liberation by the Communists. At the same time, however, Geusau’s reading of Akha as having been “ ‘refugees of war’ in a Hani dominated, class-based corvée system” challenges these dominant nationalist narratives by undermining the presumed notion of the Hani national (minority) as having always and everywhere been a harmonious and unified group.

It is generally believed, furthermore, that the sociopolitical systems of those Akha subgroups and clans that gradually migrated further south into areas that were later incorporated into the national territories of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, devolved to the level of the village. In southern Xishuangbanna (Sipsongbanna), however, a number of Akha chiefdoms or clusters of villages founded over 650 years ago were maintained well into the middle part of the twentieth century (Geusau 2000a:141; Wang N.d.:19). In addition, Sturgeon's (2005) work on local Akha border chiefs in the Thai-Myanmar and China-Myanmar border regions has provided evidence that a certain degree of sociopolitical organization existed beyond the village level for at least some Akha in the region until as recent as the 1980s.

During field work I came to learn of an Akha dominated area located in the very far eastern part of Shan State, Myanmar between the Mekong River and the Chinese border where the country of Myanmar has long been considered a far and distant place with little or no relevance for everyday life. This region, while subsumed within the territorial boundaries of Myanmar on conventional world maps and referred to by the Burman government as "Special Region Number Four," has in actuality been an autonomous tributary buffer state under the leadership of an Akha leader with stronger diplomatic, cultural, and historical ties to China than Myanmar. Locally, the region is referred to as "Na-ba" (*Nabaq*), while the Akha inhabitants refer to themselves as "A-kha Nei" (*Aqkaq Neir*) or "Red Akha," revealing their historical ties with the Communist Parties of Burma and China (see Lintner 1994:424; Bertil Lintner, personal communication, May 12, 2012).<sup>161</sup> The existence of this Akha dominated tributary-state

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<sup>161</sup> As of March 2014, however, Na-ba's leadership under the Mongla based National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) was moving to position itself to apply for designation as an official "Akha Self-Administered Zone" within Myanmar proper (Shan Herald Agency News 2014a). As part of these efforts, the Akha leadership has put out a call for Akha from other parts of the region to resettle in Na-ba with offers of land and simple bamboo houses so as to boost the number of Akha in Na-ba and better position themselves as an Akha dominated region.

complicates caricatures of “*the Akha*” as either a “perennial minority” or the quintessential “Zomian” anarchists in all times and places.

Like other populations in the region as well as much of mainland Southeast Asia (inclusive of both upland and lowland populations), various sub-groups and clans of Akha have migrated at different periods of time for various reasons such as overpopulation, land scarcity, sickness, warfare, and repressive as well as beneficial state policies (Hanks et al. 1964; Scott 2009; Jonsson 2012). Contrary to conventional thought, however, the migrations of Akha as well as other upland groups were often cyclical and gradual rather than linear in nature, particularly during periods prior to the relatively recent demarcation of modern state borders. Ian Baird has described a similarly cyclical process of movement among ethnic Brao in the Lao-Cambodian border areas (2010).<sup>162</sup> In certain parts of the region, however, the demarcation of international boundaries remains an incomplete process that occasionally leads to international disputes. A recent case of the latter includes the ongoing dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the ancient Phreah Vihear Temple.

Geusau (2000a:130) and Scott (2009:174-177) have further framed the Upper Mekong Region as a “zone of refuge” (Beltrán 1965) for groups such as the Akha, who after their subordination to various in-migrating groups are believed to have dispersed throughout the region and developed cultural beliefs and practices, such as shifting cultivation, in order to avoid integration into early lowland polities. Geusau (2000a:130), in particular, built on Mary Douglas’ (1966) notion of “encapsulation” in arguing that following their historical marginalization by in-migrating Tai groups, Akha underwent a process of “ecological and psychological

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<sup>162</sup> Baird described how the ethnic Brao, an indigenous group whose contemporary members reside on both sides of the Lao-Cambodian border, have moved back and forth across the border since its initial imposition by the French in colonial times and its reification in post-colonialist times in response to shifting political and economic circumstances on either side of the border (2010).

‘encapsulation’ ” so as to avoid integration into various lowland-based polities. Ecologically, Geusau argued, this entailed the selection and construction of habitats – “in terms of altitude and surrounding forestation – in such a way that they would not be easily accessible to soldiers, bandits and tax-collectors” (2000a:130).

As noted earlier, moreover, Kammerer argued that at the time of her research in the early to mid-1980s, Akha in north Thailand no longer saw the option of withdrawal from the Thai state as feasible given their limited technology, population pressure, and land competition from more dominant lowland Thais and the state (1986:421). As a result, she argued:

“(T)he limits of adaptability of (*Aqkaqzanr*) as a coherent, cosmologically-grounded cultural system could well be reached in the not so distant future” (Kammerer 1986:394-6).

Along similar lines, Tooker argued that between 1982-1985 Akha in north Thailand generally lost the ability to maintain their earlier semi-autonomy from the encroaching Thai state and global capitalist economy, thereby undergoing the “compartmentalization” of their formerly holistic identity as grounded in the practice of *Aqkaqzanr* (2004, 2012).

Each of these representations of Akha has, in their own way, suggested that as Akha have encountered modernity in the form of expanding nation-states and capitalist markets they have inevitably experienced a fundamental fracturing of their traditional identity. Ayoë and other Akha scholars have in turn worked to variably challenge as well as further reify the artificial barriers that have thus been constructed between the “ ‘traditional’ (Akha) and their own sense of modernity” (see Sadan 2013:29). It is to this particular domain of identitarian work that we now turn.

## 8.6 Revisionist Histories: The Formative Period of the Akha

As noted earlier, in recent years an emerging group of indigenous Akha scholars has begun to challenge these earlier representations of Akha history. Foremost among these scholars is Ayoe Nyaw-byae (Jianhua Wang). Ayoe and a number of other Akha scholars from southwest China have questioned earlier Euro-American scholars' claims of Akha as always and everywhere having been a "tribal" group lacking any political organization beyond the village level (Kammerer 1986; Tooker 1988; Geusau 2000a). While largely in agreement with this assessment in relation to the contemporary position of Akha as a minority in the region, Ayoe and his fellow scholars have challenged rather the claim that this has always been the case (Wang 2013:28). They have accordingly worked to uncover the formative period of Akha history during which they believe that the ethnogenesis of Akha as a distinct people occurred.

Ayoe has pointed to a number of factors that he believes have led Euro-American scholars to misrepresent certain aspects of Akha history. First, he noted that with the exception of Geusau, these scholars have tended to view Akha oral traditions as simply stories or myths with little or no historical value (Ayoe, personal communication, June 10, 2010). As a result, he has argued, these scholars have neglected the "ancient history of the Akha" (Wang 2013:28).

Second, he pointed to a more general tendency for these scholars, inclusive of Geusau, to both mistake the ethnographic present for the past as well as extrapolate about Akha in general on the basis of research with particular subgroups and clans, particularly those residing in north Thailand (Ayoe, personal communication, June 10, 2010). In reference to Geusau, moreover, Ayoe told me the following:

"His analysis was based on a limited amount of data. He depended largely on oral texts of the U-lo subgroup in north Thailand. My more recent findings are based on a more comprehensive analysis of oral texts both covering a wider range of subjects such as genealogies, historical migrations and ritual practices as well as based on research among

multiple subgroups residing in different parts of the region. I have also drawn on a larger body of ethno-linguistic data and more thoroughly analyzed relevant Chinese language sources. As for Tmlang, which is referred to as Talang in Chinese, our migratory texts reference several different places called Tmlang, not simply one. These were different settlements renamed Tmlang prior to our settling in Jadae state, which refers to a larger region and not a particular city as in the case of Tmlang. It was in the context of Jadae that the capital city was renamed as Tmlang. I have come across ritual texts referring to Tmlang as the market city of Jawban, the most powerful king of Jadae. ‘Tm’ refers to flowing water or a river, while ‘lang’ refers to a fortified city – together meaning a fortified city surrounded by flowing water. I have also found several lines of evidence to suggest that Jadae developed into a state or federation of chiefdoms under roughly three generations of rulers – including evidence of tribute being paid to a central authority, centralized attempts to standardize or codify Akha customary laws, and the development of a class of ritual and technical specialists” (personal communication, June 10, 2010).<sup>163</sup>

Ayoe has further argued that in the context of Jadae, Akha belonging to the ruling class owned extensive irrigated lowland rice fields (Ayoe, personal communication, June 12, 2008; Wang 2013:62; Shida and Ahai 1992). Moreover, following classical arguments for state-making in Asia, Wang has noted that, “irrigated rice farming provides a strong economic basis for supporting the elite ruling class and state administrative affairs” (Wang 2013:63). In further support of this claim Ayoe cited Tooker who suggested that at one point in the distant past Akha may have been wet rice farmers on the basis of their “ancient oral literature and Ancestral practices,” which, while containing frequent mention of wet rice farming, lack virtually any mention of dry rice farming (1996b:10). Tooker qualified her suggestion, however, by noting that first, Akha would have practiced wet rice farming on “high mountain slopes” as the low valleys would have been dominated by Tai groups, and second, any conclusion “would, of course, need to be confirmed by concrete historical evidence” (1996b:10).<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> In his more recent dissertation, Ayoe has elaborated on this point in the following manner: “(A)ccording to Akha internal historical texts,...(the) Jadae polity exhibited several key characteristics of a state. These characteristics included but are not limited to: 1) a hierarchical political structure with a hereditary apical ruler, 2) a centralized court and military, 3) a sovereign territory with a fortified capital city and several fortified defensive towns, and 4) compulsory taxation” (2013:63).

<sup>164</sup> Interestingly, certain contemporary Hani communities in various parts of southwest China, particularly Honghe, have cultivated irrigated rice in elaborate and extensive upland rice terraces for much of the past several centuries if not longer.

Ayoe has further questioned Geusau's claims that first, King Jawban and his Ajaw clan members were "originally more closely related to Hani," and, second, that the Akha position in Jadae was that of " 'refugees of war' in a Hani dominated, class-based corvée system" (Geusau 2000a:140; Wang 2013:63-71). In refuting these claims, Ayoe noted that Hani in contemporary China, in sharp contrast to Akha throughout the region, "have little...knowledge of Jadae..." (Wang 2013:64). Based on a comparative study of Akha and Hani oral histories, Ancestral genealogies, as well as ethnographic and linguistic evidence, Ayoe ultimately argued in contrast to Geusau that:

"Akha (were) at the political center of...Jadae state, that is, the Luo-pan Dian or Yuanjiang valley, while...Hani...(were) located on the periphery of Jadae...both geographically and politically" (Wang 2013:64).

Ayoe, not unlike Geusau, however, has further argued that Akha as such first came into being as a distinct people, separate and apart from Hani, as a "direct result" of their state building efforts in Jadae:

"I argue that the formation of the Akha as a people who branched off from other Hani subgroups and their adoption of the self-referential term Akha are the direct results of their collective experiences in building Jadae state" (Wang 2013:29).

As noted earlier, Ayoe has drawn from multiple lines of evidence in arguing for the existence of a short-lived Akha "state," rather than mere "shamanic chiefdom," centered in the Yuanjiang valley of the Red River between 1054 C.E. and 1274 C.E. when it was conquered by the Mongol Empire of the expanding Yuan Dynasty (Wang 2013:xi,60; Jiang 2007:7; Huang 2007:47).<sup>165</sup> This state, Ayoe has noted, is referred to as "Ja-dae Mi-khang" (*Jadae Mirkhang*) both in Akha oral histories as well as by Akha elders in general. The Akha term "Jadae," Ayoe noted, refers to "a long, flat area of land" while the term "Mi-khang" has multiple meanings such

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<sup>165</sup> Ayoe's association of the Mongol Empire with the Yuan Dynasty follows the official narrative of China as a multi-ethnic nation from time immemorial in relation to which diverse local and regional histories have been rewritten or reframed and thereby brought into line with the dominant nationalist discourse.

as “state,” “country” and “world,” depending on context.<sup>166</sup> Ayoe has further argued that the “collective experiences (of Akha) in building, defending and (eventually) losing their homeland state of Jadae” were not only instrumental in their formative history as a people in the past but have further remained as a salient and durable marker of their contemporary collective identity (Wang N.d.:3,24).

The idea or memory of Jadae, the historical Akha homeland, has figured prominently in the efforts of Ayoe and other Neo-Traditionalist elite to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging throughout the Akha World. The implications of these reinterpretations of Akha history extend far beyond mere scholarly pursuits into the everyday imaginations and practices of local Akha communities positioned throughout the region. In one respect, the focus on Jadae has been part of an effort by a small number of Akha scholars, all of Chinese nationality, to write what has never been written before. That is, to write a history of the Akha before their relegation to a perennial minority divided by multiple political and religious divisions (Wang and Huang 2008; Wang 2013).

In yet another respect, the focus on Jadae has been part of an effort to (re)educate Akha, particularly youth, about THEIR history (as opposed to Chinese, Burman, Lao, or Thai history) and instill a sense of both pride in being Akha as well as solidarity with other Akha in the region. This (re)emerging sense of solidarity has increasingly been expressed in a popular Akha saying, “Ten Akha are united as one” (*Aqkaq tseir kaq tivq kaq ma*). These goals of promoting Akha unity along with a greater sense of dignity and pride in being Akha relate to yet another goal of Neo-Traditionalist elites. This goal, in the words of their charismatic reformer-prophet,

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<sup>166</sup> Ayoe has described Jadae in the following manner: “The term Jadae is an internal geographical term of the Akha that refers to both a place and a region. As a place name, Jadae—literally meaning ‘a long, flat area of land’ - refers to the Yuanjiang valley, which was recorded as Luo-pan dian in Chinese. As a regional name, it refers to the region between the La-sha (the Red) and Yi-ma (the Black) rivers respectively, inclusive of Yuanjiang valley and Ailao mountain. All Akha throughout the region regard Jadae as their homeland” (Wang N.d.:10).

Prosperous One, is to counter the long-standing efforts of Christian missionaries, whether white foreigners or Akha, to:

“...brainwash their (Akha) converts into thinking of our Ancestral Ways as a backwards form of devil worship,  
and then, like deadly viruses,  
infect our society with numerous conflicts and divisions”  
(Prosperous One, personal communication, July 24, 2010).

Ayoe has further argued that the meaning of the self-referential term Akha has shifted throughout history in response to their changing political circumstances. For example, he holds that during their formative period in the context of Jadae state, “the primary meanings of the term Akha as ‘the people of the center’ and ‘the people between’ ” refer to both their cosmological view of being at the center of the world and also their independent status from other states (Wang N.d.:1). Following Jadae’s demise, the beginning of Akha migrations into various parts of the region, and their relegation to minorities, however, Ayoe argues that the term Akha acquires a diasporic meaning of “the people of distance” from their homeland (Wang N.d.:1).

It is only during the latter, post-Jadae period, Ayoe further argues, that Geusau and Scott’s subsequent representations of Akha society as noted earlier are accurate (Ayoe, personal communication, June 24, 2010). He added, however, that contrary to Scott’s claims:

“...the most fundamental aspects of Akha identity today,  
namely our genealogical alliance system and unified system of customary law,  
first evolved as a direct result of our collective experiences in building Jadae state and  
NOT as a means of state-evasion”  
(Ayoe, personal communication, June 24, 2010).<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> There is a contradiction in this argument in that the claim of their being historical continuity in the uniformity of Akha genealogical and customary practices as first established during the time of Jadae state runs counter to the claims of anarchy as argued by Scott whether in reference to Akha historical formations before, during or after Jadae.

Ayoe's closely related claim, moreover, that the Akha collectivity first came into being and has ever since been animated by way of the historical project of Jadae, if taken at face value, undermines Geusau and Scott's portrayal of the region's uplanders, and especially Akha, as having an inherent anti-disposition to not only hierarchy but also social collectivities more generally.

Ayoe and other's scholarly reproductions of Akhaness can be added to an ever mounting and highly productive critique of Scott's re-imaginings of Van Schendel's notion of "Zomia" (see Friedman 2011; Jonsson 2010, 2012; Shneiderman 2010; Fiskesjö 2010; Baird 2013b). As Sara Shneiderman has noted among the cross-border Thangmi in the Central Himalayas, certain Akha have variably imagined themselves as a "state" and "non-state" people depending upon their shifting positions and interests through space and time (2010:312). In either case, Akha elite's contemporary representations of Akhaness as having cultural and historical continuity challenge Scott's portrayal of "Zomian" identities as inherently fluid, shifting, and dynamic, a representation with earlier roots in classic ethnographic portrayals of the region (Keyes 1979; Leach 1954; Lehman 1979; Moerman 1965).

In addition to the above, Ayoe has further argued that the Akha historical experience of ethno-state formation followed by political subordination and marginalization was reflected in innovations in Akha material culture, namely the traditional wardrobe. He argued, for example, that the currently widespread color pattern of red, white, green, yellow, and blue first emerged as a salient marker of Akhaness during the formative period of Jadae (Ayoe, personal communication, June 10, 2010). Ayoe further argued that following the demise of Jadae and subordination of Akha this particular color pattern made its way into Akha wardrobes as a "subaltern flag" or marker of their former independent status (Ayoe, personal communication,

June 10, 2010). This interpretation, among others, has most strongly led me to wonder of the extent to which Ayoe, not until other ethnic entrepreneurs in other places and times, has been reading the present into the past rather than vice versa.

Finally, Ayoe has argued that Akha history has more recently entered into yet another phase that he refers to as the “post-modern period,” during which, “the spirits and memories of Jadae are calling the souls (of the Akha) back to their long-lost homeland, Akha are beginning to search for their long-lost roots, (and) a sense of pride in being Akha is reemerging” (Wang N.d.:22; Wang 2013:77). This “post-modern” period of Akha history in the making, he notes, has been marked by some Akha in east Shan State, Myanmar via the reconstruction of various kinds of symbolic representations of Jadae as further discussed in chapter ten. In short, the “subaltern markers” of Akhaness referred to above have reemerged as more overt markers of Akhaness in the form of reconstructed flags of Jadae state draped from the stages of public gatherings, waved by festival goers, and conspicuously embroidered on the jackets of elders and headdresses of teenagers.

### **8.7 The Demise of Jawban and Jadae: Divergent interpretations of the past**

“Aju often boasts that he comes from a long line of rebellious figures, noting that his clan members were the ones that got rid of King Jawban during the time of Jadae. Well, one time as he was boasting about this I turned to him and asked, ‘Do you really feel proud to say that your clan was responsible not only for Jawban’s demise but also that of our beloved Jadae homeland?’ Ever since I asked that question he seems to have stopped boasting and perhaps no longer feels so proud about this claim” (Ayoe, personal communication, June 11, 2010).

Aju is a descendant of the “Ma-ze” (*Mazeq*) clan, which is considered one of the oldest principal clans among Akha (Geusau 2000a:136). It is believed that during the time of Jadae the elders of the Ma-ze and Ji-ma (*Jima*) clans resisted incorporation into Jadae under King Jawban

and eventually collaborated in assassinating Jawban (Geusau 2000a:136; Lewis 1969a:68; Wang N.d.:12). At present, moreover, most descendants of the Ma-ze clan reside in various parts of north Thailand and east Myanmar.

When asked about their Ancestry, Ma-ze clan members often tend to proudly proclaim, “We come from a long line of rebellious leaders who cherished their freedom and independence.” Perhaps as a tribute to their “love of freedom,” the Ma-ze clan is both the oldest as well as largest Akha clan in north Thailand today, which marks the southernmost extreme of at least large-scale Akha migratory histories. Over the past 700 years or so the descendants of this clan have traveled the furthest from Jadae in the pursuit of independence, freedom, and ultimately home.<sup>168</sup> In addition, Ma-ze clan members’ Ancestral practices differ from other clans, particularly the A-jaw, in that they revolve around Ancestral shrines maintained in individual households rather than the household of a clan patriarch.

In contrast to Aju, Ayoe belongs to the A-jaw principal clan, which claims a direct line of descent from none other than King Jawban himself.<sup>169</sup> The Ancestors of today’s A-jaw clan members are believed to have occupied a central position of authority in the context of Jadae. Today, furthermore, very few A-jaw clan members reside in either Myanmar or Thailand. Rather, the majority reside in various parts of southern Xishuangbanna (Sipsongbanna) in southwest Yunnan, China. A-jaw migratory histories, moreover, are much shorter in terms of both distance as well as time when compared to those of Ma-ze clan members.

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<sup>168</sup> Ian Baird informed me that similar kinds of claims have been made by Hmong residing in present day Thailand, which, as in the case of Akha, represents the southernmost extreme of intra-Asian Hmong migrations (personal communication, November 26, 2014).

<sup>169</sup> Lewis writes: “The last two rulers among the Akhas were Jaw-ban and his son Ban-jee. Jaw-ban was the son of Je-jaw (father of the Ajaw clan), the son of Dzan-je. They lived in Jadae, in China. All of the A-jaw clan ‘traces’ their genealogy to this day through these two men...He was an extremely powerful ruler, and the Akhas suffered a great deal from him – and yet they are also very proud of him. He is said to have ruled over the Chinese, Thai, Shan, Mon-Khmer (A-boe), Lahus, etc” (1969a:40).

As noted earlier, Ayoe has argued that during the time of Jadae, his A-jaw Ancestors resided in lowland, urban centers of power and owned irrigated rice terraces. The latter, he argues, were worked by Akha and other non-Akha groups from lower socioeconomic classes. Ayoe further holds that the latter predominantly occupied the rural mountains surrounding these urban centers where they cultivated upland dry land rice. He refers to this socio-economically spatialized landscape of Jadae as further evidence supporting his claim that Jadae did indeed develop into a state and not simply a confederation of chiefdoms.

Both Aju and Ayoe have played leading roles in the cross-border Neo-Traditionalist movement. Aju has served as one of several representatives of Akha in Thailand. In addition, in the everyday workings of the movement, Aju has played the roles of a coordinator, emcee, scribe and media producer. Ayoe, on the other hand, has been a key representative of Akha in China that has played multiple roles ranging from an organic intellectual to mediator, organizer, and historian.

Aju, moreover, is Ayoe's senior by some twelve years. According to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, Aju's seniority in this relationship has been marked by way of both a particular term of address, namely "older brother" (*Ardov*), as well as protocol holding that Aju begin eating prior to his "younger brother" (*Aqnyir*) Ayoe and so forth. In actuality, however, Ayoe, by virtue of his particular contributions to the movement, has often been shown a higher degree of honor by various Akha leaders than Aju, leading Aju to develop a certain degree of resentment towards Ayoe.

This issue has been particularly salient for Aju given that in his younger days he occupied a much more prominent position of leadership within the Traditionalist Akha World of north Thailand. Aju's former life, however, came to a rather abrupt end during the late 1990s when the

Thai authorities brought false criminal charges against him. Realizing that he had little or no chance of receiving a fair trial, Aju fled Thailand for England where he spent several years before returning to Thailand and attempting to pick up the pieces of his former life. He has subsequently struggled ever since to reestablish himself as a leader in the ever expanding Akha World centered on the Upper Mekong Region.

Aju has been involved in efforts on behalf of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors since the late 1980s. At that time he was the Information Officer for the Chiangrai based Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand (AFECT), the first non-governmental association founded by and for “tribal peoples” in north Thailand (Bangkok Post 1990). In its heyday, more than 60 Akha villages from various parts of north Thailand were active members of AFECT (Bangkok Post 1990). All of these villages, furthermore, were Traditionalist villages in the sense that those residing within the village gates were carrying the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, as opposed to Christianity or Buddhism. At that time, the relatively high degree of religio-political factionalism that has since come to characterize much of the Akha World of north Thailand had not yet come to be. As growing numbers of individuals, households and entire villages began to convert to different denominations of Christianity during the late 1980s and 1990s, AFECT’s formerly extensive village network began to dwindle.

Apart from his organizational endeavors, Aju is a competent musician and composer whose early productions date back more than 20 years. His early musical productions largely took the form of the Thai country music genre of “songs for life” (เพลงเพื่อชีวิต) infused with Akhaness in the form of instrumentation and language. Thematically, Aju’s early songs highlighted the sufferings of Akha in Thailand at the hand of the Thai state while forever reminding Akha, particularly youth, not to forget THEIR language, culture and roots.

As Aju has aged through the years and his long hair and bushy beard grayed through and through, however, his musical repertoire has shifted more towards the traditional in the form of so-called “Hill tribe” (ชาวเขา), “tribal” (ชนเผ่า) and/or “ethnic” (ชาติพันธุ์) instrumentation. He is often accompanied on vocals by a middle-aged Akha woman, Mi-ju (Mi-ju; not to be confused with Ayoue’s wife by the same name) who is variably versed in traditional archaic Akha songs otherwise performed a cappella. Paralleling this change in musical repertoire, Aju’s vocation in life has invariably shifted from that of an ethnic leader and artist to an ethnic performer.

One of Aju’s earliest songs was entitled “Jadeh,” after Jadae, which he has translated into English as “Akha Homeland.” This song was included on his 1996 cassette album “We are the Akha” (*Aq Kaq Zaq Ma*). The title track, “We are the Akha,” has gradually become his most popular song among Akha in various parts of the region. Aju first wrote “Jadeh” in 1984 while in his natal upland village of Saencharoen in Chiangrai, Thailand. A revised English translation of the song’s refrain is included below.

### **Jadeh: Akha Homeland**

“The Akha...come down from Jadeh...  
 In the old days, we used to have irrigated rice fields in China.  
 One day an Akha woman married a Dai man...  
 We’ve been on the move for a long time, always on the move.  
 After staying with his wife for a long time, the Dai man tied up the cat,  
 He hit the cat, and ran all over the land, taking our land.  
 Our rice fields, our expansive rice fields, are now gone.  
 We could not stay any more, we had to move down south.  
 Our land was all gone, we had to move down south.  
 After we moved south, we never lived in Jadae again.  
 As we moved down south we faced many problems.  
 All of the good land was gone, there was none left...”

In 2003, Aju reworked the album “We are the Akha” into video compact disc format with music videos and English subtitles. The video accompanying the song “Jadeh” was cut and edited from a recording of an excursion arranged for the participants at the Third International

Conference on Hani-Akha Culture held in Yuanyang and Honghe Counties, Honghe Prefecture, southwest Yunnan, China in 2002. These tri-yearly conferences, which are further discussed in chapter nine, “Histories within Histories,” have played a key role in connecting certain Akha elite from various parts of the region since their inauguration in 1993. During the particular excursion that Aju spliced into his digitized reworkings of “Jadeh,” the conference participants were taken to a scenic viewpoint along a steep mountain road from where they could observe an extensive array of ancient Hani irrigated rice terraces expanding as far as the eye could see.

For Aju and many of the other Akha participants from Thailand and Myanmar these soaring mountains, extensive irrigated rice terraces, and the relatively better-off position of Hani and Akha in China, all came to represent “Jadeh” or the “Akha Homeland.”<sup>170</sup> In this manner, the largely mythical imaginings of Jadae that they possessed prior to their initial visit to China acquired an actual spatial and temporal point of reference in the sensorial world. This sensorial landscape, furthermore, gradually came to simultaneously signify the past, present, and future of Akhaness in terms of a lost homeland past, a rediscovered homeland present, and lastly a re-imagined homeland future in which Akha might experience prosperity as well as live and be treated with dignity and respect.<sup>171</sup>

This re-discovery of Jadae, however, has not so much triggered a desire to return to Jadae as provided a range of new imaginings for how one might live and be treated in the homeland as variably recreated through space and time according to a particular community’s history of migration and settlement in the region. Rather, Akha in various positions throughout the region have possessed a range of multiple and shifting orientations towards homeland. For example,

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<sup>170</sup> Akha representatives from Laos first begin participating in these international conferences in 2008 when the sixth conference was held in Luchun County, Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan, China.

<sup>171</sup> The views of these Akha from beyond China must be understood in light of their disenchantment with their own positions in Thailand or Myanmar, causing them to perhaps idealize the Chinese model without realizing its downsides.

among certain elderly Old-Traditionalists in north Thailand, the homeland is embodied in customary practices that simultaneously recreate home through time and space while linking the living living with their homeland past (i.e. Jadae) and future (ie. the domain of the living dead). The homeland-making practices of one such Old-Traditionalist community, Law-ja Village, were discussed earlier in chapter five.

One afternoon while chatting with Aju in the very same field house at Deu-leu's home in Chiang Mai where I had one of my earliest history lessons with Ayoe, I asked Aju about the history behind his song, "Jadeh: Akha Homeland." He informed me that the motivations for writing the song had come from all the stories that his elders had told him when he was young about the lives of their Ancestors during and following the time of Jadae. Aju further noted that in the song he purposely juxtaposed their glorious past in Jadae with their downtrodden present in Thailand where they have long faced hardships at the hand of the Thai authorities.

Note that in the song's narrative, moreover, Aju attributed the demise of Jadae to its being overrun by non-Akha Dai-Lue Others following the marriage of an Akha woman and Dai-Lue man (referred to as "Dai man"), and not in any way to the assassination of King Jawban, an act in which his Ancestral clan members were directly implicated. Akha elders in general, moreover, tend to refer to this story in any one of its multiple versions to explain why it was in the distant past that the Ancestors chose to adopt a residence pattern in which daughters marry out of their paternal households (patrivirilocal). The different versions of this story thus serve in warning Akha against the dangers of marrying non-Akha Others, particularly Dai/Tai, in relation to not merely the overall well-being but also the very existence of Akha households as microcosms of the larger Akha World and in turn Akhaness.

In his recent ethno-historical excavations of the Ancestral vaults, however, Ayoe has offered what he refers to as a more “historical-factual” rather than “legendary-mythical” explanation for the decision of the Akha Ancestors to adopt a patrilocal residence pattern.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, in contrast to Aju’s narrative on the demise of Jadae, Ayoe ultimately attributed the collapse of Jadae to “the treachery of some envious and self-serving Dai-Lue *and* Akha leaders,” particularly by way of a successful plot to eliminate King Jawban. As might be expected, furthermore, Akha have variably referred to these divergent interpretations of the Akha past in making sense of the Akha present as riddled with both factionalism and also overly confident leaders or potential leaders.

For example, throughout field work I often overheard Akha from various socioeconomic backgrounds attribute the untimely passing of “Ja-bo” (*Jarbo*), the most popular Akha singer in the region to date, to the deviousness of certain unnamed Akha who were envious of his fame. Jabo, who is discussed in more detail in chapter ten, hailed from a small rural Akha village in far southwestern Xishuangbanna, China until his untimely death in 2007 at the age of only 37. Other Akha villagers told me that they are careful to warn their children of the potential dangers of

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<sup>172</sup> Drawing on Chinese written and Akha oral archives, Ayoe traces the figure of the legendary Dai man who married into an Akha household at the time of Jadae and thereafter seized control over Jadae with the support of other in-migrating Dai to that of a certain General Zhuang Qiao who had been dispatched by King Qingxiang (ruled 298 BC-263 BC) of Chu State (1042 BC-223 BC) “on a military expedition westward in order to expand its territory in 279 BC. General Zhuang conquered some small states and/or chiefdoms all the way to Dian country (Jadae). But, meanwhile, the Qin army conquered Ba state and Qianzhong Jun (Qianzhong Prefecture in today’s middle Guizhou Province) of Chu State in 277 BC, which cut the path of General Zhuang and prevented his going back to Chu State. Therefore, he had no choice but to stay and marry a local woman, and later declared himself King of Dian. This event is also recorded in the Akha oral texts, stating that one day an *Aq-cmq* (also pronounced *Aq-cuq*) man from the downstream came to Jadae country, asking the Akha chief (Abaw Jadae) for a place to stay because he got lost. *Aqcmq* or *Aqcuq*, is a general Hani-Akha term referring to Tai speaking peoples. They are also called *Biq-cmq*, meaning *Cmq* people from downstream, here *biq* means downstream. The king (Abaw Jadae) built a small house beside his own mansion and let the man stay in the small house. *Dae-yur*, the daughter of the Akha chief, (shortly thereafter) fell in love with the man and they were permitted to marry. But later, with the support of his own people, the man conquered and ruled over much of Jadae. As a result, (Abaw Jadae) established a rule that forbids son-in-law’s from living with their bride’s natal families. This is reason why Akha women must marry out of their paternal households” (Wang 2013:54-55).

rising too high and being cut down by the devious actions of other envious Akha. Jabo and Jawban were referenced, moreover, as particularly salient examples of the latter.

The historical persona of Jawban and Jabo were similarly invoked by various Akha elite in explaining the seemingly endless obstacles they encountered in their efforts to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging. This was particularly the case in reference to the Akha World of Thailand, in reference to which I was told again and again that many of the Akha leaders or potential leaders were overly confident and stubborn, making it difficult for any kind of collective effort to even get off the ground, let alone succeed. As such, there was an ambivalence in relation to the particular historical persona of King Jawban, who, while, on the one hand, was admired for his instrumental role in bringing about the Akha homeland state of Jadae, was, on the other hand, seen as having grown overly confident and stubborn (see Lewis 1969a:40; Geusau 2000a:139).

As a result, various Akha have tended to hold an ambivalent disposition towards the centralization of power on one hand and its decentralization on the other. I disagree, moreover, with Geusau and Scott's representations of *all* Akha as the quintessential state-avoiding, egalitarian-loving people, whether in the case of the historical period prior to or after roughly World War II. This ambivalence has carried over into the contemporary efforts of Neo-Traditionalist elite to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging by adopting some of the technologies of nation state making that often necessitate the centralization of authority over certain matters such as the standardization of language and culture.

Much in the fashion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), furthermore, certain elite have been chosen to represent national-level communities of Akha in Myanmar, China, Laos and China respectively. All of these efforts, which have inevitably

contributed in part towards the centralization of authority within the Akha World in the making, have been carried out amidst concerns that they remain true to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors in terms of protocol. A salient example of the latter concern has been a preference among certain elite that they come to their agreements via an often extended process of consensus building rather than either a top-down authoritative process or democratic style majority-vote.

On one occasion, Mi-ju, a leading female figure among Neo-Traditionalist elite from Thailand, compared the Akha past to the Thai present. She suggested that Jaw-ban's assassination and the subsequent fall of Jadae most likely occurred due to the same factors that were at the time causing a great deal of divisiveness in Thai society. "In Thai society at present, just like Jadae in the past," she added, "different interest groups are selfishly competing against each other for power and ultimately bringing about the downfall of the larger 'nation' as a whole" (Mi-ju, personal communication, June 1, 2012).

### **8.8 Interpreting the Deep Past: Of Myths, Histories, and Science**

"In the past I felt like I was nobody,  
as if I had no roots.  
More recently, however, I've begun to learn more about the history of my people.  
I've begun to rediscover my roots.  
I've found that all of our traditional rituals provide windows into our history.  
We just have to look at them carefully and in comparison to other sources to see this,  
to see how they speak of our deep history, our deep roots"  
(A-yoe, personal communication, May 9, 2011).

One evening as we sat chatting inside Grandfather Ha's (*Aqbawrha-e*) house, A-yoe told me of his profound awakening some years ago to the richness and beauty of his roots as embodied in the Ways of the Akha Ancestors (*Aqkaqzanr*). We sat across from each other on the mat covered wooden floor of the male side of the partitioned house, nearest to the main entrance. According to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, the household's Ancestral shrine was positioned

along the upper wall of the adjacent female side of the home, partitioned off and protected from any impurities that might enter through the main entrance.

As we sat and talked long into the night, Grandfather Ha's extended family members ensured that we never ran out of black tea, tangerines, sunflower seeds, and white custard cookies. Grandfather Ha and several of his brothers sat just across the room from us, engaged in their own lively conversation with Mi-suo and Mi-sheu about the purification rite carried out earlier that day inside the home. Grandfather Ha's grandson struggled in vain to fend off sleep and keep his eyes open while lying in his grandfather's lap. A-yoe, Mi-suo, Mi-sheu, and I had arrived together in Law-ja Village from Chiang Mai a few days earlier in order to document their annual observance of the "Ritual Offering to the (Spirit) Owners of the Earth, Water, and Sky" (*Mirsanr Lawr-e*) as described earlier in chapter five.<sup>173</sup>

At one point during our exchanges Ayoe's face lit up as he began to tell me some news he had recently learned from one of his ethnic kin in China, A-eu (*Aqer*). In brief, A-eu had informed him that recent genetic and linguistic studies had demonstrated that the patrilineal line of today's Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples, including Akha, was descended from nomadic pastoralists hailing from the Tibetan Plateau. In contrast, he continued, the matrilineal line was believed to have descended from Mon-Khmer agriculturalists indigenous to the Upper Mekong Region. This information, he added, suggests that at some point in the distant past these male nomadic pastoralists moved south into parts of what are today's northwest Yunnan and intermarried with local Mon-Khmer women.

These marriages, he continued, most likely came about as a result of the peaceful establishment of alliances with local Mon-Khmer leaders. At the same time, Ayoe added, these

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<sup>173</sup> To reiterate, Law-ja is the indigenous Akha term for a particular Akha village located in the uplands of north Thailand that at the time of field work represented one of several centers of power in the larger Akha World of Old- and Neo-Traditionalists alike.

local Mon-Khmer women provided their husbands with the knowledge required to adapt to a new environment, and most importantly how to farm and cultivate irrigated rice. “All of this information, this history,” he continued, “has long been documented in our oral traditions, particularly those relating to the origins of the first Akha husband and wife, our marriage rites, and the initiation rites of a White-Skirted Woman” (Ya-yae A-ma [*Yayaer Aqma*]).

The latter initiation rite is performed on behalf of married, post-menopausal women that have at least one surviving son by virtue of whom they may become an Ancestor and thus be honored and remembered by their descendants. During the ritual the initiate is fully aligned with the patrilineal descent group of her husband through the incorporation of her genealogical name. When asked about this rite, several elders in Law-ja Village compared it to the lowland Thai practice of official marriage registration in the sense that following the ritual the husband and wife would “forever more” be united as husband and wife, not only in the realm of the living living but also that of the living dead.

Women who do not undergo this initiation are believed to return to the patrilineal line of their father upon passing away. Following initiation, moreover, White-Skirted Women are permitted to make Ancestral services on behalf of their households. They also acquire the responsibility for carrying out a series of rites related to rice cultivation. Elsewhere, Kammerer has extensively discussed the initiation rites and subsequent responsibilities of White-Skirted Women among U-lo Akha in north Thailand (1986:306-337).

A-eu is an Akha male currently in his mid-thirties that hails from a very old and large Akha community located in the southern mountains of Xishuangbanna (Sipsongbanna), Yunnan, not far from the international border with east Myanmar. At the time of my exchange with Ayoe as noted above, A-eu was completing a doctorate in genetics at a university in Kunming, the

capital of Yunnan Province, China. A-eu, moreover, was one of the more active as well as charismatic youth involved in Neo-Traditionalist elite's efforts to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging throughout the region.

Over the past several years A-eu has organized and taught several Akha literacy workshops in different parts of Xishuangbanna, China. During these workshops A-eu taught the particular Akha orthography that has since its inception in 2008/2009 been associated with the Neo-Traditionalist faction of which he is a member. A-eu is also an amateur singer and songwriter. Wherever and whenever he joins a social gathering among his fellow Akha he is known to sing either some of his own songs or those of Ja-bo, the now deceased legendary singer also from Xishuangbanna.

Ayoe, who has lived in north Thailand for much of the past eight years, regularly communicates with A-eu as well as other Akha (and Hani) intellectuals in China via online chat forums such as "Q," which is very popular among Chinese citizens at home and abroad. Shortly after hearing of A-eu's scientific discoveries, I took advantage of the virtual ties connecting this virtual Akha crypto-nation in the making, and asked Mi-suo to contact A-eu via e-mail for further details on the sources of his claims. In response, A-eu sent us no less than eight academic articles from journals in the fields of human genetics and linguistics (Belle and Barbujani 2007; Blench 2004; Bradley 1997; Chen et al. 2007; LaPolla 1994; Wen et al. 2004; Wilkins and Marlowe 2006; Yong-Li et al. 2004). More recently, in November 2012, A-eu, under his official Chinese name, Zhang Xiaoming, presented these results along with his own more recent genetic

explorations at the Seventh International Conference on Hani-Akha Culture held in Yuanjiang County, Yunnan China in November 2012 (Zhang 2012).<sup>174</sup>

In addition, we learned that in contrast to Ayoe, A-eu believed that their patrilineal Ancestors were a strong and powerful warring group that had moved down from the Tibetan Plateau into areas that are today part of northwest Yunnan, violently subduing local populations along the way, murdering men and taking women as brides. A-eu's imaginings of his distant male Ancestors in this manner perhaps reflects a larger cultural logic within China whereby each of the official ethnonationalities (*minzu*) are represented as having had a glorious and mighty past, present, and, indeed, future within the Chinese nation's multi-ethnic narrative from and to time immemorial. This cultural logic has greatly differed from that found among Akha positioned in other parts of the region, particularly Thailand. In Thailand, rather, Akha have been represented as a marginalized, oppressed, and above all disorganized and conflict-avoiding people, whether on the part of outside observers or Akha themselves.

### **8.9 Ritualized Encodings and Re-enactments of the Distant Past**

*Ayoe*: "All of this information, this history, has long been documented in our oral traditions, particularly those relating to the origins of the first Akha husband and wife, our marriage rites, and the initiation rites of a White-Skirted Woman. And you know, each time that I take part in one of our traditional rituals I can feel the presence of our Ancestors. And I'm sure that each of the elders here in Law-ja can also feel their presence. These rituals are a fundamental means by which we maintain our relations with them, and whereby they continue to bring blessings into our everyday lives.

At the same time, I am gradually discovering just how much of our ancient history is encoded in and in turn reenacted through our Ancestral traditions. I am continually amazed at how our history has long been passed from one generation to the next.

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<sup>174</sup> The English translation of A-eu's paper, which was written and given in Mandarin Chinese, was, "Insights into the Origin, Migration, and Admixture of the Hani Minority Nationality on the Basis of Genetic Studies" (Zhang 2012).

And as you know, we are increasingly finding evidence from written historical records, genetics, and linguistics that supports the historicity of many aspects of our oral traditions.

At the same time, most Akha today have no idea of the extent to which our traditions serve as records of our past.

Most Akha that continue to practice our Ancestral traditions simply see themselves as carrying the traditions of their Ancestors, unable to speak to the deeper histories and meanings behind their practices.

The many others that have abandoned our Ancestral traditions largely see them as backwards and primitive traditions without any significance for their own sense of identity and history.

This knowledge of our deep history, our roots as encoded in our traditions is something that I am determined to share with my Akha brothers and sisters.”

*Micah:* “Ayoe, it seems to me that the elders here in Law-ja at least are very much aware of the historical implications of their traditions.

Perhaps the main difference between your understanding and theirs is that they are continuing to live this history through their traditions.

For them this history is a lived, everyday experience rather than an intellectual exercise.

Both Grandfather Ha and Grandfather Bae have told us at different points in time of how, while they have made some modifications in their traditions, they are continuing to uphold the traditions of their Ancestors, going back all the way to the time of Jadae.

They also stressed that each time they carry out these traditions they are both reaffirming their roots in Jadae as well as maintaining their Ancestral obligations.

I’d suggest that they are actually aware of history, of their history, as encoded and reenacted in their traditions, just in a different, more embodied and experiential rather than intellectualized way.”

*Ayoe:* “Well, it is true that some of the Traditionalist elders and particularly ritual specialists are aware of the deeper histories and meanings behind these rites.

But in general, most Akha simply carry out the rituals without this knowledge.

When you ask about the meaning or history behind this or that particular ritual practice or symbol, the answer you generally get is, ‘Well, we do x, y or z because that is what our Ancestors did before us.’

It is frustrating to hear this answer time and time again.

Yet, even those with more specialized knowledge of the traditional rites are limited by the fact that they have not had an opportunity to systematically study the full range of ritual practices and symbols found throughout the region.

We are a diasporic people that has been scattered throughout various parts of the region. The histories and meanings behind our rites and symbols have similarly been scattered throughout the region in the extant rites of different communities.

As such, it is only by way of accessing and then comparing the full range of these ritual practices that we can begin to access the deeper histories and meanings behind them and thereby reconstruct our common historical roots in the distant past...”

In his reading of Akha oral traditions as Akha history, Ayoe has offered several examples drawn from the initiation rite for a White-Skirted Woman, marriage rituals, and stories relating to the origins of the first Akha husband and wife. He has noted, for example, that during the “White-skirted Woman’s Initiation Rite” (*Yayaer mr-e*), the initiate is referred to as “Ka-sawn A-ma” (*Kasanr Aqma*) or the “Owner of Cultivated Crops.” This term of reference, Ayoe noted:

“...is a direct reference to our female Mon-Khmer Ancestors who intermarried with our male Ancestors from the Tibetan Plateau as they moved south and settled in areas that are now part of today’s northwest Yunnan.

It is from these female Ancestors that our knowledge of how to cultivate crops first came, hence the honorific term of reference, ‘Owner of Cultivated Crops’ ”

(personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Ayoe further noted that following their initiation White-Skirted Women acquire the honor and responsibility for carrying out a series of annual rites related to rice cultivation. Elsewhere, Kammerer has noted that they are also permitted to make Ancestral offerings on behalf of their household, an act with deep implications for the prosperity of the rice crop and their overall well-being (see Kammerer 1986:306-337).

In his reading of Akha oral traditions as history, Ayoe has carefully distinguished between what he refers to as “legends” or “folktales” and “authentic oral histories.” In short, he has considered those aspects of tradition that can be corroborated by reference to histories of the book and science as authentic oral histories. I first learned of Ayoe’s views on this matter when I asked him about a composite version of a story relating to the origins of the first Akha couple that I had both read in the dissertation of Cornelia Kammerer as well as heard in bits and pieces from various elders in different upland villages (Kammerer 1986:32-35). At the time, we were in Law-ja Village to take part in their annual renewal of the village gates (*Lanrkanq mr-e*) as described earlier in chapter five. This story links the origin of the first Akha couple to that of

various parts of the woman's wardrobe, the partitioning of the house into male and female quarters, and finally the village gates.

In short, the story holds that the Supreme Creator (*Aqpoeq Miqyaer*) arranged for an Akha man to be married to a female spirit dwelling in the forest beyond his village. When he meets this spirit, however, she is naked, covered in hair, and has long fangs and claws. The man covers her with a skirt fashioned from his rice sack and a headdress fashioned from his shoulder bag. They then return to the village where they are married and the female spirit subsequently devours her husband.

The female spirit later requests another husband, who only agrees to marry her after she informs him that she will both cut off her fangs and claws as well as have the house divided into a male and female side. Sometime after their marriage the relatives of the female spirit come looking for her from the forest. Upon entering the village and finding that she is alive and happily married they return to the forest. After they return on one more occasion, however, her husband decides to build a gate at the perimeter of the village with two figures, one male and one female, placed in front of it as a sign to the female spirit's relatives that she is alive and happily married. This act serves in preventing her spirit relatives from ever entering the village again. The female spirit subsequently turns into an Akha woman.

The theme of domestication runs deep throughout this story wherein the distinction between the categories of the raw and cooked or spirit and human figure prominently (Lévi-Strauss 1969). There is a further association made between the categories of women and nature as well as men and culture, albeit not necessarily within the context of gendered inequalities (Ortner 1974; Kammerer 1986). Kammerer and Lewis have further noted that their storytellers tended to identify the spirit woman from whom the first Akha wife came with any one of several

Mon-Khmer hunter-gathering societies, whom by virtue of living in the forest were considered spirits (Kammerer 1986:34; Lewis 1968:2).

In response to my inquiry regarding this story, Ayoe commented that it was really more of a legend or folktale regarding the origins of the first Akha couple and so forth. He continued to note that he knew of a different story with more credibility as oral history:

“This story holds that the first Akha marriage took place between an Akha man and the daughter of a Dragon.

In our tradition the Dragon is symbolic of a powerful ruler or king.

As such, this particular story fits what we know from history and science – namely that our male Ancestors moved down from the Tibetan Plateau into what is today’s northwest Yunnan where they established political alliances with local leaders and married local women of Mon-Khmer Ancestry...”

(personal communication, May 13, 2011).

### **8.10 Concluding Remarks: Historical and scientific reproductions of Akhaness**

In conclusion, history and, to some extent, science have come to play ever increasing roles in Neo-Traditionalist elites’ crypto-nationalist efforts to frame a larger pan-Akha sense of belonging of a profoundly religious, modern, and authentic nature. Certain of these elite, in particular several scholars and officials hailing from southwest China, have engaged in a collective effort to write that which has never before been written before, namely a deep history of the Akha prior to their more recent relegation to a diasporic perennial minority scattered throughout the Upper Mekong Region. These elite have further positioned the ancient Akha homeland-state of Jadae front and center in their historical reproductions of Akhaness.

In constructing their revisionist histories, elite have challenged earlier representations of Akha as a people without either a history or state of their own. At the same time, however, they have looked to primarily written histories and, to a lesser extent, science, as means of validating and deciphering out the historical from the mythical aspects of Akha oral histories. In addition,

they have largely incorporated the narrative of marginalization with respect to the post-Jadae history of Akha.

As noted earlier, however, this narrative is complicated by the post-Jadae presence of a number of translocal Akha political formations extending beyond the village gates and involving multiple and shifting alliances as well as tributary relations with various external polities, especially in the Akha Worlds overlapping the contemporary borders of north Thailand, east Myanmar, southwest China, and northwest Laos (Geusau 2000a:141; Roux 2011[1924]; Sturgeon 2005:10,25,101; Wang 2013:72-73). Akha elite's revisionist histories further mask a great deal of complexity and diversity in terms of the experiences of Akha communities through time and space.

In addition, these particular Akha assertions of peoplehood as fundamentally grounded in having their own history and, indeed, state, albeit since dissolved, variably adhere to and push against the boundaries of various local, national, and global discourses regarding the meanings of peoplehood (cf. Friedman 1994; Anderson 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). In this particular Akha case, moreover, peoplehood is understood as having come into being in conjunction with that of the (Akha) state. In other words, Akha elite have posited a particular kind of state-based ontology for Akha ethnogenesis.

These reproductions of Akhaness past, moreover, have been only partially about the past. Rather, MATA has capitalized on these reconstructions of Akha history in their efforts to look after and improve Akhaness present and future while promoting their crypto-nationalist project. For example, MATA has rematerialized Akhaness in the form of reconstructed flags of their homeland-state (*Jadae Mirkhanq*) draped from public stages, waved by official greeters, and embroidered on the jackets of elders and headdresses of teenagers during each of their post-2008

annual transregional gatherings on the occasion of the “New Year’s Ancestral Service” (*Kartanr Aqpoeq lawr-e*). These crypto-national gatherings, which have taken place in the multi-ethnic lowland, urban border town of Tachilek in east Myanmar, are discussed in chapter ten.

Before delving further into MATA’s efforts to re-spatialize the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and in turn Akhaness in the context of these annual gatherings, however, I now turn to a brief historical discussion of the rise of the broader Neo-Traditionalist movement of which MATA has come to represent one distinct and yet prominent branch. I also discuss the orthographic politics underlying Akha elites’ reformations of Akhaness. The debates and subsequent fissures that have arisen as elite from various parts of the region have sought to negotiate a common and distinctly Akha orthography have posed major obstacles towards Neo-Traditionalist elites’ crypto-nationalist project.

## CHAPTER NINE

### **Histories within Histories: Earlier Efforts to Modernize the Ways of the Akha Ancestors**

#### **9.1 Introduction**

MATA's post-2008 efforts to look after and improve the Ways of the Akha Ancestors in reference to a larger Akha World in the making have their roots in a much longer history going back to roughly the mid-1980s. It was between the latter period and the early 2000s that a network of Neo-Traditionalist Akha from various parts of north Thailand, southwest China, and east Myanmar first began to take shape as a result of both the agencies of various Akha and non-Akha figures as well as the larger region's ongoing transformation from the opium producing battlefields of the CIA's Golden Triangle to the international market of the Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) (see Walker 1999; Evans et al. 2000; Glassman 2010; Than Swe and Chambers 2011). This Neo-Traditionalist network gradually developed as a result of a series of international gatherings of Akha (and Hani) held in southwest China and north Thailand. It was only with MATA's rise to prominence in the larger Akha World in roughly 2008 that east Myanmar, the Myanmar-Thai border town of Tachilek in particular, emerged as a major site for the reproduction of Akhaness in Neo-Traditionalist fashion.

These earlier gatherings, as briefly described below, provided an opportunity for many of the leading Neo-Traditionalist figures involved in MATA and NADA's more recent efforts on behalf of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors to first, initially meet, and, second, engage in a series of identity exchanges whereby they gradually negotiated a common vision of a larger Akha World framed in reference to the (Akha) Ancestors and the written (Akha) word. Key among these gatherings has been a series of International Conferences on Hani-Akha Culture held largely in various parts of Yunnan, China on a tri-yearly basis since 1993 (Geusau 1993, 2000b,

2002a; Tooker 1996a; Morton 2013:36-40). Initiated by certain Han Chinese scholars under the directive of the Chinese state, over time certain Hani and Akha elite from various parts of the region have gradually assumed the reins in organizing the conferences. To date, the only conference that has been held beyond China was the second such conference held in north Thailand in 1996. The most recent conference was held in Yuanjiang County, Yunnan, China, in late November 2012.

Geusau, who played a key role in both facilitating these exchanges as well as helping to organize the second through fourth conferences prior to his death in 2002, commented that:

“The question of how to maintain and adapt Hani/Akha ancestor service to new situations, such as urban life and modernised agriculture, was discussed extensively at the Second International Hani/Akha Culture Studies Conference in 1996” (see Aje 1996; in Geusau 2000a:150).

In addition, between 1996 and 2002 a series of smaller international workshops were held in China and Thailand under the auspices of the South East Asian Mountain Peoples Culture and Development-Research, Documentation, and Information Programmes (SEAMP-CD-RDI) based in Chiang Mai, Thailand.<sup>175</sup> These SEAMP-CR-RDI workshops focused primarily on issues relating to the documentation of Akha oral traditions and development of an international Akha writing system. Moreover, the question of how to balance the preservation and modernization of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors was a constant issue of concern and discussion throughout these gatherings. However, under Geusau, these earlier projects mainly focused on efforts to salvage what was left of the rapidly vanishing Ways of the Akha Ancestors.

One noted exception to the above, however, entailed a project beginning in the mid-1980s to abolish a taboo requiring the killing of human twins at birth. This project, which was

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<sup>175</sup> SEAMP-CD-RDI was a project run under the larger Mountain Peoples' Culture, Development and Education Foundation (MPCDE). As noted earlier, Geusau and several prominent Thai scholars and social activists officially founded MPCDE in 1989.

run by Akha staff from AFECT, involved working with an extensive network of Akha elders and village level officials from throughout north Thailand to encourage interventions in the rare case that twins were born and make arrangements for the often necessary supplemental powdered milk to be provided to the families (Veera 1989). One of the elders working with AFECT at the time explained the rationale behind their efforts in the following manner:

“(W)e are (now) living in Thailand, where we want to obey and conform to the laws, as supported by His Majesty the King of Thailand, who likes the hill tribes. We thus must adapt to and abide by the laws of Thailand” (Veera 1989:7-8).

Other elders justified their decision to abolish the taboo by noting that the various rules and regulations underlying the Ways of the Akha Ancestors had been laid down by none other than “their Ancestors who were human beings” (Veera 1989:9). Along similar lines, another elder commented that:

“ ‘Sm-mi-o’ (Smr-mir-or), the founder of the Akha tribe, had not started this (law), but (rather) Jawban, an Akha ruler who governed over parts of Yunnan for only three generations. But this was *only* twenty generations ago, and thus this law could be changed” (Veera 1989:6-7).

As such, one elder commented:

“There is nothing wrong in reforming the Ways of the Akha Ancestors in order to fit in and adapt to modern society while retaining the rich teachings of the traditional culture” (Veera 1989:9).

It was not until 1999, moreover, that certain Akha elite from various parts of the region first expressed the need for a common Akha writing system during the Third International Conference on Hani-Akha Culture that was held in Jinghong, Yunnan, China (Geusau 2000b; Morton 2010:111). These elite had come to the realization that a standard Akha orthography would be necessary to reach their goals of first, cultivating stronger transregional networks, second, adapting the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, especially Ancestral Services and related

genealogical practices, to contemporary circumstances in the region, and, third, documenting and thereby “preserving (their) traditional knowledge” (see Tooker 1996a).

Moreover, elites’ seemingly natural choice of Roman rather than Burmese, Mandarin, Lao or Bangkok-Thai characters for their eventual orthography was more a product of first, their goals of transcending the national on multiple fronts while making it easier for Akha youth to acquire competency in English, and, second, historical circumstances (Ayoe, personal communication, August 15, 2008; Morton 2010). Since the early 1920s certain Christian missionaries and later, national governments, particularly the People’s Republic of China, had used Roman characters to develop earlier versions of Akha or Hani orthographies respectively (see Morton 2010:132-133). In late 1920s Kengtung, Burma, an Italian Catholic Priest, Father Potaluppi, and his local Akha collaborators developed the very first such Akha orthography.

It would not be until August 2008, however, that a coalition of 33 Akha elite representing different religio-political factions in the region came together in the Thai-Myanmar border town of Maesai to negotiate what was referred to at the time as the “Common Akha Orthography” (CAO; *Khanqgm Aqkaq Sanqbovq*) (see Morton 2010, 2013:44-46). Less than five months later, however, on the cusp of 2009, an additional meeting of 40 Akha elite was held in Jinghong, China during which their previously agreed upon CAO was revised ever so slightly so as to make it more akin to rather than divergent from the official state-endorsed Hani orthography in China.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> During the Jinghong, China gathering a total of six changes were made to the CAO. First, one consonant was changed from *sh* to *x*. Second, three vowels were changed from *e* to *ei*, *eu* to *e*, and *ui* to *ee*. Last, two tonal markers were changed from *f* to *vq* and *x* to *vr* (see Morton 2010:120). In both of these orthographies, moreover, Roman characters not used to denote initial consonants are used as tonal markers placed at the end of syllables and not pronounced. For example, in the Jinghong system the consonants used for tonal markers include *q* (long, low tone), *r* (long, high tone), *v* (short, mid-tone), *vq* (short, low-tone), and *vr* (short, high-tone). For example, in the word “*Aqkaq*” (Akha), ‘q’ marks that each syllable in the word is pronounced with a long, low tone.

During each of these meetings, disagreements erupted over seemingly minute orthographic choices reflecting elite's divergent religio-political positions (Morton 2010:119-123, 2013:45). The varying language ideologies or “beliefs and feelings about language and discourse” (Kroskrity 2004:509) that elite brought to the negotiating table in each context were in large part a reflection of their particular positions and interests. For example, Ayoe, in his position as the sole Akha representative from China during the first meeting in Maesai, Thailand, strongly encouraged his fellow negotiators to create an orthography more similar to than distinct from the official state-endorsed Hani orthography in China to no avail.

Ultimately, however, several prominent Christian elite withdrew their support for the CAO that was renegotiated in Jinghong on the cusp of 2009. They accused their Neo-Traditionalist counterparts, namely MATA, of having violated an earlier agreement to put aside “the issue of religion” in their language unification efforts and focus rather on their “common culture” (Sa-la A-jei, personal communication, July 7, 2010). Sa-la A-jei, a leading Protestant-Baptist missionary from north Thailand, told me that contrary to this agreement, MATA and Prosperous One, in particular, “...were actively using the new writing system to undermine the Christian faith among Akha and encourage a return to the animist ways of the past” (personal communication, July 7, 2010). In particular, Sa-la A-jei accused MATA of appropriating what was supposed to have been a bipartisan orthography and using it to literally promote their anti-Christian propaganda. Since that time, Christian elite in Thailand, in particular, have largely decided to adopt the first version of the CAO negotiated in Maesai in 2008, thereby marking the second, renegotiated version from Jinghong as a distinctly Neo-Traditionalist orthography.

Elsewhere, Thai anthropologist Yukti Mukdawijitra has examined the largely unsuccessful efforts of Tai minority elite in Vietnam to establish a standard Tai orthography as a

lens into Vietnam's complex political history (2007). Tai elites' orthographic efforts, he demonstrates, reflect and offer insight into the dynamic and complex nature of relations between the Vietnamese state and Tai in general, between the state and various sub-groups of Tai, and between sub-groups of Tai in of themselves (Yukti 2007:406). Akha elites' orthographic negotiations similarly reflect and provide insight into the multiple and shifting positions of Akha not only on numerous sub-national and national scales but also regionally and globally as a result of varied orthographic interventions by different national governments as well as foreign minority rights advocates and Christian missionaries (see Morton 2010).

Ironically, foreign and Akha Christian missionaries alike have long stressed the appeal of Christianity by virtue of the deep sense of pride that it instills in its literate converts.<sup>177</sup> Neo-Traditionalists' efforts to literize the Ways of the Akha Ancestors have thus challenged the hegemonic hold of Christians on Akha literacy and in turn modernity. Following the refracturing of Akha elite along religio-political lines as noted above, Neo-Traditionalists began to capitalize on their newly created orthography in developing language primers, literacy training programs, publications, websites, and online forums in support of their crypto-nationalist movement.

Neo-Traditionalists further began to use their new orthography as a tool for not merely documenting and preserving the Ways of the Akha Ancestors but also looking after and improving and thereby reshaping the latter in the form of written multi-national legislative agreements distributed throughout various parts of the larger Akha World in the making. In this manner, the earlier salvage ethnographic approach of first, Geusau, and, more recently, Ayoe,

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<sup>177</sup> As discussed earlier in chapter six, however, Kammerer (1990:282-283) has stressed that the gradually rising numbers of Akha converts to Christianity during the post-1980s were not motivated by "the quest for literacy" that had been critical among early Hmong and Karen converts (Tapp 1989a:77-78; Keyes 1977:55; Hovemyr 1989). Hence, the more recent post-2000s rise of competing "quests for literacy" (in Akha) among Akha Christians and Neo-Traditionalists as discussed in this dissertation reflects the shifting nature of Akha identitarian religio-politics since the 1980s and earlier.

has been increasingly pushed aside in the interest of actively intervening in the larger Akha World as a means of promoting its de-colonization from the “alien” and “oppressive” grip of Christianity and non-Akha Christian Others.

Between 2008 and 2011, Neo-Traditionalists organized four major regional gatherings in various parts of north Thailand and east Myanmar.<sup>178</sup> The main issue on the agendas for each of these gatherings was none other than the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. I limit my discussion here to the gatherings that occurred first, in a particular upland Akha village in rural north Thailand in February 2009, and, second, the lowland urban center of Maesai abutting the border with Tachilek, Myanmar. I focus on these two gatherings for reasons of their historical significance in shaping the overall trajectory of the larger Neo-Traditionalist movement to reforge a larger Akha World around the all important, albeit similarly reforged, figure of the Ancestors.

First, in February 2009 some 4,000 elite and non-elite Akha from various parts of the Akha World gathered in an upland Akha village in north Thailand, Law-ja, that has since the late 1980s been both a stronghold of Old-Traditionalists as well as a battleground between the latter and Christian evangelicals (see Li 2013). Referred to as “The Second International Gathering of Akha,” the event was sponsored by various organizations including the local sub-district office of the Thai government and the Akha Fellowship of Thailand (FAT), a non-governmental and non-denominational organization. During the event, public speeches were given, performances staged, and a series of more private meetings held behind closed doors.

An emerging coalition of Old-Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalists organized the latter, more private meetings over a period lasting three days. It was during this particular gathering,

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<sup>178</sup> These gatherings occurred in first, the upland Akha village of Saenchai-pattana in north Thailand in April 2008, second, the upland Akha village of Law-ja in north Thailand in February 2009, third, the upland Akha village of Hoga (*Hoggar Pu*) in east Myanmar in December 2010, and, last, the lowland urban border town of Maesai in north Thailand in December 2011.

moreover, that the groundwork was laid for the subsequent emergence of the regional Neo-Traditionalist “Mekong Akha Network” (*Naqkaq Aqkaq Dzoeqawq Armavq* or NADA) as noted earlier. During these meetings, various Akha representatives from north Thailand, east Myanmar and southwest China voiced their opinions on the often contentious issue of which aspects of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors should be modified and how. These negotiations, which were videotaped by the organizers in their entirety, culminated in an agreement reached by consensus and further ratified in an official document written in the then only recently renegotiated Common Akha Orthography (CAO) from Jinghong as noted earlier (see figure 9.1 below).

Apart from declaring the coalitions’ general support for the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, the document listed a series of permissible modifications to the latter as well as a number of taboos that were henceforth to be abolished, including the taboo involving human twins as discussed earlier. At the very end of the gathering a formal ceremony was held during which leading Akha representatives from Myanmar, China, and Thailand, along the model of other inter- or multi-national associations such as ASEAN or the UN, signed the document via written signature and thumbprint.<sup>179</sup> Prosperous One’s signature (*Mirnyoq*) and thumbprint, however, were positioned at a higher level on the document than the others, marking his position as the chairman of the larger coalition of Akha Traditionalists.

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<sup>179</sup> The particular country of each representative was written adjacent to their signature and thumbprint with “*Laqbeeq*” referring to China, “*Mam*” to Myanmar, and “*Taiq*” to Thailand.

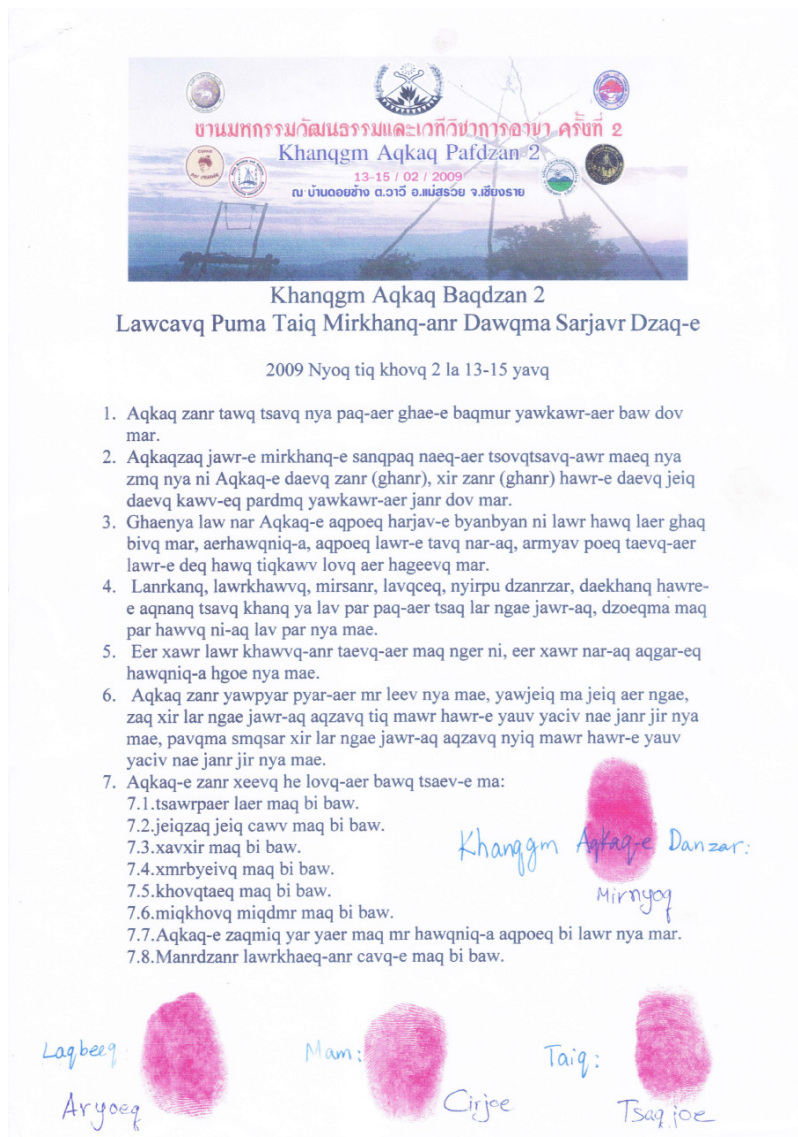


Figure 9.1: This figure is a scanned copy of the official agreement on behalf of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors resulting from the “Second International Gathering of Akha” in north Thailand in February 2009 and used with permission from NADA. A full translation of the document is included below.

Some of the most significant modifications to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors that were endorsed in the document related to Ancestral offerings. These particular clauses of the document were written in the following manners:

“In the case that it is still feasible, we fully encourage Akha to continue making all of the Ancestral Offerings as has been done by our Ancestors before us. However, in the case

where this is no longer feasible we encourage Akha to make as many Ancestral Offerings as we can collectively agree upon.”<sup>180</sup>

“Akha women in general, not just White-Skirted Women, may now make Ancestral offerings on behalf of their households.”<sup>181</sup>

The latter, gendered refashionings of the Ancestral Ways reflected growing concerns on the part of first, Neo-Traditionalists more generally to lighten the Ancestral burden, and, second, certain women, especially those without any (surviving) brothers, that they be permitted to remember and honor the Ancestors of their natal patrilineage.<sup>182</sup> While women have long played key roles in preparing many of the items that are offered or fed to the Ancestors, men have carried the responsibility for making the final offering at the foot of their Ancestral altars. Moreover, only women that had acquired a special status referred to as White-Skirted Women (Ya-Yae-A-ma [*Ya Yaer Aqma*]) were permitted to carry out Ancestral offerings on behalf of their households.

As noted earlier in chapters five and eight, White-Skirted Women are married, post-menopausal women with at least one surviving son that have undergone an elaborate initiation rite whereby they are fully aligned with the patrilineal descent group of their husbands via the incorporation of their genealogical names. Following this realignment, White-Skirted Women are permitted to make Ancestral services on behalf of their households. They also acquire the responsibility for carrying out a series of rites related to rice cultivation (see Kammerer 1986:306-337).

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<sup>180</sup> The original Akha statement reads as follows: “*Ghaenya law nar Aqkaq-e aqpoeq harjav-e byanbyan ni lawr hawq laer ghaq bivq mar, aershawqniq-a aqpoeq lawr-e tavq nar-aq, armyav poeq taevq-aer lawr-e deq hawq tiqkawv lovq aer hageevq mar.*”

<sup>181</sup> In the original Akha this reads as: “*Aqkaq-e zaqmiq yar yaer maq mr hawqniq-a aqpoeq bi lawr nya mar.*”

<sup>182</sup> Another gendered refashioning of the Ancestral Ways that was endorsed in the document pertained to divorced women. In particular, an earlier law preventing divorced women from returning to their natal homes for more than fourteen days before being properly remarried into another household was abolished. In the original Akha, this new rule read as follows: “*Miqkhovq miqdmr maq bi baw.*”

Ayoe, the sole China representative and signatory to the agreement, explained the significance of the meeting and document to me via e-mail in the following manner:

“During the meeting we agreed to amend eight major articles of *Aqkaqzanr*. It was truly a historical event and I am confident these developments will further our efforts to bring Akha Christians back to *Aqkaqzanr*” (personal communication, April 16, 2009).

These amendments are listed in the document under the heading, “We have further ratified each of the following new *Zanr*” (see translation below). Moreover, shortly after the meeting, Ayoe scanned and e-mailed the document to certain Akha officials in Jinghong, China. By doing so, Ayoe proudly declared, “the document became the very first Akha language document ever distributed throughout the Akha diaspora” (personal communication, April 16, 2009).<sup>183</sup> A translation of the document follows:

“The Second International Gathering of Akha  
Law-ja Village, Thailand (The Establishment of a Covenant)  
2009, The Year of the Water Buffalo, February 13-15

1. It is urgent that we work to document the Ways of the Akha Ancestors so that future generations will be able to continue carrying it.
2. Our Akha people residing in different countries should establish relationships with the leaders of their respective governments so that they may go about the urgent task of developing written manuals relating to our full range of life- and death-related *zanr* to ensure that they may be taught to future generations and carried forevermore.
3. In the case that it is still feasible, we fully encourage Akha to continue making all of the Ancestral Offerings as has been done by our Ancestors before us. However, in the case where this is no longer feasible we encourage Akha to make as many Ancestral Offerings as they can collectively agree upon.
4. In the absence of a Village Leader (Dzeu-ma [*Dzoeqma*]) it is now permissible to carry out various rites pertaining to the village gates, the village source of pure water, the (Spirit) Owner of the Earth, the village swing, the village cemetery, the village gathering grounds, and

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<sup>183</sup> In (Neo)Traditionalist fashion, moreover, this declaration dismisses the significant amount of Christian literature in Akha language that has variably circulated throughout the Akha World of the Upper Mekong Region since the 1950s or so as non-Akha.

the sacred dirt holes where (iron rich) reddish colored earth is gathered for ritual use and consumption.<sup>184</sup>

5. The village source of pure water is no longer the sole place from where clean/pure water for carrying out rituals may be obtained. Any other readily available source of clean/pure water may be used for this purpose as well.
6. It is now easier to carry the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. For example, it is now acceptable for the relatives of a deceased person who has not left behind a complete household (i.e. spouse and children) to offer just one pig or chicken or, at the very minimum, one chicken's egg as part of their funerary rites. In the case that the deceased has left behind a complete household (i.e. a spouse and children), it is now acceptable to offer just two pigs, one chicken, and one chicken's egg as part of their funerary rites.
7. We have further ratified each of the following new *Zanr*:
  - a. Individuals born with mental or physical deformities, including twins, are no longer considered taboo.
  - b. Animals (non-human) born with mental or physical deformities (including multiple or single births) are no longer considered taboo.<sup>185</sup>
  - c. Individuals who die a violent, unnatural death are no longer considered taboo.
  - d. Families without any surviving sons are no longer considered taboo.<sup>186</sup>
  - e. It is no longer taboo to carry out various activities outside of the particular time of year in which they would normally be expected to occur.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> As noted earlier, in Traditionalist villages it is the Village Leader (Dzeu-ma) who is responsible for not only leading the community in carrying these rites but also initiating key stages of the ritual process. For example, in the case of the rites relating to the annual renewal of first, the village swing at the height of the rainy season, and, second, the village gates towards the end of the dry season, it is the Village Leader who inaugurates both the new swing by taking the first three swings and also the new gates by being the first person to pass through them.

<sup>185</sup> In terms of births, these taboos have applied to multiple births in the case of animals such as horses, buffalo and cattle that normally give birth to one offspring at a time, while that of single births applies to animals such as pigs and dogs that normally give birth to more than one offspring at a time (see Tooker 2012:290).

<sup>186</sup> According to the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, if a death occurs within a family lacking a surviving son then they must carry out a highly simplified and expedited funeral for the deceased within one day of their passing.

<sup>187</sup> As noted earlier in chapter five, Traditionalist Akha divide a year into two periods pertaining to the spatial domains of the "inside" (*lavq nyir*) and "outside" (*lavq khoer*) respectively. The "inside" domain pertains to the realm of the "living living" within both the village gates and also their agricultural fields, all of which are associated with life giving forces and fertility. In contrast, the "outside" domain pertains to the realm of the "invisible spirits" (*naevq*) located beyond the village gates in all surrounding areas other than villagers' agricultural fields, all of which are associated with potentially dangerous and life draining forces (see Tooker 2012:157-214; Wang 2013:87-88, 152-153). Only certain kinds of activities are supposed to take place during these respective periods. For example, the "outside" period is associated with the farming or rice cultivation-harvest season while the "inside" period is associated with the non-farming season of relative leisure when various activities pertaining to the "living living" may be carried out, including the construction of new homes as well as marriage and new housewarming ceremonies.

- f. Divorced women are no longer considered taboo.
- g. Akha women in general, not just White-Skirted Women, may now make Ancestral offerings on behalf of their households.
- h. It is no longer necessary to carry out rites on behalf of women pregnant out of wedlock in order to prevent them and their children from suffering a calamity.

International Akha Committee Chair: *Mirnyoq* (thumbprint)

China Representative: *Ayoe* (thumbprint)

Myanmar (Burma) Representative: *Cirjoe* (thumbprint)

Thailand Representative: *Tsaqjoe* (thumbprint)”



Figure 9.2: The official banner prepared for “The First Mekong Akha Meeting on *Aqkaqghanr*” held in Maesai, Thailand in December 2011. In the background is the Thai-Myanmar-Laos tri-border region centering on the Upper Mekong River. The large boldfaced print in red at top translates as, “I am Akha and I carry *Aqkaqghanr*.”

An additional gathering of equal if not greater significance occurred two years later in the lowland Thai-Myanmar border town of Maesai where a select group of roughly 100 Akha elite from various parts of the region met in December 2011 for a private, four day meeting referred to as “The First Mekong Akha Meeting on *Aqkaqghanr*” (“*Naqkaw Aqkaq Ghanrsanrkhovq-e Baqdzan, Ardanq Bae-e Pov*”) (see figures 9.2 above and 9.3 below). As noted earlier in chapter

two, these elite cultural producers have settled on the term “Gawn” (*Ghanr*) as the standardized form for that which Akha in the region variably refer to as “Zawn” (*Zanr*), “Yawn” (*Yanr*), or “Gawn” (*Ghanr*) depending on language variety and sub-group affiliation. “Gawn” (*Ghanr*), they have argued, is the “older, more archaic” and hence “authentic” form of the term.

This meeting was unique in several respects. First, it was jointly organized by MATA and NADA, both of which had gradually materialized in the wake of the “Second International Gathering of Akha” held in north Thailand in 2009 as noted earlier. Second, an expanding network of Neo-Traditionalists from Myanmar, China, Laos, and Thailand participated in the meeting. Most significantly, large delegations from Jinghong and Mengla in Yunnan, China, as well as northwest Laos were present along with a smaller delegation from Na-ba (*Nabaq*), an Akha controlled buffer-tributary state abutting the borders of southwest China, east Myanmar, and northwest Laos as well as the upper stretch of the mighty Mekong River.



Figures 9.3 & 9.4: Figure 9.3 on the left is a photo of most of the participants in “The First Mekong Akha Meeting on *Akqaqghanr*” held in Maesai in December 2011. Figure 9.4 on the right is of Prosperous One ceremonially distributing copies of The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion to representatives from various parts of the Akha World, including Mengla (China), north Thailand, northwest Laos, Mongsat (Myanmar), Kengtung (Myanmar) and, finally, Na-ba. (Left photo taken by author. Right photo taken by and used with the permission of Mi-suo Pyaw-gawn).

Third, during the meeting Prosperous One introduced and distributed the then brand new publication, The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011). As previously discussed in chapter seven, this book was the culmination of several years of work on the part of various Neo-Traditionalist elite. During the book's unveiling at the Maesai gathering, Prosperous One presented it as a "manual" or "guide" for both returning to as well as continuing to carry a "lightened" and "improved" version of *Aqkaqghanr*. The meeting culminated with Prosperous One ceremonially distributing signed hardcover copies of the text to representatives from various parts of the Akha World (see figure 9.4 above).

Finally, the gathering resulted in the production of yet another official Akha language document reflecting a series of negotiations that took place among the participants. First, the document declared the participants' stance on the centrality of Ancestral genealogies and the patronymic tradition to *Aqkaqghanr*. Second, the document affirmed the participants' respect and appreciation for those Akha who were able to fully carry *Aqkaqghanr* as was done in the past by the Ancestors, while encouraging those who, for various reasons, could no longer do so, to adopt the "lightened" and presumably "improved" version of *Aqkaqghanr* as outlined in The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011).

Moreover, an additional note was included encouraging Akha to study the particular Common Akha Orthography (CAO) endorsed by MATA and NADA as a means of learning how to carry *Aqkaqghanr*, presumably by way of reference to The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion. Last, a final section of the document outlined a number of details that had been agreed upon in reference to the establishment of NADA as the official umbrella organization of Traditionalists in the Akha World. Through these agreements NADA had effectively come into being through the selection of officers, setting of three year term limits, and explication of its

relations with other organizations in the region such as MATA. Once again, moreover, the document was endorsed via the signatures and thumbprints of national-level representatives from each part of the Akha World, inclusive of northwest Laos this time around.

## **9.2 “I am Akha and I carry the Akha Religion!”: Neo-Traditionalist Essentializations of Akhaness**

The various Traditionalist factions that have joined the transregional movement on behalf of *Aqkaqghanr* have held a diverse range of conceptions and practices of the latter. These divergent views and practices relate not merely to *Aqkaqghanr* as it is to be properly carried in the present but also how it was carried in the past by the Ancestors as well as how it should be carried in the future by the generations yet to come. Each faction has variably reimagined the limits and possibilities for reframing *Aqkaqghanr* and by extension Akhaness. Most significantly, there exists between Old-Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalists a wide chasm as to their underlying conceptions and practices of *Aqkaqghanr*.

For example, among Old-Traditionalists, *Aqkaqghanr* is construed of in holistic fashion as an entire way of life or culture. For Neo-Traditionalists, however, *Aqkaqghanr* is conceived of in narrow fashion as religion, separate and apart from culture and other aspects of social life. Nevertheless, in spite of these divergent philosophical-phenomenological conceptions of and engagements with *Aqkaqghanr* there has been an underlying consensus on the fundamental intertwining of Akhaness and *Aqkaqghanr* more broadly construed.

Moreover, the various debates and discussions elicited as part of the larger movement on behalf of *Aqkaqghanr* have often focused on the existential-philosophical question of what it means to be Akha and in turn to carry *Aqkaqghanr*. The constantly renegotiated meanings of Akhaness and in turn *Aqkaqghanr* that have emerged during these debates have further framed

the various kinds of reformations of *Aqkaqghanr* that the movement's members have been able to imagine, propose, negotiate and either officially ratify, reject altogether or table for further discussion. Notably, however, while some faction's representatives have endorsed various kinds of reformations in principle and on paper, they have been reluctant or resistant to follow through on these reformations in terms of their own everyday practices of *Aqkaqghanr*.

Nevertheless, by way of these negotiations the diverse members of the movement eventually came to a tentative verbal and written agreement in principle as to a minimalist definition of what being Akha and carrying *Aqkaqghanr* entailed. This definition was initially spelled out and subsequently re-worked in a series of official documents written in the Traditionalist CAO and commemorating a series of formal transregional gatherings of Akha that occurred in north Thailand and east Myanmar between 2008 and 2011 as noted above.

The various participants in each of these gatherings have through time renegotiated and reproduced an increasingly delimited and bounded definition of Akhaness. Moreover, the gatherings themselves have become increasingly formalized as well as internationalized in terms of setting, protocol and participation. A concerted effort has been made by the key organizers, namely NADA and MATA, to group the participants and their representatives according to country of origin or nationality. Yet, in spite of these efforts to reframe the larger Akha World according to the international boundaries dissecting it on no less than five fronts, a certain number of sub-national and transregional factions have asserted their views independently of other factions hailing from the same national territory.

Through their negotiations, the movement's participants have reconstructed an increasingly delimited and bounded conception of Akhaness as spelled out in each of the official documents commemorating their efforts. Foremost, Akhaness has been unequivocally associated

with not only “carrying” but also “believing in” *Aqkaqghanr*. In this fashion, Akhaness has been reframed as grounded in both practice or orthopraxy (Tooker 1992) as well as belief or orthodoxy. It has been MATA, moreover, more than any other faction that has most strongly developed the latter idiomatic stress on the interiorized dimensions of Akhaness in their textual reproductions of Akhaness in The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011).

This minimalist redefinition of Akhaness as fundamentally grounded in *Aqkaqghanr* has implied that the roughly eighty percent or so of Akha in north Thailand and east Myanmar that have, since the 1980s, “gone down to...” the *Ghanr* of “non-Akha Others,” most prominently Christianity, have become “non-Akha Others,” in spite of their increasing claims to the contrary. In their textual reproductions of Akhaness, moreover, the ethnic intrapreneurs behind the movement on behalf of *Aqkaqghanr* have been highly cognizant of the ever increasing religio-political factionalism charactering the contemporary Akha Worlds of north Thailand and east Myanmar in particular. Their outreach strategies have accordingly taken the form of a concerted effort to simultaneously:

- 1) Undermine the authenticity claims of Akha converts to the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others - a significant aspect of which has involved exposing the presumably unjust and exploitative conditions under which these converts have been led by foreign and Akha missionary “predators” to both abandon as well as denigrate *Aqkaqghanr*;
- 2) Assert the centrality of *Aqkaqghanr* to Akhaness by way of further stressing that *Aqkaqghanr* was the *Ghanr* originally given to Akha and Akha alone by A-peu Mi-yae (*Aqpoeq Miqyaer*) in the distant past and that it is by way of the Akha Ancestors that Akha have maintained a direct line of communication with A-peu Mi-yae;

- 3) As well as encourage Akha to respect the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others by both refraining from looking down on or speaking badly of other *Ghanr* more generally as well as respectfully taking down and returning to their rightful owners the various materials associated with their former *Ghanr* in the case of return converts to *Aqkaqghanr*.<sup>188</sup>

In principle, moreover, the movement's participants have further redefined the carrying of *Aqkaqghanr* in minimalist fashion. For example, as declared in agenda item eight of the official Thai and Akha language document issued from the first of their series of transregional gatherings in north Thailand in 2008:

“Individual (households) may elect to make as many annual Ancestral Offerings as they are able to – ranging from one to three or nine (twelve)” (Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand 2008).

Based on archival research, moreover, I learned of at least two earlier formal gatherings of certain Akha organic intellectuals in north Thailand in 2000 during which they considered the possibility of reducing the annual number of Ancestral Offerings as well as which offerings to eliminate, if any (SEAMP-SHAC 2000). These earlier gatherings, however, occurred on a more local as well as sub-national level and involved exchanges over the possibility of reducing the annual Ancestral offerings from twelve (or nine) to three rather than one.

MATA in turn has adopted and reworked these earlier minimalist reformations of Akhaness and *Aqkaqghanr* in The Book for Carrying the Akha Religion (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011). In their efforts to look after and improve *Aqkaqghanr* as a fundamental means of promoting both the survival as well as scaling-up of Akhaness throughout

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<sup>188</sup> These encouragements to be respectful of the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others stand in the face of what are generally perceived as the blatantly disrespectful views and practices of Christians towards their Traditionalist counterparts, the most disconcerting of which have involved the discarding and burning of the Ancestral Altars of Akha converts to Christianity.

the larger Akha World, MATA has sought to appease the interests of various Traditionalist religio-political factions. In order to achieve the latter aim, MATA has simultaneously:

- 1) endorsed the minimalist reduction of Akha religiosity to the observance of at least one annual Ancestral Offering;
- 2) praised those who are able to continue observing the full round of twelve or nine annual Ancestral Offerings;
- 3) and elevated Akha religiosity to new extremes via a process that can be likened to the fetishization of the Ancestral cult as noted earlier in chapter seven.

Each of these reworked definitions of Akhaness in minimalist-essentialist fashion has implicitly rested upon the indigenous equation between religion and ethnicity or *Aqkaqghanr* and Akhaness that not only challenges but negates the very authenticity of Akha who for varying reasons no longer carry *Aqkaqghanr* but rather the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others (Kammerer 1990:278). The ethnic intrapreneurs behind the movement on behalf of *Aqkaqghanr* have consciously striven to uphold as well as elevate this indigenous equation to a more explicit, vocal and in turn powerful discourse variably incorporative and transcendent of the presumably hitherto upland village-based senses of belonging among Akha in the region.

Moreover, in recent years, leading figures such as Prosperous One have become increasingly bold in articulating this discourse in relation to an ever widening range of publics. In the introductory chapter of this dissertation I began with one such example of the latter in the context of the “Second International Gathering of Akha” in the upland Akha village of Law-ja in February 2009. This discourse, as reworked by Prosperous One and his disciples, has emerged as a key ideological weapon of sorts in the authenticity battle being waged against Christian elite

who have sought to “disassociate” the religious from the cultural in claiming authenticity as both Christian as well as Akha (see Roy 2010).

At the same time, however, in reformulating this indigenous equation between religion and ethnicity, MATA has further essentialized and reified Akhaness in a manner that diverges from the more relativist notions of Akhaness held by Old-Traditionalists both in the past as well as present. Scholars working in various Old-Traditionalist upland villages in north Thailand during the late 1980s have commented not merely on the highly intertwined ethno-religious nature of Akhaness that they encountered among their interlocutors but also their cultural relativist stance relative to the practice based identities of other, non-Akha groups (Kammerer 1990:278, 281; Tooker 1992, 2012:76).

For example, in an article highlighting the ways in which the highly intertwined ethno-religious identity of Akha had both impeded Christian conversion prior to the 1980s as well as shaped the nature of rising rates of Christian conversion during the 1980s in north Thailand, Kammerer commented:

“Akha are cultural relativists: frequently heard expressions are ‘everyone has their own customs’ and ‘everyone’s customs are their own’ – in our words, ‘to each his own’... (Moreover,) from the Akha perspective, it is appropriate for people of each sort to adhere to their inherited traditional rules for proper action. This, then, is identity in action” (1990:278,281).

In addition, drawing from research with another Akha subgroup in upland north Thailand during roughly the same time period as Kammerer, Tooker similarly noted a cultural relativist stance among her interlocutors with respect to their views of group identities:

“Villagers were relativists about the practices and identities of members of other tribes. However, there were clear mental models of ethnic groups which distinguished the group of self-identification (the ‘insiders’) from the outsiders. Thus, Akha were very clear about what were Akha practices and what were Lisu practices, for example, and each group’s ritual practices served to reinforce these distinctions. (Nevertheless,) this upland identity

was not as ‘fluid’ as others have proposed. Any fluidity lay in the ability to change ethnic identity easily but not in the categories themselves” (1992, 2012:76,289n.7).

As noted earlier, MATA, while retaining a cultural relativist stance in reference to the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others, has further reconceived of Akhaness in reference more so to interiorized beliefs than exteriorized practices. MATA has gone further, however, in their idiomatic reframing of Akhaness as more of an interiorized state of being by way of an additional racial and biological reconstruction of Akhaness wherein phenotype and blood, albeit not blood quantum per se, figure prominently. As a result, the contemporary identitarian work of Prosperous One and his disciples has inverted the order of fluidity as argued above by Tooker (2012:289,n.7) to the extent that, first, a more rigid boundary has been constructed around the perimeter of Akhaness (inter-ethnically speaking), and, second, a certain degree of flexibility has been introduced in terms of the permissible ways of being authentically Akha (intra-ethnically speaking).

In this respect, MATA has conceptually uprooted Akhaness from the domain of customs as extrinsic markers of distinct collectivities wherein individuals may, with varying degrees of difficulty, abandon one set of customs for another, thereby taking on membership in another collectivity, and rerooted it rather in the domain of religion as an immutable and “intrinsic (ethno)racial characteristic, revealing the inner essence of a people” (see Wenger 2009:85). According to the former framing of Akhaness as customs, “If you want to live within the Akha village gates then you must be(come) Akha by way of carrying *Aqkaqghanr*,” wherein you may apply to individuals belonging to any other, non-Akha collectivity. In contrast, according to MATA, “If you are Akha (by blood) then you should carry and believe in *Aqkaqghanr*,” representing a conceptual and spatial reframing of Akha notions of the person and belonging in

both an essentialist fashion as well as relative to the larger Akha World in the making beyond the village gates.

In the next chapter we will visit the lowland border town of Tachilek, Myanmar where MATA has organized an annual transregional celebration of the “New Year’s Ancestral Service” in Neo-Traditionalist fashion since 2008. As a reinvented tradition framed around the scope of the larger Akha World, this gathering has played a key role in promoting Neo-Traditionalist elites’ crypto-nationalist project. By way of this ethnographic detour I offer a “thick description” of MATA’s efforts to respatialize the Ways of the Akha Ancestors and in turn Akhaness in an upwardly unifying as well as deeply religious and yet modern fashion. I also discuss how MATA’s crypto-nationalist project has evolved in conjunction with that of a *sub*-nationalist project via which they have positioned Akha in Myanmar as a “sub-nationality of sorts” of Myanmar (see Jonsson 2005:236).

Recall that earlier in chapter five we examined this particular rite – the “New Year’s Ancestral Service” – as it was carried by a certain household of Old-Traditionalists in the upland, and largely Akha-centric village of Law-ja in north Thailand. In juxtaposing these two seemingly disparate manifestations of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors, my aim is to allow for them to speak for themselves in highlighting the various ways in which they represent continuity as well as rupture with the past. The next chapter begins with a translation of Prosperous One’s opening address in Akha language for the “First (Annual) Gathering to Celebrate the New Year’s Ancestral Service” in Tachilek, Myanmar on December 28, 2008.

## CHAPTER TEN

## Respatializations of the Ancestral Ways: From Deeply Grounding to Upwardly Unifying



Figures 10.1 & 10.2: Figure 10.1 on the left is of the official port of entry to Tachilek, Myanmar from Maesai, Thailand. In the picture two delegations of Akha from Mengla and Jinghong, China respectively are crossing the border into Myanmar to participate in the 4<sup>th</sup> annual New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration organized by MATA in early December 2011. Figure 10.2 on the right is of the main performance stage for the latter celebration. Notice the flags positioned along the top of the stage. The three, slightly elevated flags in the center are of the Myanmar nation while the four, slightly lower flags on each side of the latter represent the Akha “people” (*tsawrjeq*) or crypto-nation according to the author's reading. Both photos were taken by the author.

“My brothers and sisters who carry *Za-ni*<sup>189</sup> *Ghanr* and who have gathered together to  
 celebrate our very first and highly honored New Year's Ancestral Service,  
 All of our leaders and siblings,  
 We are grateful to all of you and wish you all the best.

May peace be with you all.

There are twelve months in the year.  
 We have worked hard throughout the year.  
 Our men have reaped much wealth from trading.  
 Our women have reaped an abundance of crops.  
 We have enjoyed a bountiful harvest.  
 The time has come for us to joyfully celebrate our New Year's Ancestral Service and make offerings to our Ancestors.

<sup>189</sup> As noted earlier, “*Za-ni*” is an archaic word for referring to Akha and Hani alike that continues to be used in the archaic ritual texts recited by Ritual Reciters in various ritual contexts.

In the past, we only celebrated our New Year's Ancestral Service at the household and village level.

Today, however, our Ancestors have led us to realize that the time has come for all of our people to gather together in one place and celebrate our New Year's Ancestral Service.

We are deeply grateful and highly respectful of our Ancestors.

All of my Akha brothers and sisters,

it is on behalf of our Akha people and our *Za-ni Ghanr* that we have gathered here today and had an opportunity to come to know each other.

We greatly value our Akha people and our *Za-ni Ghanr*.

We are deeply blessed and our hearts are filled with happiness and pride.

My brothers and sisters,

as we gather together we should think of how we can contribute towards the betterment of our people and our *Ghanr*.

In doing so, we should neither be close minded nor think only of our own situation.

Rather, we should open our hearts widely and consider how we can contribute to the development of our *Ghanr*.

I want all of our Akha people to know that our *Za-ni Ghanr* is a beautiful and highly valued *Ghanr* that our Ancestors have carried for many generations.

However, for various reasons our people have been experiencing great difficulties in fully and completely carrying our *Ghanr*.

In the past,

our *Ghanr* was a heavy burden.

There were many different ideas as to how our *Ghanr* should be practiced.

Moreover, no one ever took the responsibility for looking after and improving our *Ghanr* so that it could be adapted to our current situation.

Let us remember in our hearts our Akha brothers and sisters that have been forced to discard our *Ghanr* and go down to and take on the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others.

The time has now come for us all to work together to look after and improve our Akha *Ghanr* so that our people will no longer experience difficulties carrying it.

As for our Akha brothers and sisters that have gone down to and taken on the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others,

I want to remind you all that we have our roots,

our origins in our Akha *Ghanr*,

and I want to ask you for your help in supporting our *Ghanr*.

Today is the very first time that we have gathered together to celebrate the New Year's Ancestral Service.

And while the organizers of this celebration are our brothers and sisters who carry Akha *Ghanr*,

I want to remind us all of the words of our Ancestors:

All Akha are united as one! (*Aqkaq tseirkaq tiqkaq ma!*)

I am very happy and grateful that all of us have come together today in honor of the New Year's Ancestral Service.

I believe that our efforts in this regard will be carried on and remembered by future generations.

I remember and am grateful towards our Akha brothers and sisters from different parts of the region that were not able to join us today.

They have all sent their warm thoughts and greetings to us for many blessings from our Ancestors.

The purpose of our gathering here today is to not merely celebrate our New Year's Ancestral Service but to also begin working year by year on behalf of our Akha people and our Akha *Ghanr*.

We wish much peace and blessings to all of our leaders and Akha brothers and sisters here with us today.

We wish everyone much prosperity and abundance in the coming year.

May our Ancestors bless us all"

(Prosperous One, December 28, 2008).<sup>190</sup>

## 10.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to highlight a series of transregional gatherings of Akha that MATA has organized on an annual basis since 2008 on the occasion of the "New Year's Ancestral Service" (*Gartanr Aqpoeq lawrdzoer-eq*). These gatherings have taken place in the multi-ethnic lowland, Myanmar border town of Tachilek. As noted elsewhere, the Akha World(s) of Tachilek-Maesai-Chiangrai has figured prominently as a site wherein certain Akha

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<sup>190</sup> This quotation is a translation of Prosperous One's opening address in Akha for the "First (Annual) Gathering to Celebrate the New Year's Ancestral Service" ("*Kartanr Aqpoeq lawrdzoer-eq yawbae pov*") in Tachilek, Myanmar on December 28, 2008.

have gathered in their efforts to look after and improve the Akha Religion while promoting a larger, pan-Akha sense of belonging.<sup>191</sup>

As a reinvented tradition framed around the larger Akha World in the making, these gatherings have played a key role in promoting Neo-Traditionalist elites' crypto-nationalist project among an ever expanding range of Akha from various parts of the region. In particular, Neo-Traditionalist elite have capitalized on these gatherings as a powerful venue for both negotiating as well as asserting their distinctly Neo-Traditionalist reproductions of Akhaness in the form of numerous material and immaterial markers of Akhaness past, present and future. In producing and displaying these markers of Akhaness, moreover, MATA has drawn on each of the previously discussed anchors of Akhaness in its translocal, Neo-Traditionalist fashioning – inclusive of ancestry, religion, culture, language, and history.

The questions that I have foremost in mind as I highlight various aspects of these gatherings are twofold. First, what kinds of identitarian work have these ethnic intrapreneurs sought to promote by way of their transregional, lowland, and urban based gatherings? Second, how have the latter kinds of identitarian work compared/contrasted with those taking place via the much more numerous household and village level rites taking place in upland villages throughout the region?

I further aim to demonstrate the specific ways in which certain local Akha actors have reframed the secular and religious aspects of Akha social life in relation to their particular historical circumstances and cultural imaginaries. In the description that follows, the Euro-American trained observer will most likely find it difficult to clearly identify and distinguish between the political, religious, economic, legal, and cultural aspects of social life. This is not

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<sup>191</sup> As discussed earlier in chapter nine, moreover, the Akha World(s) encompassing the further borderlands of southwest China and east Myanmar have likewise figured prominently as sites wherein certain Akha elite have gathered to discuss, imagine and forge a larger, pan-Akha sense of belonging.

merely due to the fact that the secular and religious aspects of social life are in actuality deeply interrelated and dynamic but also that in the Akha case they have been framed according to a particular cultural logic and set of historical circumstances.

## 10.2 Neo-Traditionalist Reproductions of the New Year's Ancestral Service

In mid-December 2011 more than a thousand Akha from Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and China joined a three day Neo-Traditionalist celebration of the New Year's Ancestral Service in the border town of Tachilek, Myanmar, just a stone's throw across a narrow, muddy river from Maesai, Thailand. The celebration coincided with the animal days of the water buffalo (*nyoq*), tiger (*khalaq*), and mule or rabbit (*tanqla*), further marking the transition from the end of the water buffalo year to the beginning of the tiger year.<sup>192</sup> MATA, the Tachilek-based Neo-Traditionalist faction that financed and organized the celebration under the leadership of Prosperous One, selected the auspicious day of the water buffalo for its opening according to the

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<sup>192</sup> I later came to learn of a dispute among certain Neo-Traditionalists as to the particular animals associated with three of the terms marking the passage of time in terms of both a twelve day cycle and also a twelve year cycle, namely "tawn-la" (*tanqla*; (mule or rabbit), "lawng" (*lanq*; rabbit or dragon) and "shae" (*xaer*;~ferret or termite). This dispute was a reflection of ongoing tensions between varying local practices of meaning making on the one hand, and ongoing efforts at regional standardization on the other hand. This issue was and has remained particularly salient given that Akha society, not unlike that of many other ethnic groups in the region, places a great deal of significance upon not only the particular animal year but also the animal day when an individual is born in both explaining personality types and interpersonal compatibility (Kammerer 1986:255-258) as well as selecting auspicious (animal) days on which certain rites should or should not be carried out. This dispute over the three terms noted above was first officially discussed and apparently resolved during a transregional gathering of Akha elite in Jinghong, China between December 30, 2008 and January 2, 2009. Elsewhere, Ayoe, himself a key figure behind the latter efforts, has explained the rationale guiding their reproductions of Akha temporality in standardized fashion in the following manner: "It is believed that the Akha ancestors used the same calendar and (system of customary law at the time of) Jadae State...(Since that time) variations (have developed in the calendars and systems of customary law practiced by Akha in the region as a result of their) centuries-long migrations and settlement in different locations. Therefore, representatives of Akha cultural specialists, scholars, and leaders standardized the Akha calendar based on a version passed down through the ruling lineage of Jadae State (during) an ad hoc workshop held in Jinghong, Yunnan, China, December 30, 2008 - January 2, 2009" (Wang 2013:313). It was not until December 2013, however, that each of the main Neo-Traditionalist factions in the region actually followed through on the latter agreement relating in part to the animals associated with the terms "tawn-la" (*tanqla*; (mule or rabbit), "lawng" (*lanq*; rabbit or dragon) and "shae" (*xaer*;~ferret or termite) by adopting the standardized version in their respective calendrical reproductions. In the standardized version, "tawn-la" (*tanqla*) is designated by the "rabbit," "lawng" (*lanq*) by the "dragon," and "shae" (*xaer*) by the "termite."

Ways of the Akha Ancestors. The event took place in a large public field located alongside the main thoroughfare running from the Thai-Myanmar border crossing at Maesai-Tachilek.

On the occasion of each of their post-2008 annual New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebrations in Tachilek, MATA has linguistically resignified the large public field wherein the celebration occurs by referring to it in Akha as "Dae-khawn" (*Dae Khanq*). By referring to this place as Dae-khawn, MATA has symbolically transformed it from a non-Akha space to a distinctly Akha space. Dae-khawn, moreover, has generally been used to refer to a flat area of land located at the upper end of upland Akha villages and reserved for various kinds of communal gatherings. Thus, MATA's temporary reframing of this indigenous term in reference to the lowland, urban setting of their regional New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration has reflected their efforts to spatially and temporally redefine the domain of Akhaness from that of deeply grounding rural, upland and decentralized villages to that of a more upwardly unifying urban, lowland and centralized authority.

This act of resignification, however, is a temporary one, as once the celebration is over and everyone has returned home the Dae-khawn quickly reverts to a large open public field available for other kinds of non-Akha festivities such as the Shan and Lahu New Year celebrations held just prior to and after that of the Akha celebration. Regardless of this temporality, however, many of the Akha that have participated in the communal gathering have come away from it with a sense of having been part of a larger Akha collectivity or world.

### **10.3 Neo-Traditionalist Performances of Akhaness for Akha and non-Akha Publics**

On the second day of the celebration in 2011 a formal opening ceremony was held during which a large number of distinguished guests from the regional Myanmar military government

were welcomed and entertained along with a large crowd of bystanders. A patrol of heavily armed soldiers, moreover, kept the latter, less distinguished guests from blocking the view of the former, more distinguished guests. The main VIP, however, was the Burman regional commander of Tachilek district who wore a colorfully embroidered Akha jacket over his official dark green uniform. He had received the jacket as a gift from his Akha hosts upon arriving at the celebration grounds.

As the distinguished guests arrived, they were greeted by Akha of varying ages and gender standing on the sides of their pathway and decked out in full Akha modern-traditional dress reflecting their diverse regional and sub-group affiliations. Women of varying ages pounded ornately decorated bamboo poles on the ground in unison to the steady beat of bronze gongs and cymbals played by several middle-aged men. Nearly all of the greeters conspicuously held or displayed small flags representing either the Myanmar nation or Akha sub-nation.<sup>193</sup>

Shortly after the arrival of the Burman regional commander and his entourage of officials and troops, including not merely Burman but also Shan, Lahu, and Wa representatives, a pair of Akha emcees, one male and one female, called the congregation to order in first, Burmese, and, then, Akha language. Thereafter the Burman regional commander took the stage in his Akha jacket to formally open the celebration with a few words in Burmese exclusively. He was followed by none other than Prosperous One who gave a long written address prepared in advance in first, Burmese, and, second, Akha. Prosperous One's words on this occasion were not that different from those given on the occasion of MATA's very first transregional celebration of

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<sup>193</sup> Between the second and third celebrations in late 2009 and 2010, however, the design of the Myanmar national flag was changed according to a mandate of the central government in October 2010. From the third celebration in December 2010 onwards MATA prominently displayed the newly recreated Myanmar national flag alongside of their own recently (re)created Akha sub-national flag of sorts.

the New Year's Ancestral Service in Tachilek in December 2008. A translation of the latter speech is included at the beginning of this chapter.

Following these speeches, the Burman regional commander and one of the main financial sponsors of MATA, Elder Brother Chi-jeu (*Ardov Cirjoe*), were each given a pair of scissors and led by several young Akha women decked out in their traditional-modern Akha dress to the center of the stage where they officially opened the celebration by jointly cutting a bright red ribbon and releasing several bundles of colorful balloons into the sky to the applause of the audience. Thereafter, a series of performances began on the main stage as the balloons drifted higher and higher into the sky.

The opening performance involved roughly 100 Akha youth, adorned in a diverse array of Akha wardrobes, singing-reciting the first fourteen Ancestral names of the master genealogy shared by all Akha, while clapping their hands in unison to a recorded instrumental accompaniment blasted from gigantic speakers arranged on each side of the main performance stage. Thus, from the very beginning of the celebration, MATA had brought into play the powerful symbolism of family and kinship. As noted earlier in chapter three, Neo-Traditionalist elite and non-elite alike have looked to their patronymic linkage system and related Ancestral services as the fundamental core of Akhaness amidst the vicissitudes of modernity (see Morton 2013:50).



Figures 10.3 & 10.4: Figure 10.3 on the left is of the (re)constructed Akha Flag from the museum display of sorts organized by MATA during their observance of the Third (Annual) New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration in December 2010. The largely illegible caption in Burmese script translates as, "The Flag Symbol of the Akha Ethnic Group." Figure 10.4 on the right highlights just one example of the variety of ways in which the Akha Flag has made its way onto modern-traditional Akha wardrobes. Both photos were taken by the author.

Moreover, the backdrop of the main performance stage was decorated with much larger versions of the mini-flags noted earlier, albeit with the Myanmar flags hung in a more central as well as higher position than the Akha flags (see figure 10.2 above). When I first inquired about the Akha flags in 2009 I was intrigued to learn that they represented the ancient Akha homeland of Jadae as discussed earlier in chapter eight. These (re)constructed flags were composed of a large red circle in the center surrounded by alternating white, green, yellow, and blue triangular shaped patterns (see figures 10.3 and 10.4 above). Throughout the remainder of the celebration, I noticed additional material representations of these (re)constructed flags in the form of patches of varying sizes sewn onto individuals' jackets and in some cases, headdresses (see figure 10.4 above).



Figure 10.5: The front side of the official invitation card for Akha from Thailand to the Fourth (Annual) New Year's Ancestral Service in Tachilek, Myanmar, December 12-14, 2011. The card was written in a combination of Akha and Thai languages.

#### 10.4 Border Temporalities: “The time in Tachilek is 30 minutes behind that of Thailand”

A month or so prior to the celebration the organizers distributed colorful invitation cards written in a combination of either Akha and Burmese or Akha and Thai to various Akha elite residing throughout the Akha World(s) of north Thailand and east Myanmar (see figure 10.5 above). Other arrangements were made via the use of cellular phones and the internet to invite as well as make arrangements for the participation of certain Akha from southwest China and northwest Laos. Ayoe, moreover, once again faithfully fulfilled his crucial role as the liaison between the Tachilek based group and a gradually rising number of Akha in southwest China and northwest Laos.

The fronts of the invitation cards were adorned with three colorful images that have emerged as powerful symbols of Akhaness in its refashioned, Neo-Traditionalist persuasion (see figure 10.5 above). In the center was an enlarged literized, pictorial representation of the master Ancestral genealogy shared by all Akha framed against a background of expanding mountains and a sky brilliantly lit by a fiery red sun positioned top and center as discussed earlier in chapter

seven. This central image was surrounded, on one side, by a yellow circle emblazoned in the center with an image of a water buffalo surrounded by images of each of the twelve animals around which the Akha calendar is organized in terms of years and days, and, on the other side, by an image of a vibrantly green, fertile rice stalk.

In addition to general information regarding the date, place and schedule for the celebration, MATA reminded their Akha guests from south of the border that, “The time in Tachilek is 30 minutes behind that of Thailand,” so as to ensure that the latter would be on time for the opening ceremony. By doing so MATA sought to impose a more stringent sense of time into their reproductions of Akhaness according to national time as dictated by the mechanical clock rather than local time as dictated by the will and whim of organic actors. On a side note, Myanmar is one of only fifteen countries in the world that has offset its time by a half-hour increment so as to better satisfy their sense of the sun being directly above them at noon.

MATA further included a bold faced section wherein they informed their guests more generally that, “It would be greatly appreciated if everyone wears their Akha dress.”<sup>194</sup> MATA’s admonishment to their guests to wear Akha dress for the celebration was in response to a rising trend among Akha, particularly middle aged and younger generations, to no longer wear ‘Akha’ dress apart from special occasions such as religious ceremonies or festivals. Elsewhere, Tooker has identified the latter trend as just one indication of the “compartmentalization” of Akhaness into distinct spheres of social life (2004). However, if we recognize that culture, inclusive of the material and immaterial, is often more dynamic and fluid than stagnant and fixed, then we could alternatively frame the latter process as that of the ongoing reproduction of Akhaness.

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<sup>194</sup> This further applied to the roughly thirty non-Akha staff that MATA hired to help with various aspects of the celebration in addition to a much larger number of Akha staff. These staff members, which were mostly ethnic Burmans and Shan (Tai-Yai), were given black jackets adorned with Akha style patterns to wear throughout the period of the celebration.

Moreover, paralleling MATA's religious reproductions of Akhaness in a partially dematerialized fashion, I once overheard Prosperous One admonish a group of popular Akha singers from southwest China in the following manner:

“It is not enough for us to merely wear our Akha dress and sing in our Akha language. We must also truly believe in our Akha *Ghanr* and help our Akha people”  
(personal communication, December 22, 2009).

Prosperous One had spoken these words to the singers just prior to their debut on the opening night of MATA's Second (Annual) New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration in Tachilek in December 2009. Prosperous One's emphasis here on Akhaness as, first and foremost, an interiorized state of belief, parallels his conceptual uprooting of the domain of Akhaness from that of customs, understood as extrinsic markers of peoplehood that may be swapped under certain conditions, to that of a religion, conceived as an immutable and “intrinsic (ethno)racial characteristic, revealing the inner essence of a people” (see Wenger 2009:85).

### **10.5 Of Traditional Modernities and Modern Traditions**

MATA's lowland, urban-based transregional celebrations of the New Year's Ancestral Service have in certain ways differed from as well as paralleled those taking place around roughly the same time of year in numerous rural, upland households and villages throughout the region. The latter village level observances of this particular Ancestral Service as well as others more generally have tended not to be fixed according to any standardized calendar but rather planned according to local, and, in some cases, translocal considerations such as preparedness and the timing of other intra- as well as inter-village rites. In particular, the New Year's

Ancestral Service is supposed to first, be observed sometime between that of two other related rites, and, second, begin on the auspicious day of the water buffalo (*nyoq*).<sup>195</sup>

However, a notable exception to the above lack of any fixed date per se for the New Year's Ancestral Service can be found in contemporary southwest China. For example, in 1987 the Xishuangbanna Prefectural government of Yunnan, China declared the (Akha/Hani) New Year's Ancestral Service as an official local-public holiday to be held annually between January 1-4 (Wang 2013:77), regardless of the particular animals associated with those days.<sup>196</sup> In contrast, each of MATA's annual celebrations of the New Year's Ancestral Service since 2008 have, according to the Western calendar, been held in different parts of December and January, while, according to the Akha calendar, they have been fixed to begin on the auspicious day of the water buffalo. In recent years, however, MATA has tended to schedule their Tachilek-based celebration in early December so as to both permit greater participation by other communities of Akha in the region as well as join other celebrations taking place throughout the region, particularly in southwest China, Na-ba, and, more recently, northwest Laos.

In the Old-Traditionalist, upland village setting, moreover, the celebration of the New Year's Ancestral Service is marked by both a series of two household level Ancestral offerings as well as the collective birthday of everyone in the village as discussed earlier in chapter five. The celebration marks the "transition from one animal year to the next. As the animal year changes, each person in the community, even a newborn baby, gains a year in age" (Kammerer 1986:261).

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<sup>195</sup> The "New Year's Ancestral Service" is observed sometime after the "New Rice Ancestral Service" (*Hawqxeevq Aqpoeq*) and just prior to the final annual rice-related rite of "Storing Rice Seeds for First Planting" (Kammerer 1986:273).

<sup>196</sup> However, in southwest China the fixed date for the celebration as determined by the state tends only to dictate the scheduling of larger, urban based celebrations such as those organized by the official Akha associations in Jinghong and Mengla. The much larger number of smaller, village based celebrations taking place in southwest China tend to be organized both so as to not coincide with certain other village and regional-level celebrations as well as according to a variety of local considerations such as villagers' preparedness, whether or not a death has occurred and so on.

In their urban, lowland-based reproductions of Akhaness in a simultaneously Neo-Traditionalist and trans-local fashion, MATA has incorporated and to some extent reworked a number of symbols and practices that have served to render their gatherings recognizable, familiar, and ultimately meaningful to both their Akha guests as well as themselves. Not unlike other ethnic elite more generally, these Akha ethnic intrapreneurs have been constrained in their cultural reproductions by the need to incorporate certain primordial symbols or markers of Akhaness. They have had to draw in part from these primordial symbols or markers in order to ensure that their ethnic or, in this particular Akha case, crypto-nationalist project resonates with members of the general population (see Brass 1974; Guneratne 2002:193; Kaup 2000:17,54).

Among this particular faction of Akha, however, a peculiar dialectic has been at work between the primordial and new or traditional and modern. This dialectic has been at play, moreover, since at least the post-1980s if not the entire period of Akha history beginning with their ethnogenesis as a distinct people in the context of their Ancestral homeland-state of Jadae during the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. (Wang 2013:64). In the context of Jadae, the in/famous figure of King Jawban, as discussed earlier in chapter eight, is attributed with having accomplished the monumental and unprecedented task of uniting all Akha under the independent polity of Jadae. As part of his unification efforts, moreover, King Jawban issued a series of decrees or laws bringing about the very production of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors in a centralized and standardized fashion (Lewis 1969a:46; Geusau 2000a:133,139; Wang 2013:60-61).

There are certain parallels, moreover, between these historical efforts of King Jawban at the time of Jadae and those of MATA and their Neo-Traditionalist allies in the contemporary Akha World. Foremost, MATA has similarly worked to reshape the Ways of the Akha Ancestors

in a centralized and standardized fashion while promoting the scaling-up of Akhaness. They have further worked to ensure that the fruits of their labors are made known throughout the Akha World, albeit in an increasingly literized as well as oral manner. As noted earlier in various chapters, the Akha World(s) of Jadae and the Upper Mekong Region were characterized by orality and the absence of the written word until roughly the latter half of the twentieth century.

Unlike MATA, however, King Jawban was successful in his efforts to not only promote the scaling-up of Akhaness but also construct a centralized Akha polity, albeit a relatively short-lived one. In contrast, MATA has neither had recourse to a centralized Akha state in promoting their efforts nor sought to bring about the latter per se. Indeed, these contemporary ethnic intrapreneurs often referred to their lack of an Akha state as a major obstacle towards their efforts to reproduce Akhaness in a centralized and standardized fashion – whether in the form of a common orthography, religion proper, or historical narrative. As citizens of different nation states under the authority of more dominant, non-Akha groups such as the Han Chinese, Burmese, Thai, and Lao, their collective efforts have been complicated by the multiple and shifting loyalties, obligations, and imaginings that each member has brought to the table.

We will now return to our discussion of MATA's Tachilek-based observance of the New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration. As noted earlier, MATA has introduced and reworked a number of symbols and practices into the celebration that have served in rendering it recognizable or familiar to their Akha guests from various parts of the region. These particular symbols or practices, as discussed below, can be thought of as elements of the traditional that MATA has consciously sought to interweave with the modern in their cosmopolitan reproductions of Akhaness.

As other scholars have argued, the very notion of the traditional has come about as a co-construct of that of the modern (Hall 1996b; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Vlastos 1998; Jonsson 2004:676).<sup>197</sup> By default the traditional or old has been defined and perceived as that which is not modern or new. Contemporary Akha identitarian work, however, has defied simple categorization via the binary of the traditional and modern. Rather, depending upon their positionality, Akha have variably conceived of the relationship between Akhaness past, present, and future as characterized by continuity, dynamism and rupture.

As noted earlier, Neo-Traditionalists affiliated with MATA and NADA have tended to perceive of their Ancestral past as a static, unreformed, and unnecessarily heavy burden that must be “looked after and improved” so as to ensure the very survival of Akhaness as a distinct way of being in the world. These Neo-Traditionalists have further sought to identify and in turn filter out certain aspects of their Ancestral burden deemed to be fundamental to their (re)emerging modern Akha sense of belonging. In contrast, Old-Traditionalists have tended to perceive of their Ancestral past as a more dynamic and yet necessarily heavy burden that they must carry to the best of their ability so as to ensure both continuity between Akhaness past, present, and future as well as the continual flow of blessings from the living dead to the living living.

From each of these vantage points, inclusive of Old-Traditionalists and Neo-Traditionalists alike, the notion of the traditional as in contradistinction to the modern fails to apply. Rather, in these particular Akha cases it is more accurate to think of their cultural reproductions of Akhaness as either modern traditions or traditional modernities. These particular Akha engagements with tradition have been and continue to be as much about the

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<sup>197</sup> Jonsson, in particular, has aptly argued that contrary to conventional thought, in actuality communities the world over have continually reconstructed their traditions by way of their very “engagements with modernity and modernization” (2004:676).

present and future as the past (see Strathern and Stewart 2004:6). Moreover, their modern reproductions of tradition or vice versa (traditional reproductions of modernity) are as much a reflection of their parochial as well as cosmopolitan concerns, experiences, and outlooks.

As other scholars have noted, Akha cultural (re)productions have long been framed in reference, or more accurately opposition, to non-Akha outsiders, especially more powerful ones (Geusau 1983, 2000a:143; Tooker 1988:12, 2012:22; Kammerer 1986:403). While this framing of Akhaness would seem to suggest an underlying cultural ethos of accommodation and cosmopolitanism rather than isolation and parochialism, the latter interpretations have tended to dominate these scholars' representations of Akha history. Tooker, moreover, while representing Akha as "one of the more isolated (or peripheral) of the upland tribal groups" in Southeast Asia, further argued that they have, over *la longue durée*, developed "alternative usages of the same set of cosmopolitical signs" as that of more dominant, lowland ethnic Tai groups in various parts of the region (2012:29, 1996c:352).

MATA's reproductions of Akhaness in the context of their annual celebrations of the New Year's Ancestral Service have similarly been shaped in reference as well as opposition to a variety of local, national, regional, and global norms regarding notions of peoplehood, religion, culture, language, history and, to some extent, development (cf. Friedman 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). MATA's cultural work has not only drawn on a cosmopolitan orientation towards larger Akha and non-Akha Worlds alike but also has cosmopolitan ambitions, albeit in reference to a larger world framed in reference to Akha and Akha alone. In their reworkings of Akhaness, moreover, MATA has been variably constrained and free to reimagine the boundaries of Akhaness past, present and future.

MATA has, after all, been under the gaze of various audiences ranging from the central Myanmar government to the regional Tachilek government, various local non-Akha publics (i.e. Burman, Shan, Lahu, Wa and so forth), as well as a range of divergently positioned Akha publics from various parts of the Upper Mekong Region in terms of nationality, sub-group, lineage, class, and religio-political affiliation. Each of these interest groups has possessed their own imaginary of Akhaness. MATA has had to cater to these often divergent imaginaries so as to ensure that their cultural reproductions have resonated with each of these publics. At the same time, however, MATA has sought to rework the boundaries of Akhaness in the interests of not only ensuring their survival as a distinct people but also raising their overall status as a people relative to non-Akha as well as promoting a larger, pan-Akha sense of belonging.

In navigating the multilayered and dynamic demands of these various publics, MATA has employed a number of representational strategies that have built on the unique array of linguistic, socioeconomic, cultural and political capital that their members and allies have brought to the assembly line of cultural production. While MATA has simultaneously orchestrated multiple onstage displays of Akhaness for various audiences, they have also reserved certain kinds of offstage displays for a strictly Akha audience (cf. Scott 1990). They have further adopted a representational strategy wherein multiple transcripts, more so than “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990), have circulated as a means of providing certain kinds of information to various audiences.

For example, each year on the final day of their now annual transregional celebration of the New Year’s Ancestral Service in Tachilek, MATA has organized a more private meeting attended by Akha and Akha alone. In terms of language, these gatherings have similarly been conducted in Akha and Akha language alone, whether in spoken or written form. While MATA

initially held these gatherings in the local government's rather small meeting hall located alongside the main thoroughfare running from the border bridge to the festival grounds, they have in recent years shifted the location to a much larger government owned gymnasium located in a nearby section of the town so as to accommodate a growing number of participants from various parts of the region.

During these more private gatherings MATA has sought to more formally position itself as a major center of power within the emerging Akha World by working to promote and solidify alliances among Akha elite from various parts of the region. Indeed, it has only been in the context of these meetings that Akha elite representing different centers of power in the larger Akha World have been formally recognized and given opportunities to address the larger Akha congregation.<sup>198</sup> In contrast, during each of MATA's more public celebrations of the New Year's Ancestral Service it has been certain non-Akha and Akha elite representing the Myanmar geobody exclusively that have been recognized as such. During each of the former, more private gatherings, moreover, an expanding network of Akha elite has formally discussed and endorsed a series of reformations of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors reflecting MATA's Neo-Traditionalist leanings.

Nevertheless, the diverse range of histories and expectations that MATA's audiences have brought to the representational table has ensured a certain degree of multivocality in terms of the interpretations of their cultural reproductions, regardless of their intended meanings. MATA, moreover, has been anything but a monolithic association of Akha elite, possessing its

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<sup>198</sup> For example, during the final, more private gathering held on the occasion of MATA's fourth annual celebration of the New Year's Ancestral Service in December 2011, Akha elite representing each of the following centers of power were formally recognized and given opportunities to speak on behalf of their constituents: Tachilek, Kengtung, Mongsat, Na-ba, Thailand, Laos, Jinghong, and Mengla. Tachilek, Kengtung, and Mongsat represented sub-national centers of power within Myanmar while Jinghong and Mengla represented sub-national centers of power within China.

own internal dynamics and heterogeneity in terms of individual's cultural imaginings and agendas. Prosperous One, however, in his self-declared position as the "brains" behind MATA, has tended to dominate the offstage negotiations behind their onstage productions.

### **10.6 Neo-Traditionalist Respatializations of Akhaness**

We now turn to a closer examination of the various kinds of cultural productions on display during MATA's annual celebrations of the New Year's Ancestral Service. These productions, which I liken to modern traditions or traditional modernities, have resulted from a concerted effort on the part of MATA to creatively recombine select aspects of Akhaness past, present and future in forging a simultaneously modern and authentic Akha ethos or way of being that can firmly stand its ground relative to that of non-Akha Others. In contrast to earlier representations of Akhaness, however, wherein Akha cultural productions have been framed in inverse relation to those of more powerful, non-Akha Others (see Tooker 1996c:352), MATA's productions have been variably framed in both reference as well as opposition to those of non-Akha Others, albeit not necessarily more powerful Others.

Elsewhere, Tooker has argued that Akha have spatially constructed their peripheral, village based polities and cultural identities in a manner that draws on the "*same* set of cosmopolitical signs" as dominant, non-Akha lowlanders in the region and yet positions themselves as a people of the center (1996c:352). She points to one such example in the "notion of the infusion of a cosmic potency in space and the geomantic properties of that potency" wherein the latter is understood as "moving from a raised center outward and downward, in a pattern that for the lowlands has been described as a 'mandala' " (Tooker 1996c:242-243). Challenging conventional understandings of the mandala model, Tooker argues that:

“The Akha material demonstrates that the Akha are not just a rung of replication of the sacred center of the kingdom... Instead, through spatial practices, they index a different, alternative center of potency (whose content is defined differently), that of their own village polity, *using the same symbolic spatial set as used in the lowlands*. As Geusau (1983:263) has observed: ‘Contrary to what one would expect from members of a minority group who portray themselves as losers, the Akha feel themselves very much at the centre of the universe-disc (*mirkhanq*). The Chinese, Burmese, and Shan are cast as inhabitants of the periphery...’ These practices also produce the Akha as a geographic, economic, political, religious, linguistic, and ethnic entity. We can regard this phenomenon as a contextual shift in the use of spatial symbolics: the meaning of the spatial and power symbolics shifts depending on whether one is in an upland or lowland context” (Tooker 1996c:352).

In contrast, MATA’s contemporary reproductions of Akhaness have been variably framed in both reference as well as opposition to those of various non-Akha Others, albeit not necessarily more powerful Others. The various kinds of cultural reproductions on display during MATA’s observance of the New Year’s Ancestral Service have included but are not limited to the range of languages employed in spoken (i.e. for narration) and written form (Akha and Burmese), linguistic resignifications of the space wherein the celebration has occurred (linguistic respatializations), numerous materialized symbols positioned throughout the grounds, a variety of theatrical performances, the configuration of performance space(s) (i.e. modern & traditional stages), the refashioning of Akha dress, as well as a number of practices inviting audience participation.

By way of these cultural reproductions, MATA has created a distinctly Akha space wherein certain opportunities have been provided for Akha from various parts of the region to engage in “creative expression, self-representation, and engagement” (Gottdiener 1985; in Flores 1997:263). It has been while immersed within this Akha space, moreover, that certain Akha have developed a sense of belonging to a larger Akha World in the making. As has been argued for Latino communities in the U.S., this physical and creative space has allowed for Akha to both express as well as recreate their culture, “to be themselves, and to develop their own identity as a

group” (Flores 1997:263). At the same time, however, Akha have been variably constrained in their cultural constructions and practices by multiple and shifting structural features such as national political institutions, transborder market economies, as well as hierarchical schemes of racial, cultural, gender and class based difference (see Ong 1996:738).

Further echoing Rosaldo (1988), moreover, I hold that for Akha, Akhaness tends to concentrate in each of the multiple and shifting social centers wherein they have communally gathered for various purposes. MATA’s spatial reproductions of a distinctly Akha space in the context of their now annual New Year’s Ancestral Service-Celebration have represented just one such example of a social center, albeit a rather profound one, wherein Akha from throughout the region have gathered to co-envision, imagine, and create a larger Akha World shaped and molded in response to multiple and shifting experiences as well as expectations of modernity. In their efforts, moreover, Akha have been motivated by both instrumental *and* expressive factors such as the pursuit of power, wealth, dignity, pride, as well as cultural resistance and vitalization (cf. Rosaldo 1988:162).

### **10.7 Akha Aesthetics 101: Symbolic reproductions of a modern authenticity**

As we casually made our way across the bridge marking the official border crossing from Maesai, Thailand to Tachilek, Myanmar, we met a number of other groups heading to the same destination, namely MATA’s fourth (annual) celebration of the New Year’s Ancestral Service (December 12-14, 2011; see figure 10.1 above). Just moments before as we were officially checked out of Thailand, we were divided into three lines or categories of border crossers - first, Thai nationals and partial citizens, second, Burmese nationals, and, third, foreign nationals from neither Thailand nor Myanmar. As we reemerged into the open air from within the narrow and

cavernous Thai immigration office and began to cross the bridge en route to Myanmar, we were briefly reunited as a motley crew of border crossers in the no-human's-land stretching across the length of the bridge.

A narrow and eternally muddy river, known on the Thai side as the Maesai, snaked its way along beneath the bridge. Every once in a while a local border crosser tossed a small or large plastic bag of refuse over the edge of the bridge into the depths of the river below. A short walk upstream from this official crossing was a more informal crossing point that required its transgressors to carry their clothes atop their heads while wading across the river in their underwear. The chilled morning air greeted us at the bridge which had undergone its daily ritual of reopening an hour or so before our arrival. Later that afternoon, as the sun rose higher in the sky we would do our best to avoid its gaze by taking refuge in the shade of a tea shop, tarp covered tent, umbrella or hat, depending upon the shade resources at our disposal.

While most of us traversed the bridge via foot, a number of groups had made arrangements to drive their motor vehicles, mostly either large pick-up trucks or SUVs, across the bridge to the celebration. We could identify each other on the basis of our distinctly Akha styles of dress, whether in the case of a grandmother decked out from head to toe in traditional dress, a young woman decked out from her shoulders down in modern dress, or a middle-aged man wearing a black sport jacket embroidered with distinctly Akha patterns along with dark colored slacks and leather shoes. I similarly stood out as the single tall, white foreigner or “Gala-pyu” (*Gaqlaqqyu*) sporting a black vest and shoulder bag embroidered with distinctly Akha patterns.

We were joined, moreover, on our border pilgrimage by a number of other crossers including crowds of Thai tourists from Bangkok heading for the international market in Tachilek,

local traders transporting large bundles of goods in either direction via motorcycle, bicycle or foot, a small band of mostly Akha children and a few nursing mothers occupying the central, no-human's-land in the bridge's center from where they beseeched us for money, as well as a variety of other locals moving back and forth for purposes such as work, education, business, as well as maintaining kin relations.

Upon crossing the no-human's-land in the bridge's center we were re-divided into different lines or categories of border crossers in preparation for our varied forms of induction into the Myanmar geo-body. The official boundary of the geo-body of Myanmar was marked by an immigration office that was a mere shadow of its sister office on the opposite side of the bridge in terms of overall size and cosmetic appearance. Thai and Burmese nationals and partial citizens were directed alongside the perimeter of the complex to a window from where an official seated within asked for their border pass and varying amounts of Thai baht, depending on their immigration status, before stamping their border pass and sending them on their way.

As foreign nationals from neither Thailand nor Myanmar, Mi-suo and I were officially inducted into Myanmar, albeit for only fourteen days, by several immigration officials sitting in a small office located to the side of the bridge. As we entered the immigration complex we were directed into this office. Once inside, the officials asked us for our passports and either 500 Thai baht or ten U.S. dollars, took our mug shots via webcam, and inquired about our travel and accommodation plans in Myanmar.<sup>199</sup>

On the upper part of the wall behind the officials a clock recorded the time exactly a half hour slower than that in Thailand. Above and to the right of this clock, moreover, was a framed picture of Senior General Than Shwe, the then current leader of Myanmar's ruling military junta.

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<sup>199</sup> At the time 30 Thai baht was equivalent to roughly one US dollar. As such, it was 200 Thai baht cheaper to pay with U.S. dollars which were readily available for exchange in the thriving above- and under-ground markets on either side of the border.

However, the latter, nearly ubiquitous image of Senior General Than Shwe in Myanmar proper could barely compete with that of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej as found just across the border in Thailand. In fetishized fashion, images of the latter figure have in recent years been prominently displayed not only within government offices, businesses and homes throughout the country but also along main thoroughfares and at the entrances to various villages and towns.

As we awaited our induction, the officials reminded us of the taboo against foreigners such as ourselves either staying in private homes or traveling beyond the city limits of Tachilek and Kengtung. Finally, they issued each of us a temporary visa card including our mug shot and various pieces of information such as our nationality, passport information, and date of induction. Our passports, we were told, would remain behind with them at the bridge until our return to Thailand.

As we entered into the border town of Tachilek and made our way through a swarm of local tour guide-taxi drivers, we came to the main, bustling and dusty road running through the center of town and turned right towards the grounds where MATA's New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration was taking place. Shortly thereafter we spied a small, dusty blue covered pick-up truck heading in our direction. As the truck approached we waved the driver down and caught a ride in the back alongside various other travelers the rest of the way for fifteen Thai baht per person.

As we approached the main grounds of the celebration we noticed the usual colorful banner draped over the entire width of the road announcing the celebration in the Akha and Burmese scripts. Two distinct visual markers or symbols of Akhaness in its Neo-Traditionalist persuasion were arranged on either side of the latter Burmese language announcement. On the left was an artistic rendering of the master Ancestral genealogy shared by all Akha framed

against a landscape of expanding mountains and a sky brilliantly lit by a fiery red sun positioned top and center. On the right was an artistic rendering of a golden rice stalk holding an abundance of ripened rice seed ready to be harvested combined with a vibrant green leafy branch of the beu-seu tree (*boeqsoev arbawr*), a tree of great ceremonial significance for Akha as noted earlier in chapter five.

Just below the Burmese script in the banner's center, the following was written in the Romanized Akha orthography endorsed by MATA and their Neo-Traditionalist allies:

“The Fourth Gathering of (the) Akha Brothers and Sisters Who Carry *Aqkaqghanr* on the Occasion of the New Years Ancestral Service, December 12-14, 2011.”<sup>200</sup>

In spite of its positioning beneath Burmese, however, the Akha script was much more pronounced in terms of its size and central arrangement. In addition, the Akha script was positioned between two large photographs of a smiling young Akha man and woman from the waists up and decked out in distinctly Akha dress representing a modern resynthesis of tradition or vice versa, a traditional resynthesis of the modern. Akha language, moreover, in its oral and especially written forms, has figured prominently in each of MATA's New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebrations since their inception in 2008.

Upon reaching the celebration grounds we notified the driver to stop by pushing an electric red ringer button on the ceiling of the cab, got down from the truck, paid him our 30 Thai baht and crossed the street to the event. As we arrived, we met a large number of fellow celebration goers, primarily Akha, but also Burman, Shan, Dai-Lue, Yunnanese, Lahu, Wa and so forth, reflecting the diverse ethnic and linguistic landscape of Tachilek as a microcosm of the larger region. Not long before the Akha celebration, moreover, the Shan had celebrated their

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<sup>200</sup> The original Akha was written as the following: “*Oeq Pov Byan-e Aqkaq Ghanr Tawq Luvq-e Maer Nmr Deq Gm Leir-awr Khovq Xeevq Kar Tanr Aqpoeq Lawr Dzoer-e, 12-13-14.12.2011.*”

New Year in the same location. In addition, the Lahu New Year was scheduled to take place on the grounds shortly after that of the Akha.

Around the immediate perimeter of the grounds a large number of merchants, including Akha and non-Akha, had set up booths where they were busy selling everything from domestic liquor and cigarettes to glossy posters of Korean pop stars and Jesus as well as various kinds of local foods and fashionably modern Akha dress. Later that evening, as on each evening of the celebration, a variety of children's amusement rides would be in full swing alongside of numerous booths where young and middle aged festival goers, mostly males, gambled and threw darts at balloons for prizes.

This outer area, moreover, was clearly marked off from an inner area where Akha and Akha alone engaged in a series of cultural productions throughout the celebration. A u-shaped barrier of tent covered seating areas and a small wooden fence oriented outwards from the main stage clearly marked the boundary between these two areas. From this vantage point, the area around the perimeter of the grounds was transformed into a peripheral area where a variety of tangential activities took place reflecting the larger, non-Akha world while the central area was transformed into a distinctly Akha space where Akha variably engaged in and participated in the staging, consumption and reproduction of Akhaness.

The boundaries between these two domains, however, were in some ways more porous than impenetrable. At certain times and in certain symbolic domains, Akhaness and non-Akhaness were intertwined in a variety of ways reflecting the creative ways in which Akha have variably sought to position and represent themselves relative to multiple and shifting local, regional, national and transregional gazes. The clearest domain in which the latter applied was that of the national. In brief, a variety of symbols and actors representing the central Myanmar

government, most notably the national flag and local military leaders along with their armed escorts, variably penetrated the inner core of Akhaness. Yet, even these national symbols and actors were given a distinctly Akha flavor via the placement of either Akha ethnic flags alongside of and just below the Myanmar national flag or an Akha jacket over the military uniform of the senior military official giving the opening remarks during the celebration.

There are certain parallels, moreover, between the spatial (or place remaking) practices of MATA in the lowland, urban town of Tachilek and those of certain Old-Traditionalists in upland, rural villages as described by Tooker (1988, 2012:79-88). Yet, while both sets of practices serve in reconfiguring what was formerly non-Akha space as a “microcosmic totality” of the larger Akha cosmos (Tooker 1988, 2012:79-88), the nature of the latter has been significantly reworked by MATA in reference to a rather different experience as well as reimagining of modernity. MATA’s reimaginings of the Akha cosmos have reflected a shifting cosmopolitanism or orientation towards larger social worlds and realities variably shaped by accommodation, inversion, and selective appropriation as further discussed below.

We now return to our earlier narrative of passage from the peripheral non-Akha space surrounding the celebration’s grounds to the distinctly Akha space at the core of the celebration. As we made our way across the non-Akha periphery, coming ever so closer to the Akha core, our senses were inundated with a variety of symbols, materials and practices representing Akhaness in its Neo-Traditionalist persuasion. As in former years, MATA had arranged its own space just outside of and alongside the barrier marking the boundary between the Akha core and non-Akha periphery.

This space consisted of a long, narrow tent divided into several sections where numerous symbols, materials and practices were variably on display, being freely distributed, available for

purchase, and inviting of guests' bodily participation. This space can be likened to a liminal space betwixt and between the non-Akha periphery and Akha core preparing celebration goers or initiates for initiation into the Akha core wherein they might experience *communitas* or collective joy as a result of their participation in something both distinctly Akha as well as larger than themselves (Van Gennep 1960[1909]; Turner 1969; Turner 2012).

In the section furthest from the Akha core was a display area, mostly visual but also literized in part, of Akha history in the making, particularly on the part of MATA and its Neo-Traditionalist collaborators since the early 2000s. This display section was first added to the now annual celebrations during the third celebration in December 2010. In the latter celebration in 2010, MATA first arranged for a series of photos, four inch by six inch in size, to be arranged on large brown sheets of paper according to several themes noted primarily in Burmese script.

These themes more broadly focused on MATA's history in terms of first, their transregional outreach work on behalf of Akhaness and the Akha Religion (especially in relation to the Akha World[s] of southwest China), second, their now annual regional New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration in Tachilek, third, the now annual elite golfing competitions they have organized in conjunction with the latter celebration, and last, their efforts to create and propagate a particular version of the Common Akha Orthography (CAO) as discussed earlier. In the very center of these photographic panels, moreover, MATA had positioned a large, color textile reproduction of what was referred to in Burmese as the "Flag Symbol of the Akha Ethnic Group" (see figure 10.3 above).

To the right of these largely photographic displays were several additional artifacts narrated primarily in Akha script. The first of these was a large computer generated and printed plastic color poster providing a general introduction to the CAO. Numerous copies of MATA's

literated reproductions of Akhaness were arranged just below this poster for purposes of display and sale. At the time, the latter included three publications - two basic language primers on sale for 20 Thai baht each and one more advanced book of Akha literature and proverbs on sale for 100 Thai baht.

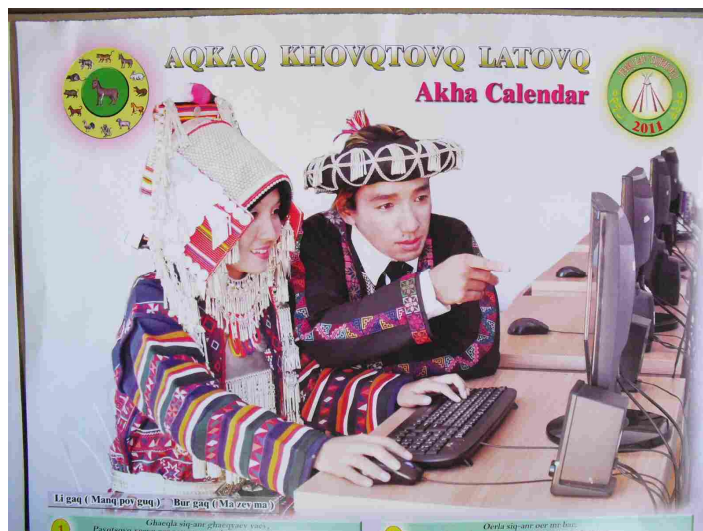


Figure 10.6: This figure is of one of the illustrations from MATA's 2011 calendrical reproduction of Akhaness as displayed and on sale during their third (annual) New Year Ancestral-Service Celebration in December 2010. The photo was taken by the author.

Moreover, each of MATA's calendrical productions from the previous years of 2009, 2010, as well as the approaching year of 2011 were on display. The latter, 2011 calendar featured large, color photos of two young Akha couples dressed in their Akha best and excitedly either reading one of MATA's language primers or using a computer together (see figure 10.6 above for a photo of the latter image). The presumably educated, literate and tech savvy Akha youth featured in the calendar are a salient representation of the particular kind of modern Akha sense of belonging that MATA has sought to promote.

Moreover, just beneath these calendars MATA displayed two medium-sized framed photographs of the legendary Akha musicians (singers and songwriters) Elder Brother Ja-bo (*Jarbo*) from Xishuangbanna, China and Elder Brother Li (*Ardovli*) from Shan State, Myanmar.

Both of these figures had passed away some years prior while only in their late thirties. Prosperous One, moreover, added a personal dedication in Akha to each of the framed photographs wherein he honored each musician for their “work on behalf of the Akha people.”

During the prior year’s celebration in December 2010, Prosperous One, Mi-suo, and I talked over dinner one evening for some time about Ja-bo’s histories in particular in relation to the larger Akha World. Prosperous One spoke of Ja-bo in the following manner:

“Ja-bo was a very special person that I hold close to my heart (As he spoke these words he placed his clenched right hand over his heart).

His songs have preserved and taught a great deal about the Ways of the Akha Ancestors. He also did a lot to help our Akha people.

I was fortunate enough to have met Ja-bo once in China during the international conference held in Mojiang in 2005.<sup>201</sup>

Following his death, moreover, I and a small group of Akha from Myanmar and China visited his grave in Xishuangbanna and paid respects to him and his surviving family members.

At the time, we were in China for the most recent International Conference on Hani/Akha Culture”<sup>202</sup>

(personal communication, December 21, 2009).

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<sup>201</sup> Here Prosperous One is referring to the Fifth International Conference on Hani/Akha Culture held in Mojiang, Yunnan, China in April 2005.

<sup>202</sup> Here Prosperous One is referring to the Sixth International Conference on Hani/Akha Culture held in Luchun, Yunnan, China in November 2008.



Figure 10.7: This figure is of the back cover of one of Ja-bo's numerous karaoke style music albums released posthumously and that has, since his passing in 2007, circulated throughout much of the larger Akha World. The writing on the cover and in the subtitles is in both Mandarin Chinese as well as the official state constructed and endorsed Hani orthography for Akha, who, as noted earlier, have been (mis)recognized in China as part of the larger Hani ethnonationality (*minzu*). The photo was taken by the author.

Ja-bo, in particular, has been and remains to date the sole Akha musician whose name and music are recognized and indeed strongly cherished by Akha throughout the larger Akha World regardless of nationality, age, socio-economic class or religio-political affiliation with the possible exception of Vietnam (see figure 10.7 above). He first became known to the Akha World(s) of Thailand and Myanmar during the early 2000s when he was invited by certain Akha elite to perform in north Thailand. He subsequently passed away in China in 2007 while in his late thirties, leaving many Akha in the region perplexed as to the circumstances surrounding his untimely passing.

Since that time Ja-bo's image and music have traveled throughout the Akha World by word of mouth, karaoke style VCDs/DVDs, cell phone MP3s, and the transregional performances of a new generation of Akha singers from Xishuangbanna that have generally been

apperceived in light of Ja-bo's legendary status. An abridged translation of just one of Ja-bo's many more popular songs, "The Akha" (*Akkaq Zaq*), follows:

"*Ja-bo*: Uuuuu cheu eeee!  
*Female backup singers*: Waw shaaa me-nyaaa.....  
*Ja-bo*: Uu cheu eeeee!  
*Female backup singers*: Waw shaaa me-nyaaa.....  
*Ja-bo*: Our *Za-ni* people belong to the same family,  
 Like rice sprouting from the same seed.  
 Ten Akha are united as one.

The *Jeu-weu* (*Jeqghoeq*) and *Jeu-jaw* (*Jeqjawr*) supra-clans share the same mother.<sup>203</sup>  
 It is so, it is so, it is so.....

Our Ancestor *Sm-mi-o* (*Smr-mir-or*),  
 We all descend from our Ancestor *Sm-mi-o*.  
 Our Primal Ancestral Mother *Tawn-Pawn* has manifold (grand)children,  
 Our Ancestor *Mawn-po* (*Manqpov*) has ten sons.

The *Jeu-weu* (*Jeqghoeq*) and *Jeu-jaw* (*Jeqjawr*) supra-clans share the same mother.  
 As the river is to fish,  
 so our Primal Ancestral Mother *Tawn-Pawn* is to us,  
 Like grains from the same rice stalk,  
 (like) manifold bamboo shoots sprouting from the same roots.

When we gather together we affirm our relatedness,  
 Our shared Ancestry,  
 And greet each other in Akha language.  
 Our clothes are all black,  
 We are of the same family.  
 Wherever we are in the region we make the same kinds of offerings to our Ancestors,  
 We share the same (soul-calling) rites of tying (black) strings around our wrists.  
 All of these things are a part of our *Zanr*.  
 Whether we live in the north or south, we are all the same.....

.....*Jadae* is the place where our Akha people flourished,  
 Happily building their villages high in the mountains,  
 Hunting in the forests,  
 Fishing in the mountain streams,  
 Singing our songs of old,  
 Happily living their lives....."  
 (*Ja-bo* and *Mi-yae* [*Jarbo and Miqyaev*] 2004).

<sup>203</sup> Recall MATA's textual based admonishments to their congregants along similar lines as noted earlier in chapter seven: "Do not distinguish between the *Jeu-jaw* (*Jeqjawr*) and *Jeu-weu* (*Jeqghoeq*) supra-clans" (Myanmar Association for Carrying the Akha Religion 2011:24-25).

By the time of MATA's 2011 celebration of the New Year's Ancestral Service, moreover, they had further refined and elaborated the display of images attesting to their historical efforts to work on behalf of the Akha people and their *Ghanr*. Most significantly, their increasingly elaborate display of images reflected both the expanding nature of their transregional movement as well as a growing alignment with various Akha centers of power not only within Myanmar proper but also beyond in relation to the small Akha dominated tributary-buffer state of Na-ba as well as additional Akha centers in southwest China and northwest Laos. In 2011, the previous year's mere eight panels consisting of four by six inch photos pasted onto brown poster paper were replaced by no less than thirty computer generated photographic collages printed on large synthetic poster boards with colorful backgrounds of mountains, flowers, and beach landscapes.

In addition, the earlier Burmese language descriptions for each panel were replaced with much larger and more prominently positioned Akha language descriptions. The photographs in of themselves were similarly enlarged to sizes varying between six by ten to twelve by twenty inches. Bright red ribbon bow ties were further hung around the perimeters of certain panels, particularly those featuring images of the various Akha financiers behind MATA's activities, inclusive of their post-2008 annual New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration in Tachilek.

Each of the themes highlighted earlier in 2010 as noted above were further elaborated upon in 2011 by the inclusion of additional photographs from various trips, meetings, and gatherings that had occurred since the previous celebration of the New Year's Ancestral Service. Most notably, MATA included two photographic panels highlighting their participation in two other regional level New Year's celebrations that had occurred in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China in early January 2011 (i.e. Jinghong and Mengsong), directly following their own

celebration in Tachilek in late December 2010. MATA also included an expanding array of photographs attesting to their continual outreach work on behalf of their CAO, in terms of both promoting as well as teaching the latter, primarily in various parts of Shan State, Myanmar as well as Na-ba and southwest China to a lesser extent.

In their 2011 cultural displays, moreover, MATA expanded on the latter theme of literacy and education by including a panel under the theme, “Our smart youth studying” (*Siqmiq ganryo dzaw-eg*). This panel included photographs highlighting various activities that occurred during the “First International Workshop for Young Akha Intellectuals on *Aqkaqzanr*” held in north Thailand in July 2010 as previously discussed. These photos highlighted MATA’s and NADA’s joint efforts to bring together an elite group of some 60 Akha youth from various parts of the region and (re)educate them as to the richness of the Ways of the Akha Ancestors while promoting their literacy in the Neo-Traditionalist version of the CAO.

In addition to elaborating on each of these earlier thematic representations, MATA incorporated an expanded number of themes into the 2011 pictorial displays of their historical efforts. Foremost among these themes was that of MATA’s expanding efforts “on behalf of *Aqkaqghanr*,” which as noted earlier has been understood by MATA as *the* fundamental marker of Akhaness. Towards this end, MATA included entire pictorial panels devoted to each of the following:

- “*Aqkaqghanr* outreach work” in various parts of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. Two entire panels were devoted to MATA’s outreach work in Laos in particular (*Laor Mirkhanq-anr Aqkaqghanr mr ir-eg*).
- A “return conversion” movement to *Aqkaqghanr* taking place in Myanmar under the direction of MATA. (*Aqkaq tiq ghanr tawq khovq lar-eg*.)

- Meetings held in various parts of the region during which representatives discussed, agreed upon and officially ratified in written form certain reforms to *Aqkaqghanr*.

Another prominent theme featured during the 2011 celebration was that of MATA's increasing engagements more generally with Akha from other parts of the region, inclusive of Thailand, Laos, China and Na-ba. Towards this end the following pictorial panels were included:

- “Building connections in the larger (Akha) world.” (*Mirkhanq-anr tsovqtsavq-e.*)
- “Venturing out into the larger (Akha) world. Teaching our (one) *Ghanr*.” (*Mirkhanq-anr ghovkhaeq dov-eq. Aqkaq tiqghanr maeq-eq.*)
- “Various gatherings and meetings. Generous displays of hospitality.” (*Maeqbawq baqdzan dzan-eq. Yan lawr-awr cawq cawq tavq-eq.*)
- “Helping those in need.” (*Xaqzanq gar cawba caw tsei naeq-eq.*) This panel featured photos from MATA's efforts to gather and distribute donations of various kinds to Akha communities in both Shan State, Myanmar following an earthquake earlier in 2011 as well as Luang Namtha, Laos.

Several additional panels focused on various aspects of Akhaness past, present and future. First, two panels were devoted to “Akha History” (*Aqkaq zirga*). These panels included a series of photographs of traditional upland Akha villages; an elderly couple carrying out a rice related ritual in their field; various ritual spaces and markers such as village gates and bamboo stars; bamboo weaving looms; wooden, foot powered rice seed pounders; simple upland homes with bamboo walls and grass thatched roofs; several photos of various artifacts on display in an Akha (Hani) museum in Mengsong, China that MATA had visited on several occasions since 2009; the traditional Akha swing and related ceremonial rites; a male householder using a large wooden pestle to pound sticky rice in a large mortar made out of a tree trunk; the back side of a

male's head prominently displaying a long, black dzawn-bawn (*dzan banq*) or thin braid of hair running downwards from the rear of his crown; the headstone of the deceased Dutch priest turned anthropologist Leo G.M. Alting von Geusau including an inscription in English language and a photo of Geusau decked out in his finest Akha dress in the style of the Akha clan into which he had married;<sup>204</sup> as well as three deceased Akha singer and songwriters of varying degrees of fame from Myanmar and China.

When I inquired about the image of Geusau that had been included in the above mentioned panel, Prosperous One informed me that:

“Grandfather Leo loved the Akha and our *Ghanr*.  
He did much to support our *Ghanr* and tried to prevent further Akha from going down to and taking on the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others, especially Christians.  
And so here we have chosen to remember and honor Grandfather Leo's contributions to the Akha and our *Ghanr*”  
(personal communication, December 14, 2011).

Other notable panels were devoted to various themes ranging from “Differences among Akha (in the region)” (*Aqkaq dmghaq dmlmr pargar-e*) to “Crops cultivated (and processed) by the Akha brothers and sisters who carry *Aqkaqghanr*” (*Aqkaq ghanr tawq maernmr mrdzaq khawvq dawr luvq-e*). The latter panel included photographs of extensive and fertile upland plantations of rubber trees, tea bushes, coffee plants, and rice along with a lowland banana plantation. Also included were several photographs of coffee and tea being processed and packaged for shipment to various outside buyers. I read this particular panel as a photographic representation of the multiple and shifting nature of Akha livelihoods in the region.

In particular, the panel attested to a rising trend among Akha in the region to be engaged in the cultivation of lucrative cash crops such as rubber, coffee, and tea either instead of or in

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<sup>204</sup> The inscription read as follows: “In memory of Leo George Marie Alting Von Geusau, Born The Hague, 4 April 1925, Died Chiang Mai, 26 December 2002. Priest and Anthropologist, He Loved the Akha.”

addition to more subsistence based crops such as rice in particular.<sup>205</sup> In spite of this trend, however, a significant number of Akha residing in various parts of north Thailand, east Myanmar, Na-ba and northwest Laos have continued to cultivate varying amounts of upland rice for both household consumption and also sale to outsiders. In addition, while certain Akha communities have in recent years clearly benefited from domestic, regional and global booms in rubber, coffee and tea, each of these markets has been anything but stable as reflected in often dramatic fluctuations of prices that local farmers neither have control over nor understand (see Sturgeon 2010; Wang 2013:184,232-233,249).<sup>206</sup>

As of 2013, rubber and tea were the main cash crops being grown by Akha positioned throughout the quad-border region of southwest China, east Myanmar, Na-ba and northwest Laos. Large and small-scale rubber investors from China, including Akha, have largely been responsible for the ongoing, post-2000 spread of upland rubber plantations throughout this cross-border region (see Sturgeon 2010). In contrast, coffee has been more predominant among Akha residing further south in the cross-border region of north Thailand and east Myanmar.

As noted in the latter panel's title, moreover, MATA attributed this particular display of Akha livelihoods to "the Akha brothers and sisters *who carry Aqkaq ghanr*," reinforcing claims on the part of MATA and various "return converts" in Myanmar that only by either returning to

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<sup>205</sup> In southwest China, however, Akha farmers have long used parts of the rubber tree other than the latex for various subsistence purposes. For example, they harvest fallen branches and the wood from older trees that are no longer productive for firewood as well as wasted rubber latex for use in easily igniting firewood. They further harvest the large seeds annually produced by rubber trees as a major source of fodder for pigs (Wang 2013:235-237).

<sup>206</sup> In reference to rubber cultivation among Akha in southwest China, Wang has noted that while the incomes of rubber farming households have increased many folds throughout the past decade, "an economy based (solely) on rubber is very vulnerable. First of all, rubber trees are very vulnerable to pests, diseases, and unfavorable weather conditions such as cold winters and storms. Furthermore, the market price of dried rubber has fluctuated dramatically. It soared to 26 yuan/kg for a few days in May 2008, but then slumped continuously down to seven yuan/kg for the rest of the year, which might (have been caused partially by Wall Street's 2008 financial crisis)... This vulnerability is not a direct effect of rubber plantations *per se*, but rather from the homogeneity of landscapes and the simplification of livelihoods created by the monoculture of rubber trees" (2013:184,232-233,249).

or continuing to carry their own *Ghanr* have they been able to truly receive the blessings of the Ancestors and the Supreme Creator, A-peu Mi-yae, in the form of economic wealth and prosperity. This particular Neo-Traditionalist Akha gospel of prosperity was discussed earlier in chapter seven.

The former panels highlighting “differences among Akha (in the region),” two in total, included a collage of photographs of different generations of Akha males and females, although primarily female youth, from different parts of the region decked out in their particular styles of Akha dress. In terms of dress, moreover, the clearest differences could be seen in women’s and men’s headdresses.<sup>207</sup> Women’s headdresses varied from pointed to very pointed, flat, turban like, v-shaped and crown-like. Men’s headdresses consisted of mostly black but also red colored turbans and crowns.

These differences, moreover, were on further display throughout the larger celebration. First, as part of the performances on the official opening day of the celebration, MATA staged a fashion show featuring no less than ten young Akha couples wearing various styles of Akha dress representing not only Akha from different parts of the region but also Hani in China. There was only one representation of Hani (dress), however, suggesting that the Hani were a singular, monolithic group. In addition, the youth fashion models were all from the Tachilek and Mongsat regions of Myanmar. As a result, they displayed or exhibited the dress of Akha and Hani from other, more distant parts of the region. Second, this diversity in dress could be more directly observed among the various celebration goers themselves, inclusive of both genders and yet

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<sup>207</sup> Euro-American scholars that have worked with Akha in east Burma (Myanmar) and north Thailand tend to differentiate Akha subgroups according to the particular style of women’s headdresses, which vary from pointed to flat, turban like and v-shaped (see Lewis 1989:699; Tooker 1995:27-28). Ayoe, however, has argued that this means of intra-group differentiation has only been found among contemporary Akha communities in north Thailand. He has argued rather that for most Akha in the larger region it has been their supra-clan affiliations and Ancestral genealogies that have been the most salient means of intra-group differentiation (Ayoe, personal communication, November 13, 2009).

more pronounced among women with their eye-catching headdresses of different shapes, sizes, patterns, colors and silver adornments.

These staged representations and indeed reproductions of Akhaness have been variably framed in reference to local, national, regional, and, indeed, global discourses regarding tradition, ethnicity, peoplehood, modernity and fashion (see Jonsson 2005:241-242; Friedman 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). By way of their simultaneously place-based and yet multi-sited representations of Akhaness, moreover, these Akha ethnic intrapreneurs have challenged and adhered to dominant models of nationalism and globalization, all the while reproducing and claiming a distinctly Akha way of being in the world (see Stephen 2007:307-308).<sup>208</sup>

My reading of these various cultural representations and performances was that the differences among Akha in the region were largely of a tangible rather than intangible nature. When read against the backdrop of the larger display section and celebration, moreover, MATA's displays of the tangible, exteriorized differences (i.e. culture) among Akha were trumped by a much more pronounced emphasis on the intangible, interiorized commonalities (i.e. religion) among Akha in *the* fundamental form of their one and only true religion or *Aqkaqghanr*.<sup>209</sup> To paraphrase Prosperous One, "It is not enough to simply wear Akha dress and speak Akha language. We must (also) fully believe in our Religion and help our people."

Last, two other panels highlighting additional features of modern Akhaness warrant further mention. First, half of one panel was devoted to the theme "Media," as written in large

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<sup>208</sup> Elsewhere, U.S. anthropologist Lynn Stephen has argued that indigenous Oaxacan migrants in the U.S. and Mexico have composed their own theories of ethnicity via digital productions that both challenge and adhere to dominant models of globalization (2007:307-8). Their "place-based" representations of ethnicity, Stephen argues, "insist on a particular location as one part of the cultural memory of ethnic identity production" (2007:308). At the same time, the integration of "pan-ethnic and pan-indigenous levels of ethnicity" into their representational strategies implies some shared ideas and goals with translocal others facing similar struggles (Stephen 2007:308).

<sup>209</sup> This claim to truth, however, has been tempered by a much older cultural relativist stance that does not challenge the veracity of the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others for non-Akha Others, but rather asserts that there is only one, true and authentic *Ghanr* for Akha and Akha alone and that Akha carrying the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others are doing so in vain and as if "breathing through the nose of Others."

English rather than Akha letters on the poster. This panel included a collage of photographs of Akha from different parts of the region engaged in various stages of digital mass media production – ranging from photographing and recording video footage from various Akha gatherings to emceeding formal gatherings via the use of remote digital microphones. The photographs prominently featured the various sized digital cameras and camcorders that these Akha media producers used in carrying out their documentary practices.

One last panel that warrants mention was entitled, “Taking care of appearances” (*Bimeeq biqjaq-e pawlavsav-e gar*). This panel featured Younger Sister Mi-ma (*Aqbur Miqmar*), the fairly young Akha wife of a senior member and primary financier of MATA, Elder Brother Ci-jeu, and her various bodily-cultural productions, inclusive of her own, rather scantily dressed and cosmetically whitened body. The panel included a series of images of Mi-ma and various Akha female youth whose bodies she had crafted in terms of facial and skin cosmetics, hair and fashion design, as well as choreographed dance performances.

Her bodily-cultural productions, moreover, reworked, and, for many celebration goers, particularly the middle-aged and elderly, stretched the boundaries between Akha and non-Akha traditional modernities, particularly those relating to the proper ways in which young females should dress and act. At the same time, however, the panel included a photograph of Mi-ma receiving a college diploma during a graduation ceremony at one of the regional public Rajaphat Universities in Chiang Rai, Thailand, located just an hour drive south of the Maesai-Tachilek border. In sum, I read this panel as a statement by Mi-ma as to what a modern as well as elite young Akha female could and should look like – fashionably dressed, well cosmeticized, white skinned and educated.

As we came to the last of the thirty or so photographic panels prominently displaying various aspects of MATA's historical efforts to rework Akhaness, we entered into yet another space heavily flavored with a variety of symbols, materials and practices further representing Akhaness in its Neo-Traditionalist persuasion. In this liminal space, betwixt and between the non-Akha periphery and the Akha core, MATA had set up a long table from behind which several Akha youth, male and female, sat and interacted with a constant flow of celebration goers seeking to engage in any one or more of the following activities:

- Browse through and purchase a variety of new Akha musical VCD and DVD karaoke style productions by Akha hailing from various parts of the Akha World. The range of productions on sale reflected that of the musicians that had been invited to perform during the celebration from Kengtung, Mongsat and Tachilek in Myanmar, Jinghong in China, as well as Chiang Rai in Thailand. In each of these karaoke style productions, moreover, the inscribed language of preference was the CAO endorsed by MATA and their Neo-Traditionalists collaborators. In fact, by the time of the 2011 celebration, MATA had officially banned all other competing versions of the Akha script from being distributed in Tachilek.
- Have their pictures taken and then digitally reframed against first, a computer generated background of their choosing and finally, atop a printed 2012 Akha calendar for a fee of 100 Thai baht.
- Purchase one or more of MATA's 2012 standardized calendrical productions for 150 Thai baht each. Moreover, two different calendrical productions were hung on the tent poles surrounding the main display area. These productions had been brought by Akha

representatives from the Jinghong Akha Association in Xishuangbanna, China and the Akha autonomous buffer-state of Na-ba respectively.<sup>210</sup>

- Browse through and purchase any one or more of MATA’s expanding array of literary and digital productions using the CAO.
- In the case of the general population, obtain a free boxed breakfast and dinner distributed in mass by MATA on the official opening day of the celebration.
- Make a financial contribution towards the costs of organizing the celebration.
- In the case of more distinguished guests, receive their official colored ribbon marking their status and seating position during the formal lunch served on the opening day of the celebration.

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<sup>210</sup> Each of these other calendrical productions differed from that of MATA in several ways. First, in terms of language, the Jinghong Akha Association’s (JAA) calendar was written nearly exclusively in Mandarin Chinese with a small smattering of Akha in the form of the Common Akha Orthography (CAO). Akha language was used only in the titles of each page of the calendar (“2012 C.E. The Year of the Dragon” [*Gmyaeq 2012 Khovq Lanq Tiqkhovq*]; “Hani/Akha Calendar of Famous People” [*Haqniq/Aqkaq Teirdovzaq Khovqtovq Latovq*]) and in noting the names of each particular month. Various MATA officials later commented disapprovingly on the latter, feeling that JAA should have employed “their own (Akha) language,” especially given their presumably better political and economic position in China. Na-ba’s calendrical production, on the other hand, was written exclusively in Akha in the form of the CAO. Last, JAA and Na-ba’s calendrical productions differed from MATA in their representation of the particular animal associated with 2012 as the “dragon” rather than “rabbit” (*lanq*), reflecting the earlier noted dispute among various Neo-Traditionalist factions as to the particular animals associated with three of the terms marking the passage of time in 12 day and year cycles, namely “tawn-la” (*tanqla*; mule or rabbit), “lawng” (*lanq*; rabbit or dragon) and “shae” (xaer; ~ferret or termite).



Figure 10.8: In this photo from MATA's New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration in December 2011, three elderly Akha men from Menglong, China are receiving their Ancestral offering-food from the hands of two middle-aged women, one Akha and the other Lahu, who were the wives of two prominent members of MATA. The photo was taken by the author.

Finally, at the very edge of this liminal space, immediately adjacent to the Akha core, MATA had prominently positioned a small table covered with a bright red cloth, behind which two women stood decked out in their conservative and yet modern, urban style Akha dress minus any headdress, warmly inviting celebration goers to partake of Ancestral offering-food consisting of small pieces of cooked chicken and pounded sticky rice mixed with ground black sesame seed (see figure 10.8 above). The greeters, one Lahu and one Akha, were, appropriately, the wives of two prominent leaders within MATA, the hosts of the celebration. The women greeters warmly invited all celebration goers, regardless of their socioeconomic status as clearly evidenced via their dress and disposition, to partake of the Ancestral offering-food.

As various individuals approached the table they cupped their hands together, palms upward, and held them out in front of one of the greeters who reached out with her left hand to embrace their cupped hands from the bottom while gently placing a small amount of Ancestral

offering-food into their cupped hands with her right hand. As she placed the food into each person's hands, moreover, the greeter offered them a brief spoken blessing. Thereafter, each guest offered a word of thanks to their host, lifted their cupped hands to their mouth and partook of their share of the Ancestral offering-food.

The striking presence or positioning of Ancestral offering-food - a profoundly symbolic, material and practical marker of Akhanness in its Neo-Traditionalist persuasion - rendered the celebration with a distinctly Neo-Traditionalist flavor. Yet, many of the celebration goers refrained from partaking of this Ancestral offering-food on account of their position as either Christians (*Kalizaq*) or Catholics (*Kovqdawvqzaq*) for whom Ancestral offering-food and its related rites are not merely taboo but also associated with none other than Satan himself.<sup>211</sup> This taboo against partaking of Ancestral offering-food, however, has tended to be more strictly adhered to in practice in the case of non-Catholic Christians (i.e. *Kalizaq*).

In this manner, the various divisions, simultaneously of a religious, cultural and political nature, found at various scales throughout the larger Akha World have been reproduced, albeit in particular ways, during each of MATA's post-2008 annual New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebrations in Tachilek. These divisions have complicated MATA's, as well as other, often competing faction's increasingly public assertions of Akha oneness or unity in diversity, as evidenced in their rhetorical use of the recently coined phrase, "Ten Akha are united as one"

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<sup>211</sup> Drawing from ethnographic research in a large and religio-politically fractured upland, Akha village in north Thailand, Akha scholar Haiying Li (Mi-suo) of China has written the following about the significance of Ancestral offering-food for Traditionalist Akha households and the implications of an individual's refusal to partake of the latter: "Many Neo-Traditionalists tell me that normally all of their household members partake of the food that is initially offered to their ancestors. They believe that this food is 'blessed' by their ancestors and that by partaking of the food they receive their 'blessings.' Most importantly, they stress that the food offered to the ancestors is a powerful symbol of their family unity. By partaking of the blessed food as a family they are ensuring that their family is strong and united. If a family member refuses to share in this blessed food then it is as if they have cut off their relations with their family and become 'Others' or 'Outsiders' " (Li 2013:160-161). Li further noted that the Catholics in her study village informed her that while non-Catholic Traditionalists received their blessings from their Ancestors, they received theirs rather from "God and Mother Maria" by way of attendance at church services (Li 2013:125).

(*Aqkaq tseir kaq tivq kaq ma*). In particular, MATA's further assertions of Akhaness as fundamentally grounded in the carrying of *Aqkaqghanr* or THE Akha Religion have contributed to the Othering of Akha who have discarded the latter for the *Ghanr* of non-Akha Others by framing them as not merely fake or unauthentic Akha but no longer Akha whatsoever, and rather Christians, Catholics, Buddhists and so forth.

### 10.8 “In Honor of the Ancestors”: Modern Ancestral resignifications of place



Figures 10.9 & 10.10: Figure 10.9 on the left is of MATA's Ancestral pole and the seven streamers draping down over the recreated Dae-khawn (*Dae Khanq*) or distinctly Akha communal gathering grounds where each of their post-2008 annual celebrations of the New Year's Ancestral Service have taken place in Tachilek, Myanmar. Figure 10.10 on the right is a close-up image of the sign positioned at the apex of the Ancestral pole and on which the following is written in Akha beneath a large red circle: “The Ancestors are Highly Respected and Venerated” (*Poeq Piq Jm Ma Anr Taq Heeq Ma*). Both photos were taken by the author.

Moving beyond the liminal space or threshold between the non-Akha periphery and Akha core, as conspicuously marked by the Ancestral offering-food table and greeters in addition to a fenced boundary, we emerged into the Akha core as centered on the Dae-khawn or central

gathering grounds for the distinctly Akha celebration. As we did so I noticed the tall Ancestral pole from each of the previous year's celebrations positioned in the very center of the grounds, inviting my gaze upward towards the sky, reflecting MATA's efforts to reframe Akhaness from the deeply grounding Ancestral practices of supposedly isolated upland villages toward the upwardly unifying Ancestral practices and beliefs of a larger, enmeshed Akha World in the making (see figures 10.9 and 10.10 above). This invented tradition of the Ancestral pole, a constant fixture at the now annual celebrations since 2008, has consisted of a large metal pole stretching some 100 feet from the ground into the sky. In order to place the pole in the ground MATA had to hire an industrial sized crane and operator from just across the border in Maesai, Thailand.

Moreover, at the apex of the pole MATA had positioned a small but discernible rectangular shaped sign bearing the following words in red positioned just below a large red circle: "The Ancestors are Highly Respected and Venerated" (*Poeq Piq Jm Ma Anr Taq Heeq Ma*) (see figure 10.10 above). MATA representatives variably identified the large red circle on the apex of the sign with both the Akha Ancestral homeland-state of Jadae as well as the Supreme Creator, A-peu Mi-yae, believed by Prosperous One to be one and the same with the God of Catholics and non-Catholic Christians alike.

Finally, seven colored streamers in the colored sequence of red, white, green, yellow, and sky blue ran down and outwards from the apex of the pole in all directions, blanketing the central seating area and Akha core below with the cosmic blessings or life force (*geevqlanq*) flowing from the Supreme Creator by way of the (Akha) Ancestors. Recall that this particular sequence of colors is believed to have emerged as a salient marker of Akhaness in the context of their short-lived homeland-state of Jadae as previously discussed in chapter eight. The seven

streamers further represented each of the seven major branches of the master Akha (and Hani) Ancestral genealogy as discussed in chapter seven.



Figure 10.11: This figure is of the main performance stage for MATA's New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration in December 2011. The photo was taken by the author.

Thereafter, as we entered the large, open area at the center of the celebration's grounds my eyes were, as on previous years, immediately drawn to the richly decorated stage positioned front and center (see figure 10.11 above). The stage, elevated roughly six feet off the ground, was adorned around its perimeter with an arrangement of brilliant yellow and red flower bouquets interspersed with long dark green palm branches. The stage's background was draped with a larger than life sized color poster adorned with a variety of images and symbols representing Akhaness on numerous scales. The poster, a digital reproduction, stretched some 25 feet high into the sky and 80 feet across the length of the stage.

An expansive mountainous landscape blanketed with dense green forests and framed against a brilliant blue sky formed the poster's backdrop. Upon taking a closer look at the mountains, however, I noticed that several of them were dotted with extensive rubber tree

plantations while a series of rice terraces could be seen in the lower foreground. Thus MATA was simultaneously appealing to their upland heritage while reworking that heritage in an economically productive fashion revealing of the linkages between the productive uplands and consumptive lowlands. The right and left sides of the backdrop were further lined with a thin, darkly colored trim of an intricately woven stitched Akha pattern, albeit in digitally reproduced form. The poster's foreground, moreover, was adorned with an arrangement of symbols representing various aspects of Akhaness in its highly interwoven linguistic, political, cultural, historical and religious forms.

At first glance, MATA's symbolic appeals to a rural, upland heritage as noted above might seem to contradict the very urban and lowland contexts wherein both MATA's members have been positioned as well as where their annual New Year's Ancestral Service-Celebration has occurred. In actuality, however, upland-lowland relations in Akha history more generally speaking have been more dynamic and interrelated than stagnant and in opposition, in spite of claims to the contrary (Geusau 1983, 2000a:143; Tooker 1988:12, 2012:22,29; Kammerer 1986:403). Moreover, while in recent years an expanding number of Akha have moved into different lowland, urban centers throughout the Upper Mekong Region for varying purposes and lengths of time, the majority of Akha continue to reside primarily in upland villages (see Kwanchewan et al. 2003). Thus, as noted earlier, MATA has had to draw from their presumably shared, primordial upland heritage in seeking to promote their ethnic project among members of the general population (see Brass 1974; Guneratne 2002:193; Kaup 2000:17,54). At the same time, however, MATA's ethnic project has been geared towards significantly reworking this heritage in an essentialist and standardized fashion that departs from earlier conceptions and practices of Akhaness and non-Akhaness alike.

MATA further decorated the top of the main performance stage with a series of flags (*parlar parlaer*), eleven in total. Three flags representing the larger Myanmar Nation were positioned at the very center of the flag arrangement. These national flags were surrounded on each side by an additional four flags representing the Akha people or, in the author's reading, crypto-nation. The latter, peripherally positioned ethnic flags were hung at a slightly lower level than the centrally positioned national flags. Throughout the celebration, moreover, I observed further reproductions of MATA's Akha flags beyond the backdrop of the main performance stage in the form of smaller, paper versions of the flag waved alongside of those representing the Myanmar nation by long rows of greeters during the opening ceremony as well as embroidered versions of the flag prominently sewn onto the backsides of elders' traditional jackets and the sides of teenagers' modern headdresses (see figures 10.3 and 10.4 above).

Upon first glance it would seem that MATA has, by way of this particular flag arrangement, defined Akhaness as a "sub-national" way of being or "unit" within the larger Myanmar "geo-body" (Jonsson 2005:236; Thongchai 1994).<sup>212</sup> However, a closer analysis of these salient identity markers from the perspectives of various Akha participant observers highlights their great deal of multivocality or range of associated meanings and interpretations. In short, through their particular flag arrangement, MATA has defined Akhaness not merely as a "sub-national" way of being relative to the Myanmar nation but also as a transregional and indeed transhistorical way of being relative to a larger Akha World that is both transcendent of as well as subsumed by multiple and shifting borders through space and time and wherein Akha are

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<sup>212</sup> Elsewhere, Jonsson has argued in reference to members of the Mien upland minority group in contemporary north Thailand that, "It is through social activities centered on sports and cultural performances at school-grounds (national spaces) that the Mien are defining themselves as a sub-nationality of sorts, and thus as a unit of Thailand" (Jonsson 2005:236).

variably positioned as a “ ‘people in-between,’ ‘people of the middle,’ ‘people of the center,’ and/or ‘people from the distance’ ” (Wang 2013:68).<sup>213</sup>

Moreover, the very presence of this Akha flag, is, according to the best of my knowledge, unique to Myanmar and Myanmar alone. During my travels throughout various parts of the Akha World, I only once came across another artistic rendering of what was referred to as an Akha flag. I came across the latter flag while on the grounds of the non-governmental association AFECT based in the urban town of Chiang Rai, Thailand. In contrast to Myanmar, however, I have neither ever heard of nor seen AFECT’s version of an Akha flag hung alongside of, let alone anywhere near, the ubiquitous triad of flags representing the Thai Nation, Buddhist Sangha and Monarchy, whether in the context of a private home or public event.

Many Akha, moreover, particularly those hailing from regions outside Myanmar, have expressed great surprise and interest upon learning of the existence of an actual Akha flag. Increasing numbers of Akha have come to learn of this flag via various direct and indirect channels such as participation in MATA’s now annual New Year’s Ancestral Service-Celebration, word of mouth, as well as MATA’s calendrical productions and the internet. The internet, in particular, has become an increasingly significant means of exchange among Akha youth in various parts of the region. In addition, I, myself, played a minor role in promoting awareness of these flags.

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<sup>213</sup> Ayoe has argued that: “The etymon ‘Kha’ (low tone) in ‘Akha’ literally means ‘between,’ ‘middle,’ ‘center,’ or ‘distance.’ The affix ‘a’ is used to refer to the names of people, animals, plants, and so on, and indicates that the word is a noun. Therefore, the term Akha can be semantically translated as ‘people in-between,’ ‘people of the middle,’ ‘people of the center,’ and/or ‘people from the distance.’ These meanings are quite simple to explain in reference to the history of Jadae state...The term Akha aptly applies to their political and geographical positions. Therefore, the Akha as ‘people in-between’ refers to a politically independent group of people who were geographically juxtaposed between other (stronger) states. The Akha as ‘people of the middle’ in turn reflects their cosmological view of being at the ‘center’ of the universe...Similarly, ‘people of the center’ indicates their geopolitical position at the center of Jadae...The term Akha was further reinforced as a term of self-reference as a result of the demise of Jadae and migrations of Akha to areas far from their original homeland; hence the fourth semantic meaning of Akha as ‘people from the distance,’ or people residing a great distance from their lost homeland. In other words, Akha refers to ‘the diaspora of Jadae’ and as such embodies a strong nostalgic sentiment towards...Jadae state, the common homeland of all Akha” (Wang 2013:68-69).

The following excerpt from my field notes following an exchange in October 2010 with Pae-sheu A-chin (*Paerxeer Achin*), who was at the time a young Akha Buddhist monk and webmaster residing and studying in Chiang Mai, Thailand, narrates just one instance in which I inadvertently came to play the role of a messenger:

“Earlier this morning I met with A-chin at his monastery...As I prepared to leave he gave me a large mountain cucumber that someone had given to him earlier. He then walked me down to my motorcycle. Along the way he noticed the Shan shoulder bag I was carrying with the Shan flag prominently displayed beneath writing in the Shan script. He commented, ‘Unlike the Shan, we, Akha, do not have a flag of our own.’ In reply, I told him about the flag that had recently been created by some Akha in Burma and flown alongside of the Burmese national flags at the Traditionalist New Year’s Celebration in Tachilek. Achin asked about the flag’s design, noting that he would try and find an image of it to post on his website...” (Field notes, October 6, 2010).<sup>214</sup>

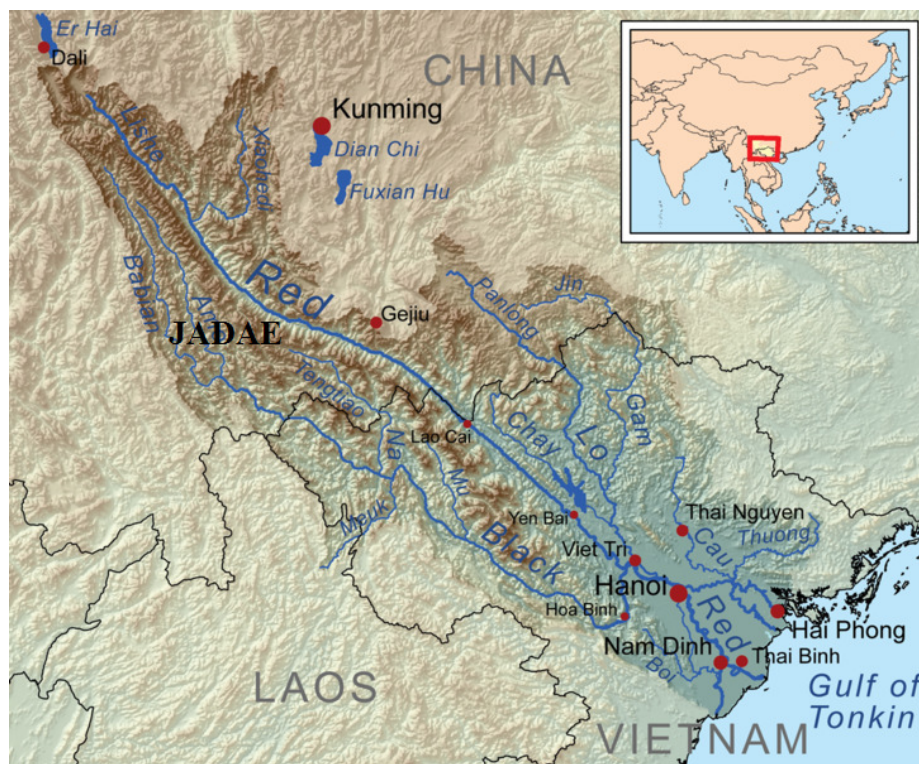


Figure 10.12: Map illustrating the hypothetical location of Jadae in Yuanjiang Valley. (“File:Redriverasiemap.png” by [Kmusser](#) is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#) [<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Redriverasiemap.png/>] Modified by addition of the label “JADAE”).

<sup>214</sup> Achin’s now defunct Thai language website was, “www.lochingcha.com.” Lochingcha, the Thai language phrase referring to swinging, was adopted by Achin in reference to the traditional Akha swing and related annual ceremony.

From another vantage point these Akha flags have represented the historical Akha Ancestral Homeland-State of Jadae (see figure 10.12 above). As noted earlier in chapter eight, Ayoe once informed me that the particular color pattern found in MATA's version of the Akha flag first emerged during the time of Jadae and was subsequently maintained by Akha up until the present, albeit in the subaltern form of the wardrobe rather than their former national flag of Jadae (personal communication, June 10, 2010). In another context, I listened as Ayoe informed some 60 elite Akha youth from various parts of the region that:

“I have been told that in the past when our Ancestors governed Jadae,  
we had our own flag.  
However, following the fall of Jadae to more powerful, in-migrating groups such as the  
Tai,  
we were no longer able to keep our flag.  
However, we never truly lost it.  
Rather, while we could not keep it in its original form,  
Our Ancestors integrated its basic color patterns into the embroidery on our women's  
dress as can still be seen today”  
(personal communication, July 25, 2010).<sup>215</sup>

Ayoe has further suggested that since roughly the late 1980s Akha history has entered a period of (re)vitalization marked by the reemergence among Akha in the region of “a sense of pride in being Akha” and a “search for their long-lost roots” in Jadae (Wang 2013:77).

MATA's materialized reproductions of the Jadae and in turn Akha flag in a more overt rather than subaltern form have represented just one of the numerous kinds of cultural productions being forged as part of this vitalization movement. While Akha throughout the region with at least some knowledge of their oral traditions have long conceived of Jadae in mythical fashion, the unique political, historical, economic and cultural circumstances encountered by Akha in contemporary east Myanmar have permitted them to more freely express or externalize this mythical sense of Jadae in various materialized forms such as the above

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<sup>215</sup> Ayoe addressed this particular group of Akha youth during the “First International Workshop for Young Akha Intellectuals on Akha Zanr” held in north Thailand in July 2010 as noted earlier.

mentioned flags or patches sewn onto jackets and headdresses, all of which have featured prominently in MATA's annual celebration of the New Year's Ancestral Service. Moreover, certain Akha communities in Kengtung, Myanmar have named various Akha spaces after Jadae. For example, Ayoe once informed me that:

“When I visited Kengtung, Burma in 2001,  
 I was taken to an Akha school, fruit orchard, and even restaurant all named after Jadae. Akha there told me that they had named these places after Jadae as they wanted to remember our history and carry on our heritage. In other words, they didn't want to forget our historical roots, especially our Ancestral homeland of Jadae”  
 (personal communication, June 24, 2010; also see Wang 2013:78).



Figures 10.13, 10.14 & 10.15: Each of these figures are close-up photos of certain salient markers of Akhaness that MATA has prominently positioned on the backdrop of the main performance stage during their annual celebrations of the New Year's Ancestral Service. Figure 10.13 on the far left is of a yellow circle emblazoned in the center with an image of a donkey surrounded by each of the twelve animals around which the Akha calendar is organized in terms of days and years. Figure 10.14 in center is of the “Akha Ancestral Genealogy Picture” (*Aqkaq Tseevq Arbar*) as discussed earlier in chapter seven. Figure 10.15 on the far right is an image of a leafy branch from the beu-seu tree in combination with a golden rice stalk holding an abundance of rice seed ready to be harvested. All photos taken by the author.

The foreground of the larger-than-life size poster forming the stage's backdrop, moreover, was adorned with a number of additional cultural productions that MATA has forged in collaboration with their Neo-Traditionalist allies from various parts of the Akha World. These cultural productions, framed against a brilliant blue sky and expansive mountainous landscape,

have come to symbolize various aspects of Akhaness in its Neo-Traditionalist persuasion. As noted earlier, these multivalent symbols have represented Akhaness in its highly intertwined linguistic, political, cultural, historical and religious forms.

The most prominently displayed of these symbols was the “Akha Ancestral Genealogy Picture” (*Aqkaq Tseevq Arbar*) positioned front and center on the poster’s foreground and stretching some twenty-eight feet in length around its framed perimeter (eight by six feet; see figure 10.14 above). As discussed earlier in chapter seven, this salient symbol of Akhaness in its Neo-Traditionalist flavor has taken the form of a computer generated rendering of an expansive mountainous landscape and sky framing a vertically and centrally arranged written list of the names of the twenty five Ancestors shared by all Akha. Moreover, a dark red sun from which brilliant yellow rays emanate is positioned at the apex of this centrally positioned written list of Ancestral names. The latter sun has been said to represent both the Supreme Creator (A-peu Mi-yae) as well as the latter’s abode in the Ancestral homeland of Jadae.

Drawing on fieldwork in an Old-Traditionalist U-lo Akha village in 1980s north Thailand, Tooker has noted that her interlocutors variably represented the ultimate macrocosmic center for Akhaness as:

“(1) the origin point of all human races in China, the walled and moated city called [Ja-dae (*Jadae lanr*)], (2) the house or village of [A-peu Mi-yaer] (creator); or (3) the ancestral village/household to which one returns at death (also the abode of [A-peu Mi-yae])” (Tooker 2012:111).

While certain parallels exist between these two historical conceptions of the “ultimate macrocosmic center” for Akha, MATA’s conception has differed in its spatialized reworking of the latter from a focus on the deeply grounding roots of particular households, clans and villages to the upwardly unifying branches of a larger transregional Akha World in the making.

A key part of MATA's efforts to scale-up Akhaness, moreover, has involved the creative reworking of the Akha cosmography in a distinctly Akha and Christian, particularly Catholic, fashion, given the Christian backgrounds of most of MATA's members and most notably Prosperous One. MATA has sought to rework the boundaries of *Aqkaqghanr* from a presumed microcosmically oriented past focused on the near and intimately known Ancestors more towards a macrocosmically oriented present and future focused on a distant and impersonal Supreme Creator, or in Prosperous One's view, God. In their efforts to rework these boundaries, moreover, MATA has sought to legitimize their position within an emerging transregional Akha World in the making.

A similar process occurred on the Tamil plains of Southern India during the late 1600s as rulers of formerly peripheral regions, including Catholic centers, "sought affiliation to status-enhancing cults with overarching cosmologies in place of localized clan deities to legitimize their expanding power within larger state systems" (see Baker 1984; Dirks 1987; In Mosse 2012:15-16). Robin Horton, moreover, has argued in reference to Africa that the "dissolution of microcosmic boundaries" has been the key factor leading communities to look towards more universal doctrines, either within their own religious traditions or those of others, as a means of more adequately addressing their incorporation into broader social worlds (Horton 1971, 1975:381; In Hefner 1993:22). Horton, however, has been criticized for both treating premodern societies as bounded, isolated units as well as ignoring the larger political and structural contexts in which they have been situated all along (Hefner 1993:23; Ranger 1993).

### 10.9 Concluding Remarks: MATA's Neo-Traditionalist reproductions of a distinctly Akha cosmography

MATA's place making practices as noted above have served to resignify, albeit only temporarily, the space wherein their annual celebration of the New Year's Ancestral Service has occurred since 2008 according to a particular Akha flavor or aesthetic (cf. Rosaldo and Flores 1997; in Flores 1997:262). Moreover, in some ways similar to upland, village based place making practices, these lowland, urban based practices have served in reconfiguring non-Akha space as a "microcosmic totality" of the larger Akha cosmos (Tooker 2012:79-88). In their creative and ever shifting place remaking practices, however, MATA has both been inspired by as well as sought to represent a radically different model of the Akha cosmos. A striking difference between these two place making practices has been that the latter are oriented towards promoting a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging that both subsumes as well as transcends the locally grounding affiliations of village and clan membership.

MATA's spatial practices, moreover, rather than serving to "position themselves as 'central' " so as to fend off more powerful, outside groups and exercise a "degree of autonomy" (Tooker 2012:22; Scott 2009), have served to position themselves as in between so as to align with more powerful, outside groups and thereby exercise a degree of autonomy.<sup>216</sup> While these orientations toward alignment rather than avoidance can arguably be seen as a product of the relatively recent penetration of the modern nation state and global capitalist system into upland spaces and lifeways (cf. Tooker 2004, 2012; Scott 2009), I would further argue that depending upon the particulars of time and place, Akha political histories throughout the Upper Mekong

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<sup>216</sup> In particular, Tooker has argued that, "A main factor in the emergence of the unique complex of spatial practices that served to construct Akha identity is the historical and political positioning of the Akha in a migratory multi-ethnic context, especially in their relationships with outside, more powerful groups. I argue that their spatial practices served to position themselves as 'central,' fending off outside powers and allowing them a degree of autonomy. This argument is consistent with that made by James Scott in his recent book on this region, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, on the creative resistance abilities of 'state-less' societies" (Tooker 2012:22).

Region have variably taken the form of alignment and avoidance in relation to non-Akha outsiders, albeit not necessarily more powerful ones. As noted earlier, moreover, throughout each of MATA's New Year's Ancestral-Celebrations a great deal of political work has been accomplished in relation to multiple scales ranging from the local to national and transregional.

First, by way of kowtowing to the Burman regional commander and his entourage of officials, MATA has sought to establish, maintain and affirm its ties with the powers that be in the local context of Tachilek, Myanmar. In recent years, moreover, at least one of MATA's representatives, Elder Brother A-lae (*Ardovlae*), has sought to more directly enter the realm of national politics by contesting the single seat reserved for an Akha National Affairs Representative in the Shan State Legislature in the 2010 general election, the first such election that had been held since 1990.<sup>217</sup> In both of these manners MATA has worked to represent and position Akha as a sub-nationality of sorts within the Myanmar geo-body. At the same time, however, MATA has further sought to position itself as a major center of power within the larger Akha World or crypto-nation in the making by promoting and solidifying alliances among Akha elite from various parts of the region.

In their efforts to reframe Akhaness, moreover, MATA's ethnic intrapreneurs have simultaneously reframed the Akha cosmos. Foremost, these intrapreneurs have fundamentally reworked the meanings, positions and practices associated with first, the Ancestors, and, second, the Supreme Creator. In this manner, MATA has worked to fundamentally reorient Akhaness from a focus on the local as reflected in deeply grounding household Ancestral practices and

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<sup>217</sup> Elder Brother A-lae or Mr. Ar Lae ran as an independent candidate against Mr. Peter Thaug Sein of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), Myanmar's ruling political party. Mr. Peter Thaug Sein won the election with 18,189 votes to Mr. Ar Lae's 9,226 votes (< <http://www.myanmarelections.org/>> accessed October 23, 2014). On a further note, during MATA's December 2013 celebration of the New Year's Ancestral Service the main guest of honor was none other than Mr. Peter Thaug Sein and not the Burman regional commander of Tachilek.

village communal rites to the supra-local by fostering upwardly unifying Ancestral beliefs and regional communal rites.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Conclusions

#### 11.1 Rising Religion and Crypto-Nationalism in the Akha World of the Upper Mekong Region

In this dissertation I have highlighted the efforts of Prosperous One and his Neo-Traditionalist disciples to imagine, negotiate, and actualize a pan-Akha sense of belonging of a profoundly religious, authentic, and modern nature. I have situated their Neo-Traditionalist movements against the backdrop of the multiple and shifting nature of Akha religio-politics through space and time. Their efforts represent a particular manifestation of the global rise of religion in identitarian politics that not only challenges the paradigm that modernization inevitably leads to the disenchantment of social life but also frames the category of religion as an ongoing historical construct rather than a naturalized given.

Akha Neo-Traditionalists, moreover, have sought to promote the very “survival” of Akha as a distinct people with their own religion, namely the “Akha Religion”. This process can thus be likened to that of “survival through religion” to build on the Comaroffs’ observation of a global shift from “cultural survival” to “survival through culture” as part of a broader trend towards the incorporation of ethnicity, albeit in an essentialized rather than alienated form (2009:19). Indeed, as described throughout this dissertation, Akha Neo-Traditionalists’ movement for “survival through religion” has simultaneously been a decolonization movement.

I have further built on and challenged earlier work on ethnic formations in a national and transnational context in arguing that contrary to conventional thought, transnational identitarian formations such as those of the Akha and other transnational minorities such as the Basques, Hmong, Iu-Mien, Karen, Kurds, and Roma have oftentimes been rooted not in the failure but rather the success of nation states in crafting ethnicity as an ever salient marker of collectivities

within a national framework. Many of the ethnic entrepreneurs behind these transnational movements have in actuality framed their identitarian productions in reference rather than opposition to the dominant model of the nation state. In addition, many of these transnational identitarian formations have in no way sought to challenge or transcend the multiple national frameworks in which their members have been embedded.

I have accordingly described the ever evolving Akha World in the making as a non-state space nevertheless shaped in the likeness and image of the state on multiple fronts. I have discussed the various state-making technologies that Akha elite have employed in bringing their non-state space of the larger Akha World to fruition (Scott 1998:78). These technologies have included transforming Akhaness from an oral to a literate culture, creating a unified orthography, reforming and standardizing Akha culture in the form of the Akha Religion, inventing transregional traditions, producing symbolic markers of translocal Akhaness, and generating a standardized historical narrative wherein Akha figure front and center (Morton 2010, 2013). Akha elite have further capitalized on their genealogical ties of ancient kinship as a means of not only anchoring the emergent Akha World but also rendering that world more legible.

These elite have been adamant, however, in conceiving of this emerging Akha World as a “non-territorial” and even “virtual” space equally molded by their common bonds of ethnic kinship and divergent experiences of national belonging (Wang, personal communication, November 29, 2011). They have accordingly disagreed with my suggestions that their Akha World in the making can be likened to a non-state formation shaped in the likeness and image of a state. Indeed, Akha elite have been constrained in their efforts to produce a larger Akha World due to first and foremost, their lacking any state of their own, and, second, their firm positions in

different territorial based states throughout the region. As noted throughout this dissertation, moreover, Akha elite have been highly cognizant of their lacking any state of their own.

Thus it was only during the final stage of writing and after much reflection on the question of how to represent Akha elites' visions and productions of a larger Akha World that I introduced the term "crypto-nationalism" as a means of describing their identitarian productions.<sup>218</sup> In introducing this concept of "crypto-nationalism" I have aimed to contribute towards efforts to critically engage with and represent the ever shifting nature of identitarian politics among ethnic minority elite working to construct subaltern identities the world over. To summarize, I have used the term "crypto-nationalism" to refer to a particular kind of collective identitarian formation that:

11. first, while existing betwixt and between the national and transnational, is firmly based in multiple territorial sites;
12. second, is in large part mimetic of the national, albeit not always with either the same intentions or consequences;
13. third, neither transcends nor is subsumed by the national and may in certain contexts serve as a buttress for and in turn be buttressed by the national;
14. fourth, not unlike the rise of various nationalisms the world over, is imagined and indeed predicated on the basis of an inherently cosmopolitan outlook (cf. Anderson 1998);
15. fifth, is distinct from the national in lacking both contiguous territorial sovereignty as well as a monopoly on violence within that territory (exhibiting rather a checkerboard type of territoriality incorporated by the national on multiple fronts);

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<sup>218</sup> As noted earlier in chapter one, Herzfeld introduced the term "*crypto-colonialism*" to describe the experiences of a number of modern nation states such as Greece and Thailand that, while having escaped direct colonialism by Western powers, were nevertheless constrained in their independence by Western powers (2002). For Herzfeld it is the very celebratory claim of such nations to having never been colonized that is the preeminent trait of a "crypto-colony."

16. sixth, is cultivated on the part of ethnic minorities that have both undergone serial experiences of colonialism through space and time as well as exhibited a heightened degree of awareness of their lack of any state of their own;
17. seventh, represents a historically particular type of decolonizing methodology that to a great extent involves an appropriation of the tools of the colonizers;
18. eighth, is often highly contested in its centering objectives at the local level by the decentralizing nature of communal life on the local sub-national level;
19. ninth, while premised on a fundamental appeal to that which is perceived as the traditional is in actuality a highly modernist project;
20. and, last, is strongly claimed by its producers to be something other than a *nationalist* formation.

In essence, it is Akha elites' heightened consciousness as to their lack of any state of their own along with their strong denial of having any ambitions for such a state that mark their vision of a larger Akha World as a distinctly crypto-nationalist formation.

Throughout the dissertation I have highlighted various aspects of Akha elites' crypto-nationalist project (i.e. the Akha World) while noting a number of obstacles that they have encountered in bringing this project to fruition. I focused most intensively, however, on the religio-political aspects of their crypto-nationalist formation. This is due to the fact that religion has long been and continues to be intimately intertwined with both ethnic as well as nationalist identitarian formations throughout much of Southeast Asia and beyond. This is especially the case in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma), both of which have been at the center of Akha elite's Neo-Traditionalist movement.

## 11.2 Speculations on the Futures of Akha Crypto-Nationalism

In this final section of the dissertation I offer some speculative comments on the possible futures of Akha crypto-nationalism. As one might imagine, much has transpired in various parts of the Akha World since the time that I conducted the main period of fieldwork upon which this dissertation is based (October 2009 through June 2012). Since that time the movement has lost much momentum as a result of two main developments. First, one of the movement's key figures, Ayoe Nyaw-byae, has left north Thailand for southwest China where he has obtained a position as an assistant professor at the Yunnan University of Nationalities in Kunming, China. The demands of his position, and not to mention those of his nuclear and extended family in China, have limited his involvements in the movement. Recall that from roughly 2008 onward Ayoe had played a key role as not only an organic intellectual but also a middleman within the burgeoning Neo-Traditionalist movement.

Second, the major Tachilek-based financiers behind MATA have become both increasingly skeptical of Prosperous One's ability to lead their Neo-Traditionalist movement as well as eager to play stronger roles in envisioning and in turn presenting their productions of Akhaness to the larger Akha World. Nevertheless, Prosperous One and his Neo-Traditionalist disciples have continued their (internal) proselytization efforts throughout various parts of the Akha World, albeit most intensively on their own national terrain of east Myanmar. In addition, MATA has in recent years been able to expand its sub-national networks upwards to the level of the state government. The latter was evidenced by the fact that the main guest of honor for MATA's December 2013 celebration of the New Year's Ancestral Service was none other than

Mr. Peter Thaung Sein, the Akha National Affairs Representative in the Shan State Legislature, and not the Burman regional commander of Tachilek.<sup>219</sup>

Finally, while it is too soon to say for sure, certain developments in Thailand and China may in the very near future pose additional obstacles towards Neo-Traditionalists' crypto-nationalist movement. First, in Thailand the May 2014 rise of an ultra-nationalist/royalist military dictatorship that is currently redrafting the country's constitution may signify an abrupt return to a not so distant era when Akha and other upland minorities with ethnic kin residing in other parts of the region beyond Thailand were considered highly suspect of their loyalty towards the Thai King as symbolic of the nation writ large. In addition, the military government's current suspension of local level elections, particularly at the sub-district level, will further detract from the little gains that Akha and other ethnic minorities throughout the nation have made in terms of sub-national political representation by way of the ballot box since the late 1990s to early 2000s.

Second, in China the Communist Party has since the 1990s been quietly revamping its ethnic policies from an earlier integrationist approach wherein ethnicity was officially recognized to a more assimilationist approach wherein ethnicity is downplayed in relation to the nation (Leibold 2013). As a result, Akha and Hani elite in southwest China may in the near future see declining state support in the form of funds and authorizations for their distinctly ethnic endeavors, whether on the national or transnational scale. Meanwhile, across the border in Laos the government remains cautious of any claims made on the basis of ethnicity due to the relatively large numbers of non-Lao ethnic minorities residing within its borders along with the fact that lowland, ethnic Lao dominate the nation's political, economic and sociocultural spheres (Evans 2003:214,217).

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<sup>219</sup> Mr. Peter Thaung Sein was elected to this position in the 2010 general election. He was at the time and remains at present a member of Myanmar's dominant political party known as the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

Nevertheless, in spite of, or perhaps because of, these obstacles I would speculate that as in the recent past, Akha Neo-Traditionalists throughout the region will continue to imagine, negotiate and actualize their crypto-nationalist project of the larger Akha World in relation to their multiple and shifting positions as both firmly embedded members of particular nation states and also a larger, emerging Akha World spanning the borders of four, and possibly, five nation states if and when Akha in Vietnam join the movement. In this manner, the concept of crypto-nationalism as outlined in this dissertation offers a particularly useful model for understanding Akha elite's identitarian productions as they have been crafted in relation to varying scales ranging from the local to sub-national, regional and transnational, all the while reflecting and being made in large part in the image of the national. Finally, it is my hope that this concept will be of use to other scholars seeking to critically engage with and represent the ever shifting nature of identitarian politics among ethnic minority elite working to construct subaltern identities the world over.

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