

# Neo-Traditionalist Movements: Akha Transformations of *Aqkaqghanr* in the Upper Mekong Region

ขบวนการเคลื่อนไหวจารัตนิยมใหม่: การปรับเปลี่ยน  
“อ่าข่าญ็อง” ในกลุ่มลุ่มแม่น้ำโขงตอนบน

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## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ถกเถียงถึงชุมชนชาวอาข่า ซึ่งผู้เขียนนิยามว่าเป็นชุมชนประเพณีแบบใหม่ที่เกิดจากการรวมตัวของชาวอาข่าจากพื้นที่ต่าง ๆ ทั่วลุ่มน้ำโขงตอนบน เพื่อปฏิรูปและรื้อฟื้นวัฒนธรรมอาข่าของตนขึ้นใหม่ ความพยายามของกลุ่มประเพณีใหม่นี้ได้เกิดขึ้นท่ามกลางกระแสการเปลี่ยนศาสนาจากศาสนาดั้งเดิมไปสู่ศาสนาคริสต์และพุทธของชาวอาข่าที่เพิ่มจำนวนอย่างรวดเร็ว และในท่ามกลางการเปลี่ยนแปลงของภูมิภาคลุ่มน้ำโขงตอนบน เป้าหมายหลักของชาวประเพณีใหม่นี้ได้แก่ ประการแรกการป้องกันมิให้ชาวอาข่าเปลี่ยนศาสนาไปนับถือคริสต์ และประการที่สอง สนับสนุนให้ชาวอาข่าที่นับถือคริสต์เปลี่ยนกลับมานับถือความเชื่อดั้งเดิม ผู้เขียนพิจารณานัยยะของกรณีศึกษาดังกล่าวเพื่อทำความเข้าใจความสัมพันธ์อันซับซ้อนระหว่างศาสนา ชาติพันธุ์และประเพณีนิยมในโลกปัจจุบัน

**คำสำคัญ:** ประเพณีนิยมแบบใหม่, วัฒนธรรมอาข่า, ภูมิภาคลุ่มน้ำโขงตอนบน

## Abstract

The author discusses the efforts of a particular community of *Neo-Traditionalist* Akha in various parts of the Upper Mekong Region to reform and revitalize *Aqkaqghanr* or “traditional Akha culture”. These Neo-Traditionalist efforts occur amidst rising rates of Akha foremost conversion to Christianity and to Buddhism to a lesser extent, as well as against the backdrop of a rapidly transforming Upper Mekong Region. The main goals of these Neo-Traditionalists are first, to prevent further Akha conversions to Christianity and second, to encourage Christian (Akha) to return to *Aqkaqghanr*. The author further considers the implications of this particular Akha case for broader understandings of the complex relations between religion, ethnicity and traditionalism in the contemporary world.

**Keywords:** Neo-traditionalism, Akha culture, Upper Mekong region

## Introduction

Akha communities in the Upper Mekong Region have experienced different policies of national integration and assimilation throughout the past 60 years or so.<sup>1</sup> As a result of these divergent policies, Akha have experienced varying degrees of difficulty in transmitting their traditional culture to the next generation. In many cases, much of traditional Akha culture or *Aqkaqghanr*<sup>2</sup> has been lost. Certain communities, however, have been able to better maintain their practices of *Aqkaqghanr* than others. For example, while some communities have reduced their ritual practices to either six or three annual ancestral services, others continue to carry the full round of either twelve or nine ancestral rites in addition to numerous other healing, agricultural, communal and life-cycle related rituals.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the negative impacts of state policies, Akha society has been further impacted by different experiences of religious conversion. Many Akha in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma), for example, have adopted either the Catholic or Protestant denominations of Christianity as well as Buddhism to a lesser extent and abandoned many aspects of *Aqkaqghanr*, particularly in terms of the traditional belief system and ritual practices. As a result of these conversions Akha society has been divided and conflicts have arisen at every level, ranging from the household to village, country and region (Li, 2013: 144-163)

At the same time, however, a large number of *Neo-Traditionalists*<sup>4</sup> in the region continue to carry their traditional culture. In this essay I define *Neo-Traditionalism* as a process of re-interpretation by which a particular group of people actively works to vitalize and maintain their earlier beliefs and practices while modifying and adapting them to their current situations and needs. A particular group of Neo-Traditionalists from Myanmar, China, Laos

and Thailand are working together to vitalize and maintain their earlier beliefs and practices in a variety of ways while modifying and adapting them to their current situations and needs (see Morton, 2010, 2013; Li 2013: 44-49, 87-106)

The members of this regional network are working to promote a common writing system, organizing conferences and cultural festivals, and developing a variety of media forms such as books, movies and karaoke music videos. Moreover, one of their primary goals is to both prevent further conversions to Christianity and also encourage Christians to return to *Aqkaqghanr*. Their efforts are occurring amidst the region's ongoing transformation "from the opium producing battlefields of the Golden Triangle to the expanding regional market of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)" (Morton, 2013: 30). Indeed, Akha Neo-Traditionalists' regional efforts on behalf of *Aqkaqghanr* have been greatly facilitated by the expanding network of highways, bridges, airports and telecommunications crisscrossing and connecting various parts of the region (Glassman, 2010; Thein Swe and Chambers, 2011).

Their efforts are geared towards supporting the vitalization and preservation of traditional Akha culture. Neo-Traditionalist Akha hold their ritual practices in very high regard, seeing them as being handed down to them by their ancestors for many generations. In contrast, Akha that have converted to Christianity have adopted the attitude of many Euro-American Christian missionaries in judging other religions to be inferior and looking down on traditionalist Akha as carrying a "heavy" and "primitive" form of "demon worship" (cf. Nightingale, 1990; Wang, 2013: 74-75)

## ***Aqkaqghanr*: ‘Religion’, ‘Ethnicity’, ‘Culture?’**

### **Outsider Perspectives on *Aqkaqghanr***

Western anthropologists who have conducted research with Akha in Myanmar and Thailand have offered a variety of definitions of *Aqkaqghanr*. For example, Paul W. Lewis, a U.S. Baptist missionary and anthropologist, defines *ghanr* as “customs, religion, way of doing things”, with an overall stress on “religion” and “ritual” (1968: 351). Leo G.M.A. von Geusau, a Dutch Catholic Priest turned anthropologist who worked on behalf of traditional Akha culture in Thailand for many years before his death in 2003, describes *ghanr* in a more holistic manner as, “religion, way of life, customs, etiquette, and ceremonies (Geusau, 1983: 249).” U.S. anthropologist Cornelia Kammerer in turn stresses the importance of understanding the indigenous Akha understanding of *ghanr* as it is the latter that has, “guided Akha reactions to Christian proselytization” (1990: 280)

Japanese anthropologist Mika Toyota argues that Geusau (1983, 2000), Kammerer (1986, 1990, 1996) and U.S. anthropologist Deborah Tooker (1988, 1992) initially framed their more holistic conceptions of *ghanr* as a critique of the Christian missionary tendency to interpret *ghanr* solely as ‘religion’ (Toyota, 2003, p. 305). Toyota further notes that Geusau, Kammerer and Tooker were careful to distinguish between indigenous Akha and Euro-American understandings of identity, ultimately arguing that Akha notions of their identity:

“...are centered on (the) acceptance of shared meanings  
and (a) common understanding of the Akha cultural system  
(Toyota, 2003: 305).”

Kammerer argues that, “Akha-ness depends upon shared descent from an apical forebear and common customs inherited from the ancestors

(and accordingly) conceives of *Aqkaqghanr* as ‘a coherent cosmologically-grounded cultural system’ (1989: 384-396 In Toyota 2003: 306).” Kammerer, moreover, notes that when Euro-American Christian missionaries first came to Thailand to convert Akha they, “did not recognize that (*Aqkaqghanr*) is 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, the earliest foreign missionaries to work with Akha in Thailand 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 (*Ghanr*) (Kammerer, 1990: 281).”

In brief, Geusau, Kammerer, and Tooker are unanimous in their representations of *Aqkaqghanr* as fundamental to Akha notions of their collective identity.

Tooker (2004), however, argues that Akha notions of their collective identity shifted during the early to mid 1980s. In particular, she argues in reference to one particular upland Akha community in North Thailand that their notions of collective identity were transformed from a “comprehensive, holistic form (1982-1985) to a compartmentalized form (1985-1998)” as a result of “increasing nation-state and capitalist penetration (2004: 243).” In support of her argument Tooker holds that, first, Akha in general have assimilated into a “modern” Thai identity that is already “compartmentalized”, second, “old” traditionalists have relegated ancestral practices to “special spheres as opposed to having them permeate everyday life”, third, “new” traditionalists have selectively revived a modified set of ancestral practices, and last, Christian converts have been able to remain living within their

communities rather than being made to leave as was done in the past (2004: 279).

### **Akha Perspectives on *Aqkaqghanr***

The interpretations of *Aqkaqghanr* by various Euro-American scholars as noted above provide insight into both the nature of Akha traditional culture and also the relationship between ethnic and religious identity among Akha. However, their interpretations of *Aqkaqghanr* only focus on some aspects of the indigenous Akha understanding of *Aqkaqghanr*. In this section I elaborate more fully on the native understandings of *Aqkaqghanr* that I learned about through my interactions with Neo-Traditionalists within and beyond my primary research site in north Thailand, hereafter referred to anonymously as *Arbawr* village.<sup>5</sup>

As for Tooker's (2004) claim regarding a post-1980s "compartmentalization" of Akha identity, I agree with her underlying argument that "notions of collective identity" among Akha have been greatly influenced by "increasing nation-state and capitalist penetration", and that Akha have more or less assimilated to a "modern" Thai identity. At the same time, however, I have found that Akha have created rather an "Akha-Thai" national identity that remains distinct from that of lowlander Thais. Moreover, I have found that many Neo-Traditionalist villagers continue to practice the full range of annual rituals associated with *Aqkaqghanr* as was done in the past by their ancestors before them, albeit with certain modifications.

In addition, I have learned that the earlier prohibition against converts to other traditions remaining within the village gates still continues in certain villages. I have also learned that in villages where it is no longer possible to maintain this prohibition due to state intervention and limits on land, the

villagers themselves often self-segregate into different sub-villages along the lines of place, ritual life, and social relations more generally. Moreover, many elder Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village told me that they wished that they could still enforce this prohibition as was done in the past in order to maintain a stronger sense of unity and community within the village gates as well as ensure the overall well-being of the community.

As Geusau, Kammerer and Tooker have all argued, *Aqkaqghanr* is much more than simply ‘religion’ as understood by first foreign and now Akha Christian missionaries. For example, a thirty eight year old Akha man from Thailand who recently completed a Master’s degree in Cultural Studies at Maefahluang University in Chiang Rai once told me that *ghanr* is much more than just religion and yet also more than culture. He told me that *ghanr* is also found in one’s blood, which he argues is more embodied than culture, and that individuals with Akha blood flowing in their veins are carrying *Aqkaqghanr*, regardless of whether they may be Neo-Traditionalist, Christian, Buddhist or Muslim and so on. He further told me that there is no accurate term for translating *Aqkaqghanr* into either Thai or English and that it is best to simply use the native Akha term in of itself so as to not create any misunderstandings.

Based on my experiences living among and learning from Neo-Traditionalist Akha in various parts of north Thailand, however, I hold that *Aqkaqghanr* can be divided into two major parts, first, *Daevqghanr*, and second, *Xirghanr*. *Daevqghanr* refers to all of the rituals, regulations and customs involving the living. These rites include but are not limited to naming ceremonies conducted at birth, weddings, blessing ceremonies, soul calling rites, annual ancestral services, annual communal rituals, regulations governing everyday life as well as food, language, music, dance, dress and oral literature more generally.



*Xirghanr* refers to all of the rituals, regulations and customs related to the deceased. These rites include all of the preparations that must be carried out in order to properly bury individuals who pass away naturally as well as “purify” the village in case of a violent or accidental death. As noted earlier, I hold that *Aqkaqghanr* can be most accurately translated into English as “traditional Akha culture”. Therefore, it is clear that from the Neo-Traditionalist perspective as outlined above, *Aqkaqghanr* includes much more than simply ‘religion’ and yet ‘religion’ and ‘ritual’ are certainly very important parts of *Aqkaqghanr*.

Akha converts to other religious traditions, however, tend to have a different understanding of *Aqkaqghanr* than that of Neo-Traditionalists. For example, a leading Akha Baptist missionary from Chiang Rai once told me that:

“...*Ghanr* is ‘religion’. All of the traditionalist (non-Christian) rituals and beliefs are associated with *ghanr*. And so all of these things must be discarded when one becomes a Christian. Moreover, in my opinion I prefer to use the term *Aqkaq Sanr* instead of *Aqkaq Ghanr* to refer to my Akha ‘cultural’ identity. The Akha term *Sanr* means ‘to have or to own’. As such, *Aqkaq Sanr* refers to our Akha ‘culture’, to those parts of our Akha identity that we share in common with non-Christian Akha. It has no ‘religious’ meanings whatsoever (personal communication, June 15, 2012).”

Lastly, he emphasized that ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ should and can be separated from one another and that Akha Christians, while carrying a different religion, are still Akha in terms of their culture.

As an example of what he meant by the common ‘cultural’ identity of Akha, the missionary referred to the “Akha Swing” (*lavqceq*) which is ritually constructed each year by Neo-Traditionalist Akha during the height of the rainy season. During this time, moreover, Neo-Traditionalists make two offerings to the Ancestors in order to ask for their “blessings” (*geeqlanq*) for good health, prosperity and an abundant rice crop in the coming year. The missionary noted that some Christians had recently decided to revive the practice of constructing the swing in of itself and minus all of the traditionalist rituals, especially the ancestral offerings. “The swing in of itself”, he stressed, “is an important part of our common Akha ‘culture’”. He further added, however, that when they build the swing in the Christian context, “We do so in the name of God”, suggesting that the swing has been given an additional ‘religious’ and not merely ‘cultural’ meaning that sets it apart from the Traditionalist context.

This argument regarding the division between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ makes sense given the fact that while Akha Christians have adopted a new ‘religion’ they nevertheless continue to see themselves as being ‘Akha’, albeit as *Christian Akha* who further set themselves both apart from as well as above non-Christian Akha. In conclusion, different views of *Aqkaqghanr* have led both outside scholars and also Akha themselves to look at the collective identity of Akha in different ways. In the following section I briefly describe the ways in which Akha Christian and Buddhist converts have reframed their notions of Akha identity and orientations towards *Aqkaqghanr*.

## **Abandonment and Accommodation: Akha Christian and Buddhist Orientations Towards *Aqkaqghanr***

Elsewhere I have argued that the Christian belief system is largely incompatible with that of *Aqkaqghanr* or traditional Akha culture (see Li, 2013: 112-144). Early foreign Christian missionaries, particularly Protestant-Baptists, working with Akha encouraged a complete transformation in their converts from *Aqkaqghanr* to Christianity, seeing *Aqkaqghanr* as a backwards form of “demon worship” (cf. Nightingale, 1990). As a result, the majority of Christian Akha in Thailand today, inclusive of both Protestant-Baptists and Catholics, have abandoned nearly all aspects of *Aqkaqghanr* and refuse to directly participate in any rituals carried out by their non-Christian relatives or fellow villagers.

Christian Akha no longer practice any of the annual rituals according to *Aqkaqghanr*, including household level ancestral offerings and healing ceremonies as well as communal level rites relating to the renewal of the village gate or the rice cultivation cycle. Christian Akha have accordingly abandoned the ritual objects associated with each of these rituals, the most significant of which is the household level ancestral altar. Moreover, Christian leaders, regardless of denomination, forbid their followers from seeking out the help of various traditional healing specialists such as *Pirma* (Ritual Reciters) and *Nyirpaq* (Shamanic Healers).<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to Christians, I have argued that Buddhist Akha tend to retain some aspects of *Aqkaqghanr* in terms of their religious beliefs and practices (see Li, 2013: 112-144). While Buddhist converts are generally required to replace their traditional ancestral altars with a statue of the Buddha, their new Buddhist practices, particularly merit making ceremonies, allow for them to continue both paying respects to as well as asking for blessings from

their ancestors, albeit by way of monks rather than their former household ancestral altars. Moreover, many Buddhist villagers informed me that depending upon their particular situation and needs they practice *Aqqaqghanr* interchangeably with Buddhism.

For example, many Buddhists continue to seek out the services of various traditional ritual specialists such as *Pirma*, *Nyirpaq*, and Traditional Medicine Specialists. Nevertheless, Buddhists, not unlike Christians, tend not to participate in the various communal level rites being observed by Neo-Traditionalists throughout the year. Buddhists also do not observe any of the Neo-Traditionalist rituals that are carried out in conjunction with the cultivation of rice. In the following section I consider the nature of the relationship between religion and ethnicity in relation to Akha and a number of other ethnic groups.

### **Religion and Ethnicity**

In studying the relationship between religion and ethnicity, scholars usually stress “the conservation role of religion in maintaining ethnic customs, language, and group solidarity (Mullins, 1989: 3 In Chumpol, 1992: 8).” Paul Rutledge, for example, notes that “religion can on the one hand serve as a means of acceptable societal identification, and yet simultaneously on the other provide the means of maintaining a separate ethnic self-identity” (1985: 52). Chumpol holds that the case of the Karen in Thailand fits Rutledge’s concept because their religious conversion experiences to Christianity have not only provided them with a means of maintaining a clear identity as Karen, but have also provided a means of maintaining a separate identity from other non-Karen Christians. As a result, Chumpol holds that “while Karen who converted to Christianity are still Karen, they are Christian Karen. They create a new identity as Christian Karen” (1992: 5).

As Akha have converted to different religions they have likewise constructed different identities. For example, Christian Akha and Buddhist Akha have constructed their own identity which is clearly different from that of Neo-Traditionalist Akha. Moreover, Akha in Thailand today hold conflicting ideas about the relationship between their religious and ethnic identities. Neo-Traditionalists see religion and ethnic identity as part of the same system and hold that a change in one results in a change in the other. For example, on one occasion as I spoke with an elder Neo-Traditionalist about Akha experiences of religious conversion, I asked him, “What do you feel is the most important part of being Akha?” He replied:

“First, I would say that it begins from the very beginning of life. When a child is born a naming ceremony is held and they are given a genealogical name. Their genealogical name is a fundamental marker of their being Akha. At the same time, we must carry *Aqkaqghanr* and make offerings to our ancestors. As you know, the Protestants and Catholics no longer do any of these things and so they are no longer like Akha. They are different (personal communication, June 5, 2011).”

This particular elder’s views were similarly expressed by many other Neo-Traditionalists residing in and beyond *Arbawr* village. These Neo-Traditionalists asserted that Akha must both have a genealogical name as well as carry *Aqkaqghanr*. In contrast, as noted earlier Christians see religion and culture as different parts of their ethnic identity and hold that changing their religion does not change their ethnic identity as Akha. Nevertheless, it is clear that as Akha convert to other religious traditions, changes take place in terms of their economic, social and cultural life that lead to a change in identity as described earlier. In the next section I discuss the concept of Neo-

Traditionalism as it applies in the Akha case. I then provide some historical background on the formation of a regional network of Neo-Traditionalist Akha that has been working to reform, vitalize and maintain *Aqkaqghanr* since 2008.

### **Akha Neo-Traditionalist Movements**

In this paper I use the term “Neo-Traditionalists” to refer to certain non-Christian and non-Buddhist Akha communities which are working to reform, revitalize and maintain *Aqkaqghanr* or “traditional Akha culture”. Neo-Traditionalists include both formally educated and non-educated Akha living in upland villages and lowland urban settings. As noted earlier, I define “Neo-Traditionalism” as a process of active reinterpretation by which a particular community actively works to revitalize, modify and ultimately maintain what they identify as their ancestral beliefs and practices while modifying and adapting them to their current situations and needs (see Gable, 2000; Spear, 2003).

My use of the term “Neo-Traditionalism” in reference to Akha stresses the dynamic nature of *Aqkaqghanr* as it has been continuously reinterpreted by various communities in reference to their contemporary needs and circumstances. It is important to note, however, that the Akha Neo-Traditionalists referred to in this paper differ in their positions on the often sensitive questions of what aspects of *Aqkaqghanr* can and should be reformed as well as how. Their positions range from ‘conservatives’ to ‘reformists’ and ‘revolutionaries’. The dynamic nature of *Aqkaqghanr*, moreover, has often been overlooked by foreign and Akha Christian leaders alike who hold *Aqkaqghanr* to be a static and “primitive” relic of the (ir) “heathenish past” destined to vanish and be replaced by the one “true” and “modern” (R) eligion of Christianity.

In the latter part of the paper I discuss the efforts of a particular community of Neo-Traditionalist Akha from various parts of the Upper Mekong Region to reform and revitalize *Aqkaqghanr* or “traditional Akha culture”. Their efforts are taking place at various levels ranging from the village to national and regional. I begin with a brief introduction to the history behind the formation of a regional coalition of Neo-Traditionalists working to reform and revitalize *Aqkaqghanr* under the umbrella organization, MAPS, or the “Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability”.

### **MAPS: The Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability**

The Neo-Traditionalist Akha associated with MAPS first began meeting formally in August of 2008 when an international meeting was held in the Thai-Myanmar border town of Maesai in order to develop a unified Akha writing system (Morton, 2010: 106). At least 36 Christian and Neo-Traditionalist Akha leaders from China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand attended the meeting and for some of them it was their first time to meet each other (Morton, 2010: 107). The purpose of the meeting was to try and develop a unified Akha writing system to be used by all Akha residing in the Mekong region in the interests of promoting both the preservation of Akha culture and language and also for greater regional communication among Akha. However, the common writing system that they developed has yet to be adopted by certain Akha Christian missionaries based in East Myanmar and North Thailand. The latter missionaries continue to use slightly modified versions of a much older writing system developed by the American Baptist Missionary Paul Lewis and his Akha collaborators in Kengtung, Myanmar in the early 1950s (Morton, 2010: 122).

It was during the meeting mentioned above that a particular group of Neo-Traditionalist Akha leaders found that they shared a number of goals related to the vitalization and preservation of *Aqkaqghanr*. Since that time they have been contacting each other via email, phone and face-to-face meeting to plan their work on behalf of Akha and *Aqkaqghanr*. At one point one of the leaders proposed that they set up an international organization to coordinate their work. The other leaders agreed and the organization was established under the name, *Naqkawq Akha Dzoeqcawq Armav (NADA)* or The Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability (MAPS).

In late July of 2010 MAPS held an international workshop on *Aqkaqghanr* in Chiang Rai, Thailand for young Akha intellectuals from different parts of the region. Akha youth from China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand joined the five-day workshop. Several elder Akha ritual specialists from my primary study village, *Arbawr* village, were invited to the workshop in order to share their knowledge of Akha traditional culture with the younger generation of Akha intellectuals. The goals of the leaders organizing the workshop were to, first, educate the youth participants about traditional Akha culture in general, second, discuss the issue of how to go about maintaining and revitalizing traditional Akha culture, and, lastly, strengthen relations among Akha from different parts of the region.

On the last day of the meeting the participants selected various leaders for MAPS-including a chairperson and one representative each from China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. A charismatic figure from Myanmar-a retired military colonel from Kengtung and current head of the Myanmar Association for Traditional Akha Culture (MATA) based in Tachilek, Myanmar-was chosen as the chairperson of the organization. As a result the international Neo-Traditionalist organization MAPS came into being.



The main goal of the leaders of MAPS is to lead the international Neo-Traditionalist Akha community in preserving, documenting and modifying *Aqkaqghanr*. Moreover, they are working to encourage both Akha youth to learn about and appreciate their traditional culture and language, and also Christian Akha to return or convert back to *Aqkaqghanr*. The leaders of MAPS are also playing a significant role in helping Neo-Traditionalist Akha to build cross-border connections and relationships throughout the Mekong region. For example, since roughly 2008 MAPS has organized numerous cross-border activities such as international meetings, cultural festivals, cross-border tours and so forth.

The cross-border movements organized by this group of Neo-traditionalists can be seen in part as building on the earlier work of a now deceased Dutch priest turned anthropologist named Leo G.M.A. von Geusau. Between the mid 1980s and his death in 2003, Geusau worked to support Traditionalist Akha under the foundation, The Mountain Peoples' Culture and Development Project (MPCD), which was based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Since the early 1990s Geusau had worked to help Akha residing in the Mekong region build relationships and connections with each other.

For example, he took some of his Akha staff from Thailand to each of the International Conferences on Hani-Akha Culture that were held in China in 1993, 1999 and 2002. At these conferences Akha from different parts of the Mekong Region were able to first meet each other, exchange ideas and begin working together on different issues. Moreover, Geusau organized a number of smaller workshops in north Thailand and Xishuangbanna, China in order to discuss the issues of how to both preserve and reform *Aqkaqghanr* as well as build and maintain stronger connections among Akha in the Mekong region. Akha leaders from China, Myanmar and Thailand participated in these

early workshops and since that time they have continued to contact each other and work together on various projects.

As noted above, Geusau had also worked on trying to reform traditional Akha culture in Thailand. He encouraged Traditionalist Akha to:

“...preserve the positive aspects of their culture and valuable skills on the one hand, and, on the other, (work) to change other aspects of (their) culture or traditional practices which are no longer appropriate in the context of the present social, legal or economic situation in Thailand (Veera, 1989: 9).”

One area in which he worked to reform *Aqkaqghanr* related to a taboo on the birth of twins. Geusau and his Akha staff members first began working with villagers in north Thailand to abolish this taboo during the mid 1980s. As a result of their work a pair of twins born in Saencharoen Akha village in March 1986 were the first to be saved through the intervention of MPCD staff, the village Ritual Reciter (*Pirma*), and government officials from the Hill Tribe Agricultural Development Project (Veera, 1989).<sup>7</sup> Another five pairs of twins born in other villages in Chiang Rai Province were subsequently saved by MPCD between 1986-1989 (Veera, 1989).

As a result of their efforts, the taboo requiring the killing of twins has since been abolished and is no longer practiced among Akha. There are, however, many additional aspects of *Aqkaqghanr* that the current generation of Neo-Traditionalists consider to be no longer adapted to today's societal context. Therefore, under the leadership of MAPS a regional movement has been started in order to modify and reform *Aqkaqghanr*.

At the same time, it is important to note that the practices of *Aqkaqghanr* of different Neo-Traditionalist communities living in the Mekong region are not

all the same. For example, based on personal communication with Akha from Laos it seems that while Neo-Traditionalists there are in large part continuing to carry much of *Aqkaqghanr*, some changes have been adapted, particularly among communities that have moved for various reasons from their natal upland villages to different lowland settings. The situation in Laos, however, differs from Myanmar, China and Thailand where Akha communities have had to adapt to a much stronger state presence and for a much longer period of time.

Neo-Traditionalists in Myanmar have already adopted a simplified version of the annual ancestral services that is reduced from either twelve or nine to six or three, depending on how one counts the actual number of ancestral offerings as noted earlier. It is in Myanmar, moreover, that a “return conversion” movement to *Aqkaqghanr* first began in 2008 among former Christian converts. In Myanmar, the three ancestral services that have been retained include, first, *Khmqxeevq Aqpoeq* or the ‘Red Egg Ancestral Offerings’, second, *Yaerkuq Aqpoeq* or the ‘Swing Ceremony Ancestral Offerings’, and, last, *Kartanr Aqpoeq* or the ‘New Years Ancestral Offerings’, each of which involves the making of two actual ancestral offerings for a total of six.

In contrast, the full round of nine ancestral services, which includes a total of twelve actual ancestral offerings, includes: 1) *Khmqxeevq Aqpoeq* or ‘Red Egg Ancestral Offerings’, two in total, marking the end of the leisure or non-farming season and beginning of spring respectively, 2) *Khmqmir Aqpoeq*, a single offering marking the actual arrival of spring, 3) *Caerka Aqpoeq* or ‘Rice Planting Ancestral Offering’, a single offering marking the arrival of the rainy season and beginning of the farming season, 4) *Yaerkuq Aqpoeq* or ‘Swing Ceremony Ancestral Offerings’, two in total, marking a period in the farming season after weeding has begun, 5) *Ghola (Zola) Aqpoeq*, a single offering made on the first buffalo day following the second ‘Swing Ceremony

Ancestral Offering’, 6) *Ghaciv (Zaciv) Aqpoeq*, a single offering made to the seven closest generations of ancestors, 7) *Karyaev Aqpoeq* or ‘Rice Flowering Festival’ during which a single offering is made, 9) *Hawqxeevq Aqpoeq*, or the ‘New Rice Festival’, a single offering during which the newly harvested rice is offered to the ancestors, and 9) *Kartanr Aqpoeq* or ‘New Year Ancestral Offerings’, two in total, marking the end of the farming season and beginning of the new year respectively (see Wang, 2013: 311-312).

Moreover, under the leadership of one Neo-Traditionalist leader from Myanmar a working center on behalf of *Aqkaqghanr* has been established in Tachilek, Myanmar. This center has recently published an Akha language text entitled, *Aqkaq Ghanr Tawq Par Dmq*, or ‘The Book For Carrying *Aqkaqghanr*’. In this book a recently modified version of *Aqkaqghanr* is outlined. This ‘new’ version of *Aqkaqghanr* is being widely adopted by Neo-Traditionalist Akha in Myanmar, particularly Christian villagers who have re-converted back to *Aqkaqghanr* and Neo-Traditionalists living in lowland, urban settings.

The situation in China is also quite different. Akha, like other ethnic minorities in China, have been effected by numerous state-led political movements such as the “Cooperative Movement” in 1957, the “Great Leap Forward” in 1958, the “People’s Communal Movement” in 1959, the “Four Clean-ups Movement” in 1964 (with the aim of “cleaning up” politics, economics, social organization, and ideology), the “Socialist Education” campaign in 1965, and finally the “Cultural Revolution” between 1966 and 1976 (Tan, 1995: 27-29). In particular, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the ritual practices of all ethnic minorities in China, including Akha, were banned.

All ethnic minorities in China were forced to comply with Han Chinese standards and practices. Therefore, after experiencing many years of having

their religious practices abolished, the Akha, as well as other ethnic groups in China, lost much of their traditional culture. Like Neo-Traditionalist Akha in Myanmar, however, Akha in China have managed to maintain the same set of three annual ancestral services (reduced from twelve), namely the *Kartanr Aqpoeq* or 'New Years Ancestral Offerings', the *Khmqxeevq Aqpoeq* or 'Red Egg Ancestral Offerings', and the *Yaerkuq Aqpoeq* or 'the Swing Ceremony Ancestral Offerings'.

Interestingly, in recent years Neo-Traditionalists in China have begun to revitalize some aspects of *Aqkaqghanr* with support from the central and local governments. As mentioned earlier, a number of Neo-Traditionalists from China have participated in some of the meetings organized by the international group of Neo-Traditionalist Akha under MAPS. For example, in December of 2011 a group of forty Akha traveled to Thailand from China. One half of the group attended a formal meeting held in Maesai on *Aqkaqghanr* while the other half visited with elders and ritual specialists in two different Neo-Traditionalist villages in order to learn more about their practices of *Aqkaqghanr*. As such, some Akha communities in China have started to revitalize their practices of *Aqkaqghanr*.

In Thailand, some Neo-Traditionalist villagers have been actively striving to carry their traditional culture in much the same way as their ancestors did before them and are not as open to efforts to simplify *Aqkaqghanr*. For instance, the Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village continue to observe all twelve of their annual ancestral offerings, all of their annual farming-related rituals, and all of their annual communal rituals. However, it is important to note that they are not practicing *Aqkaqghanr* in exactly the same way as their ancestors did in the past, for changes have taken place and they are very much aware of these changes. For example, in the past a new village gate

had to be constructed each year with freshly cut wood. Today, however, due to state restrictions on cutting trees the villagers have constructed a more permanent village gate from cement.

At the same time, the new version of *Aqkaqghanr* that is being used by Neo-Traditionalist Akha in Myanmar is seen as too simple by the elders from *Arbawr* village. Nevertheless, the villagers have begun to discuss the issue of whether or not to reduce their annual ancestral offerings from twelve/nine to six/three. Different generations of villagers differ in their opinions on both this issue and the more general issue of modifying *Aqkaqghanr*. While individuals between the ages of 30-60 are generally open to simplifying *Aqkaqghanr*, elders between the ages of 60 and 80 are generally not so open. At the same time, the younger generations in the community highly respect their elders and the latter's wishes that they maintain their current practices of *Aqkaqghanr*.

In conclusion, it is clear that different individuals and communities have varying ideas on how to go about reforming *Aqkaqghanr*. The Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village are rather conservative when compared to Neo-Traditionalists based in Myanmar and other parts of the region. Nevertheless, Neo-Traditionalists generally feel that they all belong to the same family or community as long as they are carrying *Aqkaqghanr* rather than the *ghanr* of non-Akha 'Others' such as Christianity or Buddhism.

### Concluding Remarks

Nowadays the notion of a shared Akha identity has become increasingly dynamic and contested rather than static and taken for granted. Different Akha communities have developed separate socio-cultural identities depending upon their particular nation-state of residence. In addition, Akha converts to

various denominations of Christianity and Buddhism have created new identities as Catholic and Buddhist Akha that set them apart from Traditionalists. At the same time, Neo-Traditionalists differ in their views of if and how to go about reforming their practices of *Aqkaqghanr*.

The tensions, however, that exist between Neo-Traditionalists and Christians greatly differ from those among different groups of Neo-Traditionalists. Among Neo-Traditionalists, for example, there is a general feeling that they are all Akha, regardless of the exact number of ancestral services a particular household or community makes per year. Rather, their shared sense of identity is grounded in their practices of *Aqkaqghanr* that, while varied, are ultimately geared towards honoring and remembering their Akha Ancestors who continue to “bless” them with good health, abundance and prosperity. It is on the basis of their practices of *Aqkaqghanr* that Neo-Traditionalists consider themselves to be a part of a larger family of Akha spread throughout various parts of the Upper Mekong Region. In contrast, Akha converts to Christianity foremost and Buddhism to a lesser extent have largely forgotten and indeed abandoned their Akha Ancestors.

## Endnotes

- 1 Today Akha reside in the five modern nation-states of Southwest China, East Myanmar (Burma), North Thailand, Northwest Laos and Northwest Vietnam. The number of Akha residing in each of these countries was estimated at 274,734 in China as of 2010, 250,000 in Myanmar as of 2013, 80,000 in Thailand as of 2013, 90,698 in Laos as of 2005 and 26,000-40,000 in Vietnam as of 2008. Based on these estimates the overall Akha population in the Mekong region is somewhere between 721,432 to 735,432 persons (Wang, 2013, pp. 20, 25-26; Morton, 2013, p. 33). The population figure for Vietnam includes members of the larger Ha Nhi nationality into which Akha are officially categorized. In China Akha are officially categorized as part of the larger Hani nationality.
- 2 In this paper, when writing Akha names and terms I use the most recent Akha Romanized 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’ denotes that each syllable in the word is pronounced with a long, low tone.
- 3 Whether the full round of ancestral offerings is noted as either twelve or nine depends upon how one counts each of the ancestral services as three of the nine ancestral services involve the making of two separate offerings.
- 4 My capitalization of the terms “Neo-” and “Traditionalist” as well as “Aqkaqghanr” is intentional and reflects my view of Akha Neo-Traditionalists and *Aqkaqghanr* as being on par with “Christians” and “Christianity”, “Buddhists” and “Buddhism”, and so forth, each of which are always used



in capitalized form. I also intentionally avoid using the pejorative and outdated terms of either “animists” or “animism” to refer to Akha Neo-Traditionalists and *Aqkaqghanr*.

- 5 *Arbawr* village (literally ‘Tree Village’) is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic village located in the mountains of North Thailand. Three main ethnic groups currently reside in the village, including Akha, Lisu, and Yunnanese-Chinese. Akha first began settling in the village some 35-40 years ago. As of 2013 the Akha community had grown to more than 80 percent or 554 households of the total population of roughly 6,000 persons with 730 households. Of the remaining 176 households, 156 were Lisu while 20 were Yunnanese-Chinese. While officially the Akha, Lisu and Yunnanese-Chinese villagers have all been part of the same administrative village, in actuality each group has tended to reside in different sub-sections of the larger village.
- 6 Catholics, however, tend to differ from their Protestant-Baptist counterparts in that they are more likely to go against the wishes of their religious authorities and seek out the help of various traditional ritual specialists as needed (Li, 2013: 128). Similar differences have been found among Karen Catholic and Protestant converts. For example, Roland Platz notes that Karen Catholics are more open to Karen traditional rituals than Protestants (2003: 484). Catholics, Platz writes, “can easily participate in all (kinds of non-Catholic) rituals, although they will refrain from making offerings” (2003: 484).
- 7 MPCD provided financial support for raising the infants, who were in very poor health after being born and required hospitalization as well as milk powder to supplement their mother’s milk (Life on the Mountain, 1989: 9).

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