

## CHAPTER 3

### PRACTICES OF AQKAQ ZANR IN ARBAWR VILLAGE

While Christian and Buddhist villagers have given up many of their former practices of *Aqkaqzanr*, Neo-Traditionalist villagers continue to practice much of *Aqkaqzanr* in their everyday lives. Neo-Traditionalist villagers carry out numerous rituals throughout the year at both the household and communal levels. Annual rituals include household-level ancestral services, rituals related to rice cultivation, and a series of communal level rituals carried out in different areas of the village. In addition, Neo-Traditionalists practice many other rituals in the contexts of funerals, healing ceremonies, weddings, housewarmings, naming ceremonies, and feasts held in honor of elders in order both ask for their blessing and ensure them a long and healthy life. In this chapter, I first describe how Neo-Traditionalists in my study community understand *Aqkaqzanr*. Second, I talk about 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 – ranging from individual ceremonies to household and communal level rituals.

#### 3.1 Defining *Aqkaqzanr*

What is *Aqkaqzanr*? Earlier, in chapter two, I discussed the different definitions of *Aqkaqzanr* provided by both western scholars and also some Akha individuals. I will now talk about the ways in which the Neo-Traditionalists in my study village understand *Aqkaqzanr* and why they find it difficult to understand how other Akha could abandon *Aqkaqzanr*. I will also talk about the various social functions of *Aqkaqzanr* in their everyday lives. I begin by telling a story that is often

told by various elders that explains how Akha were first given *Aqkaqzanr* by the creator (*Aqpoeq Miqyaer*).

“One day the creator called all of the different (ethnic) groups in the world together and gave each group its own *zanr* (or traditional culture). The Akha, however, were the last to arrive and receive their *zanr*. In addition, the Akha person who went to receive their *zanr* carried a basket that was woven very tightly, while the baskets of other groups had many holes. While the other groups returned home they lost much of the *zanr* that had been given to them by the creator. This was not the case with the Akha, however, who did not drop anything due to having a tightly woven basket. As a result, *Aqkaqzanr* is more complex and ‘heavier’ than that of other groups”.

Neo-Traditionalists claim that each group of people in the world should maintain and practice its own traditional culture as given to them by the creator. Groups lacking their own traditional culture are compared to animals such as rats, dogs, and pigs that upon passing away are “left to rot on the side of the road” rather than having a proper burial ritual carried out on their behalf. Neo-Traditionalists feel that individuals without any *zanr* end up in a similar state upon passing away as they do not receive proper burial rites according to their *zanr*. For example, one day as I am sitting alongside of several elders and ritual specialists in *Arbawr village* in a small thatched hut overlooking the valley below, one of the elders explains that:

“*Aqkaqzanr* was given to Akha by *Aqpoeq Miqyaer* (the creator) and it belongs to us. It is our *zanr*. We have a responsibility to carry *Aqkaqzanr* as it was carried by our ancestors before us for many, many years. And while we have never looked down on the *zanr* of others, whether they are ‘*Kalizaq*’ (Protestants), ‘*Govqdawqzaq*’ (Catholics), or ‘*Paerxeerzaq*’ (Buddhists), we feel that each of these other *zanr* is not for Akha. We feel that these other *zanr* are not our tradition, they do not fit our way of life” (personal communication, November 8, 2011).

Throughout my research I heard both of these statements as quoted above frequently repeated by different Neo-Traditionalist villagers whether in the context of ritual ceremonies, everyday conversations or more formal gatherings. From these statements it is clear that *Aqkaqzanr* continues to be a fundamental part of Akha identity for Neo-Traditionalist villagers. This was noted in the past by scholars such as Alting von Geusau, Kammerer, and Tooker who all stress that, “the most important thing for Akha identity is *Aqkaqzanr*” (Toyota 2003:306).

Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr village* today still try to continue to practice nearly all of the ritual practices of *Aqkaqzanr* that have been handed down to

them by their ancestors. And yet, it does not mean that they are practicing ‘*Aqkaqzanr*’ in exactly the same way as their ancestors, for changes have taken place and they are very much aware of these changes. For instance, in the past Akha converts to non-traditional belief systems were made to move outside of the village. Today, however, as a result of state control and a lack of land, Akha converts are rarely able to leave their natal village.

From their perspective, all of the rituals that they practice are a part of *Aqkaqzanr* – including each of the 12 annual ancestral services, rituals related to the cultivation of rice, communal level rituals relating to the village gate, swing, sacred spring and ‘Lord of the Water and Land’, as well as non-annual rituals such as funerals, naming ceremonies, healing rites and so forth. In a similar vein, Kammerer writes that, “from the Akha perspective, *zanr* encompasses the many rituals performed by traditionalists, including yearly ancestor offerings, annual and non-annual rice rituals, community ceremonies, life cycle and curing rites, and corrective ceremonies of numerous sorts (1990:332)”.

Kammerer further notes that, “in addition to ritual procedures, *zanr* also includes rules for everyday behavior, such as the dictum that washing should not be left to dry on the porch at dusk” (1990:332). Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village today continue to follow numerous everyday rules for behavior according to *Aqkaqzanr*. This is especially the case for the older generations who often complain about the improper behaviors of the younger generations. Elders often lament the fact that many of the young people today are lazy. They also lament the high rates of alcohol and drug abuse among the younger generations in the village today. These behaviors, elders argue, stem from the younger generations lack of knowledge and respect for the rules and regulations of *Aqkaqzanr*. For example, on one occasion a Neo-Traditionalist grandfather who I often visit tells me that:

“Today the younger generations no longer know our ‘*Zanr*’. This is why they pretty much do whatever they want to do and have no discipline, no shame. They can hold hands with their girlfriends or boyfriends in front of their elders and feel no shame in doing so. In the past, if we behaved like they do now, we would have been looked down upon by the other villagers, we would have been ashamed” (personal communication, October 12, 2011).

It is clear from the above that for Neo-Traditionalist villagers *Aqkaqzanr* is much more than simply ‘religion’ as understood by earlier foreign and now Akha Christian missionaries. In the following section, I describe the practices of *Aqkaqzanr* that are carried by Neo-traditionalists in *Arbawr* village today.

### **3.2 Neo-Traditionalist Villagers’ Practices of Aqkaq Zanr Today**

#### **3.2.1 The team of ritual specialists and its social functions**

Today in *Arbawr* village the traditional Akha political structure can still be found in operation, although it has been modified as a result of the village’s integration into the Thai state. Today there are a number of specialists that play roles in managing and organizing practices of *Aqkaqzanr* in the village. Their ability to manage and organize *Aqkaqzanr*, however, ultimately depends upon the financial support and the efforts of the larger community of Neo-Traditionalists.

These ritual specialists include the ‘*Dzoeqma*’ or ‘leader of communal rituals’, ‘*Khavma*’ or ‘individual(s) with detailed knowledge of how to carry out ritual practices’, ‘*Pirma*’ or ‘Ritual Reciter’, ‘*Nyirpaq*’ or ‘Shaman’, ‘*Bacivq*’ or ‘blacksmith’, and also the ‘*Naqciq*’ or ‘traditional herbal medicine practitioner’. While it is not my intention to provide an exhaustive list of all of the rites at which these specialists officiate, I do provide brief descriptions of the social functions of each of these specialists in Akha society in order to better understand how the practice of *Aqkaqzanr* fundamentally depends upon the sustained and meaningful collaboration of ritual specialists and everyday villagers.<sup>1</sup>

#### ***Dzoeqma* or ‘Leader of communal rituals’**

The term ‘*Dzoeqma*’ has been translated into English in a variety of ways. For example, Lewis defines ‘*Dzoeqma*’ as ‘village priest’ while Kickert defines *Dzoeqma* as ‘headman’ (1967:38). Geusau defines *Dzoeqma* in a more holistic manner as “religious leader”, “ruler”, “founder of the village (or the founder’s son)”, and “leader

---

<sup>1</sup> The social structure of Akha communities today differs from that of Akha communities at the time of earlier studies by scholars such as Geusau, Tooker, and Kammerer some 30 years ago. For detailed descriptions of the kinds of annual and non-annual rituals carried out in relation to agriculture and the human life cycle see Kammerer (1986) and Tooker (1988). Between that time and the present numerous changes have taken place in the ritual practices of Akha villagers – some rituals have been lost and many have been changed in form and/or content.



of the many calendrical communal village ceremonies (1986:91).” Tooker further translates ‘*Dzoeqma*’ as ‘founder/traditional leader’ (1988:48). Kammerer in turn defines ‘*Dzoeqma*’ as “Village Founder-Leader”, based upon “the two central functions of the office, i.e., founding villages and leading both communal rites and local decision-making (1986:90).”

Kammerer writes that Akha frequently claim that, “if there is no Founder-leader (*Dzoeqma*), a village cannot be built (1986:90).” Traditionally, it is the *Dzoeqma* who is responsible for finding an appropriate site to establish a new village by way of carrying out certain rituals (Kammerer 1986:90).<sup>2</sup> Tooker similarly notes that, “the *Dzoeqma* is viewed as ruler, protector and representative of the village as a whole (1988:57)”. Tooker further comments that the *Dzoeqma* is considered the ‘owner’ of the village and all of the communal structures located within the village. For example, she notes that villagers speak of the village swing as the *Dzoeqma*’s swing (Tooker 1988:57).

The *Dzoeqma* is further responsible for maintaining the well-being of the village, resolving intra-village conflicts, and fining those such as adulterers who “transgress customs” (Lewis 1968b, 1969-70:128-134; Kammerer 1986:90-91). Moreover, *Dzoeqma* play a very important role in relation to the ritual life of the village. It is the *Dzoeqma* who initiates many of the annual communal-level rituals including the renewal of the village gate and swing as well as ceremonies held at the site of the sacred spring and the altar in honor of the ‘Lord of the Water and Land’.

Today, however, the position and leadership role of the *Dzoeqma* has changed. As noted earlier, the traditional Akha political structure has largely been replaced by that of the Thai state political structure. A Thai state endorsed *Phuyaibaan* or ‘village head’ has largely replaced the traditionally endorsed *Dzoeqma* or ‘traditional village leader’. In today’s context, *Dzoeqma* can no longer fulfill all of the same social functions as they did in the past. For example, today the *Dzoeqma* in *Arbawr* village, in contrast to the ‘Village Head’, is not able to call a meeting of all of the household

---

<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, the *Dzoeqma* must be a male. Details regarding the process of selecting a new village site can be found in Kammerer (1986:90).

heads, many of whom are no longer Traditionalists but rather Christians, Catholics, or Buddhists.

The *Dzoeqma* in *Arbawr* village today is only 19 years of age. He inherited the position following the deaths of his grandfather and father, who were the *Dzoeqma* before him and according to the traditional regulations of *Aqkaqzanr*. He holds this position today even though he is still young and has little knowledge of Akha traditions. The position of the *Dzoeqma* remains a very important position for the Neo-Traditionalist villagers today. The presence of the *Dzoeqma* is necessary for them to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr*. As was done in the past, furthermore, the young *Dzoeqma* of *Arbawr* village today continues to lead other villagers in carrying out their communal rituals. While leading these communal rituals, however, the young and inexperienced *Dzoeqma* needs to be guided by the older, more experienced ‘*Khavma*’, who are discussed in more detail below. Today in *Arbawr* village the earlier much more holistic social functions of the *Dzoeqma* have been largely reduced to the area of ritual, particularly communal ritual.



**Figure 3.1:** This picture shows the young *Dzoeqma* (on the left) being instructed by a knowledgeable elder (*Khavma*) in ritually consecrating or ‘opening’ the sacred village swing.

Based on the current position of the *Dzoeqma* in *Arbawr* village today I am defining *Dzoeqma* here as the ‘leader of communal rituals’. Akha society today has been greatly impacted by state policies promoting national integration. The implementation of these policies has brought about significant changes within Akha

communities in terms of their social structure, livelihood, political systems, ethnic/cultural identity, and overall way of life. For example, state political systems have come to largely replace the traditional independent Akha political system. As a result, the *Dzoeqma* no longer plays the same roles as in the past. Nevertheless, the *Dzoeqma* continues to play an important part in the live of Neo-Traditionalist villages in *Arbawr* village.

### ***Khavma* or ‘Individual(s) with Detailed Knowledge of Ritual Practices**

In addition to ‘*Dzoeqma*’, ‘*Khavma*’ play an important role in the ritual life of the community. In the past, the term ‘*Khavma*’ was used to refer to a ‘military general’. Kammerer, who translates ‘*Khavma*’ as ‘Strongman’, notes that “in ritual texts the ‘Strongman’ is named immediately after the ‘Village Founder-Leader’ (1986:97).”<sup>3</sup> She further states that she was told by villagers that “such men are ‘fighters’ or ‘people who wage war’ against others, i.e., non-Akha (Kammerer 1986:97).” Geusau further suggests that “the ‘warrior’ or ‘tough man’, might have been a ‘war leader’ in the past and believes that ‘the emphasis was more on organizing defense of a village against invaders than on offensive warfare’ (1983:268; In Kammerer 1986:97-98)”. Moreover, during the early 1980s Geusau reports that ‘*Khavma*’ “sometimes act to maintain order in villages, as a kind of policeman’ (1983:268; Kammerer 1986:98).”

As a result of many changes taking place within and beyond Akha villages today the general social structure of villages has been transformed with the result that *Khavma* no longer fulfill their earlier roles as either ‘military leaders’ or ‘policemen’. Rather, today *Khavma* play an important role as individuals with specialized knowledge for carrying out ritual practices. With their specialized knowledge of ritual procedures and regulations, *Khavma* now oversee and direct the carrying out of various rituals taking place according to traditional Akha culture. *Khavma* play an important role in educating and guiding the *Dzoeqma* and overall community members in conducting numerous rituals and ceremonies taking place at the communal and household level.

---

<sup>3</sup> Kammerer uses a different writing system for Akha and writes ‘*Khavma*’ as ‘*Xaqma*’.

In *Arbawr* village today there are at least ten *Khavma*, with two brothers serving as the senior most *Khavma*. The remaining eight *Khavma* assist these two senior *Khavma* in guiding various ritual practices, at the same time acquiring specialized knowledge of the rituals. When the two senior *Khavma* pass away one or more of the remaining eight *Khavma* will take their position of seniority. In conclusion, *Khavma* continue to play a very important role in the ritual life of the Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village. Based on the case of *Arbawr* village, I refer to '*Khavma*' as 'the leader(s) of the ritual specialists'.

#### ***Pirma* or Ritual Reciter<sup>4</sup>**

In *Arbawr* village today there are two full-fledged Ritual Reciters that are able to carry out the extensive chanting required to offer three buffaloes during an elder's funeral. Several other Ritual Reciters in the village are only able to recite the texts required for offering one buffalo. All of these Ritual Reciters, furthermore, are males. According to traditional Akha culture only males can be Ritual Reciters. These latter Ritual Reciters are more like apprentice Ritual Reciters, referred to in Akha as either 'Boermawq' or 'Pirza'. Ritual Reciters who can chant for a three-buffalo funeral are considered the most knowledgeable as well as respected Ritual Reciters. Kammerer notes, however, that "the Ritual Reciter, unlike the Village Founder-Leader, has no official role in rituals of the annual cycle (i.e. communal and agricultural-related rites). If he did, he too would be essential to every community (1986:103)".

While Ritual Reciters in *Arbawr* village today have no official role in the annual ritual cycle, many of them participate in each of the communal rituals and the senior most Ritual Reciter is often called upon to chant some words of blessing on behalf of the entire village in the form of good health, crop abundance, and overall prosperity during meals held as part of ceremonies in which he does not play a leading role. For example, the senior *Pirma* was called on to offer a blessing on behalf of the community during a meal held as part of the rituals carried out in honor of the 'Lords of Water and Land'. In addition, the Ritual Reciter is regularly called

---

<sup>4</sup> Other scholars have translated '*Pirma*' in a variety of ways. For example, Kammerer translates it as "Ritual Reciter" (1986:100). Tooker translates it as "Spirit Priest" (1988:126). I prefer to follow Kammerer in translating '*Pirma*' as 'Ritual Reciter'.



upon to chant during different kinds of rituals including funerals, soul calling ceremonies, blessing ceremonies, purification ceremonies and so forth.

It is said, however, that Ritual Reciters, unlike *Nyirpaq*, cannot see the ‘spirits’. As such, the Ritual Reciter can only drive away ‘bad spirits’ by way of chanting and carrying out certain kinds of rituals involving animal offerings. In contrast, *Nyirpaq* can both see and communicate with ‘spirits’ from another world. At the same time, however, *Nyirpaq* are not able to chant and drive away ‘bad spirits’. This issue is explained to me by a Ritual Reciter (*Pirma*) in the context of a purification ceremony that he is performing on behalf of a household in the village. The Ritual Reciter informs me:

“A Shaman can go to another world to communicate with the spirits and find both the causes of sickness and also the kinds of rituals that need to be carried out – including the kinds of animals that need to be offered in order to cure their patient. A Shaman however, cannot carry out rituals for their patients. These rituals must be done by the Ritual Reciter. In addition, while I cannot see the ‘bad spirits’ when I chant, I always have in my possession a special branch that I use to hit and drive away ‘bad spirits’ from the body of the patient. The ‘bad spirits’ fear both my words and the special branch” (personal communication, October 4, 2011).

Kammerer suggests that “the Shaman’s job overlaps with that of the Ritual Reciter: both are involved in curing (1986:117)”. Based on my findings, however, I would argue that their roles are not overlapping but rather mutually cooperative.

### ***Nyirpaq* or Shaman**

Kammerer notes that “whereas a man decides to become a Ritual Reciter and attains the office through study, a Shaman is chosen by the spirits (1986:117).”<sup>5</sup> Shamans further differ from other ritual specialists in that they have a very unique function.<sup>6</sup> They are able to travel to the spirit world and communicate with spirits.

<sup>5</sup> Kammerer notes that, “unlike other positions, the role of Shaman is open to both men and women (1986:117).” While all of the Shamans in *Arbawr* village today are women I have observed several male Shaman in other villages.

<sup>6</sup> It is generally believed among Neo-Traditionalists that only special individuals are chosen by *Aqpoeq Miqyear* or the ‘Supreme Creator’ to become *Nyirpaq*. If Neo-Traditionalist Akha begin to show signs of being a *Nyirpaq*, then they will generally be very welcoming of it and carry out the rituals necessary to fully develop their abilities as a *Nyirpaq*.

Shamans generally deal with illness caused by ‘bad spirits’.<sup>7</sup> Like Ritual Reciters, however, Shamans have different levels of ability. There are some Shaman, for example, that are not able to travel to the spirit world to seek aid in finding the causes of illness. For example, while there are numerous female Shamans in *Arbawr* village, not all of them are able to travel to the spirit world.

One senior Shaman in particular is considered to be the most gifted of the Shaman. As a result, Neo-Traditionalist villagers call on her most often in times of illness. I often spoke with this senior Shaman while in *Arbawr* village and on one occasion had an opportunity to watch her perform a ceremony on behalf of a middle-aged male that had suffered a stroke. On one occasion as we are talking I ask her how she is able to figure out the cause of an individual’s affliction. She replies:

“In everyday life I am just like anyone else – just an ordinary person. When I chant, however, my soul (*savqlar*) travels to the spirit world and I can see and communicate with the spirits. In that world my spirit owner guides me in finding out the causes of the affliction. At the same time I must find the afflicted person’s ancestors and tell them of their descendant’s sickness so that they will help me to cure them. Without their help I would not be able to find the spirits that are responsible for the sickness. Once I find the spirits I have to negotiate with them for the person’s recovery. Some spirits are more difficult to negotiate with, while others are easier.

The difficult ones ask for a large number of different kinds of animal offerings.<sup>8</sup> It is my job to negotiate with these spirits in order to reduce the numbers and kinds of animals. For example, if two pigs are asked for I will negotiate with them for only one pig. My spirit owner in turn tells me how to deal with the affliction of the sick person after I have identified the cause of the affliction. Throughout the whole process my soul must remain in the spirit world. My soul cannot return to the human world until I have completed the whole process.

Different sicknesses require different animal offerings and rites. My spirit owner (*Ngaq-e YawSanr*) is a very traditional spirit owner and so I am a very traditional ‘Shaman’. I deal with sickness in the traditional way. It is not possible, you know, to become a Shaman by studying – rather you can only become a Shaman if you are chosen by the spirits. Each of us, furthermore, has

<sup>7</sup> From the Akha point of view, spirits that afflict humans are usually the spirits of individuals that died a violent and unnatural death and never received proper burial rites. As a result the spirits of these individuals are unable to return to their ancestral village and must aimlessly wander between the human and spirit worlds.

<sup>8</sup> Only animals such as dogs, goats, ducks, chickens, and pigs are used as offerings in these healing ceremonies.

a spirit owner in the spirit world that guides and instructs us in our work. Our knowledge comes from our spirit owners. If they are rich in their knowledge, then they are better able to pass their knowledge onto their students. This is why different Shamans have different levels of ability. We have different levels of knowledge – just like the student's today that study in school – some finish a bachelor's degree while others complete a masters or doctorate degree. It is the same with Shamans. Those with more knowledgeable spirit owners have greater knowledge and are able to travel to the spirit world” (personal communication, November 13, 2011).

This senior Shaman further notes that there are some Shamans these days who use money offered by the sick person's family to buy animals in the spirit world rather than purchasing these animals in the human world and carrying out the ritual offerings as required by tradition. She continues to note that there are some Shaman who, during their chanting, take breaks in order to eat and talk with other participants and that some of them are able to complete their chanting part way through the night rather early the next morning as required by tradition. Shaman rituals generally start in the evening after sundown and end very early the following morning. The senior Shaman stresses that according to her knowledge and experience animals cannot be bought in the spirit world, rather real animals have to be offered in the human world. She further stresses that according to tradition, once a Shaman begins their chanting they cannot stop until they have finished their task, which normally takes the entire night and ends sometime during the early morning.

Finally, it is important to note that the Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village sometimes ask for treatments from Shamans residing in other villages. This is generally the case when a prior treatment by a Shaman in the village has not worked. The villagers explained to me that just as they will go to different hospitals and doctors in the lowlands until they have been healed they similarly ask for treatments from different Shamans who have different levels and kinds of healing abilities. I will talk more about the Shaman's actual methods of treatment in the section below on rituals taking place at the level of individuals.

#### ***Naqciq* or Traditional Medicine Practitioner**

In general, older villagers have a basic knowledge about different kinds of herbal medicines. There is one villager, however, who has a very in-depth and specialized knowledge of herbal medicines. This individual is a middle-aged male

referred to as *Naqciq*. He is famous both in and beyond the village for his ability to treat broken bones in addition to a number of other ailments. His healing services are often sought out by villagers in *Arbawr* village – including not only traditionalists but also Catholics, Baptists, and Buddhists. Finally, while the *Naqciq* does not play a leading role in communal level rituals, he plays a very important role in healing villagers through a combination of herbal medicine and chants. As a result, I have chosen to include him within the group of ritual specialists in *Arbawr* village.

### **Conclusions on Ritual Specialists**

In conclusion, all of the ritual specialists discussed above have their own unique social functions in the village. They are leaders, furthermore, in their particular areas of expertise. At the same time their roles are complementary in relation to the Neo-Traditionalist community's overall ritual life and well-being. These ritual specialists play a very important role in relation to the Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village. Together, the ritual specialists and the Neo-Traditionalist villagers play important roles in maintaining their practices of *Aqkaqzanr* or traditional Akha culture. As a result, many of the traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr* continue to be practiced by the traditionalists in *Arbawr* village. In the following section I discuss some of the ritual practices that are carried out by Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village at different levels ranging from the individual to household, and community.

### **3.2.2 Different Levels of Ritual Practices**

#### **3.2.2.1 Individual Level**

In the case of most *Arbawr* Neo-Traditionalist villagers, when someone is sick they will normally go to the hospital for treatment from a medical doctor. If they do not get better after receiving treatment from the hospital, however, many of them call on a Shaman to hold a ceremony on their behalf in order to find out the causes of their sickness from another world. This is just one example of a ritual that would be carried out at the individual level in the village. There are numerous other examples that I discuss below. Each example is drawn from my experiences in the village attending numerous rituals that took place such as ceremonies held in honor of



individual elders to ask for their blessing as well as to wish them good health and longevity and healing rituals held on behalf of sick individuals as noted above.

### **Ceremonies held in honor of elders**

Ceremonies can be held in honor of elders in two kinds of contexts. The first kind of ceremony takes place when members of the younger generation want to ask for blessings from their elders in the form of good health, prosperity, and success. This kind of ceremony involves holding a ceremony during which a black pig is killed and certain pieces of cooked meat are offered to the elders. During the ceremony that takes place the elders will tie strings around the wrists of the younger generation while verbally blessing them. On one occasion upon returning to *Arbawr* village after a short time away one of the villagers told me:

“You just missed the ceremony that my son held in honor of his grandmother yesterday. We killed a pig and his grandmother gave him a blessing for good health and success as he prepares to return to Chiangmai tomorrow in order to take his college entrance examination. We all hope that he will do well and be able to continue his studies” (personal communication, November 20, 2011 ).

As Akha people believe that their deceased ancestors continue to watch over and bless them upon passing away, elders are similarly believed to be able to offer blessings to the younger generations. These elders, after all, will one day pass on to become ancestors as well. The example mentioned above reminds me of my own experiences with my grandparents in China. One difference, however, is that we generally do not kill pigs for these kinds of ceremonies. Rather, chickens and especially chicken eggs are used much more frequently. My grandmother from my mother’s side is a Shaman and whenever I leave home for a long time or have some challenging task ahead of me such as an exam, she will blow air into my ears. She as well as each of my other three grandparents will also tie strings on my left wrist and offer me hard boiled chicken eggs in order to bless me and wish me good health and success as I am leaving home or embarking on some challenging task.

A second kind of ceremony can be held on behalf of elders who are not feeling so well and/or may be very sick. For example, at one point while I was in the village one of the ritual specialists was not feeling so well. One of his daughters decided to hold a ceremony in honor of him so that his health would improve and he would live a

long life. During the ceremony a pig was killed and all of the immediate family members attended. In addition, a number of elder males and females as well as other close relatives from the village were invited to join the ceremony and meal. After the meal was prepared the family members set a table around which the father and several other male elders sat.

Before eating, however, the immediate family members began taking turns tying strings around the father's wrist. The order for family members begins with the eldest son's family down to the youngest child's family and so forth. Following the family members other guests, first relatives and then non-relatives, also began tying strings around the man's wrist. Usually people also offer some money while tying strings around the person's wrist and will offer them blessings such as, "I hope you will recover soon, and that you will lead a long and healthy life". During my time in *Arbawr* village I was able to observe and participate in these kinds of rituals quite often. In some cases I observed the ceremony taking place in two different households at the same time as there is no taboo against this particular kind of ceremony either being performed numerous times or carried out simultaneously.



**Fig. 3.2:** The senior Ritual Reciter from *Arbawr* village ties a string around the wrist of an elder during a healing ceremony held in order to ensure the elder a speedy recovery from his illness.

### Healing Rituals

Healing rituals are another case of rituals that have always been carried in Neo-Traditionalist villages. Traditionally, Akha believe that some sicknesses are caused by 'evil or bad spirits'. The help of a Shaman and Ritual Reciter is necessary in order to prevent these 'evil or bad spirits' from causing the individual's sickness. For example, during my research in *Arbawr* village one of the Neo-Traditionalist villagers suffered a stroke after which his right hand and leg were paralyzed. Following his stroke he stayed in the hospital for one month after which the paralysis remained. After returning home to *Arbawr* village his family decided to invite one of the village Shamans to hold a ceremony on his behalf in order to find the cause of his illness.

The ceremony was conducted and the Shaman learned that the sickness was the result of the family's acquisition of a piece of land from another Lisu family in the village. When the land was still under the ownership of the Lisu family one of the members of the Lisu family was shot and killed on the land. This is considered a very bad and unnatural death for Akha after which the spirit of the deceased lingers in the world of the living and may inflict suffering on the living. The Shaman in turn found that the spirit of the Lisu man who died a 'bad' death on the land was the cause of his sickness.

Prior to the ceremony, the Shaman advised the family to gather certain kinds of animals for use in the ceremony. The ceremony lasted three days from the evening on which the Shaman started chanting until the day that the Ritual Reciter held a ceremony of appeasement on behalf of the man. I visited the man not long after the first ceremony had been carried out by the Shaman. I asked him how he was doing and he informed that he is gradually getting better and that he can now slowly walk with the help of a crutch.

As mentioned earlier in terms of villagers preferring to try different hospitals and different doctors for their treatments, they similarly seek out the services of different shamans. If it is believed that one Shaman cannot effectively identify the cause of the illness then another shaman's services will be sought out. For example, about two months after the ceremony noted above, the man who suffered a stroke decided to invite another Shaman to conduct a healing ceremony for him. He had

been encouraged to do so by one of his relatives. This time, however, the Shaman was from a different village. Her methods of treatment, furthermore, are quite different from those of the first Shaman. For example, rather than buying and offering live animals in this world, this Shaman is able to use money to purchase animals on behalf of the family in the spirit world.<sup>9</sup> Amazingly, as the Shaman was in trance during the healing ceremony this money disappeared into thin air. The Shaman later explained that the money disappeared as she had used it to buy the animals in the spirit world.

Moreover, three clear bottles of pure water were placed in front of the Shaman during the ritual. During the ritual, however, the water in two of the bottles turned yellow in color. The Shaman explained that the yellow bottles of water were medicine created by her spirit owner. In addition, while in trance and visiting the spirit world, the Shaman learned more about the cause of the man's illness. She found that at some point in the past one of the man's ancestors had died in an unnatural way and a mistake was made during their funerary rites. As a result, this ancestor's spirit was afflicting the man. In order to resolve this issue the Shaman informed the family that an additional rite had to be performed. A small chicken had to be sacrificed in this world in addition to each of the animals that had been offered already in the spirit world. She also told the man to drink the two bottles of water that turned into a yellow colored medicine in order to treat his paralyzed hand and foot.

I was present for both of the ceremonies carried out by the Shamans on behalf of the man and his family. I remember that as the Shaman was chanting and going into trance in front of the family's ancestral altar, the man was lying on his bed and repeatedly saying aloud, "Oh, my ancestors, please help me to get better, please help me to recover soon". At the same time all of his family members who were present were asking for the blessings and help of their ancestors. It was a very emotional time and many of the relatives were in tears as they pleaded for the man's health to improve. I was very moved by this experience and began to cry as well. Everyone in the room was hoping for the best for the man and his family.

---

<sup>9</sup> The money, in this case Thai baht, is offered by the sick person's family. The amount of money offered depends upon the particular family.



On another occasion when I visited with this man, he sadly told me that he was very unhappy with his current condition. He lamented the fact that his illness is preventing him from joining many activities taking place both within his family and in the village at large. He also noted that he has become a heavy burden for his family to take care of. His face expressed a great deal of anxiety and sorrow. This man is one of several middle-aged villagers that are training with the elders to become a specialist on the various rituals carried out according to traditional Akha culture or *Aqkaqzanr*. Prior to his illness he always participated in various rituals taking place in the village. In addition, he was also involved in numerous events taking place outside the village such a trip arranged to China during which he and some other villagers met numerous Chinese Akha elders and talked about *Aqkaqzanr* and life in general. His wife later said to me in a very sad way:

“I feel very sorry that he can no longer join these events. I know that he loves *Aqkaqzanr* very much. This is why we have always supported him to join these activities, even if it means that he is not able to help with farming. We hope that he will recover soon and that he can continue to join all of the activities taking place in the village and beyond (personal communication, November 15, 2011).”

Apart from his family, many of the other villagers similarly hope that he will recover soon and return to join the various rituals taking place as part of *Aqkaqzanr* on a regular basis.



**Fig. 3.3:** A Shaman from another village treats a middle-aged man who suffered a stroke.

### Herbal medicine doctor

Besides the Shaman, villagers also seek treatment for different ailments from the herbal medicine doctor, who is a middle-aged male villager. For example, one male villager in his late thirties fell from a tree while picking fruit and injured his lower back. He nearly fractured one of his bones. At first, he stayed in the government hospital in a nearby town for two days before returning to the village. Upon returning to the village he sought additional treatment from the herbal medicine man. For the first two weeks following his return to the village he could not stand on his own without the help of others. The herbal medicine man came to treat him every day with a fresh application of herbs that were applied to the wounded area of his back. As part of the treatment, the herbal medicine man also chants and blows on the injured area. He further provides a bottle of sacred water that he has chanted over to be applied to the injured area. According to the other villagers, this herbal medicine man is highly skilled at treating injured bones – including fractured and broken bones.

Some of the Christian villagers also seek treatments from the herbal medicine man. The herbal medicine man, however, has found it difficult to treat Christians because of certain tensions with Christians on account of his Neo-Traditionalist background. For example, on one occasion when he comes to give a treatment to the former village head's younger brother-in-law, the herbal medicine man tells me:

“Many of the Christians criticize or look down on *Aqkaqzanr*. And yet, if they ask me for help I will not turn them away. At the same time, according to *Aqkaqzanr*, after the patient recovers they are supposed to hold a small ceremony tie strings around my wrist in order to pay respect to both me and my medicine spirit owner. In the past, many of the Christians refused to do this. I told them, however, that if they want to receive my treatment then they must follow the traditional way. And if they will not agree to carry out this ceremony then I refuse to treat them” (personal communication, December 21, 2011).

Many of the Neo-Traditionalist villagers further note that they have difficulties understanding how Christians can, on the one hand, criticize and look down on *Aqkaqzanr*, while on the other hand, seek help from various traditional ritual specialists. On a related note, one time as we were talking one of the senior *Nyirpaq* in *Arbawr* village told me that she performed a healing ritual for a Catholic villager that had removed the bamboo pipes from the male and female figures placed just outside the village gate. She explained that his actions had offended or violated the spirits of both

the village gate and the carvings and that he became ill shortly thereafter, requiring her assistance.

The Shaman further noted that it is more difficult to chant for non-Neo-Traditionalist Akha. This is because the ritual is normally carried out in front of the household ancestral altar, and in the case of Christians they have discarded their altar and ancestral rites. In addition, she noted that as a result of discarding their altar and ancestral rites, Christians no longer maintained a relationship with their ancestors. As a result, their ancestors can no longer recognize them when she enters the spirit world in order to ask for their help in finding the cause of their illness. At another time another Shaman further spoke of the same kinds of difficulties involved in treating Christians who had cut off their relations with the ancestors. In the following section, I discuss some of the household-level rituals that took place in *Arbawr* village during the time of my research.

### 3.2.3 Household Level Rituals

Ancestral worship is a fundamental part of the traditional Akha belief system. Ancestral worship is carried out in the form of twelve ancestral offerings (*Aqpoeq lawr-e*) made at certain times of the year.<sup>10</sup> Each of these offerings is made at individual household ancestral altars kept on the woman's side of the home.<sup>11</sup> The annual round of ancestral offerings is further integrated into the ritual cycle following the cultivation of rice, another fundamental part of traditional Akha society. As a result the ancestral-related rites and agricultural-related rites are closely related to each other.

Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village today continue to observe twelve annual ancestral offerings as well as numerous rice related rituals throughout the year. Kammerer (1986) and Tooker (1988) describe each of these rituals in great detail as they occur throughout various times of the year. Therefore, I will not repeat the details that they have already provided as their descriptions similarly apply to the

<sup>10</sup> There are some disagreements as to whether these ancestral offerings are made either nine or twelve times per year (see Kammerer 1986:259-268; Tooker 1988:312-317). In *Arbawr* village the Neo-Neo-Traditionalist villagers carry out twelve annual ancestral offerings.

<sup>11</sup> See Kammerer (1986:161) for a drawing of the "typical arrangement of ritual paraphernalia at an annual ancestor offering."

ritual practices of Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village today. At the same time, however, there are some differences in the ritual practices observed by *Arbawr* Neo-Traditionalist villagers today. For example, Kammerer writes:

“On the day of ancestor offerings, a woman from each ritually independent household fetches three gourds of pure water from The Creator’s Water Source in the pre-dawn darkness (1986:156).”<sup>12</sup>

In the case of *Arbawr* village today, however, while “The Creator’s Water Source” still exists, not all Neo-Traditionalist villagers continue to gather water for ritual purposes from it. For example, some villagers gather water for ritual purposes from the piped sources of water at their homes. This “sacred” water is used in carrying out various purification functions such as cleansing the animal to be sacrificed by pouring water over certain parts of its body or washing the bowls to be used in making offerings to the ancestors.<sup>13</sup>



**Fig. 3.4:** The left picture shows two women returning to their homes after collecting water from the “Creator’s Water Source”. The right picture shows a woman collecting water from the piped source at her home.

In addition, I have observed that Neo-Traditionalist villagers normally light a small piece of pine wood on fire prior to placing their offerings at the ancestral altar.

<sup>12</sup> Tooker refers to this sacred spring as the “sacred water source” (1988:50).

<sup>13</sup> For example, three parts of the sacrificial chicken’s body need to be purified with sacred water: “from feet to head on three places, roughly feet, wings, and head, three times in series (Kammerer 1986:159)”. Kammerer also provides a diagram of the “typical arrangement of ritual paraphernalia at an annual ancestor offering (1986:161).”



Villagers told me that they light the pine to provide light for the ancestors to see clearly as they return “home” and partake of the offerings being made on their behalf. This is considered an important part of the ritual process that cannot be forgotten. For example, it happened that one time while I was in the village a household forgot to light the small piece of pine wood prior to making their ancestral offering. Once it was discovered that this important part of the ritual had been overlooked the family performed an additional ritual offering of a chicken in order to correct their mistake. Neo-Traditionalists villagers today, as in the past, are very careful to make sure that no mistakes are made in any part of their ancestral rituals. Neo-Traditionalists believe that if a mistake is made then it will bring about bad luck for the family in the form of a poor harvest, illness and so forth.

Apart from changes in the ritual process for ancestral offerings, changes can also be observed in the ritual practices relating to the cultivation of rice. Interestingly, the Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village today continue to carry all of their annual ancestral and rice-related rituals in spite of growing very little rice as in the past. Today coffee is the main crop being grown by villagers in *Arbawr* village. Each Neo-Traditionalist household, however, continues to cultivate a small plot of upland rice amidst their much more expansive fields of coffee. The rice grown in this small plot is used in carrying out various rituals relating to rice.



**Fig. 3.5:** The left picture is of a large plot of upland rice being cultivated for both sale as well as consumption. The right picture is of a very small plot of upland rice being cultivated solely for use in rituals relating to rice and the ancestors.

Rice continues to play a very important role in the ritual and everyday life of Neo-Traditionalist villagers. Rice, furthermore, is a fundamental part of the ancestral rituals and the ancestors continue to be of great significance for Neo-Traditionalists. Ancestral worship is the most important part of the traditional Akha belief system. Neo-Traditionalists believe that their ancestors continue to watch over them and protect them from the world of the unseen. They believe that in making offerings to their ancestors they will continue to receive their blessings in the form of wealth, happiness, and good health. In short, ancestral offerings must be carried out in order to continue to receive the blessings of the ancestors. Therefore, it is easy to understand why Neo-Traditionalists continue to grow small plots of upland rice for use in the ritual process, most importantly their ancestral rituals. These ancestral rites depend upon the cultivation of rice and vice versa. In the following section I discuss the various rituals taking place at the communal level in *Arbawr* village.

### 3.2.4 Communal Level

Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village observe numerous communal rituals at various times of the year. These rituals include the building of the village gates (*Lanrkanq mr-e*)<sup>14</sup>, the ceremony to honor the “Lord of Water and Land” (*Mirsanr Lawr-e*), the building of the village swing (*Yaerkuq Aqpoeq*), as well as the ceremony to banish “evil spirits” (*Tawvma tei-e*) from the village. These communal rituals require the knowledge and labor of a large number of villagers and play an important part in promoting a sense of community and solidarity among the Neo-Traditionalists.

During my fieldwork, I was told that a traditional Akha village normally has three village gates.<sup>15</sup> These gates are referred to as the ‘main gate’ (*Garjawq Lanrkanq*), ‘upper gate’ (*Dzanrhu Lanrkanq*), and ‘lower gate’ (*Dzanrdanq Lanrkanq*). The ‘main gate’ is the gate normally used by the villagers to enter and exit the village. The ‘upper gate’ is constructed at the upper part of the village and is normally passed by villagers on their way to and from the ‘village meeting ground’,

<sup>14</sup> The Akha term ‘*lanr*’ means “bounding and protecting”.

<sup>15</sup> On a side note, Tooker notes that in contrast to the Loimi Akha, “the Ulo Akha have only two sets of main gates (see Bernatzik 1970:392-393; Kammerer 1986: 50; Lewis 1970:645, 1969:252ff.; In Tooker 1988:76).”

which is located just outside the village (*Daekhanq*).<sup>16</sup> According to the regulations of *Aqkaqzanr*, the ‘village swing’ (*Lavqce*) and ‘village meeting ground’ (*Daekhanq*) must be built at the upper part of the village. Last, the ‘lower gate’ (*Dzanrdanq*) is built at the lower part of the village facing the west. Villagers pass this gate on the way to and from the village graveyard, which is generally located to the west of a village. In everyday life villagers tend to avoid both this ‘lower gate’ and the graveyard.

Lastly, just beyond this ‘lower gate’ is another gate-like structure referred to as the *Tawvma*.<sup>17</sup> The area around the *Tawvma* is decorated with colorful wooden knives used to banish evil spirits from the village during an annual ‘spirit chasing ceremony’ after which the knives are discarded around the gate. By virtue of its association with ‘evil spirits’ belonging to another world opposite to the human world, it makes sense for the *Tawvma* to be located outside of the village just beyond the ‘lower gate’. Each of the three village gates noted above as well as the *Tawvma* must be rebuilt each year with freshly cut wood at certain times of the year. I will take in more detail about the *Tawvma*-related ritual later.

In addition, a fairly large pair of freshly made wooden female and male carvings is placed outside each of the three village gates when they are reconstructed each year. The gates as well as these carvings are further decorated with numerous ornaments carved out of bamboo and wood. Carved ornaments such as bamboo chains, stars, insects, white birds, airplanes, guns, helicopters, chicken cages, fish and so forth are used to decorate various parts of the gate. In addition, ornaments such as chained necklaces and smoking pipes are placed on the male and female carvings. It is said that the ‘evil spirits’ are afraid of these ornaments placed on and around the

<sup>16</sup> The *Daekhanq* or ‘village meeting ground’ is a place where villagers gather in the evenings after dinner in order to socialize, dance, sing, and chant. It is also the place where the old teach the young about various aspects of traditional Akha culture.

<sup>17</sup> Tooker refers to this particular gate as either “*lokhang bjaq* or *kha jeq lokhang*”, and refers to it as the “fourth secondary village gate built once a year during the ‘spirit chasing ceremony’ (1988:50).” The villagers that I worked with, however, did not refer to this ‘gate’ as a ‘*Lanrkhanq*’, but rather as a *Tawvma*, referring to the place where villagers discard the wooden knives used to banish evil spirits from the village once a year during the ‘Karyaev Aqpoeq’ in September, which Tooker translates as ‘spirit chasing ceremony’. The general structure of the *Tawvma* is similar to that of a gate.

village gates. Therefore, those decorations not only add to the beauty of the gates but also serve in keeping the ‘evil spirits’ away from the villagers living inside the gates.

The village gates signify the separation between the human and spirit worlds. Located inside the village gates, the village is considered the realm of humans where they are protected from potentially harmful spirits residing outside the village gates. According to the regulations of *Aqkaqzanr*, all villagers must reside within the village gates. At the same time, however, all villagers residing within the village gates are required to carry traditional Akha culture. As a result, Akha who discard their ancestral altar and convert to Christianity were in the past no longer permitted to live in the same village as Traditionalists (Kammerer 1986:384; Tooker 1988: 38). Lewis notes that Akha “who discard their ancestor bamboo sections (or ancestral altars) are no longer fully Akha in the eyes of traditionalists (Lewis 1968-70:24; In Kammerer 1986:384)”. Kammerer further states that “to be Akha is to uphold the prescriptions and proscriptions for action which constitute Akha Customs (1986:384)”.

In today’s situation, however, many changes have taken place in Akha society that have led to changes in various aspects of the ritual practices as described above. For example, while in *Arbawr* village today each of the three gates and *Tawvma* noted above can still be found, they are no longer located in the proper areas according to traditional Akha culture. Some Neo-Traditionalist villagers now live outside of the village gates. In addition, some Christian villagers live inside of the village gates. These gates, furthermore, are positioned along small dirt paths that are rarely used anymore by the villagers who mostly travel via motorcycle or truck on a series of new paved roads. At the same time, the villagers no longer cut fresh wood to reconstruct the main structures of the three gates, *Tawvma*, and male/female figures as they have been replaced by more permanent structures made of concrete. And yet, these gates and the *Tawvma* still play a very important role in the ritual life of the Neo-Traditionalist villagers.

In spite of these changes as noted above, Neo-Traditionalist villagers continue to observe the rituals related to the annual renewal of the village gates and the *Tawvma*, which takes place in early May. I have participated in the villager’s ritual renewal of the village gates on two occasions. The village men, including mostly elders but also some younger generations, start at the ‘main gate’ and proceed to each



of the other two gates. While they no longer cut fresh tree trunks for the structures of the gates and figurines, they do cut wood and bamboo to prepare the numerous ornamentals that are used to decorate the gate and male and female figurines placed in front of the gate. The *Dzoeqma*, or ‘leader of communal rituals’, initiates the rebuilding ceremonies by completing several acts. First, he digs a small amount of earth out of the ground from beneath the two cement posts of each gate. Second, he uses sacred water to wash off the entire gate and male/female figurines. Third, he removes all of the ornaments placed on the gate and figurines during the previous year. As the *Dzoeqma* is carrying out these activities other male villagers are busy cutting, slicing, and carving pieces of bamboo and wood into various ornamentals that are used to decorate the gate and figures – including chains, stars, chicken cages, tobacco pipes, birds, airplanes, guns, fish, and so forth.

Certain ornamentals, furthermore, are put on certain parts of the gate and/or figurines. For example, wooden carvings of birds, airplanes, guns, fish and so forth are placed along the top of the gate facing outside of the village. Nine bamboo stars must be placed along each main part of the gate, including each of the two sides and the top.<sup>18</sup> Some bamboo stars are also tied onto various trees located in the vicinity of the gate.<sup>19</sup> Bamboo chains are placed on the head of the female figure, to represent her headdress and a small bamboo basket is tied on her waist. Small tobacco pipes are also placed into each of the mouths of the male and female. Once all of the ornaments are placed on the gate, figurines, and surrounding trees, the *Dzoeqma* ritually renews/opens each gate by tapping each part of the gate with his ritually purified knife.

While in the past only men were able to participate in communal rituals, today the situation is changing. Neo-traditionalists in *Arbawr* village today are more open to permitting women to participate in their communal rituals. As a result, I was able to participate in several of their communal rites. On several occasions as I observed

---

<sup>18</sup> Akha consider the number nine to be an auspicious number. The Akha term for nine is ‘*ghoeq*’, which has the additional positive meaning of ‘completely enclosing or surrounding’ (as in the case of a protective fence).

<sup>19</sup> According to *Aqkaqzanr*, it is taboo to either cut any trees or touch anything associated with the gate or figurines. The only time these actions are permitted are during the annual ceremonial renewal of the gates.

and studied the rituals some of the villagers joked with me, saying, “Now that you have written down all of these details, it is possible that in the future we may have to learn how to do these things from you.” One of the men even once joked that I had learned enough to become a female Ritual Reciter, a position reserved exclusively for men. The villagers in general, and particularly the elders, were very glad to know that I was interested in traditional Akha culture. I feel very privileged and honored to have had such a wonderful opportunity to learn so much about *Aqkaqzanr* from them. Yet, my knowledge of *Aqkaqzanr* is still only very little compared to most of the villagers.

In the following section I talk about the annual ceremony held in honor of the “Lord of Water and Land” (*Mirsanr Lawr-e*). In *Arbawr* village this ceremony is normally held a few days after the renewal of the village gates. I attended both of these ceremonies in succession last year in *Arbawr* village. On the morning of the ceremony held in honor of the “Lord of Water and Land”, a group of elder and middle-aged men gathered at the *Dzoeqma*’s home before leaving for the area where an offering was made to the “Lord of Water and Land”. During the ceremony a pig, hen, and cock were offered to the “Lord of Water and Land”. Prior to making the offering, however, the men went about preparing an elaborate altar constructed out of bamboo as well as a number of bamboo ornamentals including long chains, stars, a basket, bracelets and so forth.<sup>20</sup> Bamboo chopsticks were also cut for each of the participants to use in eating a meal that was prepared of the leftover meat from the pig, hen, and rooster.

Shortly after the pig had been killed its liver was removed and several elders examined it in order to determine the village’s overall fortune for the coming year. On this occasion the liver was read to predict a good year for the village in terms of prosperity and health. The elders further examined certain parts of the chicken leg bones in order to determine the fortune for men’s hunting endeavors in the coming year. This reading was similarly positive, suggesting that the coming year would be a

<sup>20</sup> A total of four bracelets were made and offered to the “Lord of Water and Land”. Two of the bracelets were painted with lime and considered to represent silver bracelets. The other two were not painted and considered to represent gold bracelets.

good hunting year. Both of these readings put the villagers in good spirits regarding the coming year.

Meanwhile, several villagers proceeded to cook all of the meat from the slaughtered pig and chickens. As noted earlier, women are normally not allowed to join these communal rites. However, in this particular instance they allowed me and another woman to participate in the ceremony but did not permit us to eat the meal that was prepared. Rather, they brought other food from outside for us to eat. Once the meat was all cooked various individuals began to prepare different items such as tea, whiskey, and meat dishes to be offered to the “Lord of Water and Land”. In addition, each of the following items were also offered: four bamboo bracelets, three candles, four small pieces of flat tiles, three betel nuts, unhusked rice kernels, husked rice, and some cotton.<sup>21</sup>

As in the case of the “village gate renewal” ceremony, the *Dzoeqma* initiated various aspects of the ritual process. For example, the *Dzoeqma* tied the very first ornamentals onto various parts of the altar and surrounding trees after which other villagers followed suit. In addition, three white colored human shaped paper cuttings were hung on bamboo sticks positioned alongside of the altar. After all of the ornamentals were placed on and around the altar, the *Dzoeqma* began to place various offerings on the altar. A small bamboo table was also set up just in front of the altar on the ground for several elders and the *Dzoeqma* to eat at once the offerings had been made.<sup>22</sup> Before they began eating, however, the Ritual Reciter called to the “Lord of Water and Land” as he held a piece of meat between two chopsticks:

“We beg you to bring all good things to the village and the villagers, and to take all bad things away from our lives. Do not let us get sick, bless our crops and livestock. Cause the bad things to be good; cause the good things to become better (personal communication, May 6, 2011).”

After his recitation, everyone began to eat the meal that had been prepared from the slaughtered pig and chickens. Any leftover food could not be brought home and was thrown away in the forest. Once the meal was finished, however, I was surprised to

<sup>21</sup> As in the case of the bamboo bracelets, two of these flat tiles were painted with lime and considered to represent silver pieces. The other two were left unpainted and considered to represent gold pieces.

<sup>22</sup> The elders include ritual specialists.

see that the men began to collect and wash all of the chopsticks that had been used in the meal. They then began to arrange all of the chopsticks on the ground in an overlapping manner resembling a ladder (see picture 5 below). Once all of the chopsticks had been arranged in this manner some of the men began to count from the first to the last chopstick and alternating between the words, ‘*hawq*’ and ‘*xaq*’ each time. ‘*Hawq*’ refers to rice and ‘*xaq*’ refers to meat. As they went from one chopstick to the next they repeated the terms rice, meat, rice, meat and so forth until they reached the last chopstick.



**Fig. 3.6:** The left picture is of the altar constructed for making offerings to the “Lord of Water and Land”. The picture on the right is of the Ritual Reciter counting the chopsticks that were arranged in overlapping order in order to determine the village’s fortune or lack thereof during the coming year.

The first two counts ended on the term ‘*xaq*’ or meat. The men were not very satisfied with this reading, however, and so they began counting again. A reading of rice rather than meat is considered better. One individual counted all of the male participants and then the total number of chopsticks and discovered that they had included my chopsticks along with those of the men. I was left feeling a little embarrassed. My chopsticks were then removed and the count was redone, this time ending on the term ‘*hawq*’ or rice. As a result all of the villagers were happy with the reading and began to laugh about the whole situation. While it is true that today most



of the villagers grow more coffee than rice, rice still remains of great importance both in terms of food and ritual. They often say, “Without rice one cannot live”. At the same time, it seems that the purpose of many of the rituals in *Arbawr* village today is to ask for abundance not so much in the rice harvest but rather the coffee harvest, which has become the dominant source of income for nearly all of the villagers.

Lastly, Kammerer notes that when she observed Ulo villagers carrying out the ceremony honoring the “Lord of Water and Land”, “both the male elder and the Village Founder-Leader placed their palms together in the traditional Thai gesture of respect (waaj [Thai]) and bowed their uncovered heads three times (1986:281)”. Geusau, who also focused primarily on Ulo Akha, further notes that, “this ceremony is unusual because it is the only ritual occasion in which the Village Founder-Leader and other men (remove) their turbans and bow their heads (1983:250; In Kammerer 1986:250)”. In the case of the Loimi Akha villagers from *Arbawr* village, however, I have not found any of these conditions as described by Kammerer and Geusau to apply. In the following section, I discuss a third communal ritual referred to as the ‘Swing Ancestral Offering’.

The ‘swing ancestral offering’ (*Yaerkuq Aqpoeq*) is another important communal ritual that takes place in either late August or early September during the height of the rainy season after the villages have finished planting their upland rice crops. Unlike the village gates, the village swing is completely reconstructed each year. On the early morning of the ceremony younger male villagers cut down three tall trees to make up the three legs of the swing. They also gather bark that was later shred and woven into a long and strong rope hung from the top of the swing for swinging. After their morning meal, numerous elders came to join the construction process. Younger males generally completed heavier tasks such as digging holes to place the legs and later placing the legs and tying them together to form the swing. The elders mainly worked on weaving the intricate rope from the tree bark and guided the younger villagers through various stages of the construction process.

Once the swing was completed, the *Dzoeqma* performed a rite on the swing which ritually opened it for the other villagers to swing. He placed a bundle of leaves on the rope dangling down from the top of the swing and pushed the swing back and forth three times. After this the *Dzoeqma* swung back and forth on the swing himself

three times. Once the *Dzoeqma* completed this action the other villagers were able to freely swing. According to traditional Akha culture, however, the swing can only be used for the four days during which the 'swing ancestral offering' rite is observed. On the final day of the ritual the string is tied to one of the upper legs of the swing and it is not touched again until the following year when the old swing is removed and a new one built. At the same time, once the communal swing was finished many of the villagers went home and constructed smaller swings for their children and grandchildren to freely swing on at home. Like the communal swing, however, these smaller swings were only used for the four days during which the 'swing ancestral offering' ceremony was being observed by the villagers.

Elsewhere, Kammerer notes that the Akha with whom she lived referred to the annual 'swing ancestral offering' as the New Year for women (1986:264). Geusau similarly notes that, "according to Akha it is like a 'second New Year for the women.' (Geusau 1985:25; In Kammerer 1986:264)." Tooker similarly notes that, "in the texts of the Loimi Akha oral tradition (the being that began the swing ceremony if female,) while the being that began the New Year's Festival is male (Kammerer 1986:264-265)." I have similarly heard from Akha today that the swing ceremony is for women. However, when I observed the swing ceremony in *Arbawr* village I did not see any women actually come and swing. I asked the women with whom I stayed in the village why she did not go and swing. She replied:

"I am older now and feel too shy to go to swing. The other women my age also do not go. In the past, when I lived in Myanmar, however, I used to swing with my girlfriends. It was lots of fun. The swing is built every year in our village. However, I never see anyone my age swinging. It is mostly the younger folks that swing" (personal communication, September 7, 2011).

On the day of the ceremony I observed numerous groups of women sitting around in the yards of their homes sewing traditional bags and clothes. As they sewed they sat and talked about various issues ranging from coffee to their children and so forth. According to traditional Akha culture, everyone in the village is supposed to refrain from working in their fields when they are observing a ceremony. This provides an opportunity for the villagers to relax and enjoy each other's company. Christian and Buddhist Akha, however, do not observe these regulations. While the Neo-Traditionalist villagers were home observing their 'swing ancestral offering'

ceremony I noticed many Christian and Buddhist Akha continued to come to and from their coffee fields. As a result, several Neo-traditionalists commented to me that it often felt as if they were living in different villages rather than the same village.

The *Tawvma* is another communal ceremony that is observed by the Neo-Traditionalist villagers. It takes place during the ‘rice flowering’ ancestral rite (*Karyeav Aqpoeq*) in roughly September.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, I was not present when the villagers observed this particular ritual. My notes on the ritual are drawn from conversations with different ritual specialists. One of the ritual specialists told me that the purpose of the *Tawvma* ceremony is to drive the ‘evil spirits’ away from the village. While holding wooden spears the village children run from one household to the next driving the ‘evil spirits’ away. At the end of the *Tawvma* ceremony, all of these wooden spears are placed at the *Tawvma* ‘gate’. A senior Ritual Reciter told me that he can see all of the spirits running from the village as the villagers chase them away with their spears. He further explained the reason for banishing the spirits during the ‘rice flowering’ ceremony:

“The time period between the ‘rice planting ceremony’ (*Caerka aqpoeq*) and the ‘rice flowering ceremony’ (*Karyeav aqpoeq*) ceremony is considered the time of the spirits from another world. It is the time when the spirits hold wedding ceremonies and not humans. This is the time when the villagers spend a great deal of time outside the village in their fields. It is during this period that the spirits usually enter the village. By the time of the ‘rice flowering ceremony’, however, humans have generally stopped working in their fields so as to avoid breaking the rice flowers that have bloomed. From this point until the rice harvest, humans generally spend more time at home than in their fields. The arrival of the ‘rice flowering ceremony’ means that the leisure months, or *Jawrla*, have come. This is also the time of humans and so we need to drive the spirits away from the village. This is the time when humans should be married” (personal communication, November 15, 2011).<sup>24</sup>

The Ritual Reciter further notes that Christian Akha often claim that Neo-Traditionalists worship ‘evil spirits’. He notes that in actuality many of the traditional rituals are carried out in honor of the owners of nature in order to express gratitude to them for the many needs of humans that they provide. He noted for example that

<sup>23</sup> In Akha the term ‘kar’ refers to as ‘rice’, while ‘yaev’ refers to ‘flower’.

<sup>24</sup> Traditionally, Akha believe that the time between January and March is the best time for marriages to take place. However, marriages can take place at other times of the year as long as it is not during the time of the spirits.

rituals relating to rice cultivation are carried out in order to honor the owner of rice and ask for a bountiful harvest. Finally, he notes, “If you want to receive something from others, then you also need to give something back to them. Who would be happy if others were always asking for things but never giving anything back in return?” This last idea was repeated over and over again by other Neo-Traditionalists as well.

As noted by the Ritual Reciter above, each of these annual rituals serves a purpose relating to both the natural and social worlds. On one hand, these rituals serve a purpose in helping to maintain a balance between humans and nature. On the one hand, each of the communal level rituals functions to maintain the overall wellbeing of the community. For example, in everyday life the villagers do not have much time to gather together as they are all busy with their own work. While observing communal rites, however, the Traditionalists stay at home and spend time interacting with their neighbors and relatives. In addition, at least one male member from each household takes part in the communal rites that are carried out whether in relation to the village gates, swing, “Lord of Land and Water” and so forth. In this manner, these communal rites play an important role in maintaining and promoting relationships between the villagers. At the same time, however, villagers that have converted to Christianity or Buddhism no longer observe these rituals and so divisions have arisen between them and the Neo-Traditionalist villagers. As noted earlier, many of the Traditionalists feel as if they belong to a different village from that of either the Christian or Buddhist villagers.

### 3.3 Summary

*Aqkaqzanr* remains an integral part of the everyday lives of Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village. Each of the ritual specialists discussed in this chapter continue to play an important role in the ritual life of the Neo-Traditionalist community. At the same time, many changes have taken place in their ritual practices as a result of changes taking place in their everyday lives. For example, today coffee cultivation has largely replaced the cultivation of rice. And yet the Neo-Traditionalists continue to observe the annual rituals related to rice and maintain at the very least a small plot of rice for ritual use. The Neo-Traditionalists also continue



to observe the full round of annual ancestral offerings. As noted earlier, the annual rice rituals and ancestral offerings are deeply interrelated. Each Neo-Traditionalist household, furthermore, continues to maintain their ancestral altar in sharp contrast to Christian and Buddhist villagers that have discarded and in many cases burned their altars.

In terms of their communal rituals, the *Dzoeqma* continues to play an important role in leading the villagers under the guidance of several elder ritual specialists. These communal rituals play an important role in maintaining social harmony among the villagers. As least one male member from each household is expected to participate in these communal rites. All other Neo-Traditionalists are similarly expected to refrain from working in their fields. As a result, the communal rituals provide a time for villagers to rest from their hard work and gather with other villagers. Christian and Buddhist converts, however, do not observe any of these regulations. They have become their own more or less independent communities following their own regulations according to Christian and Buddhist teachings.

The Neo-Traditionalist villagers, furthermore, are working together in order to both maintain as well as adapt their practices of *Aqkaqzanr* to their changing circumstances. For these villagers being Akha is equivalent to carrying *Aqkaqzanr*. As noted earlier by Lewis, “those who discard their ancestor bamboo sections are no longer fully Akha in the eyes of traditionalists (Lewis 1968-70:24; In Kammerer 1986:384)”. Kammerer similarly notes that, “to be Akha is to uphold the prescriptions and proscriptions for action which constitute Akha Customs (1986:384)”. Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village today continue to hold these views on the deeply connected nature of being Akha and carrying traditional Akha culture.

Many villagers and ritual specialists stress, however, that it is harder these days to completely maintain their older way of life according to *Aqkaqzanr*. They especially lament the fact that today they are no longer able to maintain the earlier rule that all Akha living within the village gates must follow the ways of the Akha ancestors. These individuals note three reasons in particular as to why they find it difficult to maintain the traditional structure of their village according to *Aqkaqzanr*. First, they note that they were not the first settlers of *Arbawr* village and so they lack

the authority to enforce certain regulations according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Second, they note that the restrictive land and registration policies of the Thai government prevent them from forcing Christians and other converts to move outside the village gate. Last, they note that a majority of the villagers have become either Christian or Buddhist and no longer carry the ways of the Akha ancestors.

As a result of these changes, many Neo-Traditionalists feel that the village no longer feels like one village but rather several villages. An earlier sense of community and solidarity has been lost. They mainly attribute the loss of an earlier sense of community to rising rates of conversion to the customs of ‘Others’, most notably Christianity. They lament the fact that they no longer have control over the situation and yet show resilience and determination in their efforts to maintain and adapt *Aqkaqzanr* to their current situation. In chapter 4 I will discuss how they are working to maintain and modify *Aqkaqzanr* in order to ensure that it will continue to be carried by future generations.