(Neo)Traditionalist Movements: A Case Study of a Multi-Religious Akha Community in Northern Thailand

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Abstract:

Most members of the Akha ethnic minority group living in Thailand today have converted to Christianity and no longer practice Aqkaqzanr or traditional Akha culture. At the same time, however, some Akha are continuing to carry their traditional culture. As a result, many divisions and tensions have arisen within Akha communities. For example, many Christian Akha refuse to participate in the rituals of traditionalists. In addition, debates have arisen among Akha as to the relationship between ethnicity and religion. For example, on one hand many traditionalists argue that to be Akha is to carry Aqkaqzanr and that individuals carrying the zanr of other groups are no longer Akha. On the other hand, many Christians argue that religion and culture are different parts of their identity and that their conversion to Christianity has not changed their culture or identity. In this paper I present a case study of a multi-religious Akha community in northern Thailand. First, I talk about the impacts of national integration upon the village. Second, I discuss the different kinds of social problems that have developed as a result of conversions to non-indigenous forms of religion. Third, I talk about the importance or lack thereof of Aqkaqzanr for villagers carrying different religious belief systems. Last, I talk about the ongoing efforts of a (Neo)Traditionalist group of villagers to modify and continue carrying Aqkaqzanr as an integral part of their identity.

Introduction

Nowadays, many ethnic minority groups throughout the world have lost their indigenous cultures as a result of the policies of the particular nation-states where they reside. These policies have invariably promoted the assimilation, and so-called ‘civilization’ or ‘modernization’ of ethnic minorities. Many indigenous cultures are no longer being passed on from one generation to the next as was done in the past. As a result many aspects of indigenous culture have been lost.

In addition to the negative impacts of state policies, many ethnic peoples living in Asia and beyond have undergone the process of religious conversion. Many ethnic peoples have abandoned their traditional belief systems and adopted the belief systems of any one of the so-called world religions (i.e. Christianity, Buddhism, Islam). As a result, the traditional cultural heritages of many ethnic groups have been lost, particularly in terms of their belief systems. At the same time, however, some ethnic groups have continued to carry their own traditional culture and strongly resisted the influences of various foreign and national missionary groups seeking to convert them to other religions.

Akha society, like that of other ethnic minority groups, has been strongly impacted by both different national policies and also different experiences of religious conversion. The Akha are a Tibeto-Burman speaking group numbering between 567,616 to 744,000 people and residing mostly in the mountainous borderlands of Southwest China, East Shan State in Burma, North Thailand, Northwest Laos and Northwest Vietnam (Morton 2010:101-2). Many Akha in Thailand and Burma today have adopted either the Catholic or Protestant denominations of

1 Earlier scholars working with Akha tend to write the indigenous Akha term for ‘traditional culture’ in English as ‘zang’. In 2008, however, a group of Akha leaders from different parts of the Upper Mekong region developed a unified Akha writing system based on Roman characters. In this system the term for ‘traditional culture’ is written as ‘Aqkaqzanr’. In this particular system “q” is used as a low tone maker and “r” as a high tone marker and neither are pronounced.
Christianity and abandoned many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* or traditional Akha culture. At the same time, however, a large number of Traditionalist Akha in the region continue to carry traditional Akha culture. Furthermore, a number of traditionalist Akha leaders from Burma, China, Laos and Thailand recently started to work together in order to preserve and revitalize traditional Akha culture.

Today's Akha community in Thailand and increasingly Burma as well is becoming increasingly divided over the issue of religion. Many Akha villages in Thailand have been divided into numerous sub-villages over the issue of religion. For example, there are currently six different Christian churches belonging to five different organizations in the village where I conducted my research. In addition, on the basis of religion and/or place of residence the villagers can be divided into at least eight different groups: 2 different traditionalist groups, 1 Catholic group, 4 different Protestant/Baptist groups and 1 Buddhist group.

At the same time, a number of debates have developed among Akha belonging to different belief systems over the relationship between their ethnic and religious identity. For example, traditionalist Akha in Thailand and Burma frequently say that Akha today are not only divided by national borders but also by religious borders. The popular Akha saying, "Akha Tseirkha Tiqkh Ma" (~Ten Akha are the Same as One~), has been widely used among Akha to refer to their common ethnic identity. More recently, however, the situation has become the reverse in that, "Akha Tiqkh Ma Tseirkh Ma" (~One Akha group is divided into Ten~). The conversion of Akha to various non-indigenous belief systems such as Catholicism, Protestantism and/or Buddhism has created numerous divisions at nearly every level of society ranging from the household to village to country and region.

In this paper, I present a case study of a multi-religious Akha village in North Thailand. The material is drawn from my experiences living in an upland Akha community in North Thailand. I have chosen to refer to the village anonymously as *ArBawr* Akha village. I first visited *ArBawr* village during the middle part of 2010. At that time I mostly participated in different rituals being carried out by the traditionalist villagers. It was during this time that I first became aware of a number of tensions and divisions among villagers carrying different ritual and belief systems. I subsequently returned to the village to conduct more extensive fieldwork between October 2011 and January 2012.

My main research methods were participant observation and interviews with (Neo)Traditionalist, Christian, and Buddhist villagers (see below for clarification of the term [Neo]Traditionalist). And while the majority of my time was spent living with and participating in the rituals of (Neo)Traditionalist villagers, I did spend some time interacting with and participating in the rituals of different Christian and Buddhist villagers. At the same time, I was able to observe and interact with a number of Akha Traditionalists, Christians and Buddhists from other parts of both Thailand and various parts of the Upper Mekong Region. Nevertheless, my main research findings are based on research in the upland Akha village of *ArBawr*. It is important to stress that the Akha population throughout the region is very diverse and so my findings may not apply to all groups of Akha.

In this paper I use the term "(Neo)Traditionalists" to refer to a certain group of Akha who are working to reform, revitalize and maintain traditional Akha culture. (Neo)Traditionalists include both formally educated and non-educated Akha living in upland villages and lowland urban settings. In my understanding I define "Neo-Traditionalism" as a process of active reinterpretation by which a particular group of people actively works to revitalize, modify and simplify, as well as maintain their earlier beliefs and practices while modifying and adapting them to their current situations.
In the reminder of my paper I first provide some background information on Akha in general and my research village. Second, I talk about the impacts of various Thai state policies upon the Akha community of ArBawr village in terms of their social structure, livelihood, culture and so forth. Third, I talk about the different understandings of Aqkaqzanr that can be found within ArBawr village and consider the importance or lack thereof of Aqkaqzanr in defining Akha identity for villagers from different religious backgrounds. Fourth, I talk about the tensions and divisions that have developed among villagers belonging to different religious belief systems. Lastly, I discuss the efforts of (Neo)Traditionalist villagers to modify, simplify and document their indigenous practices of Aqkaqzanr. In particular, I focus on the importance of Aqkaqzanr to the maintenance of their rich and distinct Akha identity as passed on from one generation to the next for, in some cases, more than sixty generations.

Ethnographic Background

Akha belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family and prior to the late 1920s lacked any written script for their language. In fact, there is a legend that relates how sometime in the distant past Akha received and in turn lost a writing system given to them by ‘the creator’ on a piece of buffalo skin. As such, knowledge of Aqkaqzanr or traditional Akha culture was passed on in the form of oral texts from one generation to the next. These oral texts exist in the form of elaborate poems, proverbs, songs, legends, ritual chants, customary law and so forth.

According to ancient Akha oral histories, the ancestors of Akha were originally from the remote northern part of China and later moved south in pursuit of a suitable area to build their homeland or petty state referred to as Jadae Mirkhanq. Akha scholars from China believe that Jadae was located in the upstream area of the Red and Black Rivers in what is today’s Southern Yunnan Province sometime during the early to mid-late thirteenth century (Wang and Huang 2000:8). Jadae collapsed, however, during the time of the fall of the Dali Kingdom and the rise of the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368) (Wang and Huang 2008:4).

Following the fall of Jadae Akha migrated southwards into different parts of what is today’s Southwest Yunnan Province, China. Many groups, however, migrated further south into various parts of Southern Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna) located along today’s borders with Burma and Laos. A certain number of Akha migrated further south into areas that are today parts of five nation-states in upper mainland Southeast Asia. As a result, Akha currently reside in five modern nation-states, namely Xishuangbanna of Yunnan Province in China, Eastern Shan State in Burma, North Thailand, Northwest Laos and Northwest Vietnam. In today’s context of modern nation-states Akha have become a minority ethnic group in each of the countries where they reside. The result of state integration has brought about significant changes within Akha communities throughout the region in terms of their social structure, livelihood, political systems, ethnic/cultural identity, and overall way of life. For example, state political systems replaced their traditional independent political status.

Based on Geusau’s figures from 2000 the total number of Akha in the Upper Mekong Region is between 937,000-1,050,000 people (Geusau 2000:125-6). More recently, however, Morton provides a more conservative estimate of between 567,616 to 744,000 total Akha residing in the region (2010:101-2). In China, Akha number roughly 600,000-700,000 people and are officially identified as part of the larger Hani Nationality (Geusau 2000:125). In Myanmar, where they number roughly 150,000 people, they are referred to as ‘Kaw’ (Geusau

The very first script was developed by an Italian Catholic Priest, Father Potaluppi, and his Akha collaborators in Kengtung, Burma in the late 1920s (Morton 2010:132). This script, however, was never used to any appreciably extent by Akha. In contrast, a second script developed by an American Baptist Missionary, Paul Lewis, and his Akha collaborators in Kengtung, Burma in the early 1950s has been much more widely used by Christian Akha converts throughout Burma and Thailand (Morton 2010:132).
2000:125). In Laos, where they number between 92,000-100,000 people, they are referred to as ‘Ko’(Duy Thieu 1996; Geusau 2000:125). In Vietnam, where they are referred to as ‘Xo’, their population is estimated to be between 20,000-25,000 (Geusau 2000:126). In Thailand, where Akha number roughly 75,000 persons, Akha are officially categorized as one of nine so-called ‘hill tribes’ and popularly referred to as ‘Ikaw’ (Geusau 2000:127). The terms Ikaw, Kaw and Ko, however, are all considered derogatory by Akha in these regions who prefer to be referred to as Akha (Wang 2008:2).

Today, the notion of a shared Akha identity has become increasingly fluid and hybridized rather than static or fixed. Akha have developed their own socio-cultural identities dependent upon country of residence. For example, Akha in China have incorporated numerous loan words from Mandarin Chinese into their everyday Akha language. At the same time, they have adopted numerous Han Chinese customs including birthday celebrations, the mid-Autumn festival and so forth. Religious conversion, particularly in Thailand and Burma, has similarly impacted on Akha identity in a variety of ways. Scholars’ descriptions of Karen Christian converts in North Thailand can similarly apply to Akha Christian converts. For example, Chumphol writes that, “(While) Karen who converted to Christianity are still Karen, they are Christian Karen. They create a new identity as Christian Karen (1993:5).” Akha converts to various denominations of Christianity or Buddhism have similarly created new identities as Catholic or Christian or Buddhist Akha.

**Background on Research Site – ArBawr Akha Village**

*ArBawr* village is located in Wawee Sub-district, Mae Suai District, Chiang Rai Province of North Thailand. The village is located 28 kilometers from the District Office in Mae Suai and 75 kilometers south of Chiang Rai city. *ArBawr* is located at an altitude of 1,800 meters from sea level and the average yearly temperature is a comfortable 18 degrees Celsius. The entire landscape surrounding the village is mountainous. On a peak just above the village there is a large Buddhist park and a small residence for several monks. Many tourists visit the village and surrounding areas throughout the year, although especially during the winter season. By this time of year the coffee beans have turned bright red and are ready for harvest. A number of locally and government owned guesthouses cater to tourists visiting the area.

Three main ethnic groups reside in *ArBawr* Village - Akha, Lisu and Yunnanese-Chinese. Akha, who are the most recent to settle in the village, first began moving into the village from Burma and other parts of Thailand roughly 30 years ago. Since that time Akha have come to make up 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 are Lisu while 20 are Yunnanese-Chinese. In this study, however, I chose to focus exclusively on the Akha community of *ArBawr* Village. While officially the Akha, Lisu and Yunnanese-Chinese villagers are all part of the same village, in actuality each group resides in a particular section of the village. The large Akha section is further divided into different sub-villages along the lines of religious affiliation with some exceptions.

In terms of religious divisions among Akha villagers there are currently six different Christian churches and communities located in different sections of the village. These churches include two churches affiliated with the Akha Church of Thailand (ACT), an additional two churches affiliated with the Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF), a single Catholic church, a church run by a Korean missionary and a Lisu Christian church. In addition, there is a Buddhist park and shrine located at the upper level of the village and a number of ritual spaces located throughout the area where Akha and Lisu traditionalists carry out their respective traditional practices at different times of the year. The arrival of Christianity, as part of other changes taking place nationally, regionally and globally, has brought forth a great deal of changes in nearly every aspect of life in the village such as social structure and relations, ritual activities, and notions of identity.
In terms of occupation, today the villagers are primarily coffee farmers and coffee is the main source of income. Many of the villagers, furthermore, have experienced great success with coffee. In more recent years several villagers have established their own coffee processing factories in the village and have been able to sell their coffee in markets as far away as Bangkok and Canada. Most of these factories employ Tai-Yai (Shan) and Akha migrant laborers originally from various parts of Shan State, Burma. Besides coffee, some villagers continue to grow corn, black and red beans, upland rice, fruits, vegetables and tomatoes. In addition, there is a Government Agricultural Research Station located in the upland areas above the village where more than thirty Akha villagers are currently employed.

**Impacts of Integration into the Thai Nation-State**

Akha and other upland minority groups in Thailand have been greatly impacted by the arrival of various programs and institutions related to the national integration efforts of the Thai state – particularly so-called highland ‘development’ programs geared towards ‘developing’, ‘civilizing’ and ultimately controlling the everyday lives of upland minorities. These state led programs and institutions have greatly impacted nearly ever aspect of life in upland villages ranging from social structure to political structure to education and livelihood. In addition, the majority of upland minority communities have had little or no control over the changes brought forth by the state. Rather, upland minorities have had to make adjustments to their traditional culture and society in order to adapt to different state policies and the challenges of new social demands.

*ArBawr* village is just one of many upland communities that has been disrupted by various state policies. For example, foremost, the Akha of *ArBawr* village have mostly lost their traditional political structure and have had to adopt a new form of political structure according to the Thai state’s system of administration. A state endorsed PhuYaiBan or ‘village head’ has largely replaced the traditionally endorsed Dzoeqma or ‘traditional village leader’.

At the same time, however, the villagers have benefited from the improved roads, running water, telephone lines, electricity, cash crops and so forth brought about through different highland development projects. One of the most significant changes, however, has been in the area of livelihood which has been and largely remains based on agriculture. For example, during the 1970s and 1980s the Thai government’s highland development policies "largely centered on replacing opium cultivation with cash crops (Chayan 2005:158)."

In 1983, the Royal Development Project was established in order to stop opium cultivation in the uplands and improve the overall quality of life of uplanders. In the name of His Majesty the King the project’s officials encouraged upland communities falling within the jurisdiction of the program to cultivate alternative crops with economic potential that could both replace opium and prevent further deforestation. *ArBawr* village was one of numerous upland villages targeted for opium crop replacement efforts. In addition to the Royal Development Project a host of other state and international development organizations were involved in opium replacement efforts in *ArBawr* village. These organizations and programs included the Thai National Public Welfare Department, the United Nations Organization (UNO), the Thai-German Highland Development Project, the Thai-Norway Highland Development Project and the Thai-Australia Highland Development Project.

In 1983 officials working with the Thai-German Highland Development Project first introduced breeds of Arabica coffee to the villagers of *Arbawr*. Many villagers told me that when they first began growing coffee they were very concerned as to whether or not coffee would allow for them to make a decent income. Besides coffee, the villagers also grew other crops such as black and/or red beans, tomatoes and so forth. Over time, however, villagers have increasingly shifted towards the mono-crop cultivation of coffee. Today the former lands
of opium have become the lands of coffee. As a result, coffee has become the main source of income in the village and the local coffee has become internationally recognized.

In general, the villagers say that they are happy to plant coffee. They further noted that they have been able to generate more income from coffee than they could from opium in the past. Today, the domestic market has grown and through the intervention of several Thai and foreign investors the villagers have gained access to the international premium coffee market. The construction of a paved road to the village has also provided a great convenience for the villagers to transport their coffee. It now only takes about thirty minutes to travel by truck from the village to the district town from where either Chiangrai city can be reached in another hour or Chiangmai in another two and a half hours. Today, the overall quality of life in the village has greatly improved. Nearly every household owns a pickup truck in addition to several motorbikes.

Education is another important part of the Thai state's efforts to 'assimilate' ArBawr villagers into the Thai nation. Through their life experiences living in Thailand during the information age, more and more parents have come to realize the importance of a formal education for their children. And while there is a state run elementary and nursery school in the village many of the families who are better off choose to send their children to study in better schools in lowland towns and cities, especially Chiangrai, Maesai and Chiangmai where they are able to learn additional languages such as Chinese and English. I often heard many of the villagers comment:

"We can only use Thai language here in Thailand while Chinese and English can be used throughout the entire world. As such if our children learn to speak Chinese and English then they will have a much better opportunity to improve their lives in the future".

As such many of the children from ArBawr village are studying either Chinese or English language in addition to Thai. In addition, many of the children who study in different lowland towns or cities end up staying in anyone of numerous centers run by foreign and/or Akha Catholic or Protestant missionaries where they are permitted to stay for either little or no charge depending upon their families income. As a result, many of the children have become either Catholic or Protestant, depending upon the religious orientation of the center where they stay.

In summary, the Thai state's policy of national integration has brought about a number of significant changes in the everyday lives of the villagers in ArBawr. State efforts to replace the cultivation of opium have brought about significant changes in the economic lives of the villagers. These changes have led to some improvements in the material and mental lives of the villagers. At the same time, Akha traditional culture has been greatly transformed as the traditional political and educational systems have broken down in response to state policies. The village's traditional political structure can no longer play the same role as in the past prior to the arrival of the state political system.

At the same time, the younger generations of villagers are educated by Thai teachers in state schools and universities and not in the village by their elders. Neither Akha culture nor language are included in the educational curriculum of the Thai educational system. As a result, the younger generations are socialized into Thai society and culture and lose touch with their own unique society and culture. In addition, many of the children end up boarding in centers run by either foreign or Akha Christian missionaries where they are strongly encouraged to become Christian and abandon their traditional culture.

**Foreign Missionaries and the Arrival of the World Religion**

In addition to the impacts of state policies, the arrival of Christianity has brought forth a great deal of changes in nearly every aspect of life in my study village ranging from social
structure and relations to ritual activities and notions of identity. For example, Akha converts to Christianity have formed both a new lifestyle and community and also a new religious identity that contrasts with that of (Neo)Traditionalists. In fact, the religious identity of the Christian villagers is often formed in opposition or contrast to that of Traditionalists or (Neo)Traditionalists who are seen by the former as practicing a 'primitive' and 'backwards' form of 'devil worship'. At the same time, while Christian converts continue to reside in the same larger administrative village as other non-Christians they have tended to establish their own smaller, intra-village communities where they attend church and socialize.

Early foreign missionaries working with Akha interpreted Aqkaqzanr or traditional Akha culture as a 'primitive' and 'backwards' form of 'devil worship'. The current generation of Akha missionaries continues to hold the same interpretation. As such, missionaries, whether foreigners or Akha alike, have encouraged Akha to abandon their traditional culture and adopt Christianity. In their efforts to encourage Akha to convert, however, missionaries have used different approaches. For example, missionaries often provide their converts or potential converts with social services such as education, boarding for children studying in the lowlands, healthcare, agricultural development and assistance with land and citizenship related issues. In many cases, however, conversion to Christianity is required before villagers are able to receive these services.

In terms of education, many of the children from ArBawr village have received and continue to receive educational scholarships and room and boarding from different missionary centers based in Chiangrai. Over time many of the children that receive these services end up becoming Christians and upon returning home they are taught to encourage their families to convert as well. At the same time the children converts often refuse to participate in the ritual life of their Traditionalist elders, particularly healing rituals involving the tying of strings and ancestral services. The Christian missionaries have forbidden them from participating in these rituals, which are now considered to be 'backwards' and 'primitive' forms of 'devil worship'. Some parents in turn end up being persuaded by their children to convert to Christianity, particularly those whose eldest son or only son converts as traditionally the transmission of Aqkaqzanr or traditional Akha culture is done by way of the son.

One of the most often cited examples of the above relates to one of the earliest Traditionalist families to convert to Christianity some 15 years ago. It was with this particularly family’s conversion that the ability of the Traditionalists to maintain the village within the traditionalist gates as a Traditionalist village initially broke down. The conversion of this formerly Traditionalist family was largely brought about by way of their three sons, all of whom were some of the first children in the village to receive a formal education in the lowlands with the assistance of foreign Christian missionaries. One of the family’s sons has since become a leading Akha missionary in Thailand.

An elder traditional ritual specialist currently in his eighties spoke to me of his initial disappointment in the head of the family who decided to convert to Christianity at the urging of his Christian sons:

“...He, my elder brother and some other households were the first to come from Burma and establish the village. Sometime later we chose him to be the assistant to our village head, who was Lisu at the time. At the same time, we had agreed amongst each other that we would all continue to maintain and practice Aqkaqzanr and not adopt the zanr of others ('aqcawq-e zanr'). In the end, however, he abandoned Aqkaqzanr and adopted Yesu-zanr (The zanr of Jesus)".

A number of other households, especially those belonging to the same clan, also converted to Christianity following the lead of the assistant village head note above. As a result, the formerly Traditionalist village was split between Traditionalists and Christians. At
the same time, as a result of the position of the assistant headman who led the conversions, the converts were able to remain living within the boundaries of the traditionalist village. This situation contrasts with the past when converts were made to move outside of the gates of the village. Ironically, in the past the very same assistant headman who led the conversions played a key role in ensuring that converts were made to leave the village. At the same time, however, in spite of residing within the same administrative village, intra-village boundaries have developed among (Neo)Traditionalist and Christian villagers on the basis of their *zanr*, often understood as ‘religion’ by Christians on the one hand and as ‘ethnicity’ by (Neo)Traditionalists on the other.

The intra-village communal boundaries that have developed among Akha belonging to different traditions take numerous forms. For example, during my stay in the village I was able to observe that in their everyday lives the (Neo)Traditionalists and Christians rarely visit each other’s homes, in spite of often residing next door to each other. Moreover, when different villagers are looking for other villages with which to exchange labor for agricultural work or house building etc. they tend to do so with villagers carrying similar traditions. Another example can be found in the tendency for Christians to not participate in the ritual activities of (Neo)Traditionalists and vice versa – with the partial exception of relatives who will generally provide assistance with food preparations and so forth while avoiding the actual ritual activity in of itself.

Further boundaries can be seen in the fact that Christians, unlike non-Christians, are able to take advantage of a number of benefits on the basis of their membership in the church. For example, Christians are able to receive a discount for medical care in certain hospitals with a church affiliation. As noted earlier, they are also able to receive assistance in educating their children in what are considered to be better lowland Thai schools. In addition, some missionary groups, particularly Catholics, have helped their converts to obtain land and legal citizenship – two very prominent areas where Akha communities in general have experienced great difficulties. For example, the middle-aged mother of a Catholic family from ArBawr village told me that:

"...If it weren't for the *Aqda Gawqdawq* (Catholic Priest) we would have nothing. He gave us the land on which we built this house in advance and then slowly let us pay the money back little by little. The lawyer in the Catholic center also helped us to process our citizenship applications. I have no relatives here to depend on, and so without the help of the *Aqda Gawqdawq* I don't know how we would have been able to survive after coming from Burma where we experienced many hardships".

In addition to help with land and legal citizenship I learned that all three of the woman’s children have received educational scholarships from Catholic centers located in Maesuai and Chiangmai. Last, two of her children were able to find full-time work in the same centers following their graduation from secondary school. As such we can see that some Christians, unlike non-Christians, have the additional advantage of being able to find employment in different Christian organizations. As a result of each of these factors, increasing numbers of villagers in ArBawr village have gradually converted to Christianity. And yet as noted earlier, a significant number of villagers remain steadfast in their devotion to the *zanr* or their ancestors, namely *Aqkaqzanr*. Today, out of a total of 540 households roughly 180 are (Neo)Traditionalists, 240 are Christians, and 20 are Buddhists.

**Religious Conversion and Communal Divisions**

As increasing numbers of villagers have converted to the *zanr* of others numerous social problems have arisen within the village. Communal divisions along the lines of *zanr* have developed within the village. Tensions have further developed within and between
households. Moreover debates over the relationship between ethnic and religious identity have arisen among villagers carrying different zanr. For example, Christians and Buddhists no longer take part in the traditional communal-based rituals and festivals organized by (Neo)Traditionalists. Individuals that have converted to Christianity refuse to partake of both their (Neo)Traditionalist relatives' offerings made in honor of their ancestors offering foods and also healing ceremonies involving the tying of strings around wrists.

At the same time, (Neo)Traditionalist villagers argue that to be Akha means to carry Aqkaqzanr as rooted in ancestral services. The latter further argue that Kali (Protestants) and Gawqdawq (Catholics) villagers are no longer like 'Akha' as they no longer carry Aqkaqzanr. In contrast, Kali (Protestants) and Gawqdawq (Catholics) villagers argue that religion is replaceable and compatible with Akha culture. In their view, conversion does not entail a change in ethnic or cultural identity but rather simply the replacement of one religious system with another.

In addition, it is important to note that while tensions have developed between (Neo)Traditionalists and Christians, numerous divisions have also developed among villagers belonging to different Christian churches or organizations. For example, in ArBawr Akha village there are currently six different Akha Christian churches funded and supported by different Christian groups in Thailand and abroad. Each of these groups in turn are competing for converts in the village and tend to look down on each other, holding that their particular way of being 'Christian' is more authentic or in line with the teachings of the bible. For example, Catholic villagers tend to see Aqma Maria (The Virgin Mary) as being more important and worthy of more reverence than her son, Jesus, as, "...without the mother there would be no son". Kali zaq (Protestants), however, hold Jesus in a much higher position and pay little attention in terms of ritual to his mother, the Virgin Mary.

These different views of the relations between religion and ethnicity have led to divisions and conflicts within Akha society. (Neo)Traditionalists in ArBawr village generally expressed a feeling that conversion within their village has destroyed communal unity and harmony. These tensions have arisen as a result of the fact that while significant numbers of Akha in Thailand and Burma have abandoned Aqkaqzanr, a certain number of households and communities in the same region continue to carry Aqkaqzanr and resist the efforts of a new generation of Christian Akha missionaries to convert them to what they identify as the zanr of others. As such it is necessary to examine the indigenous notion of Aqkaqzanr in order to better understand the ways in which it is integrated into villagers' understandings and practices of their traditional Akha identity.

**Aqkaqzanr**

Western scholars working with Akha in Burma and/or Thailand offer different definitions of Aqkaqzanr. For example, Paul Lewis, a Christian missionary and anthropologist, defined zanr as "religion, custom, a way of doing things", with an overall stress on "religion" and "ritual" (1969). Leo Alting Von Geusau, a former Catholic priest who worked on behalf of traditional Akha culture in Thailand for many years before his death in 2003, describes zanr in a more holistic manner as, "religion, way of life, customs, etiquette, and ceremonies (Alting von Geusau 1983: 249; Kammerer 1990: 280)." Cornelia Kammerer in turn stresses that it is important to understand the indigenous Akha understanding of zanr as it is the latter that has, "guided Akha reactions to Christian proselytization" (1990: 280).


"(note a) contrast between the Akha 'indigenous' notion of 'identity' and Western notions of 'identity' (and argue that) Akha identity is centered on acceptance of shared meanings and common understanding of the Akha cultural system. Initially, their arguments were
developed in a critique of the missionary interpretation of zang as 'religion' (Toyota 2003:305)."

Kammerer further argues that "Akha-ness depends upon shared descent from an apical forebear and common customs inherited from the ancestors (and) conceives of Akhazang as 'a coherent cosmologically-grounded cultural system' (1989:384-396; Toyota 2003:306)." Kammerer notes that when western Christian missionaries first came to Thailand to convert Akha they, "did not recognize that Akhazang is a cultural subsystem equivalent to what anthropologists term ethnic identity, and did not realize the implications of conversion for Akha (1998:268-273)." As a result, the first foreign missionaries to work with Akha in Thailand encouraged 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 Zang (Kammerer 1998: 268-273)." In short, Alting von Geusau, Kammerer and Tooker stress that, "the most important thing for Akha identity is Akhazang (Toyota 2003:306)."

Tooker (2004:243), however, argues that "notions of collective identity (1982-85) among Akha in Northern Thailand have shifted in recent history from a comprehensive, holistic form to a compartmentalized form"(1985-1998) as a result of "increasing nation-state and capitalist penetration." She argues that 1) Akha in general have assimilated to a "modern" Thai identity that is already "compartmentalized", 2) "old" traditionalists have relegated ancestral practices to "special spheres as opposed to having them permeate everyday life", 3) "new" traditionalists have selectively revived a modified set of ancestral practices, 4) while Christian converts have been able to remain living within their communities rather than being made to leave as was done in the past (Tooker 2004:279).

The interpretations of Aqkaqzanr by these western scholars provide insight into both the nature of Akha traditional culture and also the relationship between ethnic and religious identity. Their interpretations of Aqkaqzanr, however, only focus on some parts of the indigenous Akha understanding of Aqkaqzanr. In the remainder of the paper I will elaborate more fully on the indigenous understanding of Aqkaqzanr that I have learned about through my interactions with (Neo)Traditionalists in ArBawr village.

Aqkaqzanr, Buddhism and Christianity

As Alting von Geusau, Kammerer and Tooker argue, Aqkaqzanr is much more than simply 'religion' as understood by first foreign and now Akha Christian missionaries. For example, one Akha man from Thailand who recently completed a Master's degree in Cultural Studies at Maefahluang University in Chiangrai argues that zang is much more than just religion and yet also more than culture. He holds that zang 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 Aqkaqzanr. This individual further argues that there is no accurate term for translating Aqkaqzanr into either Thai or English and that it is best to simply use the Akha term in of itself.

Based on my experiences living and learning with (Neo)Traditionalist Akha in various parts of north Thailand, however, I believe that Aqkaqzanr can be divided into two major parts: (1) Duevqzanr (Life related rites and regulations) and (2) Xirzanzn (Death related rites and regulations). Duevqzanr refers to all of the rituals, regulations and customs relating to the living, including but not limited to naming ceremonies conducted at birth, weddings, blessing ceremonies, soul calling rites, annual ritual offerings to ancestors, annual communal level rituals, food, language, music, dance, dress, stories and rules and regulations governing everyday life. Xirzanzn refers to all of the rituals, regulations and customs related to death, including both natural and unnatural or accidental deaths. As note earlier, from my perspective I identify Aqkaqzanr as traditional Akha culture. Akha converts to other religious traditions, however,
tend to have a different understanding of *Aqkaqzanr* than that of (Neo)Traditionalists. This makes sense as they have adopted a new religion and need to provide a justification for their decision to do so.

**Akha Buddhists or *Parxeerzaq***

As for villagers that have adopted *Parxeerzaq* or Buddhism, they have replaced their ancestral altars with a statue of the Buddha and no longer carry out the annual round of ancestral offerings according to *Aqkaqzanr*. The indigenous Akha term for Buddhism, *Parxeerzaq*, literally refers to 'the zanr of the yellow (xeer) robed (par)'. Akha Buddhists generally feel that there are more similarities between traditional Akha culture and Buddhism than between traditional Akha culture and Christianity. This view seems to be one of the reasons behind their decision to convert to Buddhism. In addition, some aspects of traditional Akha culture have been retained by Buddhists. Many of the Buddhists informed me that they mix certain elements of *Aqkaqzanr* together with their Buddhist practices depending on their particular situation and needs. For example, many of them continue to seek out the services of traditional medicine specialists, *Pirma* or Ritual Reciters and *Nyirpa* or Shamans. In strong contrast to Christians, Buddhists are free to fully participate in the traditionalist rituals of their (Neo)Traditionalist relatives and friends. The middle path approach of Buddhism and tendency for monks to not outright forbid this or that practice seems to explain the flexibility with which Buddhist villagers mix their Buddhist and traditionalist rituals and beliefs. Most importantly, Buddhists stress that in their new tradition they are able to continue paying respects to their ancestors, albeit by way of Buddhist monks.

On another hand, however, Akha Buddhists in general no longer participate in traditionalist communal level rituals such as those carried out to rebuild the village gates annually or make offerings to the Lord of the Water and Land annually. Buddhists similarly do not carry out any of the traditionalist rituals relating to the cultivation of rice. In terms of communal level rites the Buddhists tend to participate in the various national-level Buddhist celebrations held throughout Thailand such as *Songkran* or *Loikrathong*. The new house warming ceremonies of Buddhists are similarly carried out according to Buddhist rather than Akha traditional culture.

**Akha Christians – *Kalizaq* (Protestants) and *Guqdawqzaq* (Catholics)**

The situation among Christian converts is very different from that of Buddhist converts as noted above. In general, the Christian religious belief system is largely incompatible with that of traditional Akha culture or *Aqkaqzanr*. Early foreign missionaries working with Akha encouraged a complete change in their converts from *Aqkaqzanr* to *Yesu-zanr* or Christianity (literally 'the zanr of Jesus'). As a result the majority of Christian Akha in Thailand today refuse to carry out or participate in any religious rituals carried out according to *Aqkaqzanr*.

The new religious identity of Christian Akha has been formed largely in contrast to that of Akha (Neo)Traditionalists, whom they tend to see as carrying a 'backwards' and 'primitive' form of 'devil worship'. As a result, nearly every aspect of their ritual life differs greatly from that of traditionalist Akha villagers – ranging from birthing rites to naming ceremonies, weddings, healing rituals and funerals. Christian Akha have developed a new set of ritual practices.

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3 The *Pirma* or ‘Ritual Reciter’ plays a very important role in the ritual life of Akha (Neo)Traditionalists. *Pirma* are the ones who direct the soul of the deceased back to the land of the ancestors during funerary rites. They also carry out different kinds of purification rites for the living either inside or outside of the house.

4 The *Nyirpa* or Shaman is an individual with the ability to communicate with the spirits from the world of the deceased in order to find and cure the causes of sickness for the living.
practices according to their new religious belief system. For example, apart from weekly church services on Sunday, the annual ritual celebrations of Akha Protestants include Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving. Catholic Akha observe a number of other ritual celebrations in addition to the three observed by Protestants. For example, on the 15th of August Catholics observe the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.

Interestingly, the Christian celebration of Easter occurs around the same time as the (Neo)Traditionalists’ celebration of their Khanqee Khanqmir Aqpoeq Lawr-e or ‘Minor New Year Ancestral Offering’. During this ceremony the (Neo)Traditionalists prepare red-dyed hardboiled eggs and make ritual offerings to their ancestors. The preparation of red-dyed hardboiled eggs, and not the practice of making offerings to ancestors, has been continued by Christian Akha in their Easter celebrations. Moreover, the Christian celebration of Thanksgiving takes place around the same time as the (Neo)Traditionalist celebration of Caerxeetsa or the ‘New Rice Ceremony’. Christians even use the earlier (Neo)Traditionalist term, Caerxeetsa to refer to their new Christian celebration of the harvest. At the same time, it is important to stress that in the Christian context the ‘red dyed hardboiled eggs’ and their celebration of the ‘New Rice Ceremony’ have taken on a new meaning adapted to their Christian beliefs and practices.

Other Christian ritual celebrations relating to various aspects of the life and death cycle also differ greatly from those practiced by (Neo)Traditionalists – ranging from naming ceremonies to weddings, housewarming celebrations, healing ceremonies and funerals. As noted earlier, in general Christian converts believe that Aqkaqzanr is a ‘primitive’ and ‘backwards’ form of ‘demon worship’ practiced by uneducated and superstitious individuals. Christians have further replaced their former ancestral altars with images of either ‘Jesus’ in the case of Protestants or ‘Jesus’ and ‘Mary’ in the case of Catholics. Christian leaders further forbid their followers from seeking out the help of various traditional healing specialists such as Pirma (Ritual Reciter or Priest) and Nyirpa (Priest). They are also forbidden from participating in traditionalist rituals, even in the case where the ritual is being carried out on behalf of a close family member. As such it is clear that Akha Christians have made little or not attempt to adapt traditional Akha cultural patterns into their ritual activities.

Recently, however, Akha Christians have begun building the traditionalist Akha Lavqceq or swing. When I first learned this I was curious to understand why and how they were doing this. I knew that Christians were forbidden from practicing any elements of Aqkaqzanr and so I began questioning different Christian leaders about this issue. The general reply I received was that:

“~...We consider the swing itself to be an important part of Akha culture and not religion. And so when we build the swing we do not perform any of the traditionalist rituals normally associated with the building.”

From the perspective of (Neo)Traditionalists, however, it is very important for the ‘swing’ to be built and used only during the appropriate time and in the appropriate place and also for the proper rituals to be carried out during the construction. Christians violate all of these concerns and their actions are largely seen as offensive and insensitive towards (Neo)Traditionalists. As a result, many (Neo)Traditionalists, especially elders, feel that Christians do not respect Aqkaqzanr and are only interested in the ‘swing’ to the extent that they are able to generate money by showing it to tourists. For example, one Akha missionary recently told me, “I am planning to build both a traditional ‘swing’ and ‘village gate’ at my church center in the near future in order to attract tourists.”

Generally speaking, Akha Christians no longer practice any elements of Aqkaqzanr. Kammerer notes that the first foreign missionaries to work with Akha in Thailand, “encouraged Akha converts to retain their culture by keeping their language and their traditional clothes. For
(these missionaries), to be Akha is to speak Akha and to wear Akha clothes (1990:281)." More than twenty years later these ideas have been largely adopted by indigenous Akha missionaries and their followers. For example, when asked about which parts of their Akha identity are most important to them today nearly all of them refer to their Akha language and dress. In reality, however, even their Akha language and dress have been modified or adapted to their Christian identity. For example, the Christian symbol of the cross is used widely as a pattern on Christian Akha dress. In addition, many new 'Christian' words have been adapted into their Akha language and a new style of singing has largely been adopted from Western style church music.

In general, following Hirsch's (1983) description of the process of conversion from Buddhism to Christianity among Khon Muang in the north of Thailand I hold that in the Akha context Christianity and Aqkaqzanr should be seen in "disjunction" and that as Akha have become Christian they have developed new truths, values and ways of thinking and acting. For Akha Christians, Christianity has become both a new system of doctrine and also a new way of life in place of the former. Christians have largely rejected their prior culture and adopted a new 'Christian' culture.

In contrast, (Neo)Traditionalist Akha in ArBawr village are engaged in a number of efforts to preserve, reform and maintain their traditional culture, Aqkaqzanr. Their efforts to do so are taking place as increasing numbers of Akha are converting to different denominations of Christianity and Buddhism. Why is Aqkaqzanr so important to these (Neo)Traditionalists and what are the goals of their movement? In the final section of the paper I will discuss their efforts to preserve, reform and maintain Aqkaqzanr as well as their motivations for doing so.

The Practices of Aqkaqzanr: From Traditionalists to (Neo)Traditionalists

Since coming to Thailand and interacting with Akha in ArBawr village I have begun to wonder why a certain number of villagers continue to carry Aqkaqzanr while the majority have abandoned it and converted to different denominations of Christianity and Buddhism. Through my interactions with (Neo)Traditionalist villagers both in ArBawr village and in other parts of the Mekong Region I was able to learn about the great value and deep meaning of Aqkaqzanr for (Neo)Traditionalist Akha today. In the following section I will discuss the findings of my inquiries into the value of Aqkaqzanr for (Neo)Traditionalist villagers today.

First, however, it is necessary to re-clarify the meaning of the term (Neo)Traditionalism as I use it in this paper. In my understanding I define ‘Neo-Traditionalism’ as a process of re-interpretation by which a particular group of people actively works to revitalize, document and maintain their earlier beliefs and practices while modifying and adapting them to their current situation. I further use the term (Neo)Traditionalists to refer to both educated and non-educated Akha living in upland villages and lowland urban settings throughout the Mekong Region.

Today, more and more Akha are abandoning Aqkaqzanr and became either Christians or Buddhists. Gradually Aqkaqzanr is being lost and as it is lost the distinct ethnic identity of the Akha is also disappearing. A common statement that I have heard from many (Neo)Traditionalists is the following:

"...The creator created all ethnic groups in the world, and gave each group its own traditional culture. Every one should maintain and practice their traditional culture. Aqkaqzanr was given to us by the creator and we should continue to carry it as our ancestors have done before us for many years."

At the same time, however, some (Neo)Traditionalists both within and outside of ArBawr village have come to realize the need for working to reform or modify Aqkaqzanr in order to adapt it to their current situations faced by Akha throughout the region. Since roughly 2008
or so a group of (Neo)Traditionalist leaders from different parts of the Mekong Region has been working to find ways of reviving, maintaining and simplifying Akhazanr in order to both prevent further conversions to Christianity as well as encourage Christians to return to Aqkaqzanr. One of the main goals of this group is to adapt and simplify Aqkaqzanr so that it can be more easily practiced by Akha living in today’s rapidly changing world.

In addition, in September 2010 a two year project documenting traditional Akha culture was started in ArBawr village by a group of (Neo)Traditionalist Akha working under the Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability or MAPS. The U.S. Embassy in Bangkok has provided funding for the project. The project has been a collaborative project between the Akha staff of MAPS and a large group of (Neo)Traditionalist villagers in ArBawr village. The primary goal of the project is to document the (Neo)Traditionalists complete round of annual rituals in written, audio and video form. The group is further using a recently unified international Akha writing system in documenting the traditions and publishing related texts and videos. All of the individuals involved in the project are very concerned about the future of Aqkaqzanr and worried that it is not being transmitted to the younger generations of Akha who are increasingly converting to foreign belief systems, particularly Christianity.

At the same time, a growing international group of (Neo)Traditionalist villagers have been organizing meetings, festivals and informal gatherings throughout the past several years during which they discuss and celebrate their (Neo)Traditionalist identity. Akha from Burma, China, Laos and Thailand have all been involved in these activities. Furthermore, several groups of (Neo)Traditionalists from Burma, Laos and Thailand have visited Akha communities in China throughout the past several years. For example, in late December of 2011, (Neo)Traditionalist representatives from Burma, Laos and Thailand traveled to Xishuangbanna in order to attend several annual Akha New Years celebrations held in Jinghong city and several Akha villages. As the group traveled to different villages they held small informal meetings with local villagers in order to exchange their knowledge of Aqkaqzanr.

More recently, a book outlining the new version of Aqkaqzanr has been produced by several (Neo)Traditionalist leaders based in Burma and Thailand. In this book many aspects of Aqkaqzanr have been modified and simplified. For example, a number of former taboos have been abolished ranging from a taboo against the birth of human twins to a taboo against divorced women returning to their parent’s home for longer than a brief period of time before remarrying. In addition, women are permitted in addition to men to make ancestral offerings and sacred water for use in rituals can be gathered from other clean sources in the case where there is no traditional sacred spring (Irxawr lawrkhawvq) to gather water for ritual purposes. At the same time, a written, pictorial representation of Akha ancestral genealogies has been created and used in place of the traditional ancestral altar.

(Neo)Traditionalists are also discussing the issue of whether and how to reduce the number of annual ancestral offerings. For example, some villagers have already decided to reduce the number from 12 to 3. It is emphasized, however, that the decision to reduce the number of offerings ultimately depends upon individual households. In general, however, the majority of Akha that are adopting each of these modifications are from different parts of Burma and many of them are former Christians who decided to convert back to Aqkaqzanr.

In contrast, in the case of Arbawr village in Thailand the (Neo)Traditionalist villagers have never converted to Christianity and continue to practice all of the annual ritual practices of Aqkaqzanr including the full round of 12 annual ancestral services, rituals related to the cultivation of rice and various communal level rituals relating to the village gate, swing, sacred spring and ‘Lord of the Water and Land’. They are actively striving to carry their traditional culture in much the same way as their ancestors did before them under the leadership of a group of elders in their 60s, 70s and 80s. At the same time, however, the villagers are not
necessarily practicing Akha\textit{zn} in exactly the same manner as their ancestors, for changes have taken place and they are very much aware of these changes.

For instance, an earlier taboo requiring the killing of human twins was abolished over 20 years ago. In addition, in the past a new village gate and female and male carvings placed outside the gate had to be cut from freshly cut trees. Today, however, due to state restrictions on cutting trees the (Neo)Traditionalists decided to construct a more permanent gate and female and male carvings out of cement. Changes can further be seen in the ritual process for funerals. For example, today a pick-up truck is used to carry the coffin from the home of the deceased to the cemetery located in a forested area outside of the village. In the past, the coffin was transported by the labor of the deceased’s male relatives. In addition, the villagers have started constructing grave markers from cement and including a picture of the deceased as well as their full name, birth date, animal year and death date on the marker in either Thai or Akha language. Neither of these traditions were carried out in the recent past.

Changes can also be seen in relation to the cultivation of rice. As noted earlier, the majority of villagers in ArBawr village today are growing coffee instead of rice as their main crop. In spite of this change, however, each (Neo)Traditionalist household continues to cultivate a small plot of rice for use in the annual round of rice related rituals. While coffee has become the main source of income in the village the (Neo)Traditionalists continue to value rice and the rituals related to rice as an important part of their identity.

There are, however, some differences among the generations of (Neo)Traditionalists as to their openness to the modification or simplification of \textit{Aqkaqzanr}. For example, while individuals between the ages of 30-60 are generally open to simplifying \textit{Aqkaqzanr}, elders between the ages of 60 and 80 are generally not so open. Several elders have commented to me:

“\textit{The new version of Aqkaqzanr is good but it is much too simple for us. It may be suitable for Akha in Burma that have converted back to Aqkaqzanr. But it is not suitable for us. We want to continue to practice all of the annual rituals that have been handed down from our ancestors to us, generation by generation. If, after our passing, however, our sons can no longer practice the same way as we are now then we would rather have them reduce the number of ancestral offerings than adopt other’s religions.”}

In fact, the elders say that if any one in the village would like to reduce the number of ancestral offerings from 12 to 3 then they are free to do so. As of the present moment, however, no villagers have yet to do this. For the elders this option is more suitable than losing more and more villagers to the religions of others such as Christianity and Buddhism. As long as the villagers continue to carry Aqkaqzanr and not adopt Christianity or Buddhism they feel as though they are all part of the same community.

The younger generations between the ages of 30 and 60, however, generally feel that the new version being practiced in Burma is easier to carry and more suitable to their lives today. In spite of these feelings, however, they would prefer to pay respect to the views of their elders and continue to follow their lead. Many of the younger generations further commented to me:

“\textit{When our elders pass away we will have to either adopt the new version of Aqkaqzanr or develop our own set of simplified rituals as we will not be able to continue practicing in the same way without our elders. At the same time we are determined to continue carry Aqkaqzanr and not adopt the religions of others.”}

From the above it can be seen that while the younger generations may have different motivations than the elders they are nevertheless confident in their desire to continue carrying Aqkaqzan\textit{q} and that Aqkaqzan\textit{r} is best suited for Akha. Along these lines, the former headman of the village, an Akha male in his mid forties told me:
“I cannot imagine myself adopting another religion and burning my family's ancestral altar (as is often required of Christian converts). It is unfathomable to me to do such a thing. The ancestral altar is like my ancestors for me. They give Geevqlanq (‘blessings’) to me and my family, they bring us good health and success in life. It is because of them that we have enjoyed such a good life.”

These Akha (Neo)Traditionalists clearly feel that to be Akha is to carry Aqkaqzanr. They feel that Akha Protestants, Catholics and Buddhists are no longer like 'Akha', particularly the Christians, as they have abandoned their ancestors and no longer practice Aqkaqzanr. As such Akha converts to the religions of others have effectively become 'others' who identity themselves as Gawqdawqzaq (Catholic People) and Kalizaq (Christian People). As Kammerer has noted, 'Aqkaqzanr is equivalent to what anthropologists term ethnic identity. (Therefore), language and clothing are not central to Akha ethnic identity; what is central, the core of Akhanness, is Aqkaqzanr (1998: 268-273)."

Conclusions

Today’s Akha community in Thailand and increasingly Burma as well is becoming more and more divided over the issue of religion. The conversion of Akha to various non-indigenous belief systems such as Catholicism, Protestantism and/or Buddhism has created numerous divisions at nearly every level of society ranging from the household to village to country and region. Many Akha villages in Thailand have been divided into numerous sub-villages over the issue of religion. For example, in terms of religious divisions among my study community there are currently six different Christian churches and communities located in different sections of the village. These churches include two churches affiliated with the Akha Church of Thailand (ACT), an additional two churches affiliated with the Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF), a single Catholic church, a church run by a Korean missionary and a Lisu Christian church. In addition, there is a Buddhist park and shrine located at the upper level of the village and a number of ritual spaces located throughout the area where Akha and Lisu traditionalists carry out their respective traditional practices at different times of the year.

There are less tensions between Akha Buddhists and Akha traditionalists since the Akha Buddhists do not look down upon Aqkaqzanr as a ‘backwards’ and ‘primitive’ form of ‘devil worship’. Moreover, many of the (Neo)Traditionalists and Buddhists agree that there are more similarities between Aqkaqzanr and Buddhism than between Aqkaqzanr and Christianity. Buddhist monks, furthermore, do not forbid Buddhist Akha from practicing Aqkaqzanr with the exception of requesting that they remove their ancestral altar from their household. As a result Akha Buddhists remain more open to Aqkaqzanr and often seek out assistance from various traditional ritual specialists such as Pirma (Ritual Reciter or Priest) and Nyirpa (shaman).

In contrast, there are obvious tensions between Akha (Neo)Traditionalists and Christian converts. In general Akha Christians tend to view Aqkaqzanr as a ‘backwards’ and ‘primitive’ form of ‘devil worship’ with a heavy economic burden. Christian leaders, furthermore, require that their converts completely replace their former traditionalist beliefs and practices with an entirely new set of Christian beliefs and practices. This requirement, however, is more pronounced among Protestants than Catholics.

I can recall one case involving a Protestant family in ArBawr village whose father’s health was very poor in spite of having both gone to the government hospital and also praying in Christian fashion for better health. The family decided in turn to see if a traditionalist Nyirpaq (shaman) could heal their father. When they asked the head of the Protestant church if they could do so, however, they were told that it would be a violation of their Christian faith. The family subsequently decided to abandon their Christian faith and return to Aqkaqzanr. Shortly after returning to Aqkaqzanr and seeking the help of a Nyirpa the father’s health improved. In contrast, many Catholics are more open to Aqkaqzanr. Many Catholics continue to seek out
the services of the traditional herbal medicine practitioner, however, doing so in the name of 'God' rather than their ancestors. In addition, a middle aged Catholic man told me:

"In the case of sickness some Catholics still ask for help from the Pirma, Nyirpa and/or traditional herbal medicine practitioner. If we do this, however, we must do so in secret so that our church leader does not know. And if he finds out he will scold us."

At the same time, (Neo)Traditionalists say that they do not understand Christians who tend to criticize and look down on Aqkaqzanr on the one hand and yet often seek help from traditionalist ritual specialists on the other. Their contrary ideas and behaviors are seen as contradictory and hypocritical. For example, a traditional herbal medicine practitioner from the village told me:

"While I am not happy that some of the Christians make fun of Aqkaqzanr, I will still treat them if they ask for help. At the same time, in the traditional way, after the patient recovers, they are supposed to hold a small ceremony and tie strings around my wrist in order to both pay respect to me and my medicine owner/spirit. In the past, many of the Christians refused to do this. I told them, however, that if they want to receive my treatment then they must follow the traditional way. And that if they will not do this then I will not treat them."

(Neo)Traditionalists generally feel in turn that even though Akha may convert to the religions of others they still cannot get by without having to rely on the assistance of various traditionalist ritual specialists. At the same time, the (Neo)Traditionalists feel that they surely get by just fine without having to rely upon the help or advice of non-traditionalists.

As for the impact of religious conversion upon the members of particular ethnic group it is clear that religion has become a more or less significant means by which they differentiate amongst each other. For example, the different terms used to refer to Akha carrying different religions (e.g. Aqkaqzaq, Kalizaq, Gawqdadwaqzaq, Paerxeerzaq) reflect the Akha perception of the different practices and ways of life of Akha carrying each of these different traditions. At the same time, the notion of a shared Akha identity has become increasingly fluid and hybridized rather than static or fixed. Scholars' descriptions of Karen Christian converts in North Thailand can similarly apply to Akha Christian converts. For example, Chumpol writes that, "(While) Karen who converted to Christianity are still Karen, they are Christian Karen. They create a new identity as Christian Karen (1993:5)". Akha converts to various denominations of Christianity or Buddhism have similarly created new identities as Catholic or Christian or Buddhist Akha.

In conclusion, Akha Christians argue that they are Akha by way of continuing to wear Akha dress and speaking Akha language. Some Akha Christians further claim that they are Akha by virtue of their Akha blood. In contrast, Akha (Neo)Traditionalists hold that their language and clothing are not central to their ethnic identity, rather what is central to their being Akha is Aqkaqzanr. This claim can be further supported by a long standing tradition whereby 'outsiders' can become Akha by following the rules and regulations of Aqkaqzanr.

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