

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Ethnographic Context - *Arbawr* Akha Village

The information presented in this thesis is drawn from research conducted in a village referred to anonymously in Akha language as *Arbawr* village (literally meaning ‘Tree Village’). It is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic village located in the mountains of North Thailand. Three main ethnic groups reside in *Arbawr* village, including Akha, Lisu, and Yunnanese-Chinese. Akha first began moving into the village from other parts of Thailand and Myanmar roughly 35 years ago. Since that time the Akha community has 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 are Lisu while 20 are Yunnanese-Chinese. In this study, however, I focus exclusively on the Akha community of *Arbawr* village. While officially the Akha, Lisu and Yunnanese-Chinese villagers are all part of the same administrative village, in actuality each group resides in different sections of the larger village.

In this thesis, furthermore, I use the term Neo-Traditionalists to refer to a certain group of Akha who are simultaneously working to reform, revitalize, and maintain traditional Akha culture or *Aqkaqzanr*. Neo-Traditionalists include both formally educated and non-educated Akha living in upland villages and lowland urban settings throughout the Upper Mekong Region. I define Neo-Traditionalism as a process of active reinterpretation by which a particular group of people consciously works to revitalize, modify, and maintain their earlier beliefs and practices in relation to their changing life circumstances. In the following section, I discuss the ways in which the Akha community of *Arbawr* village is impacted by the integrationist policies of the Thai nation-state.

1.1.1 Impacts of Integration into the Thai Nation-State

Akha and other upland minority groups in Thailand are heavily 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 highland communities and environments. These state led programs and institutions impact nearly every aspect of life in upland villages ranging from social structure to political structure, education, and livelihood. In addition, the majority of upland minority communities exercise little or no control over the changes brought forth by the Thai state. They tend to have little or no say in the process of their ‘development’. Rather, upland minorities are forced to make adjustments to their traditional cultures and societies in order to adapt to different state policies and the challenges of new social demands.

Arbawr village is just one of numerous upland communities in North Thailand that is disrupted by various state policies. For example, the Akha of *Arbawr* village have adopted a new political structure following the Thai national system of administration in place of their traditional political structure. A state endorsed *Phuyaiban* or ‘Village Head’ largely replaces the traditionally endorsed *Dzoeqma* or ‘Traditional Village Leader’.

At the same time, however, the villagers benefit from various aspects of highland ‘development’ such as improved roads, running water, electricity, telephone lines, medical facilities, and cash crops. One of the most significant changes, however, takes place in terms of their livelihood, which continues to depend heavily on agriculture. From their very inception in the 1970s and 1980s, the Thai government’s highland development policies, “largely centered on replacing opium cultivation with cash crops” (Chayan 2005:158). These policies effectively serve in extending state and capitalist control over uplanders and upland environments in the interests of national security and ‘development’.

In 1960s, the Royal Development Project is 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 encourage 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 is just 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 are involved in opium replacement efforts in *Arbawr* village. These organizations and programs include 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 introduce breeds of Arabica coffee to the villagers of *Arbawr*. Many villagers tell me that when they first began growing coffee they were very concerned as to whether or not it would allow for them to generate a decent income. Besides coffee, they also grew other cash crops such as beans and tomatoes. Over time, however, the villagers' livelihood increasingly shifts towards the mono-crop cultivation of coffee. As a result the earlier lands of opium are transformed into the lands of coffee. Today, coffee is the main source of income in the village and their local coffee bean is internationally acclaimed.

In general, the villagers say that they are happy to plant coffee. They further note that they are able to generate more income from coffee today 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. Their access to the expanding domestic and international coffee markets is further enhanced by the state's recent construction of a paved road to the village. 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 is greatly improved. Many households own pickup trucks and nearly all households own 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 come to realize the importance of a formal education for their children. The Thai government establishes

an elementary school in *Arbawr* village in 1945. 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. Many villagers feel that if their children only learn Thai language then they will not be able to take advantage of many of the opportunities in the wider world wherein English and Chinese language skills are of increasing demand. For example, on one occasion when I was invited by a Neo-Traditionalist couple for dinner they told me that:

“We can only use Thai language here in Thailand while Chinese and English can be used anywhere in the world. If our children learn to speak Chinese and English then they will have a much better opportunity to improve their lives in the future (personal communication, November 10, 2011)”.

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 annual income. As a result, many of the children are pressured to become either Catholics or Protestants, depending upon the religious orientation of the center where they stay.

In summary, the Thai state's policy of national integration brings about many significant changes in the everyday lives of the villagers in *Arbawr*. State efforts to replace the cultivation of opium bring about significant changes in the economic lives of the villagers. These changes lead to some improvements in the material and mental lives of the villagers. At the same time, however, Akha traditional culture is greatly transformed as the traditional political and educational systems largely break down in response to state policies. Their traditional political structure can no longer play the same role in their everyday lives as during the period prior to their integration into the Thai state.

At the same time, village youth are educated by Thai teachers in state schools and universities rather than their elders in the context of their natal villages. Akha culture, history, and language, furthermore, are not included in the educational

curriculum of the Thai educational system. As a result, village youth are socialized into Thai society and culture and lose touch with their native society and culture. In addition, while studying in lowland schools many children board in centers run by either foreign or Akha Christian missionaries where they are strongly encouraged to become Christian and abandon their traditional culture. As a result, the arrival of the so-called world religions, particularly Christianity, by way of foreign and in turn native Akha missionaries is another significant factor influencing the everyday lives of Akha in *Arbawr* village and other parts of North Thailand. In the following section I discuss the ways in which the Akha community of *Arbawr* village is impacted by an increasingly transformed religious landscape.

1.1.2 The Religious Background of *Arbawr* Village

Today, *Arbawr* village is a religiously diverse community. Four main religions are practiced by different Akha in the community. These religions include *Aqkaqzanr* ('Traditional Akha Culture'), *Kalizanzr* (Protestantism), *Kovqdawqzanr* (Catholicism), and *Parxeerzanr* (Buddhism). During my stay in *Arbawr* village I learn that the very first Christian community in the village is a Lisu Protestant community founded around the time of the arrival of the earliest Akha settlers some 35 years ago. At that time only a few Lisu households were Protestant with a majority of Lisu practicing their traditional culture. Many elder Akha Neo-Traditionalists tell me that when they first settled in *Arbawr* village they were often encouraged by the Lisu minister to become Protestants. They add, however, that they were adamant in their refusal to take him up on the offer.

At the time, the Akha villagers unanimously carry *Aqkaqzanr* within the gates of their separate Akha village. As a result, the elders tell me, there were no tensions and divisions among Akha along the lines of religion as there are today. The elders further tell me that when Akha Christians first moved into the area they were not permitted to reside within their village gates. Rather, these Christians established a separate community located in an area just below the government school. At the time, furthermore, there was no Akha Christian church and so these Christians joined the preexisting Lisu church. The few traditionalist villagers, furthermore, that decided to

become Christian were made to move beyond the gates of the traditionalist village. Within the village gates all were expected to carry *Aqkaqzanr*.

Beginning some 20 years ago, however, this situation begins to change as more and more of the traditionalist villagers begin converting to Christianity foremost and Buddhism to a lesser degree. As a result of both rising rates of conversion as well as the Thai state's heightened regulation of upland communities and land, the remaining Neo-Traditionalists can no longer enforce their policy against converts continuing to reside within the village gates. This situation has evolved to the extent that there are currently seven different Christian churches and communities located in different sections of *Arbawr* 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 Akha Catholic church affiliated with *Patrick-Jaw* Catholic Center in Maesuai, a Protestant church run by a South Korean missionary affiliated with the Christian Thai-Korean Church in Maesuai, and a Lisu Christian church affiliated with the *Maitrichit* Church in Bangkok. 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. Today, however, the majority of Akha villagers are Protestant Christians. Out of a total of 506 Akha households, roughly 344 are Christian (140 affiliated with the AOF; 90 affiliated with the Akha Catholic church; 80 affiliated with the ACT; 30 affiliated with the Korean church; 4 affiliated with the Lisu church), 142 are Neo-Traditionalists, and 20 are Buddhists.

Neo-Traditionalists, furthermore, particularly the elders, are greatly concerned about the rising rates of religious conversion in the village. As a result in part, the remaining Neo-Traditionalists have been actively participating in a regional movement of Neo-Traditionalists working to revive, simplify, and maintain *Aqkaqzanr* in order to both prevent further conversions to other religions as well as encourage converts to return to *Aqkaqzanr*. In addition, the Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village are organizing their own efforts to document and preserve their

practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. These Neo-Traditionalist efforts on behalf of *Aqkaqzanr* are discussed in chapter four.

Religious conversion brings forth a great deal of changes in nearly every aspect of life in *Arbawr* village such as social structure and relations, ritual activities, and notions of identity. For example, Akha converts to Christianity and Buddhism form a new lifestyle, community, and religious identity that contrasts with that of Neo-Traditionalists. In fact, the religious identity of Christians is often formed in opposition or contrast to that of Neo-Traditionalists who are seen by the former as practicing a ‘primitive’ and ‘backwards’ form of ‘demon worship’.¹ Christians and Buddhists, furthermore, no longer participate in the traditional ritual life of the community. At the same time, while Christian converts continue to reside in the same larger administrative village as other non-Christians, they nevertheless establish their own smaller, intra-village communities where they attend church and socialize.

In addition, Christian missionaries in particular expressly forbid their followers from participating in the rituals of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and neighbors. Christians are further forbidden to seek the help of various traditional ritual specialists such as *Pirma* (Ritual Reciters) and *Nyirpaq* (Shamans). As a result, Christians often refuse to participate in the ritual life of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and friends, thereby creating many tensions and divisions at numerous levels within *Arbawr* village.

Numerous intra-village boundaries develop among Akha in *Arbawr* village along the lines of “religion”. For example, during my stay in the village I 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, in general when

¹ From the traditionalist Akha perspective, ‘spirits’ can be divided into two kinds, either ‘good spirits’ or ‘bad spirits’. Ancestral spirits are considered ‘good spirits’ ensuring the blessing and prosperity of their descendants who pay respect to them through annual ritual offerings. At the same time, however, ancestral spirits may ‘attack’ their descendants if they are either not treated properly while they were living or they are forgotten as ancestors upon passing away. Apart from these circumstances, Akha generally only consider the ‘spirits’ of individuals who die a violent and unnatural death to be ‘bad spirits’ that may cause harm to the living. For details on how Akha distinguish between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ spirits refer to Tooker (1988) and Kammerer (1986). However, today Akha Christians in general do not distinguish between ‘good spirits’ and ‘bad spirits’. Rather they consider all of the traditional Akha rituals and ceremonies including ancestral worship, the annual rice-related rituals and communal-based rituals as being related to the worship of ‘bad spirits’ in the form of the ‘devil’.

different villagers are looking for other villagers 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. Additional religious derived tensions and divisions can be found at different levels such as within and between clans, households, and individuals. I discuss these tensions and divisions in further detail in chapter six.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

I was born in a rural Akha village in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China. It wasn't until I was in my early twenties, however, that I learned of Akha residing outside of China. When I learned this information I became very interested in visiting Akha living in Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Since that time I began my Master's degree program at Chiang Mai University and have had more opportunities to interact with Akha from Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. For example, over the past several years I have participated in numerous meetings, festivals, and informal gatherings organized by a group of Neo-Traditionalist Akha leaders from Myanmar, China, Laos, and Thailand.

Since roughly 2008 or so this group of Neo-Traditionalist leaders has been working to find ways of reviving, maintaining, and simplifying *Aqkaqzanr* in order to both prevent further conversions to Christianity as well as encourage converts 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. Some members of this group are working with Neo-Traditionalists from *Arbawr* village to document their annual round of traditional rituals. The goal of the project is to document the full round of traditional rituals in texts and videos using Akha written and spoken language before they are lost due to a lack of transmission to younger generations and rising rates of conversion to foreign belief systems.

As an Akha from China I was very surprised to learn of all of the problems stemming from religion within and beyond *Arbawr* village. In my home village we

all carry the same tradition and there are no religious divisions or conflicts. I became curious to try and understand how and why these divisions developed in *Arbawr* village and if there might be any way of overcoming them.

As such I chose *Arbawr* village as my research site in the hopes of better understanding why, on the one hand, *Aqkaqzanr* is so important to the Neo-Traditionalists, and on the other hand, why Christian and Buddhist converts no longer consider it as an important part of their lives. In addition, while most researchers focus on the issue of Christian conversion among highlanders in Thailand, very few studies focus on highlanders that continue to carry their traditional culture and even less consider re-conversion movements back to native belief systems. For example, within the past several years some formerly Christian Akha in Myanmar have reconverted to a simplified version of *Aqkaqzanr*.

My research also addresses ongoing debates over religion and ethnicity by presenting a variety of native Akha perspectives on the nature of the relations between religion and ethnicity. From my research I learn that many Neo-Traditionalist Akha feel that converts to other traditions effectively become non-Akha ‘others’, seeing Christianity or Buddhism and so forth as foreign sets of customs and beliefs belonging to ‘other’ ethnic groups. These Neo-Traditionalists are determined to continue practicing to the greatest extent possible the way of life of their ancestors; the way of life which they identify with their distinct Akha identity. The views of these Neo-Traditionalists support the idea that religion and ethnicity are inseparable aspects of identity.

In contrast, Christian Akha argue that religion is only one part of their Akha identity that can be replaced without changing their ethnic identity. For example, during a period of fieldwork in the urban, lowland town of Chiangrai I had a chance to visit and talk with several influential Akha missionaries. One of these missionaries became quite upset when I commented on the Neo-Traditionalist view that Akha Christians are no longer like Akha since no longer carry *Aqkaqzanr*. He responded with the following comment: “Who said this? They have no right to say this!” (personal communication, June 5, 2012). I then asked him what he considers to be the most important part of his Akha identity. He replied: “My Akha blood is the most central part of my Akha identity. And so as long as I have Akha blood flowing in my

veins then I will always be Akha, even though I am Christian. Also, we (Akha Christians) speak Akha language and wear Akha dress. We are only different in that we no longer follow the rituals and beliefs of the old ways according to *Aqkaqzanr*” (personal communication, June 5, 2012).

Therefore, the views of Christian Akha support the argument that religion and ethnic identity are separate aspects of identity and that a change in one of them does not entail a change in the other. As Akha convert from *Aqkaqzanr* to Christianity or Buddhism it is important to consider the meanings of these new religious belief systems and the ways in which conversion affects their ideas and practices of community and identity. This analysis of the different religious beliefs and practices followed by Akha residing in the religiously diverse community of *Arbawr* village sheds light on native Akha debates over the nature of the relationship between religion and ethnic identity.

1.3 Research Questions

This study addresses the following three main questions:

- 1.3.1 Why and how are Neo-Traditionalist villagers working to document, maintain and reform *Aqkaqzanr* with the help of an expanding regional network of Neo-Traditionalists?
- 1.3.2 What understandings do villagers that convert to Christianity and Buddhism have about their Akha identity and the importance or lack thereof of *Aqkaqzanr* towards that identity?
- 1.3.3 How does religious conversion impact the social relations between villagers belonging to different religious backgrounds?

1.4 Research Objectives

This study has four main objectives as follows:

- 1.4.1 To study why and how Neo-Traditionalist villagers are working to maintain *Aqkaqzanr*.

1.4.2 To analyze the village-based activities of an expanding regional network of Neo-Traditionalists in order to identify their goals, learn how they are working to reach those goals, and consider the local impacts of their efforts in *Arbawr* village.

1.4.3 To examine how religious conversion impacts the social relations of villagers belonging to different religious backgrounds.

1.4.4 To study Christian and Buddhist views of their Akha identity and the importance or lack thereof of *Aqkaqzanr* towards that identity.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

In today's rapidly changing world a large number of communities in Asia and beyond, particularly native groups and minorities, have converted to foreign traditions such as Christianity. Many Akha residing in Myanmar and Thailand today have similarly adopted different world religions. At the same time, however, a significant number of Akha continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr*. As a result, conflicts over the relations between ethnic and religious identity are rising among Akha communities at every level of society ranging from the household to village, country, and region. The diagram below shows the various impacts of changing national, regional, and global contexts upon Akha society and the resulting divergent definitions and practices of Akha identity that develop among Akha belonging to different religious-cultural belief systems.

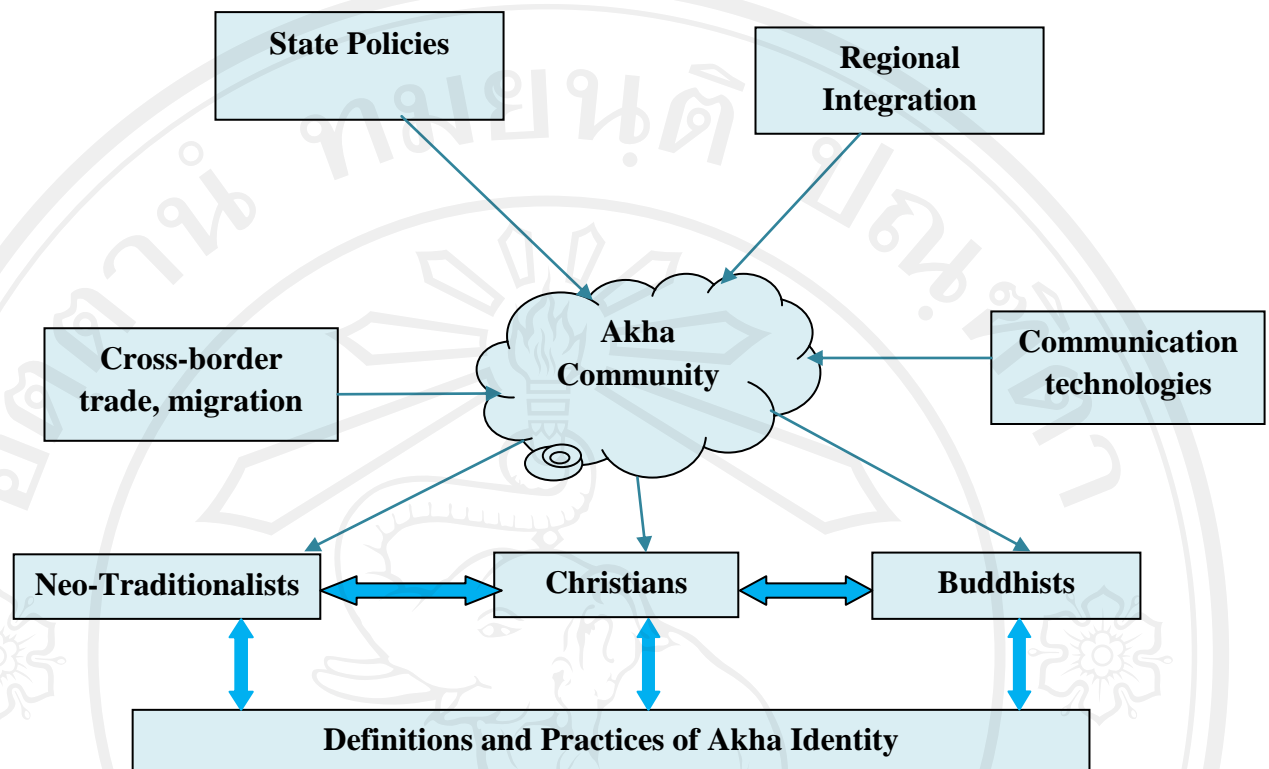


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework

1.6 Research Methodology

1.6.1 Research Sites

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 weather is cool and comfortable throughout the year. 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, especially during the cool and dry winter season. By this time of year the coffee beans are turning bright red and are ready for harvest. A number of locally and government owned guesthouses cater to tourists visiting the area.

In terms of religious divisions among Akha villagers there are currently seven different Christian churches and communities (representing different denominations), one Buddhist park and shrine, and a number of ritual spaces, apart from their homes,

where Neo-Traditionalist Akha conduct rituals at certain times of the year. The arrival of foreign traditions, as part of other changes taking place nationally, regionally, and globally, brings 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, the villagers are primarily coffee farmers and coffee is the main source of income. There are a number of coffee factories owned by different villagers located close to the village where coffee beans are processed and prepared for shipment to other parts of Thailand and various countries abroad such as Canada. Many of these factories employ Tai-Yai (Shan) and Akha laborers. Besides coffee, some of the villagers also grow corn, black and red beans, upland rice, 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.



Figure 1.2: Map of location of research site



Figure 1.3: A panoramic view of *Arbawr* village

1.6.2 Unit of Analysis

The main units of analysis in this study are the ritual practices and beliefs of Akha villagers belonging to different religious traditions ranging from Neo-Traditionalist to Christian (including different denominations) and Buddhist. I also focus on the nature of social relations both within and between each of these groups. At the same time, I focus on the collaborative efforts between Neo-Traditionalist villagers and a group of Neo-Traditionalist leaders from other parts of the region to document the annual round of traditional rites relating to the agricultural calendar and ancestral offerings.

As for the broader social context, I consider the impacts of various national, regional, and global factors on religious conversion and social relations within the village, including but not limited to: 1) the state agricultural research station, 2) the government school, 3) the coffee industry, 4) internationally funded Akha and non-Akha Christian missionaries working in the village, and 5) an ongoing movement by a group of Neo-Traditionalists from various parts of the region to document, revitalize, and simplify traditional Akha culture. The first and second factors noted above are

part of the Thai government's efforts to assimilate and/or integrate Akha into the Thai nation both economically by way of an anti-opium crop-replacement program initiated in the 1980s and culturally by way of compulsory education in government schools.

1.6.3 Research Approach and Data Collection Methods

My very first visit to *Arbawr* village occurs during the middle part of 2010. At the time I visit the village in order to participate in a ritual being carried out by the Neo-Traditionalist villagers. It is during this time that I first become aware of the numerous tensions and divisions within the village over the issue of religion. I subsequently return to the village to conduct more extensive fieldwork between October of 2011 and February of 2012.

Broadly speaking, data collection was achieved in two ways: ethnographic fieldwork and archival research. Before I carry out my village-based research I first conduct archival and library research in order to better understand the historical context of traditional Akha cultural practices as well as more recent conversions to other traditions. Second, I use several qualitative methods (interviews, participant observation, and archival/library research) in order to answer each of my main research questions as noted below:

1. Why and how are Neo-Traditionalist villagers working to maintain Aqkaqzanr? How are their practices and ideas of Aqkaqzanr being influenced by the efforts of an international group of Akha working to reform and support Aqkaqzanr?

First, I interview Neo-Traditionalist villagers in order to learn about the reasons that they have not converted to other religions and why they are continuing to carry *Aqkaqzanr*. Second, I interview the Neo-Traditionalist leaders from different parts of the Mekong Region who are working with the Neo-Traditionalist villagers to revitalize and preserve *Aqkaqzanr*. I ask them about their motivations for carrying out the project. Third, I participate in and observe their *Aqkaqzanr* documentation project as it takes place in the village.

2. What definitions do villagers that have converted to Christianity and Buddhism hold about their Akha identity and the importance or lack thereof of Aqkaqzanr towards that identity?

First, I interview villagers that have converted to Christianity and Buddhism in order to learn their views of Akha identity and the importance or lack thereof of *Aqkaqzanr* to that identity. Second, I observe their ritual practices in order to see if any elements identified by either Neo-Traditionalists and/or converts as *Aqkaqzanr* have been adapted to their new religious beliefs and practices.

3. *What impacts has religious conversion had upon the social relations of villagers belonging to different religious backgrounds?*

First, I interview villagers from each study group in order to learn their views of the ways in which their current ritual practices help them in maintaining relations with other kin and non-kin villagers residing in and beyond the village. I ask questions such as: How often do you visit your relatives and/or neighbors in the village and beyond and/or do they visit you? On what occasions do you visit them and/or do they visit you? I also ask villagers that have converted to Protestantism, Catholicism, and Buddhism about the ways in which their lives have changed following conversion – including their social relations with other kin and non-kin villagers.

Second, I participate in and observe the ritual practices of each group as they happen in the village. I consider where each group's rituals take place (household, church, forest etc.), what they do, who is involved, and the meanings and purpose(s) of each ritual. I then compare the information I collect on each group's ritual practices to see how they are different and/or similar. Third, I review work by other researchers focusing on related ethnic groups and the ways in which religious conversion impacts their social structure, livelihoods, rituals, and sense of identity in order to compare their findings with Akha in *Arbawr* village.

1.7 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is comprised of seven chapters that can be briefly described in the following manner: Chapter I includes background information on the research village and research problem. Second, it introduces the research questions, objectives, methodology, and means of data analysis. Last, the conceptual framework of the study is outlined.

Chapter II provides more general background information on Akha. In chapter II I further discuss the issue of religious conversion and its impacts upon communities' understandings of the relationship between religion and ethnicity - both in relation to Akha and other relevant ethnic groups. I then discuss the native Akha understanding of their "traditional culture" or "*Aqkaqzanr*" and how it is similar and/or different to western concepts such as "religion", "ethnicity", and "culture". Last, I discuss the concept of Neo-Traditionalism as applied to other relevant groups and provide a brief description of Neo-Traditionalist Akha residing in different parts of the Mekong region. In this chapter I also review literature relating to each of the three main concepts related to the research concerns: 1) Religion and Religious Conversion, 2) Ethnic Identity, and 3) Neo-Traditionalism.

Chapter III describes how Neo-Traditionalists in my study community understand *Aqkaqzanr*. In Chapter III I introduce the different ritual specialists who are responsible for carrying out many rituals relating to *Aqkaqzanr* and their social functions in the village. Last, I describe the different practices of *Aqkaqzanr* that take place at different levels throughout the village at different times of the year - ranging from individual ceremonies to household and communal level rituals.

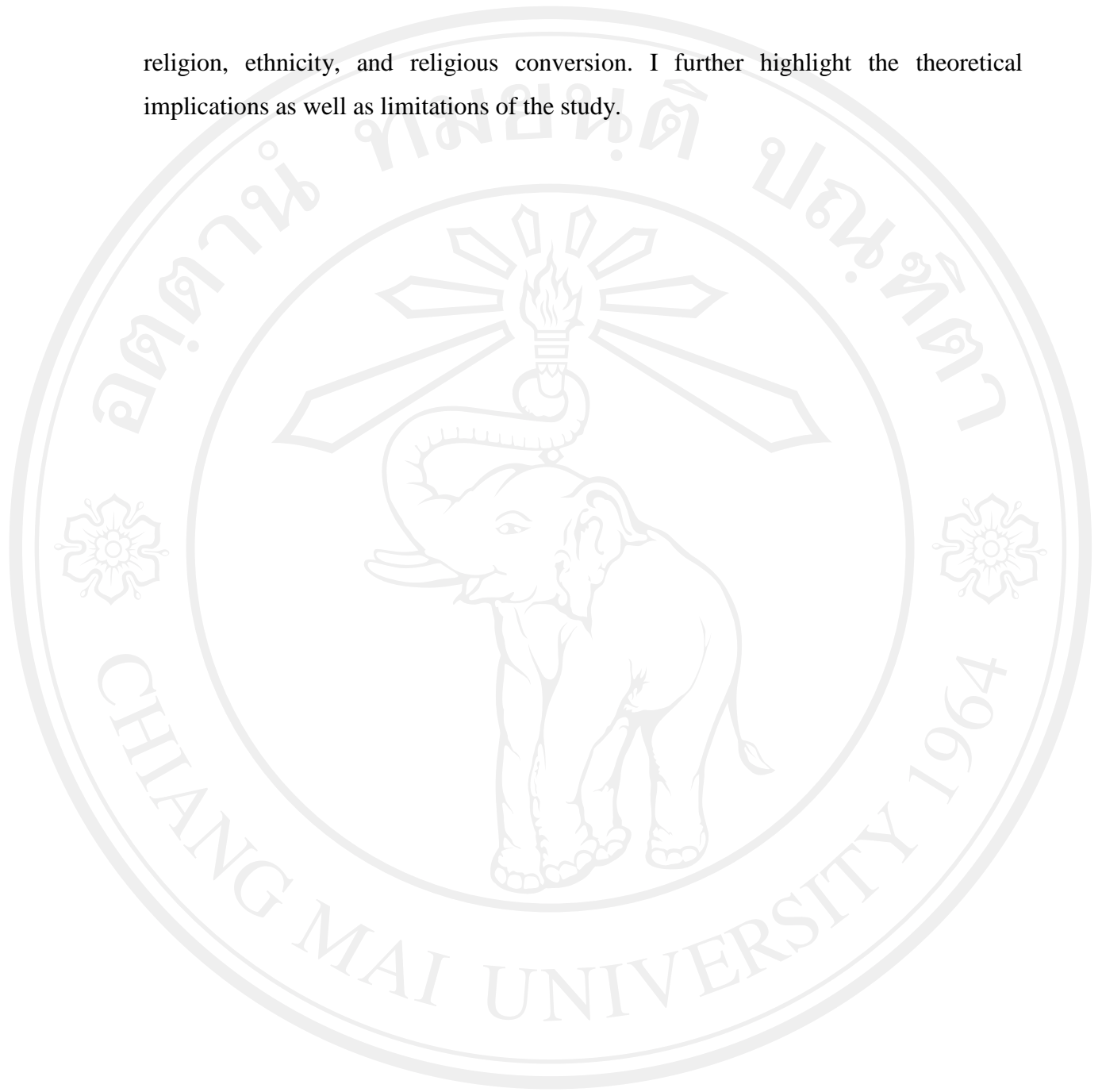
Chapter IV discusses the goals of these Neo-Traditionalists as they strive to revitalize, modify, and maintain their practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. I further discuss the various kinds of activities they are organizing in order to achieve each of these goals.

Chapter V discusses the ways in which Akha Protestants, Catholics, and Buddhists in *Arbawr* village have formed their respective communities and lifestyles, as well as their new religious identities through religious conversion. I further examine how these conversions have changed their views of *Aqkaqzanr* and their Akha identity. Last, I consider the ways in which religious converts express their new Akha identity within the context of their new tradition.

Chapter VI discusses the tensions and divisions that appear among villagers belonging to different religious backgrounds. I focus on the different kinds of tensions and divisions that arise at various societal levels ranging from the larger village to clans, households, and individual relations.

Finally, in chapter VII I summarize the major research findings and discuss the ways in these findings support and/or complicate existing theories relating to

religion, ethnicity, and religious conversion. I further highlight the theoretical implications as well as limitations of the study.



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