CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND ON AKHA AND RELEVANT CONCEPTS: RELIGIOUS
CONVERSION, RELIGION AND ETHNICITY, AND
NEO-TRADITIONALISM

In this chapter I first provide some brief background information on Akha in general. Second, I discuss the issue of religious conversion and the impacts of the latter upon communities' understandings of the relationship between religion and ethnic identity – both in relation to Akha and other relevant 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.

2.1 Brief Ethnographic Background on Akha

The term 'Akha' refers to the members of a nation ethnic group that share the same *"Aqkaqzanr"* [1] or "traditional Akha culture", including customs, culture, religious beliefs and practices, language and overall way of life (Geusau 1983; Kammerer 1990; Lewis 1969). Ancestor worship figures prominently in traditional Akha religious beliefs and practices. Linguistically, Akha belong to the Tibeto-Myanmar language family and prior to the late 1920s lacked any written script. [2] In fact, there is a legend that relates how sometime in the distant past Akha received and

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[1] The majority of Western scholars working with Akha write the Akha term for 'traditional culture' in English as "zang". However, in 2008 Akha leaders from different parts of the region developed a common Romanized Akha writing system wherein the term is written as "zanr".

[2] The very first script was developed by an Italian Catholic Priest, Father Potaluppi, and certain Akha in Kengtung, Myanmar in the late 1920s (Morton 2010:132). This script, however, was never used to any appreciable extent by Akha. In contrast, a second script developed by an American Baptist Missionary, Paul Lewis, and certain Akha in Kengtung, Myanmar in the early 1950s has been much more widely used by Christian Akha converts throughout Myanmar and Thailand (Morton 2010:132).

in turn lost a writing system given to them by 'the creator' on a piece of buffalo skin.[3] 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 laws and so forth.

Akha society is a patrilineal society that has developed a very unique genealogical system. Many Akha households can claim more than sixty generations of ancestors reaching back to the common apical ancestor of all Akha people (*Smr Mir-or*). Genealogies play an important role in Akha society. For example, when a child is born a naming ceremony is held during which the child is given a genealogical name linking them to their ancestors and making them fully human. As a result, naming ceremonies are seen as a very important part of the ritual life of Akha communities.

In addition, genealogical recitation is an essential part of funerals. During funerals ritual specialists send the deceased back to the ancestral land by reciting the deceased's genealogy beginning with the apical ancestor of all Akha on down to the genealogical name of the deceased and back again. In this way the deceased is transformed into an ancestor. As such, ancestor worship plays the most important role in Akha society. Akha strongly believe that their deceased ancestors, with whom they have very direct, blood relations, are always looking after them and blessing them in terms of health, reproduction, prosperity, bountiful crops and so forth. Each household accordingly makes twelve offerings to their ancestors at different times of the year in order to both show them honor and gratitude and also ask for their continued blessings.

In addition, Akha believe that everything in the world has its 'owner or spirit', for example, they believe in the owner of the sky, the earth, the mountain, the field, the river, the son, the moon etc. The "owners" of each of these features of the natural world are invisible supernatural powers that live in their own territories. These "owners", furthermore, can harm humans if they behave badly or violate their rules. As a result of many generations of experience living with the natural world Akha have found that their lives and well-being heavily depend upon the well-being of the

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[3] It is said that the person who went to receive the written script became very hungry on their return trip to their village. As a result, the person stopped to cook and eat the buffalo skin.

natural world. As a result, Akha have developed a complex set of ritual practices relating to nature that allows for them to maintain a balance with nature while paying respects and honor to nature. One example of this kind of ritual is the annual offering made to the "Lords of Land and Water", which takes place in roughly May during the transition from the dry to wet season, just prior to the planting season. There are many other kinds of rituals performed by Akha at different times of the year such as those related to the agricultural calendar, the village gates, the village swings and numerous rites related to the life cycle, healing and death. All of these ritual practices and ceremonies are fundamental parts of *Aqkaqzanr* or 'traditional Akha culture'.

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 Myanmar 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 Myanmar, 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. Therefore, many aspects of Akha culture have been lost and are no longer being passed on from one generation to the next as was done in the past.

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). [4]   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 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, the term "hill tribe" was officially adopted by the state in 1959 in order to refer to communities residing in the upland areas of northern Thailand such as the Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, Lisu, Mien and so forth (Kwanchewan 2006:362). Apart from their official designation as a 'hilltribe', however, the Akha in Thailand have been popularly referred to as '*Ikaw'* and their population is roughly 75,000 persons (Geusau 2000:127).   The terms *Ikaw*, *Kaw* and *Ko*, however, are considered derogatory by Akha in these regions who prefer to be referred to as *Akha* (Wang 2008:2).

Nowadays, Akha societies throughout the Mekong Region have lost many aspects of their native 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 native 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 *Aqkaqzanr* have been lost. For example, foremost, Akha communities have largely lost their traditional political structure and have had to adopt a new form of political structure according to different state systems of administration. A state endorsed 'village head' has largely replaced the traditionally endorsed *Dzoeqma* or 'traditional village leader'. Moreover, 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

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[4] 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).

Chinese customs including birthday celebrations, the mid-Autumn festival and so forth. In addition, conversion to Christianity and Buddhism has brought major changes to Akha society in terms of beliefs, practices, social structures and so forth. In the following section I provide a short history of religious conversion among Akha in North Thailand and East Myanmar and discuss the impacts of religious conversion upon Akha society and ethnic identity

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2.2 Religious Conversion and Its Impacts

2.2.1 Religious Conversion

In our rapidly changing world as a result of regionalization and globalization, a great number of people living in Asia and beyond have undergone the process of religious conversion, particularly native peoples and ethnic minorities. Throughout the past 150 years or so many missionaries came from different parts of the world, particularly Australia, the USA, and Western Europe, to Mainland Southeast Asia and began work to convert local people to their foreign belief systems. Charles F. Keyes notes that these missionaries, "believed that through study of the Bible, or, more precisely, the translated Bible, they had gained a rational understanding of God's way that would prove superior to the teachings of any other religion" (1996:282). As a result of these conversions many indigenous ethnic groups living in mainland Southeast Asia and beyond have abandoned their traditional belief systems and adopted the belief systems of any one of the so-called world religions. The numerous belief systems of indigenous ethnic groups in mainland Southeast Asia and beyond in general have in turn been labeled as traditional or primitive religions in contrast to the world religions which are seen as modern and rational.

2.2.2 A Brief History of the Introduction of Christianity to Akha

While it is not my main purpose here to talk at length about the process of religious conversion in general, I would nevertheless like to consider how and when different world religions first reached Akha in order to better understand Akha Christian and Buddhist converts today. As mentioned above, the Akha are just one of numerous ethnic groups from mainland Southeast Asia that have undergone the process of religious conversion, particularly Akha residing in Thailand and Myanmar.

Kammerer (1990) notes that it was an American Baptist pastor who first brought Christianity to Akha in Myanmar in 1869 when he, " toured eastern Myanmar in and around the Shan city of Kengtung" (Cushing 1870; Kammerer 1990: 278).

Early missionaries working with Akha, however, noted that they were very difficult to convert when compared to other groups such as Karen and Lahu. For example, Elaine Lewis (1957:229), an American Baptist missionary working among Lahu and Akha, expressed her disappointment with the "unwillingness" of Akha "to accept the 'Good News' ", adding that, "For some reason which we do not fully understand, the religion of the Lahus presents fewer serious obstacles to the Gospel than that of the Akhas…[T]he religion of the Akhas has stood as a formidable barrier to the Christian witness among that race" (Kammerer 1990:277).

After 40 years of work with Akha, however, the Baptists won their first converts (Sowards and Sowards 1963:419; Kammerer 1990:278). American Baptist Missionaries served actively in the Kengtung region of Myanmar during World War II. In the mid-1960s, however, they were expelled from Myanmar by the government. Paul and Elaine Lewis, two of the last American Baptist missionaries to work with Lahu and Akha in Kengtung, "operated a Bible school and a middle school for Lahu and Akha" (Maung Shwe Wa 1963:232,237; Kammerer 1990:278). Moreover, Paul Lewis completed both one of the earliest transcriptions of Akha language into a script form in the late 1940s and also the first New Testament in the same Akha script in the 1960s (Lim 2004:99).

In Thailand, however, the first converts were not "won" until some 50 years after Protestant missionary work first began in the region (Kammerer 1990:278). Kammerer notes that it wasn't until 1962 that an Akha evangelist originally from Myanmar and an Australian missionary couple from the Overseas Missionary Fellowship "won" their first converts in Thailand (Kammerer 1990:278). 25 years later in 1987 Akha Protestants in Thailand celebrated their Silver Jubilee (Kammerer 1990:278).

The first Protestant missionary work among Akha in Thailand began in 1955 under the OMF or Overseas Missionary Fellowship (Nightingale 1968:263; Kammerer 1990:279). Kammerer (1990) notes that no less than seven OMF missionaries (three couples) served as missionaries among Akha between 1986 and

1988. All of these missionaries, furthermore, were from either Australia or Western Europe. At the time, Paul and Elaine Lewis were, the only American Baptist missionaries to work with Akha in Thailand. They eventually retired from missionary service in June 1989. Moreover, Kammerer notes that the Lewis, unlike the OMF missionaries, did not convert Akha people directly, but rather spent their time working on medical, education, and development projects (Kammerer 1990:279). In addition to these foreign missionaries, "two Thai couples and a number of Akha Protestant evangelists (were) also engaged in spreading the 'Good News' to non-Christian Akha" (Kammerer 1990:279).

At the same time, Catholic missionaries had started their own mission in Kengtung, Myanmar as early as 1912 (Kammerer 1990:278). Kammerer states that while she is not sure as to the exact date for the first Akha conversion to Catholicism, she did meet an elderly Akha woman who had lived at the mission in Kengtung as an orphan from the time that she was roughly nine years of age, suggesting that she had become Catholic in the early 1920s (Kammerer 1990: 278). Italian Catholic missionaries first began working among Akha in Thailand during the 1960s with the involvement of three Italian priests, several Italian nuns, and one Thai laywoman (Kammerer 1990:279). The first Catholic convert in Thailand was subsequently "won" in 1971 through the work of an Italian priest belonging to the same order as the Kengtung mission (Urbani 1971; Kammerer 1990:278).

2.2.3 A Brief History of the Introduction of Buddhism Among Akha

In addition to the foreign Christian missionaries working among "hill tribes" in north Thailand, Thai Buddhist missionary monks began working simultaneously to introduce Buddhism following World War II (Omori 1994:30). These monks provided social support and religious teachings to the "hill tribes". Buddhism is the national religion of Thailand and the underlying goal of converting "hill tribes" to Buddhism has largely been to assimilate them into mainstream Thai society (Lim 2004:59-60). In the 1980s Kammerer noted that Buddhist missionary monks, or *Thammacarik* monks, ran a school for male "hill tribe" youths at a monastery in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand with sponsorship from Thailand's Department of Public Welfare of the Ministry of Interior (1990:285). Many Akha and other "hill

tribe" youth attended the school where they lived as Buddhist novices or monks depending on their age (Kammerer 1990:285). This school and pattern continues to this day. Kammerer further notes that "although many traditionalist Akha become novices and even monks while attending this school, they resume their traditional religious practices after living" (1990:285). Moreover, Kammerer further notes that, "although both Christianity and Buddhism are proselytizing religions, only Christianity has been embraced by large numbers of Akha" (1990:285). However, today more Akha in Thailand are becoming Buddhist than in the past, while the majority of conversions are still to Christianity.

As of 1990, Kammerer notes that "roughly one-fifth to one-third of the approximately 200 Akha villages (in Thailand) are fully or partially Christian, (with) Protestants outnumber(ing) Catholic(s)" (1990:279). More recently, however, a leading Akha Protestant missionary in Chiang Rai tells me that 80% of the current population of Akha in Thailand are Protestants. The Roman Catholic Church in Chiangmai also informs me that roughly 60,000 Akha in Thailand today are Catholics. In contrast, however, the director of AFECT in Chiang Rai states that roughly 40% of the Akha in Thailand today are still carrying *Aqkaqzanr*. Finally, an Akha Buddhist monk informs me that roughly 20% of the Akha in Thailand today are Buddhists. There are discrepancies between each of these figures and so they must be taken as very rough estimates. Based on my personal experiences, however, I would suggest that the majority of Akha today in Thailand are Christians followed by Buddhists and then Neo-Traditionalists.

2.2.4 Religions Conversion Among Akha and other Groups: Impacts and Responses

In reference to the Karen, scholar Chumpol Maniratanavongsiri notes that conversion to Christianity has brought significant changes to Karen culture as Karen Christians cease practicing many of their traditional rituals, which they consider incompatible with their Christian faith (1992). Along these lines, Roland Platz notes that Karen "Baptists and members of other Protestant denominations should refrain from spirit worship and also from drinking alcohol, a practice which has a sacral meaning in an Animist context as it accompanies most traditional rituals" (2003:483). Moreover, Chumpol notes that in addition to rituals, Karen Christians are forbidden

by the church from singing traditional Karen songs. Rather, Karen Christians sing new songs such as "hymns or carols that utilize Western melodies" and are created by Western missionaries (Chumpol 1992:176). Chumpol argues that "the loss of Karen traditional rituals and native songs has brought about major changes to Karen ethnic identity" (1992:176).

Platz further notes a difference between Karen Catholics and Protestants in their orientations towards Karen traditional culture. He notes that Karen Catholics, when compared to Protestants, are more open to traditional rituals. Catholics, Platz writes, "can easily participate in all (kinds of non-Catholic) rituals, although they will refrain from making offerings" (2003:484). Platz further notes a tendency for older Catholics to continue using traditional "magic spells for curing illness, while Protestants refrain from doing so" (2003:484). In addition, Karen Catholics, unlike Protestants, are not prohibited from drinking liquor and will in fact "produce liquor" for wedding ceremonies (Platz 2003:484). In sum, Platz argues that, "for Catholics, religious boundaries are more permeable compared to Protestants, and the official stance of the Church towards traditional religions became more tolerant after the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65" (2003: 484).

Moreover, when compared to both Karen Catholics and Protestants, Karen Buddhists appear to be even freer to practice traditional Karen rituals and ceremonies. For example, Platz notes that Karen "Buddhists (*che phaw, baphaw*) differ from Animists only in that they abandon the practice of *aw chä* (ancestor worship); in general, all other traditional rituals linked to rice production are still performed" (2003:475). [5] Buddhists, Platz notes, "feel close to Traditionalists (with) the difference being freedom from the ancestors, who have lost their power" (2003:482). Moreover, Platz stresses that "the only strictly Buddhist ritual for so-called Buddhists may be the offering of rice to the Buddha each morning" (2003:475). Thai anthropologist Kwanchewan Buadaeng further notes that Karen Buddhists carry out traditional rituals during the New Year and make offerings to field spirits during various parts of the agricultural cycle (2003:228).

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[5] Platz argues that, "conversion to Buddhism does not specifically require (Karen) to abandon ancestor worship, but rather provides a rationale and a ritual means for cutting ties with a ceremony which is viewed as cumbersome and often ineffective" (2003:475).

Kwanchewan further notes that Karen Christian households often joined traditional rituals organized by Buddhists households, although they "seldom organized traditional rituals themselves" (2003:228). She notes that in the context of these Buddhist rites, Christian households "would tie the wrists of Buddhist Karen, while blessing them with traditional verses" (Kwanchewan 2003:228). In this respect, Kwanchewan's findings differ from those of Platz in providing a more harmonious or compatible view of inter-religious relations among Christian, Buddhist and Traditionalist Karen.

In sum, Karen conversions to Christianity and Buddhism have variably impacted Karen social structure and relations as well as traditional Karen culture and ethnic identity. This is particularly the case in reference to Karen converts to Christianity. The new religions of Karen converts have led them to form new communities, lifestyles and religious identities that differ from those of Karen traditionalists.

Karen Christians have adopted Christian traditions such as church services, Christian songs, Christmas, Easter, 'Thanksgiving' and so forth. Karen Buddhists have similarly adopted Buddhist traditions. Central to their new religious identity is the offering of alms to Buddhist monks and/or the Buddha image. Moreover, Karen Buddhists visit Buddhist temples on Buddhist holy days (*wan phra*) and attend various ceremonies held in temples in order to "obtain magic amulets or blessings" (Platz 2003: 483).In contrast, Karen traditionalists tend not to attend either Christian church services or Buddhist temple ceremonies. Platz argues that while Karen "Animists do not practice any form of revitalization of their religion, (they are more or less compelled to) reject Christian missionary efforts" (2003:483).

In a similar fashion, the adoption of Christianity and Buddhism has brought many changes to Akha society in terms of social structure, social relations, ritual life and ethnic identity. The doctrines of Christianity and Buddhism are incompatible with the practices of *Aqkaqzanr* or "traditional Akha culture". As a result, Akha Christians and Buddhists have abandoned many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr*, particularly those aspects related to religious beliefs and ritual practices. In addition, while Neo-Traditionalist Akha hold their ritual practices in very high regard, seeing them as being handed down to them by their ancestors going back many generations, some

Akha that have converted to Christianity in particular have begun to look down on traditionalist Akha and their beliefs and rituals (Kammerer 1996; Wang 2010:15).

At the same time, however, a large number of Neo-Traditionalist Akha in the region continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr* and strongly resist the influences of various foreign and national missionary groups seeking to convert them to other religions. For example, since 2008 a group of Neo-Traditionalist leaders from Myanmar, China, Laos and Thailand 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*. For example, this group has developed a common writing system and organized international meetings and festivals such as an annual Neo-Traditionalist New Years Celebration in Tachilek, Myanmar in order to support *Aqkaqzanr* and promote unity among Akha in the region. 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.

If we consider the impacts of religious conversion upon the members of other ethnic groups it is clear that religion has become a significant means by which they differentiate amongst each other. For example, Kwanchewan (2003:224) notes in reference to the Karen living along the Thai-Myanmar border that:

"Christians, in general, were called *ba ywa hpo* (literally, 'people who worship God'). Catholics were differentiated from Protestant: the former were called *phei thi hpo or* 'people who sprinkle water,' while the latter were *bler thi hpo,* or 'people who immerse themselves in water'."

Kwanchewan adds that the different "names (noted above) reflected the Karen perception of the different practices of the two religions (2003:224)." For example, lustral water consecrated by a priest plays an important role in the daily lives of Catholic Karen in contrast to Protestant Karen (Kwanchewan 2003:224).

In addition, in turn Platz argues that, "ethnic and religious identities have become inseparable, leading to a creation of intra-ethnic boundaries (2003:481)." At the same time, religious affiliation may become a marker of intra-ethnic differentiation, or may recreate an ethnic group's identity. Platz (2003:489) further notes in reference to the Karen that:

"There are sometimes conflicts within the Protestant community, as in one village dominated by Baptists, where members of the more fundamentalist

Church of Christ Mission agitate against the Baptists, calling themselves the 'real' Christians. Pentecostal churches also have a growing influence, but it remains to be seen how important they will be in the future and whether they will act much differently from the Baptists."

Moreover, Platz notes that conflicts sometimes occur between Karen belonging to different religious traditions (2003:486). This is particularly the case in reference to households where different members may follow different religions traditions. Platz notes that many Karen, particularly Protestants, feel it is better if all of their family members at least follow the same religion. For example, Platz writes that, "an old Baptist couple complained that their son, living with his wife in a neighboring village, had converted to Buddhism" (2003:486).[6] Platz further notes that in some cases non-Christian Karen reject the proselytizing efforts of Christians. He notes, for example, that in one "Buddhist/Animist village, stones were thrown at a house where missionaries were staying" (Platz 2003:486).

Similar tensions and divisions have arisen within Akha society as a result of rising rates of religious conversion and diversity. Akha communities in Thailand and increasingly Myanmar as well are becoming increasingly divided over the issue of religion. For example, Kammerer notes that early missionaries working with Akha in Myanmar and Thailand "note that converts were not allowed to stay in their villages" (Nightingale 1968:265; Kammerer 1990:282). Moreover, many Akha villages in Thailand have been divided into numerous sub-villages over the issue of religion. For example, there are currently seven different Christian churches belonging to five different church 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 seven different groups: one Neo-Traditionalist group, one Catholic group, four different Protestant/Baptist groups and one 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, some Christian Akha view religion as replaceable and compatible with an Akha ethnic identity. Neo- Traditionalists, however, feel that to be Akha means to carry the traditional Akha belief system and ancestral services and

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[6] Platz refers to another example of a Karen Baptist (former) headman who "suffers" as a result of his daughter's marriage into a Shan Buddhist household in another village (Platz 2003:486).

that a change in these beliefs and practices means a change in ethnic identity to something other than Akha. Moreover, Neo-Traditionalist Akha in Thailand and Myanmar frequently say that Akha today are not only divided by national borders but also by religious borders. The popular Akha saying, "*Aqkaq Tseirkaq Tiqkaq Ma*" ("~Ten Aqkaq are United 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, *"Aqkaq Tiqka Tseirka Ma"* ("~One Aqkaq 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.

Nowadays 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. In addition, religious conversion, particularly in Thailand and Myanmar, 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, 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.

Since all of these tensions arise as a result of the continuity or abandonment of *Aqkaqzanr* by various members of the Akha community it is important to consider the native Akha notion of *Aqkaqzanr* and the importance of the traditional beliefs and ritual practices underlying *Aqkaqzanr*. What are these traditional beliefs and rituals and in what ways are they central and important to traditional Akha identity? What do other religious practices mean to Akha and how do they affect their community and sense of identity? In the following section, I discuss the work of earlier western scholars on Akha in Thailand in order learn how they define *Aqkaqzanr* and analyze the nature of relations between *Aqkaqzanr* and Akha identity?

2.3 Aqkaqzanr: Religion, Ethnicity, Culture?
2.3.1 *Aqkaqzanr*

2.3.1.1 Outsider Perspectives

Western anthropologists who have conducted research with Akha in Myanmar and/or Thailand have given several 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 (Geusau 1983:249; Kammerer 1990:280)." Cornelia Kammerer in turn stresses that it is important to understand the native Akha understanding of *zanr* as it is the latter that has, "guided Akha reactions to Christian proselytization" (1990:280).

Toyota argues that Geusau (1983), Kammerer (1986, 1988, 1989, 1990) and Tooker (1988, 1992):

"(note a) contrast between the Akha 'native ' 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 zanr 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 *Aqkaqzanr* 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 *Aqkaqzanr* 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, Geusau, Kammerer and Tooker stress that, "the most important thing for Akha identity is Aqkaqzang (Toyota 2003:306)."

Tooker (2004:243), however, argues that "notions of collective identity" among Akha in one particular village in North Thailand have changed recently from a "comprehensive, holistic form (1982-1985) to a compartmentalized form (1985-1998)" as a result of "increasing nation-state and capitalist penetration." In support of her argument Tooker holds 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 then being made to leave as was done in the past (2004:279).

2.3.1.2 Akha Perspectives

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 among Akha. Their interpretations of *Aqkaqzanr*, however, only focus on some parts of the native understanding of *Aqkaqzanr*. In the following section I elaborate more fully on the native understandings of *Aqkaqzanr* that I learned about through my interactions with Neo-traditionalists within and beyond *Arbawr* village.

As for Tooker's (2004) claim regarding the recent "compartmentalization" of Akha identity I agree with her underlying argument that "notions of collective identity" among Akha have been greatly influenced by "increasing nation-state and capitalist penetration", and that Akha have more or less assimilated to a "modern" Thai identity. At the same time, however, I have found that Akha have created a "Thai-Akha" national identity that remains distinct from that of lowlander Thais. Moreover, I have found that many Neo-traditionalist villagers continue to practice the full range of annual rituals associated with *Aqkaqzanr* as was done in the past by their ancestors before them. In addition, I have learned that the earlier prohibition against converts to other traditions remaining within the village gates still continues in certain villages. I have also learned that in villages where it is no longer possible to maintain this prohibition due to state intervention and limits on land, the villagers themselves often self-segregate into different sub-villages along the lines of place, ritual life, and

social relations in general. Many elder Neo-traditionalists in my study village told me that they wished that they could still enforce this prohibition as was done in the past in order to maintain a stronger sense of unity and community within the village gates as well as ensure the overall well-being of the community.

As Geusau, Kammerer and Tooker argue, *Aqkaqzanr* is much more than simply 'religion' as understood by first foreign and now Akha Christian missionaries. For example, a thirty eight year old Akha man from Thailand who recently completed a Master's degree in Cultural Studies at Maefahluang University in Chiangrai argues that *zanr* is much more than just religion and yet also more than culture. He holds that *zanr* 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*, regardless of whether they may be Traditionalist, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim etc. 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 native Akha term in of itself so as to not create any misunderstanding of the term.

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) *Daevqzanr* (Rites and regulations relating to the living) and (2) *Xirzanr* (Rites and regulations related to the dead). *Daevqzanr* 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 ancestral services, annual communal rituals, regulations governing everyday life as well as food, language, music, dance, dress and oral literature. *Xirzanr* refers to all of the rituals, regulations and customs related to death, including both natural and unnatural or accidental deaths. As noted earlier, from my perspective I hold that *Aqkaqzanr* can be most accurately translated into English as "traditional Akha culture". Therefore, it is clear that from the Neo-Traditionalist perspective that *Aqkaqzanr* includes much more than simply 'religion' and yet 'religion' and 'ritual' are certainly very important parts of *Aqkaqzanr*.

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

"…~'Zanr' is 'religion' and all of the traditional rituals and beliefs belong to 'zanr'. As a result, all of these rituals and beliefs must be discarded when becoming Christian as they differ from those of Christianity. In my opinion, I would like to use the term 'Aqkaqsanr' in stead of '*Aqkaqzanr*' to refer to my Akha cultural identity. The Akha term 'Sanr' has the meaning of 'to have or to own'. It refers to Akha 'culture', and to those parts of our Akha identity that we share in common with other non-Christian Akha. It has no 'religious' meanings. (personal communication, June 15, 2012).

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

One example that the missionary gave was that of the traditional Akha swing, which is ritually constructed by Traditionalist Akha during the rainy season each year with making ancestral offerings and asking for blessings from the ancestors for a good rice crop and health. He noted that some Christians had decided to continue this practice minus the traditional ritual beliefs and practices as the swing itself was an important part of Akha 'culture'.The missionary added that when they build the swing they do so in the name of their 'God'. His argument regarding the division between 'religion' and 'culture' makes sense given the fact that he and other Christians have adopted a new religion and need to provide a justification for their decision to do so. In conclusion, different views of *Aqkaqzanr* have led both outside scholars and also Akha themselves to look at the collective identity of Akha in different ways. In the following section I first discuss the concepts of 'religion' and 'ethnicity' and then consider the nature of the relationship between religion and ethnicity in relation to Akha and a number of other ethnic groups.

2.3.2 Religion and Ethnicity
2.3.2.1 Religion

As for the topic of 'religion', a number of definitions have been provided by various scholars. Robert Hefner writes that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Western scholars as well as missionaries held that the so-called "world religions could be distinguished by their intellectual coherence and moral rigor (1993:6)." German sociologist Max Weber drew on "ideas of the nature of magic, science, and religion widespread in the late nineteenth century" in arguing that world religions could be distinguished from traditional religions on the basis of their

superior rationalization (Weber 1956; Bendix 1977:87; Hefner 1993:7). Weber argued that, "traditional religions are piecemeal in their approach to the problem of meaning, but world religions formulate comprehensive responses to the ethical, emotional, and intellectual challenges of human life" (Hefner 1993:7). Weber saw the magician in turn as the "ideal-typical representative of traditional religion and his portrayal of that role illustrates his view of the cultural divide between traditional and world-historical religions (Hefner 1993:7)".

American Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, however, goes beyond these earlier scholars in defining religion in general, whether it be in its traditional or so-called world forms, as, "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz 1973:90; Eriksen 2001:211)". Moreover, Geertz argued that, "instead of looking at the social functions of religion, we ought to explore what religion means to people, how it helps to make sense of the world and how it gives a meaning and direction to human existence (Ibid.)".

As for the definitions of religion discussed above I find Geertz's definition to be the most useful in its stress on the role of religion in helping individuals to make sense of their everyday realities and providing a direction for their lives. And yet I also feel that equal consideration should be given to the social functions of religion. Among traditionalist Akha, for example, rituals play a very important role in creating and maintaining social relations between relatives, co-villagers and so forth.

At the same time, however, earlier scholars working with Akha tend to stress that both western notions of 'religion' as a distinct and separate sphere of social life and also divisions between the sacred and secular do not apply to the native Akha worldview (Geusau 1983; Kammerer 1986, 1988, 1989, 1990; Tooker 1988, 1992; Toyota 2003). For example, Geusau argues that the native Akha notion of identity, *zanr*, is best defined in a holistic manner as, "religion, way of life, customs, etiquette, and ceremonies," and that no distinction is made between the sacred and secular (Geusau 1983:249; Toyota 2003:305). This holistic definition supports traditionalist Akha views of the inseparability of their religious and ethnic identities.

2.3.2.2 Ethnicity

Many scholars have stressed the closely related nature of religion and ethnicity. The phenomenon of ethnicity, however, is a complex one. As with religion, different scholars define ethnicity in different ways. For example, Richard A. Schermerhorn defines an 'ethnic group' as "a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood (1970:12; Chumpol 1992:7)." Wsevolod Isajiw sees an ethic group as "an involuntary group of people who share the same culture or (the) descendants of such people who identity themselves and/ or are identified by others as belonging to the same involuntary group (Isajiw 1979:25; Chumpol 1992:7)." Frederik Barth brings attention to what he argues are four general features of ethnic groups, namely that they: "1) are largely biologically self-perpetuating, 2) share fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms, 3) make up a field of communication and interaction and 4) have a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order" (1969:11-12; Chumpol 1992:7-8).

Anthony P. Cohen (1985) in turn stresses that people become aware of their ethnicity, referred to as culture, as a result of interactions with individuals belonging to other ethnic groups or cultures. Along these lines Cohen writes:

> "People become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries: when they encounter other cultures, or when they become aware of other ways of doing things, or merely of contradictions to their own culture (1985; Eriksen 2001:261)".

Ethnicity as defined in this study, falls under Anthony P. Cohen's definition as noted above. For example, Kammerer notes that "In traditional Akha culture, while humanness is predicated on practicing Zanr of some kind, a particular identity depends upon the kind of Zanr practiced. Those who practice Akha customs are Akha, those who practice Lahu customs are Lahu, and so on. It follows, then, that those who adopt Jesus customs are 'Christ people' (1990:285)".

Kammerer further notes that "a convergence is thus evident between the ideas about identity outlined by the missionary Jean Nightingale and the reformulated

definitions of Akha-ness among converts" (1990:285-286). Moreover she notes that Jean and her husband encouraged, "Akha converts to retain their culture by keeping their language and their traditional clothes" (Kammerer 1998:268-273). Kammerer further states that "these converts do not simply become Christians; they become Akha Christians. Despite the proclaimed 'universal brotherhood of Christ', both Akha Protestants and Akha Catholics have few ties with non-Akha-Christians (either hill-dwelling or valley-dwelling)" (1990:285-286).

I have found that Kammerer's earlier descriptions as noted above can equally be applied to the current situation in my study community of *Arbawr* village. For example, in *Arbawr* village today Akha Christian converts have formed not only a new lifestyle and community but also a new religious identity that contrasts with that of Neo-Traditionalists. Therefore, Neo-traditionalists tend to 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.

As mentioned earlier, it is widely recognized that religion and ethnicity are closely related phenomena. At the same time, conflicts and tensions over the relationship between ethnic and religious identity are on the rise throughout the world today. This leads to questions such as: What are the fundamental aspects of ethnic identity? Does religious conversion recreate or reinvent ethnic identity? In order to consider these questions I now turn to the work of a number of other scholars that have talked in detail about the functions of religion in relation to ethnicity and vice versa. For example, Anderson and Freideres (1981:42; Chumpol 1992:9) argue that:

"Many of the functions of religion are oriented toward the preservation of ethnic identity. As various social scientists have pointed out, religion contributes to a sense of identity in an age of depersonalization; it may be a nationalistic force and assume the role of the protector of ethnic identity; it promotes social integration; it attempts to validate a people's customs and values through socialization; it affirms the dignity of ethnic group members who might be considered by non-members as having low status; it tends to be a pillar of conservatism; and it often encourages conscious social isolation from outsiders".

Platz argues that ethnic and religious identities "are two of many human identities of varying importance; the two are not necessarily congruent, as is the case with the Karen" (2003:479). Moreover, Platz notes that, "no single identity exists;

rather, there are a number of constantly changing identities which sometimes conflict with each other" (2003:479). Platz uses a combined primordialist and situationalist approach to define ethnic identity. He writes that, "a primordial and a situationalist ethnic identity may exist simultaneously" (2003:479).[7] He further states that, "ethnic boundaries may be permeable, fluent and fixed at the same time" (Platz 2003:479).

Moreover, Platz argues that, "religious identity may outweigh ethnic identity, and the boundaries of ethnic identity become less clear when a universal religion is the unifying factor" (2003:481). In support of this argument he provides the example of "second-generation migrants from Pakistan living in the United Kingdom, who define themselves as bicultural (Pakistani and British), but as part of the transnational (Islamic) community" (Platz 2003:481). Platz further notes that, "the Indonesian archipelago has recently become an example of conflicts where religion is used as an element of distinction. In particular, monistic religions like Christianity and Islam tend to polarize and proselytize" (2003:481).[8]

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

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[7] Platz stresses that, "the primordial concept of ethnic identity is overly rigid and its critics stress that the dynamic of changing identity is not included, while ethnicity is overemphasized and the significance of social interaction neglected" (2003:480). In contrast, he adds that, "according to situationalism (formalism, circumstantialism), common cultural traits depend on the situation of the actors to determine how ethnic boundaries are defined" (Platz 2003:480).

[8] Platz further notes that, "in the case of Karen Protestants, ethnic and religious identities have become inseparable, leading to a creation of intra-ethnic boundaries. Conflicts within other tribal societies of Northern Thailand are even deeper, however: Christian Akha show contempt for traditional rituals, while Hmong Protestants tend to be intolerant and polarizing, leading to separate religious spaces within the same village" (2003:481).

Christianity are still Karen, they are Christian Karen. They create a new identity as Christian Karen" (1993:5).

Similarly, the case of the Akha also fits Rutledge's conception of the relations between religion and ethnicity as noted above. In this paper I argue that as Akha have converted to different religions they are simultaneously constructing different identities. For example, Christian Akha and Buddhist Akha have constructed their own identity which is clearly different from that of Neo-traditionalist Akha.

As noted earlier in reference to Akha in Thailand today there are different ideas about the relationship between religion and ethnic identity. Neo-Traditionalists see religion and ethnic identity as part of the same system and hold that a change in one results in a change in the other. For example, on one occasion as I talk with an elder Neo-Traditionalist I ask him, "What do you feel is the most important part of your Akha identity?" He replies:

"First, I would say that it begins with birth, when a child is born a naming ceremony is held and they are given a genealogical name. This name is a fundamental marker of their being Akha. At the same time, we must carry *Aqkaqzanr* and make offerings to our ancestors. And you know, the Protestants and Catholics, they no longer do any of these things, and so they are no longer like Akha" (personal communication, June 5, 2011).

This particular elder's views were similarly expressed by many other Neo-Traditionalists both in and beyond *Arbawr* village. These Neo-Traditionalists assert that Akha must both have a genealogical name as well as carry *Aqkaqzanr*. In contrast, Christians see ethnicity and religion as different parts of their identity and hold that changing their religion does not change their ethnicity. Nevertheless, it is clear that as Akha convert to other religious traditions changes take place in terms of their economic, social and cultural life that lead to a change in identity.

In the context of Canada, however, Chumpol holds that many native peoples have begun searching for their roots and a more meaningful identity and are increasingly "turning to older traditions for guidance" as part of that process (1992:137). These native communities, Chumpol notes, are increasingly rejecting Christianity and a major cultural revitalization movement is taking place (1992:137). Sweat lodges, fasts, potlatches and other spiritual ceremonies are all being revived as part of this revitalization movement (Chumpol 1992:137).

A similar kind of revitalization movement is taking place today among Akha communities in the Mekong Region. In contrast to the situation in Canada, however, a large number of Neo-traditionalist Akha continue to carry traditional Akha culture and have firmly resisted conversion to non-native traditions such as Christianity or Buddhism. In addition, a group of Akha leaders from Myanmar, China, Laos and Thailand have been working to modify and simplify traditional Akha culture and related rituals so that they can be more easily carried in today's context. The members of this group are working to both maintain traditional Akha culture and also change and adapt it to current situations at the same time. Their work is being done, furthermore, in order to both support Akha that continue to practice traditional Akha culture and also encourage those who have abandoned it to return. In the next section, I will review the concept of Neo-Traditionalism and provide some background information on Neo-Traditionalist Akha.

2.4 Neo-Traditionalism and Background on Neo-Traditionalist Akha

2.4.1 Neo-Traditionalism

Are traditions invented and/or reinterpreted? In early writings on what we might refer to as Neo-Traditionalism, there is a debate as to whether or not traditions are invented from thin air and/or reinterpreted on the basis of earlier beliefs and practices. For example, in his work on the interactions between native leaders and colonial officials in re-interpreting customary law in nineteenth century Africa, Spear notes that:

> "In earlier work I used the term 'pseudo-traditionalism' (to explain this process), but now think 'neo-traditionalism' better captures a process marked by reinterpretation that was neither spurious nor false (2003:3,4-5)".

Spear further argues that:

> "The case for colonial invention has often overstated colonial power and ability to manipulate African institutions to establish hegemony. (In reality, however,) tradition was a complex discourse in which people continually reinterpreted the lessons of the past in the context of the present (2003:3,4-5)."

In reference to Terence Ranger who coined the term "the invention of tradition", Spear argues that:

"Contrary to subsequent interpretation, much of Ranger's original analysis did not concern British invention of African tradition but of their own, as colonial authorities adopted recently devised British institutions of the regiment, public school, country house, civil service and imperial monarchy to establish a 'feudal-patriarchal' ethic of African subordination (2003:5)."

Spear further notes that, "far from being created by alien rulers, then, tradition was reinterpreted, reformed and reconstructed by subjects and rulers alike" (2003:4).

The concept of "Neo-traditionalism" is further discussed by Eric Gable who conducted ethnographic research in a Manjaco village in Guinea-Bissau between 1986-1988 (2000). Gable's discussion of Neo-Traditionalism begins with his observations of what he initially interpreted as a great deal of arguments between village youth and elders over their traditions (2000:195). His work focuses on an organization developed by village youth referred to as the "Culture Development Club", and whose members "were often publicly critical of certain aspects of what the elders referred to as 'custom' (Gable 2000:195)". For example, Gable notes one such incident that took place in the area of the village's sacred shrine/forest where:

"…the elders sat closest to the shrine itself on two rows of crude benches where every household head had his 'place,' each man with a clay pot for his 'share' of palm wine on the ground in front of him. (But) the young men sat or stood at a more distant jumble of logs, waiting for the elders to make their speeches to the spirit. One of the juniors - a young married man named Tomas, (started to yell) at the elders that from now on the junior's pot would also be filled before any elder drank, and threatened that if the elders didn't listen they would find themselves drinking at the shrine alone. From then on, the elders and the juniors had made an agreement; the juniors would share the wine with the elders together in the village sacred forest (2000:195)."

For Tomas, the village's sacred forest was merely a convenient and customary meeting place and nothing more. Gable notes that he was often openly "dismissive of the elders' beliefs in local spirits" (2000:195). Gable further notes that:

"…incidents such as this might be interpreted as typifying a fairly predictable transformation in village life. The inhabitants of another out of the way place embrace (or succumb to-depending on your proclivities) modernity's persuasions as they refashion their lives through clearly modern institutions like The Club for the Development of Culture (2000:196)."

This youth-led club, he notes, developed in response to a great number of changes taking place at the time in the village as more and more young people were leaving to

find work in urban centers and life within the village was becoming more competitive as greater social inequalities were developing. Gable further notes that:

"…the circle of young men who were the founders of the Club for the Development of Culture had a twofold agenda regarding what they called 'culture'. (On the one hand,) they wished to protect and promote certain elements such as dance and cooperative labor in order to make village life attractive to the young (while on the other hand, they) wanted to eradicate certain elements of Manjaco 'culture' which they considered destructive (2000:196)."

In short, each of the authors noted above tends to view Neo-Traditionalism as something that, rather than being invented from thin air, is actively reinterpreted, reformed and reconstructed from earlier beliefs and practices in response to changes taking place at local, regional and global levels. In my own work I define the term '**Neo-Traditionalism' as a process of re-interpretation by which a particular group of people actively works to revitalize and maintain their earlier beliefs and practices while modifying and adapting them to their current situations.**

There are some similarities between the situation that Gable observed in Manjaco village and the situation I encountered among Neo-traditionalist Akha in *Arbawr* village in north Thailand. For example, there have been some disagreements between the elders and the younger generations in *Arbawr* village over the question of what parts of *Aqkaqzanr* should be modified, simplified and/or reformed. In particular, there has been an ongoing disagreement over the question of whether or not to reduce the annual number of ancestral offerings from twelve to some lesser number. In contrast to the situation described by Gable, however, I have neither ever heard of nor observed younger villagers confronting their elders in such a direct and coarse manner. The younger villagers in general still maintain a high degree of respect for their elders and would be ashamed of confronting their elders in such a direct and harsh manner. In the following section, I talk in more length about the Neo-traditionalist Akha community in *Arbawr* village and various parts of the greater Mekong region.

2.4.2 "Neo-Traditionalist" Akha?

As for the meaning of the term Neo-Traditionalist I am referring to non-Christian and non-Buddhist Akha from different parts of the region who are working to both maintain as well as adapt their traditional culture to today's changing contexts. Neo-Traditionalists include both educated and non-educated Akha living in upland villages and lowland urban settings. I must stress, however, that my discussion in no way applies to all Akha groups residing in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region. As mentioned earlier, my thesis mainly focuses on the villagers from one upland village, *Arbawr* village, located in Northern Thailand. At the same time, however, I will provide some discussion of activities being carried out by Neo-traditionalists residing in various parts of the region. I will first start with a short history of the formation of an international group of Neo-Traditionalist leaders from various parts of Myanmar, China, Laos and Thailand.

2.4.2.1 MAPS: The Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability

In the first chapter I talked briefly about an international group of Neo-Traditionalist leaders who are working to maintain and modify *Aqkaqzanr*. The members of this group first began meeting formally in August of 2008 when an international meeting was held in the Thai-Myanmar border town of Maesai in order to develop a unified Akha writing system (Morton 2010:106). At least 36 Christian and Neo-Traditionalist Akha leaders from China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand attended the meeting and for some of them it was their first time to meet each other (Morton 2010:107). The purpose of the meeting was to try and develop a unified Akha writing system for use by all Akha residing in the Mekong region in the interests of promoting both the preservation of Akha culture and language and also greater regional communication among Akha. Eventually, however, the common writing system that was developed has yet to be adopted by a number of influential Akha Christian missionaries based in East Myanmar and North Thailand. These missionaries are continuing to use a much older writing system developed by the American Baptist Missionary Paul Lewis and his Akha collaborators in Kengtung, Myanmar in the early 1950s (Morton 2010:122).

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

In late July of 2010 MAPS held an international workshop on *Aqkaqzanr* in Chiangrai, Thailand for young Akha intellectuals from different parts of the region. Akha youth from China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand joined the five day workshop. Several elder Akha ritual specialists from my study village were invited to the workshop in order to share their knowledge of Akha traditional culture with the younger generation of Akha intellectuals. The goals of the leaders organizing the workshop were to: 1) educate the youth participants about traditional Akha culture in general, 2) discuss the issue of how to go about maintaining and revitalizing traditional Akha culture and 3) strengthen relations among Akha from different parts of the region.

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

As noted earlier, the main goal of the leaders of MAPS is to lead the international Neo-Traditionalist Akha community in preserving, documenting and modifying *Aqkaqzanr*. Moreover, they are working to encourage both Akha youth to learn about and appreciate their traditional culture and language, and also Christian Akha to re-convert back to *Aqkaqzanr*. The leaders of MAPS are also playing a significant role in helping Neo-Traditionalist Akha to build cross-border connections and relationships throughout the Mekong region. For example, since roughly 2008

MAPS has organized numerous cross-border activities such as international meetings, cultural festivals, cross-border tours and so forth.

The cross-border movements organized by this group of Neo-traditionalists can be seen in part as building on the earlier work of a now deceased Dutch priest turned anthropologist named Leo Alting von Geusau. Between the mid 1980s and his death in 2003, Alting von Geusau worked to support Traditionalist Akha under the foundation, The Mountain Peoples' Culture and Development Project (MPCD), which was based in Chiangmai, Thailand. Since the early 1990s, Leo Alting von Geusau had begun helping Akha residing in the Mekong region to build relationships and connections with each other. For example, He took some of his Akha staff from Thailand to each of the International Conferences on Hani/Akha Culture that were held in China in 1993, 1999 and 2002. At these conferences Akha from different parts of the Mekong Region were able to first meet each other and begin working together. Moreover, Dr. Leo organized a number of smaller workshops in north Thailand and Xishuangbanna, China in order to discuss the issues of how to both preserve and reform *Aqkaqzanr* and also build and maintain stronger connections among Akha in the Mekong region. Akha leaders from China, Myanmar and Thailand participated in these early workshops and since that time they have continued to contact each other and work together on various projects.

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

"…preserve the positive aspects of the culture and valuable skills on the one hand, and, on the other, create consciousness in attempt to change other aspects of culture or traditional practices which are no longer appropriate in the context of the present social, legal or economic situation in Thailand (Life on the Mountain 1989:9)."

One area in which he worked to reform *Aqkaqzanr* related to a taboo on the birth of twins, which he and the Akha staff of MPCD effectively worked with villagers in north Thailand to abolish during the early to mid-1980s. As a result of their work a pair of twins born in Saencharoen Akha village in March of 1986 were the first to be saved through the intervention of MPCD staff, the village Ritual Reciter, and government officials from the Hill Tribe Agricultural Development

Project.[9] Another five pairs of twins born in other villages in Chiangrai Province were subsequently saved by MPCD between 1986-1989 (Life on the Mountain 1989:9).

As a result of their efforts, the taboo requiring the killing of twins has been abolished and is no longer practiced among Akha today. There are still many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr*, however, that are considered no longer fit to today's changing society by many Neo-Traditionalist Akha. Therefore, under the leadership of the group of Neo-Traditionalist Akha leaders noted above a movement to modify and reform *Aqkaqzanr* has started among Neo-Traditionalist Akha in the Mekong Region.

At the same time, it is important to note that the practices of *Aqkaqzanr* of different Neo-traditionalist communities living in the Mekong region are not all the same. For example, Neo-Traditionalist Akha in Laos are for the most part continuing to carry *Aqkaqzanr* to a high degree with some changes currently taking place, particularly among communities that have moved from their upland villages to different lowland settings for various reasons (based on personal communication with Akha from Laos). The situation in Laos, however, differs from Myanmar, China and Thailand where Akha communities have had to adapt to a much stronger state presence and for a much longer period of time.

Neo-Traditionalists in Myanmar have already adopted a simplified version of the annual ancestral services that is reduced from twelve to three, including the *Kartanr Aqpoeq* or 'New Years Ancestral Offering', the *Khmqxeevq Aqpoeq* or 'Red Egg Ancestral Offering', and the *Yaerkuq Aqpoeq* or 'the Swing Ceremony Ancestral Offering'. Moreover, under the leadership of one Neo-Traditionalist leader from Myanmar a working center on behalf of *Aqkaqzanr* has been established in Tachilek, Myanmar. This center has recently published an Akha language text entitled, *Aqkaq Ghanrtawq Par Dmq,* or 'The Book For Carrying *Aqkaqzanr*'. In this book a recently modified version of *Aqkaqzanr* is described. This 'new' version of *Aqkaqzanr* is being widely adopted by Neo-Traditionalist Akha in Myanmar, particularly Christian

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[9] MPCD provided financial support for raising the infants, who were in very poor health after being born and required hospitalization as well as milk powder to supplement their mother's milk (Life on the Mountain 1989:9).

villagers who have re-converted back to *Aqkaqzanr* and Neo-Traditionalists living in lowland, urban settings.

The situation in China is also quite different. Akha, like other ethnic minorities in China, have been effected by numerous state-led political movements such as the "Cooperative Movement" in 1957, the "Great Leap Forward" in 1958, the "People's Communal Movement" in 1959, the "Four Clean-ups Movement" in 1964 (with the aim of "cleaning up" politics, economics, social organization, and ideology), the "Socialist Education" campaign in 1965, and finally the "Cultural Revolution" between 1966 and 1976 (Tan 1995:27-29). At the same time Akha have been affected by numerous related state policies. As a result of all of these political movements and related state policies the native cultures of Akha and other minority groups in China have been largely destroyed.

Moreover, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the ritual practices of all ethnic groups in Xishuangbanna, like those of other ethnic minorities in China, were prohibited from being followed. All nationalities in China were forced to comply with Han Chinese standards and practices. Therefore, after experiencing many years of having their religious practices abolished, the Akha, as well as other ethnic groups in China, lost much of their traditional culture. Like Neo-Traditionalist Akha in Myanmar, however, Akha in China have kept the three same annual ancestral services (reduced from twelve), namely the *Kartanr Aqpoeq* or 'New Years Ancestral Offering'*,* the *Khmqxeevq Aqpoeq* or 'Red Egg Ancestral Offering', and the *Yaerkuq Aqpoeq* or 'the Swing Ceremony Ancestral Offering'.

Interestingly, in recent years Neo-Traditionalists in China have begun to revitalize some aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* with support from the central and local government. As mentioned earlier, a number of Neo-Traditionalists from China have participated in some of the meetings organized by the international group of Neo-Traditionalist Akha (under MAPS). For example, in December of 2011 a group of 40 Akha came to Thailand from China. One half of the group attended a formal meeting held in Maesai on *Aqkaqzanr* while the other half visited with elders and ritual specialists in two different Neo-traditionalist villages in order to learn more about their practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. As such, some Akha communities in China have started to revitalize their practices of *Aqkaqzanr*.

In Thailand some Neo-Traditionalist villagers are actively striving to carry their traditional culture in much the same way as their ancestors did before them and are not as open to efforts to simplify *Aqkaqzanr*. For instance, the Neo-Traditionalists in my study community continue to observe all twelve of their annual ancestral offerings, all of their annual farming-related rituals, and all of their annual communal rituals. However, it is important to note that they are not practicing *Aqkaqzanr* in exactly the same way as their ancestors did in the past, for changes have taken place and they are very much aware of these changes. For example, in the past a new village gate had to be constructed each year with freshly cut wood. Today, however, due to state restrictions on cutting trees the villagers have constructed a more permanent village gate from cement.

At the same time, the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* that is being used by Neo-Traditionalist Akha in Myanmar is seen as too simple by the elders from my study village. And yet villagers have begun to discuss the issue of whether or not to reduce their annual ancestral offerings from twelve to three. Different generations of villagers tend to have different opinions on this particular issue and the more general issue of modifying *Aqkaqzanr*. While individuals between the ages of 30-60 are generally open to simplifying *Aqkaqzanr*, elders between the ages of 60 and 80 are generally not so open. At the same time, the younger generations in the community continue to pay high respect to their elders and follow their wish to maintain their current practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. These practices of *Aqkaqzanr* are described in chapter four.

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

2.5 Summary

Today each of the Akha communities residing throughout five modern nation-states has experienced different polices of national integration and/or assimilation. As a result of the implementation of various state polices, Akha communities in general throughout the region have experienced difficulties and obstacles in passing on their traditional culture to the next generation. Many aspects of traditional Akha culture have been lost. The polices of each particular state towards ethnic minorities such as Akha, however, differ and have had different kinds of impacts. As a result, some Akha groups in the region have maintained and preserved more of *Aqkaqzanr* than others. This is the reason why some Akha groups' ritual practices have been reduced entirely to three annual ancestral services while others continue to carry out twelve annual ancestral services in addition to other farming and communal-related rituals.

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

At the same time, however, a large number of Neo-traditionalists in the region continue to carry their traditional culture. A group of Neo-traditionalist leaders from Myanmar, China, Laos and Thailand are working together to revitalize and maintain their earlier beliefs and practices in a variety of ways while modifying and adapting them to their current situations. For example, they are working to promote a common writing system, organizing conferences and cultural festivals, and developing a variety of media forms such as books, movies, music cds, and so forth. Moreover, one of their primary goals is to both prevent further conversions to Christianity and also encourage Christians to return to *Aqkaqzanr*.

All of these activities are geared towards supporting the revitalization and preservation of traditional Akha culture. Traditionalist Akha hold their ritual practices in very high regard, seeing them as being handed down to them by their

ancestors for many, many generations. At the same time, however, some Akha that have converted to Christianity have adopted the attitude of many Western missionaries in judging other religions to be inferior and looking down on traditionalist Akha as carrying a heavy and primitive form of "demon worship".

Christian Akha have also adopted the early Western missionary view of *Aqkaqzanr* as 'religion' and not 'culture'. These views continue to be held by the new generation of native Akha missionaries. As such, missionaries, whether foreigners or Akha alike, have encouraged Akha to completely abandon *Aqkaqzanr* and adopt Christianity. These different views of *Aqkaqzanr* have caused tensions and divisions between Neo-traditionalists and Christians.

Furthermore, a debate has developed among Akha belonging to different belief systems over the relationship between religion and culture. For example, a leading Akha Baptist missionary from Thailand once told me that it is important to separate religion from culture and that while Christian Akha have changed their religion they have not changed their culture, which he largely reduces to dress and language. In contrast, numerous Neo-Traditionalist leaders and villagers from Myanmar and Thailand that I have spoken with argue that for them to be Akha means to carry their traditional belief system as rooted in ancestral services and that a change in this belief system means a change in ethnic identity.

In contrast, there are less tensions between Buddhists and Neo-Traditionalists since Buddhists, unlike Christians, tend to not look down upon *Aqkaqzanr*. 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* and *Nyirpaq.*

Nowadays 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. In addition, Akha converts to various denominations of Christianity or Buddhism have created new identities as

Catholic or Christian or Buddhist Akha. At the same time, among Neo-Traditionalists there are different ideas of how to go about reforming *Aqkaqzanr*, particularly between different generations. These tensions, however, differ from those existing between Neo-Traditionalists and Christians. Among Neo-Traditionalists, for example, the question of how many ancestral services a particular individual or community is carrying out is not so important – rather what is important is that they are all practicing *Aqkaqzanr* as rooted in ancestral services. As a result, all Neo-traditionalist Akha in the region consider themselves to be a part of the same larger family and community.