

CHAPTER 4

NEO-TRADITIONALIST VILLAGERS' MOVEMENTS TOWARDS *AQKAQZANR*

In Chapter 3 I discussed the practices of *Aqkaqzanr* today in *Arbawr* village. In this Chapter I will discuss the goals of these Neo-Traditionalists as they strive to adapt and simplify *Aqkaqzanr*. I will also discuss how Neo-Traditionalists are working to achieve these goals and the various kinds of activities they have been organizing. Today, some Neo-Traditionalists have come to realize the need for working to reform or modify *Aqkaqzanr* in order to adapt it to the current situations faced by Akha throughout the region. Since 2008 a growing international network of Neo-Traditionalists has been organizing meetings, festivals and informal gatherings during which they discuss and celebrate their Neo-Traditionalist identity. Akha from Myanmar, China, Laos and Thailand have all been involved in these activities. One of the main goals of these activities is to adapt and simplify *Aqkaqzanr* so that it can be more easily practiced by Akha living in today's rapidly changing world. The Neo-traditionalist villagers of *Arbawr* village are one such group that is involved in these activities.

4.1 What are the Goals of these Neo-Traditionalist Movements?

“AFECT (The Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand) has been helping us to document our practices of *Aqkaqzanr* for nearly 30 years now. And yet, through all of these years we have not seen any real benefits. Villagers continue to abandon *Aqkaqzanr* for Christianity or Buddhism and no one is really working on behalf of our *Aqkaqzanr*” (*Aqbawrtivq*, personal communication, November 25, 2011).

I often heard the above statement from different Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village during my visits. This statement speaks for itself in explaining how and when

a Neo-Traditionalist movement first began among Akha in Thailand as well as where the movement stands today. In order to understand their current efforts it is necessary to go back in history to the founding of a formal association based in Chiangrai Thailand referred to as the Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand (AFECT). At the time, AFECT was the only organization both in Thailand and the region that worked on behalf of *Aqkaqzanr*. All of the other organizations working with Akha in Thailand, while carrying out various development related work, were ultimately working to convert Akha to various forms of either Christianity or Buddhism. These latter groups accordingly encouraged Akha to abandon much if not all of their traditional practices, particularly rituals carried out in honor and remembrance of the ancestors.

AFECT was officially recognized by the Thai government as an association in 1989 along with its Chiangmai based parent organization, The Mountain Peoples' Culture and Development Education Foundation (MPCDE). MPCDE was initially started under the direction of the late Dr. Leo Alting von Geusau in collaboration with a group of Akha headmen, several prominent Akha women leaders, and several Thai scholars. It was MPCDE in conjunction with AFECT that initiated the movement among Akha in Thailand and beyond to work on behalf of *Aqkaqzanr*, primarily in the areas of ritual documentation and cultural reformation. In carrying out these activities Dr. Geusau and his Akha collaborators worked closely with both elders who were knowledgeable about *Aqkaqzanr* as well as ritual specialists from various parts of Chiangrai.

In terms of documentation, the group carried out extensive work in documenting the numerous and complex rituals that take place according to *Aqkaqzanr* in both audio and written form. A great deal of work was done in documenting the lengthy and elaborate ritual texts recited by *Pirma* in the context of various rituals. The most elaborate of these rituals and related texts is that of the funeral for an elder that has passed away naturally and for whom three buffalos are ceremonially offered.

In terms of cultural reformation, the group initiated numerous supra-village level discussions on the issue of how to go about reforming certain aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* that were considered burdensome and/or no longer appropriate in

contemporary times. One of the most prominent examples of a tradition that was discussed and eventually abolished was a custom requiring the killing of twins at birth. This custom was abolished for two primary reasons. First, the custom violated the laws of the Thai nation-state. Second, with support from MPCDE and AFECT villagers could now afford to purchase powdered milk to supplement the mother's inadequate breast milk and ensure the survival of both twins. *Aqjur Dzoeqbaw*, who was the director of AFECT at the time, was a key figure in carrying out this successful effort to abolish the twin taboo in Thailand.

During my research in *Arbawr* village I learned that it was one of several key villages wherein AFECT carried out its efforts to document *Aqkaqzanr*. Several elders and ritual specialists from the village were actively involved in the early preservation and reformation efforts of AFECT. Therefore, the Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village first began to carry out their own preservation and reformation efforts in conjunction with their early collaborations with AFECT. For example, *Arbawr* village was the second village to construct more permanent village gates made out of cement rather than the traditionally prescribed fresh wood which had to be cut and prepared annually. The latter reformation of tradition was also initiated by *Aqjur Dzoeqbaw* in response to the Thai government's ban on logging in the national forests surrounding *Arbawr* village. *Arbawr* village was also one of the earliest villages to abolish the taboo on twins.

The Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village explained to me that it was and is necessary to reform and in some cases abolish those aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* that either violate the laws of Thailand or are no longer adapted to contemporary life. At the same time, however, the villagers stressed that they are very hopeful that their traditional practices of Akha culture will be carried on by the future generations. They are simultaneously concerned with documenting in written form what is left of their traditional practices before they disappear, reforming practices considered outdated or burdensome, and passing on their traditions to the next generation.

The earlier collaborations between *Arbawr* village and AFECT largely came to an end following the resignation of *Aqjur Dzoeqbaw* from AFECT in the late 1990s and subsequent death of Dr. Geusau in 2003. As a result, the villagers' goals of documenting their traditional practices with the support of AFECT were not able to be

achieved. Nevertheless, the Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village never lost the motivation to continue carrying, documenting, and modifying traditional Akha culture. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, a new regional organization, MAPS (Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability), has evolved and started working with Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village to document all of their traditional ritual practices. These current efforts in collaboration with MAPS can be seen as a continuum of their earlier work with AFECT. In the following section I will talk about how Neo-Traditionalists are practically working to achieve each of their goals of documenting, modifying, and continuing to carry *Aqkaqzanr*.

4.2 How are Neo-Traditionalists Working to Achieve their Goals?

4.2.1 Recruiting *Pirma* or Ritual Reciters from Outside Villages

Today, there only a small number of *Pirma* left in Akha society. Many *Pirma* have passed away while others have abandoned their roles as part of the requirements for becoming Christian or Buddhist. The societies of Akha Christians and Buddhists have no place for *Pirma*. Among Neo-Traditionalists, however, the demand for *Pirma* remains very strong as they continue to play an important role in the ritual lives of communities, households, and individuals. This is certainly the case for the Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village.

During my time in *Arbawr* village I came to learn from one of the ritual specialists that they have recruited a *Pirma* from other village. This ritual specialist informed me that they were determined to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr* to the fullest extent possible and had a great need for skilled *Pirma*, particularly *Pirma* that could chant for a funeral involving the ceremonial offering of three buffalos. He continued to tell me the story of how they first learned about one *Pirma* that has since settled in *Arbawr* village and is considered to be the most senior *Pirma* in the village:

“One time my younger brother attended a funeral in another village. While participating in the ritual he had an opportunity to meet the *Pirma* who was carrying out the chanting and so forth. He learned that the *Pirma*, who was in his early fifties at the time, was capable of chanting the ritual texts necessary for making the most elaborate offering of three buffaloes. After my brother returned to *Arbawr* village he told me that he had met a very knowledgeable *Pirma* who was capable of chanting for three buffaloes. We both agreed that we needed more *Pirma* in our own village who were capable of carrying out

such an elaborate ritual. The senior *Pirma* in our village at the time was very old and it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to officiate during funerals.¹ In addition, at the time our senior *Pirma*'s apprentice was still learning the ritual text required for offering three buffaloes and had not yet mastered it. We were worried that if this senior *Pirma* passed away then we would no longer be able to carry out proper funeral rites involving the offering of buffaloes. My brother and I in turn talked to the other ritual specialists and villagers about this skilled *Pirma* from another village and we collectively agreed to see if we could encourage him to resettle in our village and be one of our main *Pirma*" (personal communication, November 25, 2011).

The elder continued to tell me that following their collective agreement he went to visit with the *Pirma* and his family on two occasions to see if they would be interested in resettling in *Arbawr* village. In order to encourage them to resettle in *Arbawr* village they were offered some land for both building a home and growing coffee and other crops. The *Pirma* accepted and has resided in *Arbawr* village ever since.

It is clear that *Pirma* remain an indispensable part of the everyday lives of villagers who continue to carry traditional Akha culture. Their most elaborate role, furthermore, is fulfilled in the context of funerary rites, particularly those involving the offering of three buffalos to a deceased elder. In general the Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village prefer to offer three buffalos to their deceased relatives. This is particularly the case for households that have the economic means and kin support network to do so. They believe that the more they offer to their deceased relatives who are on their way to becoming ancestors, then the more they will be blessed by them in return. A grand and elaborate funeral ceremony involving the offering of three buffalos is considered a great honor to the deceased turned ancestor.

The Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village, furthermore, both recognize and are proud of the fact that they have been able to maintain their traditions with the help of their own *Pirma* and other ritual specialists such as *Dzoeqma*, *Khavma*, and

¹ This Senior *Pirma* passed away in November of 2010 at the ripe old age of 97. During his elaborate funeral rites, which I attended, his family offered him the highest honor of three buffaloes with the help of several *Pirma*.

Nyirpaq.² For example, on one occasion I am invited for dinner by a middle-aged man at his home. At one point we begin talking about their project to document *Aqkaqzanr*. In reference to this issue he tells me:

“We have the largest number of *Pirma* in any village in Thailand. Many other villages no longer have any *Pirma* at all. They come here to ask our *Pirma* to recite for them. And our *Pirma* are happy to do so, although they will only do so if they do not have any pressing ritual obligations in *Arbawr*. Here in *Arbawr* we have a number of ritual specialists in different fields that are able to carry out all of our traditional rituals. We feel very blessed and happy to be able to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr* (personal communication, November 7, 2011).”

The Senior *Pirma* once told me that since he resettled in *Arbawr* village he and another senior *Pirma* have chanted at more than fifty funeral ceremonies. He also noted that they are happy to chant for Neo-traditionalists from other villages in the region, adding that they sometimes chant for villagers residing across the border in Myanmar. Finally, he stressed that he is happy to pass his knowledge onto those who are interested in learning how to recite the ritual texts that are such an essential part of *Aqkaqzanr*.

The Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village today are generally able to carry their traditional culture within their own particular community that has become a sub-community of sorts within the larger village that includes Akha converts to Christianity and Buddhism who no longer carry *Aqkaqzanr*. At the same time, however, the Neo-Traditionalists are concerned about rising rates of conversion among Akha to first, Christianity, and second, Buddhism. They are concerned about the future of their traditional way of life both within their particular community and beyond. As a result, they are happy to support other Neo-Traditionalist villagers in Thailand and beyond in continuing to carry *Aqkaqzanr* by providing them with the assistance of necessary ritual specialists such as *Pirma* and *Khavma*.

In the past, most of the villagers' efforts on behalf of *Aqkaqzanr* were carried out in relation to their own village and with the assistance of the Thailand based

² *Dzoeqma* ('Leader of communal rituals'), *Khavma* ('Individuals with Detailed Knowledge of Ritual Practices'), and *Nyirpaq*/Shaman.

association AFECT. Today, however, a number of ritual specialists and villagers from *Arbawr* village are actively participating in an international movement supporting *Aqkaqzanr* that includes Akha from China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. In the next section I discuss the various kinds of activities that these villagers have been participating in as part of this larger international movement of Neo-Traditionalists.

4.2.2 Participation in *Aqkaqzanr*-related Meetings

As mentioned earlier, a growing number of Neo-Traditionalists from various parts of the Upper Mekong Region have come to realize the need to reform *Aqkaqzanr* in order to adapt it to contemporary life. Since 2008 a growing international network of Neo-Traditionalists has begun organizing *Aqkaqzanr*-related meetings, festivals and informal gatherings during which they discuss and celebrate their Neo-Traditionalist identity. A core group of Neo-Traditionalist leaders are playing fundamental roles in organizing, funding, and directing these activities. Neo-Traditionalists from China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand are participating in these activities. Among the participants in these activities are a number of representatives from *Arbawr* village. As noted earlier, the underlying goal of this movement is to adapt and simplify *Aqkaqzanr* so that it can be more easily practiced by Akha living in today's rapidly changing world.

There is not enough space here to describe all of the activities that are being organized as part of their efforts on behalf of *Aqkaqzanr*. Rather, in the following section I describe what I believe to be the four most significant meetings that took place among Neo-Traditionalist Akha in the Upper Mekong Region between 2008 and the present. Recall that the particular movement that I am describing first began in 2008.

The first meeting that I will discuss was held in the upland Akha village of *Saenchai Pattana* in Chiangrai, Thailand between April 5th-7th of 2008. The second meeting I will discuss was held in *Arbawr* village between February 13th-15th of 2009. The third meeting I will discuss was held in the upland Akha village of *Hoqgar* in Myanmar between December 26th-29th of 2010. The final meeting I will discuss was held in the lowland border town of Maesai in Thailand between December 9th-12th of

2011. During each of these international gatherings the participants talked extensively about *Aqkaqzanr* in general and more particularly about how to go about reforming *Aqkaqzanr*. In addition, at the conclusion of each meeting an official written declaration was created in Akha language wherein the meeting's participants affirmed the agreements that they had come to on various issues relating to the reformation of *Aqkaqzanr*.³

In these written declarations a number of significant modifications are made to certain aspects of *Aqkaqzanr*. For example, a number of earlier taboos are abolished ranging from a taboo against the birth of twins to a taboo against the return of divorced women to their parent's home for longer than a very brief period of time after which they are expected to remarry. In addition, it is declared that women in addition to men are now permitted to make ancestral offerings and that the sacred water used in rituals can be gathered from other clean sources in the situation where individuals do not have access to the traditional sacred spring (*Irxawr lawrkhawvq*).

A written, pictorial representation of Akha ancestral genealogies has also been created and is being used by some households in place of the traditional ancestral altar. The declarations further encourage Akha to make as many offerings as they can and to offer different kinds of things such as fruits in addition to the traditional offering of a freshly slaughtered animal. It is further declared that depending upon each household's economic status they may choose to offer different kinds of items during funeral rituals ranging from a chicken's egg to a chicken, pig, or buffalo. The same is said to apply for other rituals such as ancestral offerings carried out at different times of the year.

Another more sensitive issue that is being discussed during these meetings is that of whether or not to reduce the number of annual ancestral offerings required of traditionalists. For example, some villagers have already decided to reduce their annual ancestral offerings from twelve to three. It is generally felt, however, that the decision to reduce the number of offerings and/or apply the various modifications to *Aqkaqzanr* noted in the declarations ultimately depends upon individual households.

³ The Romanized writing system used in the documents was initially created by an international network of Neo-Traditionalist, Christian, and Buddhist Akha in Maesai, Thailand in August of 2008 and later slightly modified in Jinghong, China in January of 2009.

In addition to the written declarations noted above, several Neo-Traditionalist leaders based in Myanmar and Thailand have published a book or manual that outlines the new modified version of *Aqkaqzanr* that has been agreed upon in principal throughout each of the four meetings discussed earlier. At the same time, however, while all of the participants in these meetings agree in principal with the idea that *Aqkaqzanr* needs to be modified, there are a number of disagreements as to exactly how it should be modified. Some villagers, particularly the elders of *Arbawr* village, are determined for now to continue practicing their traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr* and are unwilling to completely adopt the modified version of *Aqkaqzanr* spelled out in each of the agreements and book mentioned above. In general, the majority of Akha that are adopting the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* are former Christians from different parts of Shan State, Myanmar that have recently returned to *Aqkaqzanr*.

In contrast to these re-converts from Myanmar, the Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village have never abandoned *Aqkaqzanr* and continue to carry out the full annual round of ancestral offerings as well as all of the rituals related to the agricultural cycle. They are deeply committed to carrying their traditional culture in much the same way as their ancestors did before them, and under the guidance of their various ritual specialists. As noted earlier, however, the villagers' practices of *Akhazanr* have changed through time to the effect that they are no longer carrying *Aqkaqzanr* in exactly the same manner as their ancestors did before them. The villagers, furthermore, are very much aware of these changes.

For example, as noted above, an earlier taboo requiring the killing of twins at birth was abolished in *Arbawr* village more than 20 years ago. In addition, in the past the village gates and carvings had to be reconstructed annually with freshly cut wood. Today, however, due to state restrictions on cutting trees the Neo-Traditionalists decided to use cement to construct a more permanent gate and related carvings. Changes can also be seen in the ritual process for funerals. For example, today a pick-up truck is often used to transport coffins from the home of the deceased to the cemetery located in a forested area outside of the village. In the past, the coffin was carried to the communal cemetery by a group of the deceased's male relatives. In addition, the villagers have initiated a new rite of constructing grave markers from cement that often include a picture of the deceased along with their full name, birth

date, animal year and death date written in Thai and/or Akha language. In the recent past there were no grave markers.

As noted earlier, the Neo-traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* generally support the idea of modifying *Aqkaqzanr* and many of them are actively involved various activities geared towards documenting, modifying, and supporting *Aqkaqzanr*. On one occasion one of the village's ritual specialists that is actively involved in the larger, international Neo-Traditionalist movement tells me:

“We are very much aware of the need to document as well as modify *Aqkaqzanr* so that it can continue to be practiced by future generations. If we do not carry out this work then more and more of our Akha people will convert to the ‘religions’ of others. And if this continues it is possible that in a very short time all of our Akha people will abandon our *Aqkaqzanr* and it will disappear from the face of the earth. And so we are very glad to take part in these efforts. We are very happy to provide financial support for these efforts as the future of our *Aqkaqzanr* depends upon this work. We want our future generations to carry our *Aqkaqzanr* (personal communication, December 10, 2011).”

The Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* also informed me that they are very happy to know that there are still a significant number of Akha carrying *Aqkaqzanr* in the region today. They are glad to know that they are not alone in doing so. They are also filled with hope due to the growing number of Akha in Myanmar that are returning to *Aqkaqzanr*. This type of large-scale re-conversion is something that has not yet happened across the border in Thailand. In general, there is an overall feeling among the villagers that the international network of Neo-Traditionalist Akha is expanding and gaining more and more strength.

There are, however, some differences among the different generations of Neo-Traditionalists as to their openness to the modification of *Aqkaqzanr*. For example, 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. Along these lines, an elderly ritual specialist in his eighties tells me:

“The new version of *Aqkaqzanr* is good but it is much too simple for us. It may be suitable for Akha in Myanmar that have converted back to *Aqkaqzanr* from Christianity. But it is not suitable for us. We want to continue to practice all of the rituals that have been handed down from our ancestors to us, generation by generation. If, after our passing, however, our sons can no longer practice in the same manner then we would rather have them reduce the number of ancestral offerings than adopt the *zanr* of others (personal communication, November 7, 2011).”

In fact, the elders say that if any one in the village would like to reduce the number of ancestral offerings that they make from twelve to three, then they are free to do so. So far, however, no villagers have chosen to make this reduction in their ancestral offerings. For the elders, this latter option of reducing the number of offerings is preferable over the alternative option of conversion to the religions of others such as Christianity and Buddhism. Ultimately, as long as they and the other villagers continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr* they feel as though they are part of the same community.

The younger generations between the ages of 30 and 60, however, generally feel that the new version being practiced in Myanmar is both lighter to carry and also more suitable to their contemporary lives. In spite of these feelings, however, they hold a great deal of respect for their elders and continue to follow their wishes in terms of their practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. The following words of one middle-aged male represent the views of the younger generations more generally speaking:

“When our elders pass away we will have to either adopt the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* or develop our own set of simplified rituals as we will not be able to continue practicing in the same way without our elders. Either way we are determined to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr* and not convert to the religions of others” (personal communication, November 21, 2011).

From the above statement it is clear that while the younger generations may have different motivations than the elders, they are nevertheless confident in their desire to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr*, which they feel is best suited for Akha. In a similar vein, a male villager in his mid forties who used to be the village head told me:

“I cannot imagine myself adopting another religion and burning my family’s ancestral altar (as is often required of Christian converts). I cannot even conceive of doing such a thing. The ancestral altar is like my ancestors for me. They give *geevqlanq* (‘blessings’) to me and my family, they bring us good health and success in life. It is because of them that we have enjoyed such a good life” (personal communication, January 4, 2011).

These Neo-Traditionalists clearly feel that to be Akha is to carry *Aqkaqzanr*. They feel that Akha Protestants, Catholics and Buddhists are no longer like ‘Akha’, particularly the Christians, as they have abandoned their ancestors and no longer practice *Aqkaqzanr*. In the views of these Neo-Traditionalists, Akha converts to the religions of others have effectively become ‘others’ who identify themselves as

Kovqdawqzaq and *Kalizaq*. They are essentially confirming what anthropologist Cornelia Kammerer pointed out more than ten years ago:

“*Aqkaqzanr* is equivalent to what Anthropologists term ethnic identity. (Therefore), language and clothing are not central to Akha ethnic identity; what is central, the core of Akha-ness, is *Aqkaqzanr* (1998: 268-273).”

As noted earlier, the Neo-traditionalists of *Arbawr* village are active participants in a larger regional movement supporting *Aqkaqzanr*. Their practices of *Aqkaqzanr*, furthermore, have undergone some modifications as noted earlier. In spite of these modifications, however, the Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village continue to observe all of the annual ritual practices of *Aqkaqzanr*, including twelve annual ancestral services, rituals related to the cultivation of rice, as well as various communal level rituals relating to the village gate, swing, sacred spring and ‘Lord of the Water and Land’. All of these ritual practices continue to form an important part of their collective identity. Their persistence in carrying out the full range of ritual practices according to *Aqkaqzanr*, however, has been criticized by some Neo-traditionalists.

Most prominent among these critics is the chairman of the international working group of Neo-traditionalist leaders who is originally from Kengtung, Myanmar. I have interacted with this individual on many occasions and have often heard him indirectly criticize the Neo-traditionalist villagers of *Arbawr* village, particularly the elders. On one occasion during a small informal meeting held at *Arbawr* village in April of 2012 he stated angrily and loudly to the other participants:

“Some Akha say that *Aqkaqzanr* has to be modified, improved, and yet they are not willing to adopt the very same modifications that are agreed upon in our discussions. If we were all to continue practicing *Aqkaqzanr* like these individuals, who are still making twelve ancestral offerings and carrying out all of the rice related rites and so forth, then we would only continue to lose more and more Akha to the religions of others. The Christians that are now returning, furthermore, would never consider doing so if *Aqkaqzanr* continued to be such a burden to carry” (personal communication, April 16, 2012).

As the chairman was speaking all of the other participants were very quiet. The Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village clearly knew that his harsh words were directed at them. Nevertheless, no one stood up to argue against his words in the

meeting. Towards the end of his remarks, however, the chairman apologized for his harsh words, adding: “Let us all continue to support each other and work together on behalf of our *Aqkaqzanr* and our Akha people” (personal communication, April 16, 2012).

As I commented earlier, the elders of *Arbawr* village have in fact made it clear to the other villagers that if anyone would like to reduce the number of ancestral offerings from twelve to three then they are free to do so. To date, however, no households have decided to do this. This issue brings attention to some of the tensions that exist within the international movement of Neo-Traditionalists, particularly in terms of how to go about modifying *Aqkaqzanr*. These tensions, however, are quite different from those that exist between Neo-Traditionalists and Akha carrying the religions of others, particularly Christianity. For example, a common phrase that I have heard among Neo-traditionalists is: “*Aqkaqzanr tanq nar-a tiqhaq pyaq zaq mar*”, which translates as, “If we carry *Aqkaqzanr*, we are all part of the same family”. Neo-Traditionalists in turn feel that Akha Christians no longer belong to the same family.

In conclusion, the Neo-traditionalists of *Arbawr* village are building strong relationships with Neo-traditionalists from other parts of the region – inclusive of China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. They have never tired in their efforts to maintain, protect and preserve their practices of *Aqkaqzanr* while at the same time adapting to today’s rapidly changing world. In the following section, I will discuss a cultural preservation project that was carried out in *Arbawr* village between 2010 and 2012 in order to document their traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr* in written, audio, and visual form.

4.2.3 Further Collaborations with the International Network of Neo-Traditionalists: *Aqkaqzanr* Documentation Project

Between 2010 and 2012 an elaborate project was carried out in *Arbawr* village in order to document their traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr* in written, audio, and visual form. The project was funded primarily by a grant from the U.S. State Department (U.S. Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation). The project itself came about as a result of a growing number of exchanges that took place between the Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village and several Neo-Traditionalist leaders from

other parts of the region, including Thailand and China. In short, it is fair to say that these Neo-traditionalist leaders helped the villagers to achieve their dream of documenting their traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. One of the key leaders in the project, *Aryoeq*, an Akha male in his late thirties from China, tells me the following story about how the project first began:⁴

“At the time, for more than ten years I had known two brothers from *Arbawr* village who are both prominent Christian leaders. They never once mentioned to me, however, that there were still some traditionalists in their village and so I assumed that everyone in the village had become Christians under their influence. It wasn’t until I joined the meeting that was held in *Arbawr* village in February of 2009 that I learned that a good number of the villagers still carried *Aqkaqzanr*” (personal communication, March 15, 2012).

It was during this meeting in *Arbawr* village in 2009 that *Aryoeq* first had an opportunity to talk with the Neo-Traditionalist elders of the village. As a result of their exchanges he came to learn of their dream of documenting their traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr*, a dream that they had never given up on since their earlier interactions with AFECT going back more than twenty years. The elders added, however, that they had never been able to achieve their dream due to a lack of qualified persons for the job. They added that they had long been searching for a suitable person to help them document their practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. *Aryoeq* further informs me that:

“I was deeply impressed by their great love of *Aqkaqzanr*. And when they asked me if I would help them I could not turn them down. I could not say no. I felt that it was my responsibility to help them, to contribute my knowledge and time to work on *Aqkaqzanr* as a member of the younger generation. At the same time, it opened a wonderful opportunity for me to learn about and document what is left of our traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr* before they are gone. I already knew deep in my heart that we urgently needed to study, preserve, and protect our traditional culture. As a result, during the meeting I informed the elders of *Arbawr* village that I would search for funding for the project and that if I was able to find funding

⁴ *Aryoeq*, my mother’s younger brother, is a Neo-Traditionalist leader originally from Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China that is currently working on his doctorate degree in anthropology at the University of California-Riverside in the USA.

we could begin working together on the project” (personal communication, March 15, 2012).

Fortunately, *Aryoeq* was eventually able to obtain funding for the project from the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. The documentation project subsequently began in *Arbawr* village in September of 2010.



Fig.4.1: This picture was taken during the inaugural ceremony for the project that was held in *Arbawr* village in September of 2010. In the picture, *Aryoeq*, standing on the left, is receiving a symbolic check for the grant from the Consular General of the U.S. Consulate in Chiangmai who is standing on the right.





Fig.4.2: This collection of four photos is from the welcoming and departing ceremonies held in honor of the VIP guests from the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, the U.S. Consulate in Chiangmai, and various local Thai government offices. The Akha villagers in the photos are adorning traditional Akha dress, performing traditional Akha dances, and singing traditional Akha songs.

As can be seen from the above pictures, the project entitled, “The Documentation of Akha Traditional Culture” was officially opened in *Arbawr* village on September 1st, 2010 under the sponsorship of an international network of Neo-Traditionalist Akha referred to as the “Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability” (MAPS, see chapter 2). The opening ceremony for the project was held on the same day as the village’s observance of their annual swing ceremony and ancestral offering. During the early part of the morning on that day, Neo-Traditionalist male villagers of different ages joined together in tearing down their old village gate and constructing a new one in its place. Later in the morning they joined the other villagers in preparing to welcome various guests of honor to their village for the ceremony. The opening ceremony was held in a large, paved open space located directly in front of the Doi Chaang Coffee factory located directly south from and slightly above the village.

All of the villagers were dressed in their best traditional Akha attire for the ceremony as they lined the two sides of the walkway used by the guests of honor from the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, the U.S. Consulate in Chiangmai, and various local

Thai government offices. As the guests of honor arrived and entered into the ceremonial grounds the villagers sang traditional Akha songs and danced traditional Akha dances in order to express their joy and gratitude to the guests from the U.S. State Department for their support of the documentation project. For the Neo-traditionalist villagers it was a day worth celebrating as they were finally going to make some progress in reaching their long term goal of preserving their cherished practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. They believed, furthermore, that this opportunity was ultimately brought to them by *Aqpoeq Miqyaer*, the Supreme Creator of the Universe, and their ancestors. On one occasion as I participate in a ritual being documented in the village an elder informs me:

“The Supreme Creator and our ancestors are worried that our Akha people will very soon disappear from the world. And in order to prevent this from happening they have brought us together to work for *Aqkaqzanr* and the Akha people” (personal communication, September 15, 2011).

In a similar vein, during one of my exchanges with one of the ritual specialists of *Arbawr* village he informs me that:

“We are all from different countries that are very far apart from each other and yet here we are working together for our *Aqkaqzanr* and our Akha people. It is only by way of the blessings of the Supreme Creator and our ancestors that we have been brought together to do this very important work. We were very blessed to meet *Aryoeq*. We have found that we have the same goals and are working together to reach those goals (personal communication, November 20, 2011).”

The documentation project has from its very beginning been a collaborative project between the Akha staff of MAPS and a large group of Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village. The goal of the project is to document the complete round of annual and non-annual rituals carried out by the Neo-Traditionalist villagers in written, audio, and visual media forms. In general, the rituals of *Aqkaqzanr* can be divided into two main types – those relating to various aspects of the life-cycle (*Daevqzanr*) and those relating to death (*Xirzanr*).⁵ The working group is using a

⁵ *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 ritual offerings to ancestors, annual communal level rituals, food, language, music, dance, dress,

recently unified common Akha writing system in documenting various aspects of the rituals in written form. All of the individuals involved in the project are greatly concerned about the future *Aqkaqzanr* and are eager that it be passed on to the younger generations who are increasingly abandoning *Aqkaqzanr* for the belief systems of others, particularly Christianity.

The project lasted for two years during which an incredible amount of information was documented in written, audio, and visual media forms. The project has come to a successful end. Numerous items have been produced and distributed to Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village and other parts of the Upper Mekong Region. For example, four books have been published relating to funerary rites (including a DVD production), *Pirma* recitations, the genealogies of the *Arbawr* villagers, and various life-cycle related rituals (including a DVD production). Each of the books focusing on various rituals provides a general outline of the practices that take place during the ritual as well as various regulations to follow throughout the ritual process. The DVDs provide a visual component to the books. In this manner the purpose of documentation is served alongside of that of providing an opportunity for interested individuals to learn more about and observe the ritual practices as they are being carried out.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the particular practices of *Aqkaqzanr* in *Arbawr* village that have now been documented extensively are not considered to be the standard for all Neo-Traditionalist Akha in the region. As noted earlier, there is some variation in practices of *Aqkaqzanr* and not all Neo-traditionalists share the same ideas as to how to go about reforming *Aqkaqzanr*. For example, in China today Akha no longer continue to observe either the annual ancestral offerings or rice-related rituals as in the case of *Arbawr* village in Thailand. Rather, Akha in China continue to observe three of the annual ancestral offerings including the Akha New Year, the Swing Festival, and the Red Egg Festival. At the same time, many Neo-traditionalists in different parts of Myanmar have decided to reduce their annual ancestral offerings from twelve to three. As noted earlier, many of these Neo-Traditionalists are former Christians who decided to return to the new

stories and rules and regulations governing everyday life. *Xirzanr* refers to all of the rituals, regulations and customs related to death, including both natural and unnatural or accidental deaths.

version of *Aqkaqzanr* following its reformation or lightening. In general, it is felt that the decision to reduce the number of ancestral offerings or to adopt the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* ultimately depends upon individual households.

Many Neo-traditionalists in the region, however, including the younger generations in *Arbawr* village are eager to reduce their annual ancestral offerings from twelve to three so as to lighten the burden of *Aqkaqzanr*. As noted earlier the chairman of the international working group on behalf of *Aqkaqzanr* has been quite critical of the elders of *Arbawr* village for their reluctance to adopt the new, lightened version of *Aqkaqzanr* that they played an important part in creating in the very first place. However, the elders of *Arbawr* village are determined to continue carrying the practices of *Aqkaqzanr* as passed down to them by their ancestors. This determination is reflected in the views of an elder who tells me that:

“We will continue to practice the same *Aqkaqzanr* that we have been practicing for many years now. After we pass away, however, if our children can no longer continue to practice *Aqkaqzanr* in the same way, then it is up to them to decide whether they want to adopt the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* being practiced in Myanmar. Or, they may decide to use all of the books and DVDs that we have created now in continuing to carry our traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr*” (personal communication, November 15, 2011).

In conclusion, the Neo-traditionalists of *Arbawr* village are very happy to have achieved their goal of documenting their traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr* and welcome anyone who is interested in learning about *Aqkaqzanr*. Moreover, the ritual specialists of *Arbawr* village are very willing to help Akha in other villages to continue practicing *Aqkaqzanr*. While the future is uncertain, the completion of the documentation project has provided the Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village with hope that their cherished practices of *Aqkaqzanr* will continue to be carried into the distant future by their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and so on. This hope and determination is reflected in the following words of one of the village elders:

“Now that our *Aqkaqzanr* is documented the younger generations can learn how to practice different rituals by referring to these texts and DVDs. They can use these texts and DVDs to continue practicing our traditions. We now feel confident that our future generations will continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr*” (personal communication, November 15, 2011).

4.3 Summary

Efforts to work on the documentation and preservation of *Aqkaqzanr* began in *Arbawr* village more than thirty years ago when Akha staff members from the Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand (AFECT) first began to work with some of the elders and ritual specialists. At that time and until very recently, AFECT was the only organization both in Thailand and the greater region that supported and worked on behalf of traditional Akha culture. All of the other organizations working with Akha in Thailand at least were religious-based organizations that while supporting various development-related efforts simultaneously “encouraged” Akha to convert to either Christianity or Buddhism. The latter organizations saw and continue to see traditional Akha culture as an impediment to “progress”, not only in material but also in spiritual terms. As a result, the latter missionary-development related organizations “encouraged” the Akha with whom they worked to abandon many of their traditional practices. This was and continues to be the case most strongly among Christian organizations.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the late Dr. Geusau, along with various Akha staff members of AFECT and a number of elders and ritual specialists from different villages in Thailand, began to organize a number of supra-village level activities geared towards discussing, reforming, and ultimately protecting traditional Akha culture. The primary purpose of these activities was to encourage the greater Akha community to consider modifying some aspects of their traditional culture so that it could be better adapted to contemporary life. A particular emphasis was placed on either revising or abolishing customs that were in violation of the laws of the Thai nation-state. At the same time, a great deal of effort was made in documenting traditional rituals taking place throughout the year. A particular emphasis was placed on documenting in written and audio form the elaborate ritual texts chanted by *Pirma* during various ritual processes, particularly funerals, and transmitted orally from a *Pirma* to his student.

As noted earlier, a number of villagers and ritual specialists from *Arbawr* village were involved in the early efforts of AFECT. As a result of their involvement, *Arbawr* village was one of the earlier villages in Thailand to adopt several more or

less significant modifications to *Aqkaqzanr* that were discussed and agreed upon by the larger Akha committee members of AFECT. For example, *Arbawr* village was the second village in the region to construct more permanent village gates made out of cement rather than the traditionally prescribed fresh wood which had to be cut and prepared annually. The latter reformation of tradition was initiated in response to the Thai government's ban on logging in the national forests surrounding *Arbawr* village. *Arbawr* village was also one of the earliest villages to abolish the taboo requiring the killing of twins upon birth, a taboo that was in direct violation of Thai national law.

As noted earlier, however, the Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village have long been concerned with the issue of documenting and preserving their traditional cultural practices in addition to reforming and adapting them to contemporary life. The villagers have long been eager to document as much as possible of their traditions in Akha language before they disappear so that the knowledge at least of these traditions can be handed down to the next generation. The villagers in turn tried to work on this project of documentation with the help of AFECT but were unable to make any real progress in doing so. This situation had left the villagers disappointed as well as disillusioned with the staff members of AFECT.

In spite of their disappointments, however, the Neo-traditionalists of *Arbawr* village never relented in either their efforts to maintain their traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr* or their determination to document these practices. They had long been searching for an opportunity to turn this dream into a reality. As part of their efforts to maintain their traditional practices the villagers have recruited *Pirma* from other villages, attended various activities organized by the international network of Neo-Traditionalists, and exchanged ideas and information relating to *Aqkaqzanr* with the growing members of this network.

It was during one of these events, furthermore, that the elders and ritual specialists of *Arbawr* village first met *Aryoeq*, a gifted young Akha man from China, with whom they later collaborated in achieving their dreams of documenting their traditional cultural practices over a two year period between 2010 and 2012. Following the completion of this project the elders and ritual specialists expressed a great deal of happiness and confidence that their traditional practices will not be lost.

They expressed a great deal of hope that the next generations of Akha will at the very least be able to learn about as well as practice *Aqkaqzanr* into the distant future.

At the same time, it is important to stress that not all Neo-traditionalists in the region hold the same ideas regarding how to go about modifying *Aqkaqzanr*. In Myanmar a growing number of Neo-Traditionalist “return converts” from Christianity have already adapted the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* and reduced the annual number of ancestral offerings from twelve to three. Meanwhile in *Arbawr* village the Neo-Traditionalists continue to observe the full round of rituals and are determined at least for the time being to not adopt the new version of *Aqkaqzanr*. Some Neo-Traditionalist leaders, furthermore, have criticized the elders of *Arbawr* village for not adopting the new version that they themselves played a part in creating. The elders of *Arbawr* village, however, insist that while the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* being practiced in Myanmar may be best for Akha in that context, it is too simplified for them and that they will continue to practice *Aqkaqzanr* according to their traditions and abilities to do so.

The elders and ritual specialists of *Arbawr* village further state that at the present they have the resources – ritual specialists, communal solidarity, knowledge, ritual spaces etc. - required to adequately carry *Aqkaqzanr* according to their traditions. As a result, their traditional practices are not seen as a burden but rather as a meaningful and integral part of their lives. If they were to give them up they would feel as though they were missing something essential and integral to the life of their community. Nevertheless, the younger generations in the village are more open to the new version of *Aqkaqzanr*, particularly the modification of the annual round of ancestral offerings from twelve to three. In reference to the new version of *Aqkaqzanr*, the elders feel it is very simple and does not apply to their current situation. For example, during one of numerous exchanges with a leading ritual specialist in the village I ask him, “What are your thoughts on the new version of *Aqkaqzanr*”? He replies:

“The new version of *Aqkaqzanr* is good but it is much too simple for us. It may be suitable for Akha in Myanmar that have converted back to *Aqkaqzanr*. But it is not suitable for us. We want to continue to practice all of the annual rituals that have been handed down from our ancestors to us over many, many generations. If, after our passing, however, our sons can

no longer practice in the same way then we would rather have them reduce the number of ancestral offerings than adopt the religions of others” (personal communication, December 8, 2011).⁶

Moreover, as noted earlier, this elder further stresses that he and the other elders have publicly stated that if any one in the village would like to reduce the number of annual ancestral offerings from twelve to three, then they are free to do so. To date, however, none of the villagers have yet done so. Ultimately, for the elders the option of reducing their ancestral offerings is preferable to losing additional villagers to the religions of others, particularly Christianity and Buddhism. As long as the villagers continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr* then they will continue to remain part of the strong and vibrant community.

The younger generations of villagers between the ages of 30 and 60 hold their elders in great respect and continue to follow their leadership when it comes to their practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. This is the case in spite of their own personal preference for the new version of *Aqkaqzanr*, particularly the reduced number of ancestral offerings. Either way, the younger generations are determined to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr*, either in the more traditional way of their elders and ancestors or in the new version being carried out in Myanmar. For example, on one occasion a middle-aged male villager tells me:

“When our elders pass away we will have to either adopt the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* or develop our own set of simplified rituals as we will not be able to continue practicing in the same way without our elders. At the same time we are determined to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr* and not adopt the religions of others” (personal communication, November 15, 2011).⁷

From the above it can be seen that while the younger generations may have different ideas regarding their practices of *Aqkaqzanr* than the elders, they are nevertheless confident in their desire to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr* as best suited for Akha.

In conclusion, while there are some tensions among Neo-traditionalists over the issue of how to go about modifying and practicing *Aqkaqzanr*, these tensions are quite different from those between Neo-Traditionalists and Akha that have converted to the religions of others, particularly Christianity. The general feeling among Neo-

⁶ This statement reflects the views of elder Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village more generally.

⁷ This man’s views reflect those of the younger generations of Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village more generally speaking.

Traditionalists is that as long as they continue to carry the traditions of their ancestors, albeit in more or less modified forms, they are all part of the same family. There is a general consensus that they are all working together as the members of one larger family in order to support their traditions and make their Akha people stronger. In contrast, this deep sense of solidarity and community is no longer felt with Akha that have converted to Christianity and Buddhism. In ending, it is clear that Neo-traditionalists today, as in the past, see their ritual practices, particularly their ancestral offerings, as playing an integral part in their everyday lives and overall sense of belonging to a larger Akha community.