

CHAPTER 5

AQKAQZANR IN THE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF CHRISTIAN AND BUDDHIST VILLAGERS?

Akha that convert to either Christianity or Buddhism are often required to abandon many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* that contradict their new belief systems, particularly their traditional beliefs and rituals practices. As a result, religious conversion brings forth a great deal of changes in nearly every aspect of life ranging from social structure and relations to ritual activities and notions of identity. This has clearly been the case in *Arbawr* village. In this chapter I discuss the ways in which Akha Protestants, Catholics, and Buddhists in *Arbawr* village have formed their respective communities and lifestyles, as well as their new religious identities through religious conversion. I also examine how these conversions have changed their views of *Aqkaqzanr* and their Akha identity. Last, I consider the ways in which these religious converts express their new Akha identity within the context of their new tradition.

5.1 Protestant Villagers

5.1.1 Protestant Akha and Their New Religion

Akha that choose to follow *Yesu* or Jesus, in obedience to *Miqyaer* or God, identify themselves as *Kalizaq*. They refer to their new religion as *Kalizanzr* (Protestantism) or *Yesuzanzr* ('the Zanzr of Jesus'). Protestants in *Arbawr* village, not unlike other Christians in the world, believe that there is only one God who created the world.¹ They further believe that Jesus is the son of God who was sent to earth to

¹ As noted earlier, there are currently seven different Protestant churches located in different sections of the village. These churches include two churches affiliated with the Akha Church of Thailand (ACT), an additional two churches affiliated with the Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF), a church run by a Korean missionary, and a Lisu Christian church.

save all of humankind from the consequences of their sins. Moreover, Protestants think of Jesus as a fundamental conduit and symbol of God. In their minds, furthermore, Jesus is of much greater importance than his mother, Mary. As will be noted below, this particular belief contradicts the great value that Catholic Akha place upon the Mother Mary in addition to her son Jesus. Protestant Akha accordingly pay little attention to Mary in terms of their religious beliefs and rituals.

Protestant Akha further believe that all Christians who believe in and follow the teachings of God and Jesus will go to *Mqtav* or ‘heaven’ when they pass away. At the same time, they believe that non-Christians will go to *Xiqbeer lanma*² or ‘hell’ when they pass away. For example, an elderly Protestant woman over seventy years old who converted to Protestantism about 4 years ago, tells me:

“Our pastor tells us that God has prepared a large house made of gold for us (Protestants) in heaven when we pass away. He told us that there are golden chairs in this house for all of us to sit in comfortably. When we pass away we will go to this house prepared for us by God in heaven. Those who do not believe in God and do not follow Jesus, however, cannot go to this house. Rather, they will go to hell” (personal communication, October 14, 2011).

Throughout my time in *Arbawr* village I had a chance to interact with numerous other Protestants from different age groups who made similar kinds of statements when we talked about their religious beliefs and practices.

The Christian belief system is largely incompatible with that of *Aqkaqzanr* or traditional Akha culture. Early foreign Christian missionaries working with Akha, furthermore, encouraged a complete change in their converts from *Aqkaqzanr* to Christianity, seeing *Aqkaqzanr* as a backwards form of “demon worship”. As a result, the majority of Christian Akha in Thailand today have abandoned nearly all aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* and refuse to participate in any rituals carried out by their non-Christian relatives or fellow villagers. Christian Akha no longer practice any of the annual rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr*, including household level ancestral offerings and communal level rites relating to the renewal of the village gate or the rice cultivation cycle.

² *Xiqbeer lanma* literally translates into English as ‘pool of blood’.

Protestant Akha have accordingly abandoned the ritual objects associated with each of these rituals, the most significant of which is the household level ancestral altar. Traditionally, the ancestral altar has always been considered to be the most sacred space for Akha. The ancestors and their related rituals of honor and respect form the core of traditional Akha culture. Protestant Akha, however, have discarded, and in many cases burned their ancestral altars and replaced them with images of Jesus. They no longer make offerings to their ancestors but rather worship Jesus and God.

Based on the doctrines of their new faith, Protestant Akha have created a new ritual space in the form of the *Uqduqtanq-e nymr* or church. The church has become the most important ritual space for Protestant Akha villagers to carry out their religious ceremonies including Sunday church service and various holy days such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. The church is also the place where Protestant villagers hold various rituals such as naming ceremonies for newborns, baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Note that in contrast to Neo-Traditionalist Akha, most of the religious practices of Protestants take place outside the home in the church.

Protestant villagers also have new ritual specialists that they refer to as *Saqraq* or ‘pastor’. A minister, who is almost always male, leads his church in all of their religious rituals and other related activities that may take place in various households. Protestant ritual specialists, unlike those of the Neo-Traditionalists, must be formally educated and literate as they are required to organize all of the church-related activities as well as teach their community from the *Javrliq* or Bible, which has been translated using an Akha writing system that differs from the one used by Neo-Traditionalist Akha today.³ Protestant ministers must often also be literate in Thai language as their churches are often part of larger Thai-based organizations and they are required to maintain regular communication with the latter. The most prominent Protestant ministers, furthermore, are generally required to be competent in English language as much of their financial support comes from English-speaking Christians in various parts of the U.S., Western Europe, and Australia.

³ The script used in the bible was developed by an American Baptist Missionary, Paul Lewis, and his Akha collaborators in Kengtung, Myanmar in the early 1950s and is widely used today by Christian Akha converts in Myanmar and Thailand (Morton 2010:132).

As a result of all of these requirements, the position of ritual specialist among Protestants is largely filled by younger Akha males and occasionally females. In *Arbawr* village, the ministers of all of four of the Protestant churches are men between the ages of 40-50 who are able to read and write Thai language. In contrast, among the Neo-Traditionalists nearly all of the positions of ritual specialists are filled by middle-aged and elderly males and females. In the new religious practices of Protestants, furthermore, the elders more generally no longer play a leading role in carrying out rituals as in the case of Neo-Traditionalists. In addition, during my time in *Arbawr* village I spoke with several Protestant elders who used to be highly respected ritual specialists prior to their conversion to Christianity. I was saddened to find that little or no place was afforded for them to continue their role as ritual specialists within their new religious tradition.

In terms of religious practices, one of the most fundamental requirements for Protestants is to faithfully attend weekly church service each Sunday. Protestants are also required to stay home and refrain from engaging in any kind of work all day Sunday, especially agricultural labor. They are also required to say a prayer of thanksgiving prior to the start of each and every meal as well as prior to sleeping each evening. They are also forbidden from drinking alcohol. After attending a number of church services in *Arbawr* village at one of the Protestant churches under the Akha Outreach Foundation, however, I learned that not all of the villagers follow the regulations of the church. For example, one Sunday morning one of the female members of the congregation announced to the community the following:

“Nearly all of the people here today are women. Where are all of the men? We have been taking note lately of who has not been attending church and other related activities. We are quickly approaching Christmas and the time for our annual year-end meeting. During the meeting we will talk more seriously about this issue and consider revoking the memberships of those who have not been coming to church. We really hope that all of you will join our church services each Sunday and each of our other church related activities. This is essential if you want to be considered a member of our church. Please convey this message to those who are not present today. In addition, we have also noted fewer and fewer people wearing their Akha dress for church on Sunday. We want to encourage everyone to wear their Akha dress when they come to church. Finally, we have been told that some church members have been drinking alcohol. We want everyone to know

that this behavior is wrong and to encourage those who have been drinking to refrain from doing so” (personal communication, December 10, 2011).

After this announcement, the pastor went to the front of the church and reiterated the comments of the female assistant as noted above. The pastor then began the day’s church service, which involved worshiping Jesus and God by way of songs, the reading of Biblical passages, sermons by the minister, and lengthy prayers during which everyone was asked to stand, bow their heads, and close their eyes. In addition, it was interesting to note that the ritual space within the church was divided into separate seating areas for males and females. The males sat in chairs arranged along the left side of the church while the females sat on the right side.

In addition to the regulations mentioned above, the Protestant leaders strongly forbid their followers from seeking out the help of various traditional healing specialists such as *Pirma* and *Nyirpaq* when they are unhealthy or experiencing misfortunes in life. I can recall one case involving a Protestant family in *Arbawr* village whose father’s health was very poor in spite of having both gone to the government hospital and also praying in Christian fashion for better health. The family decided in turn to see if a traditionalist *Nyirpaq* could heal their father. When they asked the head of the Protestant church if they could do so, however, they were told that it would be a violation of their Christian faith. The family subsequently decided to abandon their Christian faith and return to *Aqkaqzanr*. Interestingly enough, the father’s health improved shortly after receiving treatment from a *Nyirpaq*.

The Protestant woman who told me of this family’s situation stressed that they were Christians and that their seeking out the services of a *Nyirpaq* was against the doctrines of Christianity. She added in turn that when she is feeling ill or things are going badly in life for her or any members of her family, she prays to God for healing and goes to see a doctor in town. She stressed that she would never consider seeking out the services of a *Nyirpaq*. From her perspective, to be *Kaliqzaq* (Protestant) means to strictly follow the beliefs and ritual practices of Christianity, most notably the taboo against turning to the “idols” of other “lesser” religions in times of need.

Moreover, Christian converts refuse to participate in the rituals of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and neighbors. Most significantly, they refuse to either partake of any offerings made in honor of the ancestors or participate in healing rites

involving the tying of strings around a person's wrists. In general, however, Protestants tend to only participate in what they believe to be the non-religious aspects of their relatives or neighbors religious ceremonies – i.e. helping with the preparation of meals, setting up eating spaces, serving meals, cleaning, during funerals and so forth.

I can recall one particularly saddening instance of this refusal that took place during my time in *Arbawr* village. One of the Neo-traditionalist households held a special ritual in order to ask for blessings for their economic prosperity and overall wellbeing. An important part of the ritual involves the preparation of three bowls containing a small amount of cooked ribs from a freshly killed pig. Each of these bowls are prepared for the three *Aqghoe* or uncles (mother's brother) of the household who are expected to hold their particular bowl while a blessing is made and in turn eat at least some of the meat in the bowl.⁴ The three uncles include the grandmother's brother, mother's brother, and wife's brother.

In the case of this particular family, however, the grandmother's brother was a Protestant convert who agreed to be present at the table during the ceremony but refused to either hold or partake of the particular bowl of food prepared for him. The refusal of this particular "uncle" to participate in the ritual caused a great deal of stress and anxiety for the members of the Neo-Traditionalist household that were holding the ceremony. This particular "uncle's" refusal to actively participate in the ritual both denied the family access to an important source of blessings and also created a barrier between the two families of "wife-givers" and "wife-takers".

Protestants have developed their own way of adjusting to their new faith. For example, they often greet each other by shaking hands in both their everyday and ritual lives. It seems to me, furthermore, that Protestants have replaced the Neo-Traditionalist healing rite of tying strings with the hand shake and laying of their hands on the individual for whom healing is being asked in this particular case from Jesus and God. I have also learned that the two rites of Baptism and Communion are

⁴ *Aqghoe* (uncle or mother's brother) play a significant role in many ceremonies carried out as part of *Aqkaqzanr*. Without their participation these ceremonies can not be completely carried out with the result of ensuring less blessings for the household sponsoring the ceremony. According to *Aqkaqzanr* the patrilineal line of the wife-giving family is an important source of blessings for a household.

of particular importance in the religious lives of Protestants. Along these lines, the Protestant grandmother who is quoted above further tells me:

“My husband and I became Protestants over four years ago. Prior to that time my husband was one of the village’s leading ritual specialists. We were baptized during the second year following our conversion. The Baptismal rite is only held once a year in our church. During this ritual we partook of some break and red colored soft drink meant to symbolize the body and blood of Jesus. By doing this we were able to fully become Protestants” (personal communication, October 14, 2011).⁵

The grandmother then continues to tell me that there are still a certain number of church members that have not yet been baptized in spite of being Christians for more than four or five years already. She stresses that they have yet to “eat the bread and drink the red drink” because they are not yet ready to fully become Protestants. She referred to these individuals as being “half Protestant” and “half *Aqkaqzanr*”. For this grandmother, to be fully and completely Protestant means to have received the rite of Baptism and partaken of “the body and blood of Jesus”.

In sum, it is clear that Protestant Akha have formed a new lifestyle and community as well as a new religious identity that contrasts with that of Neo-Traditionalists. In fact, the religious identity of Christian villagers is often formed in opposition or contrast to that of Neo-Traditionalists. At the same time, while Protestant Akha converts continue to reside in the same larger administrative village as other non-Christians, they tend to establish their own smaller, intra-village communities where they attend church and socialize. In the following section, I talk about Protestants’ views of *Aqkaqzanr* or traditional Akha culture in light of the great value they place on their new Protestant traditions. I also analyze the ways in which

⁵ Throughout my time in Arbawr village I visited with this grandmother and her husband on numerous occasions. Her husband talked to me at great length about his knowledge of both *Aqkaqzanr* and Christianity. He is a very kind and knowledgeable elder that helped me to make sense of the similarities and differences between these two traditions. I learned in turn that two of their nephews are highly influential leaders in the Protestant Akha community in Thailand. Under the leadership of these nephews the majority of their extended family members had all converted to Christianity more than 20 years ago. This appears to be the primary reason for the couple’s decision to convert as well. As should be clear by now, the practice of *Aqkaqzanr* or traditional Akha culture is deeply implicated in the continual creation and maintenance of the social fabric of family, extended family, and the larger community. Without the support of an extended family it would be nearly impossible for a household to continue practicing *Aqkaqzanr*.

Protestants continue to claim an Akha identity while changing their fundamental religious beliefs and practices.

5.1.2 Protestants' views of *Aqkaqzanr* and Their Akha Identity

As noted in chapter two, the early foreign Christian missionaries working with Akha in Myanmar and Thailand interpreted *Aqkaqzanr* or traditional Akha culture as a “primitive” and “backwards” form of “demon worship”. The current generation of native Akha missionaries continues to hold the same interpretation. One Sunday morning while attending the Protestant church service under the Akha Outreach Foundation, a middle-aged female church leader addresses the congregation in a sour mood. Many of the chairs on the male side of the church are empty. The woman tells the congregation that they are required to attend church as part of their responsibilities as Christians. She stresses that if they are not willing to come to church then it is better if they stop being Christian and “return to their old ways as slaves of the devil, making heavy and unnecessary offerings to the spirits”.

Under the influences of initially foreign Christian missionaries and now their own Akha missionaries, Protestant Akha in *Arbawr* village and beyond have come to see *Aqkaqzanr* or traditional Akha culture as a “backwards” form of “demon worship” that amounts to little more than a heavy economic burden for its practitioners. In Thailand and Myanmar, Akha Christians generally refer to Neo-traditionalists by way of the derogatory term, *Lawrcivqzaq* meaning “those who make offerings to and worship demon spirits”.⁶ On one occasion an elderly Protestant grandmother from another village in North Thailand informs me:

“When my family carried *Aqkaqzanr*, we constantly had to kill different kinds of animals to make offerings to the evil spirits. This made our family poor. If we did not make these offerings then the evil spirits would become angry and inflict either me or my family members with some sort of illness. When we carried *Aqkaqzanr* I had constant back pain. I was inflicted by the evil spirits. Since becoming a Protestant, however, my back pain has gone. Now, *Aqdaq Yesu* (‘Father Jesus’) protects and looks after me, preventing the evil spirits from inflicting me” (personal communication, November 6, 2010).⁷

⁶ Neo-traditionalists consider the term *Lawrcivqzaq* to be derogatory and prefer to be identified as *Aqkaqzanr tanq-e zaq* or ‘those who carry *Aqkaqzanr*’.

⁷ I met this grandmother while attending the wedding ceremony of one of my Akha friend’s residing in another upland Akha village located in Maefahluang District on November 6, 2010.

In response to grandmother's words as noted above, I comment that my own mother also suffers from constant back pain as a result of the heavy agricultural work she did when she was younger and not as a result of being inflicted by evil spirits. I tell her that in order to treat her back my mother did not make any animal offerings but rather went to see a doctor for treatment. At the moment, I was eager to show the grandmother that *Aqkaqzanr* is not a form of devil worship by way of my mother's situation. In the end, however, I don't think that I made any impact in changing her views. While listening to numerous Christians judge and de-value *Aqkaqzanr* in such a scornful and inaccurate way throughout various parts of my time in Thailand I often became upset. I found myself wondering how someone could develop such a negative view of their own history and traditions which in turn are an important part of their own identity.

Akha missionaries and their followers believe that *Kalizanzr* or Protestantism is superior to the teachings of any other religion. For example, during the annual celebration of Thanksgiving at one of the Protestant churches affiliated with the Association of Akha Churches of Thailand (ACT), a prominent pastor tells the congregation the following:

"Our 'Protestantism' is not only a world religion, but also the best religion in the world. Our Protestant brothers and sisters live all over the world. We are a huge community. I have visited Akha in China and Laos where the government does not allow them to become Protestants. The government is not open to Protestantism. Akha in Laos are especially poor. For the most part they continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr* and worship the devil. We need to help them. We need to teach them about the love of God so that they can improve their lives. We Akha here in Thailand are in the best situation. We have the richest and smartest Akha. We are free to choose to become Protestants. We should all be grateful for this. We should all feel proud to be a part of the Protestant family" (personal communication, October 20, 2011).

This view of Christianity as a more advanced and superior world religion when compared to more local traditions such as *Aqkaqzanr* has much deeper roots not only in the biases of early foreign Christian missionaries but also the Western scholarly tradition. Anthropologist Robert Hefner writes that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Western scholars as well as missionaries held that "world religions could be distinguished (from primitive religions) by their intellectual

coherence and moral rigor (1993:6).” So-called ‘primitive religions’ in turn were considered, “murky amalgams of magical delusion and fetishist taboo (lacking in) any real system of ethics (and with) their doctrines (developed) opportunistically as the needs of their practitioners require (Hefner 1993:6).”

The belief systems of native groups such as the Akha have generally been labeled as “traditional” or “primitive” religions in contrast to the “world religions” such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, which are seen as “modern” and ‘rational’. Akha Christians today similarly differentiate their Christian tradition from *Aqkaqzanr* as being a more “superior” as well as “righteous” tradition. In the latter respect, Akha Christians express an even greater degree of disdain in their derogatory views of *Aqkaqzanr* as being not only “primitive” but also “unrighteous” or “morally wrong”. At the same time, Protestants, particularly those that are literate in the Christian Akha writing system, generally see themselves as more modern, educated, and civilized than their non-Christian counterparts whose tradition largely remains an oral tradition. Protestants, furthermore, generally view their former Akha identity prior to conversion in the same manner – as a “primitive” and “backwards” form of “demon worship”.

At the same time, however, Christians still identify themselves as Akha. They generally hold that while they have changed their religion, they are still Akha in terms of their cultural identity. In chapter two I mentioned that Dr. Paul W. Lewis, one of the earliest as well as most influential Christian missionaries to work with Akha in Myanmar and Thailand, defines *zanr* as “religion, custom, a way of doing things”, with an overall stress on “religion” and “ritual” (1969). Dr. Lewis’ ideas have more or less been adopted by Akha missionaries and their followers today. For example, Protestants in *Arbawr* village view *Aqkaqzanr* as a type of “religion” somehow apart and separate from “culture”. As I noted earlier in chapter two, a leading Baptist missionary from Chiangrai, who is the main protégé of Dr. Lewis, holds that:

“ ‘Zanr’ is ‘religion’ and all of the traditional rituals and beliefs belong to ‘zanr’. As a result, all of these rituals and beliefs must be discarded when becoming Christian as they differ from those of Christianity. The word ‘Sanr’, however, refers to ‘culture’ and to those parts of our Akha identity that we share in common with other non-Christian Akha (personal communication, June 15, 2012).

The same missionary further holds that “culture” and “religion” can and should be separated from one another and that Akha Christians, while carrying a different religion, are still Akha in terms of their culture. Akha Christians hold, furthermore, that religion and culture are different parts of their identity and that their conversion to Christianity has not changed their Akha culture or identity. At the same time, however, it is clear that Protestantism has become an integral part of their new Akha identity, even to the extent that they differentiate themselves from Neo-Traditionalists by use of the self-referential term *Kalizaq*.

5.1.3 Protestant Beliefs and Ritual Practices

Protestants have adopted an entirely different set of beliefs and ritual practices that form the core of their new way of life and identity. Their religious beliefs and practices differ greatly from those of Neo-Traditionalists. For example, the ritual practices of Protestants primarily take place in the church, whereas those of Neo-Traditionalists take place in individual households and various sacred sites in and around the village. Apart from weekly church service on Sunday, furthermore, Protestant Akha observe several annual ritual celebrations including Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving.

Interestingly, the Christian celebration of Easter occurs around the same time as the Neo-Traditionalist celebration of their *Khmqxeevq khmqmir Aqpoeq Lawr-e* or ‘Minor New Year Ancestral Offering’. During this ceremony Neo-Traditionalists prepare red-dyed hardboiled eggs and make ritual offerings to their ancestors. The preparation of red-dyed hardboiled eggs, and not the practice of making offerings to ancestors, has been continued by Protestant Akha in their Easter celebration. Moreover, the Protestant celebration of Thanksgiving takes place around the same time as the Neo-Traditionalist celebration of *Caerxeevqdzaq* or the ‘New Rice Ceremony’. Christians even use the Neo-Traditionalist term, *Caerxeevqdzaq*, to refer to their new Christian celebration of the harvest.

At the same time, it is important to stress that in the Christian context the ‘red-dyed hardboiled eggs’ and their celebration of the ‘New Rice Ceremony’ have taken on a new meaning adapted to their Christian beliefs and practices. Finally, the Christian celebration of Christmas further occurs around the same time as the Neo-

Traditionalist celebration of *Kartanr Aqpoeq* or the ‘Traditional Akha New Year’. Protestants stress, however, that they celebrate Christmas in honor of the birth of Jesus and not in honor of the new year.

Following Hirsch’s (1983) description of the process of conversion from Buddhism to Christianity among *Khon Muang* in north Thailand, I argue that among Akha the Protestant tradition and *Aqkaqzanr* should be seen in “disjunction” with one another. As Akha have become Protestants they have developed new truths, values and ways of thinking and acting. For Akha Protestants, Protestantism has become both a new system of doctrine and also a new way of life in place of the former. Akha Protestants have largely rejected their prior culture and adopted a new “Protestant” culture.

As a result, Akha Protestants have made little or not attempt to adapt traditional Akha cultural patterns into their ritual activities. Recently, however, some Akha Christians have begun building the traditionalist Akha *Lavqceq* or ceremonial swing. When I first learned this I was curious to understand why and how they were doing this. I knew that Christians were forbidden from practicing any elements of *Aqkaqzanr* and so I began questioning different Christian leaders about this issue.⁸ The reply of one Christian leader as noted below represents the views of Christians more generally speaking:

“We consider the swing itself to be an important part of Akha culture, separate and apart from religion. And so when we build the swing we do not perform any of the traditional rituals normally associated with the building process” (personal communication, June 16, 2012).

Interestingly, Protestants construct their swings each year around roughly the same time as Neo-Traditionalists – following the planting of rice during the height of the rainy season between late August and early September. In contrast to Neo-Traditionalists, however, Protestants observe neither the traditional rites proscribed as part of the swing’s construction nor the prohibition against using the swing outside of the ritual period during which it is constructed. Rather, Protestants continue to use their swings throughout the entire year.

⁸ In early June of 2012 I visited Chiangrai city and met with several influential Akha missionaries whose centers and organizations are all based within the vicinity of the city.

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

In conclusion, nearly every aspect of Protestant’s ritual life differs from that of Neo-Traditionalists – ranging from birth rites to naming ceremonies, weddings, healing rituals and funerals. Anthropologist Cornelia Kammerer notes that the first foreign missionaries to work with Akha in Thailand, “encouraged Akha converts to retain their culture by keeping their language and traditional clothes. For (these missionaries), to be Akha is to speak Akha and to wear Akha clothes (1990:281).” More than twenty years later these ideas have been largely adopted by native Akha missionaries and their followers. For example, when asked about which parts of their Akha identity are most important to them today, nearly all of them refer to language and dress.

In reality, however, even their Akha language and dress have been modified according to their new Christian identity. For example, the Christian symbol of the cross is used widely as a pattern on Christian Akha dress. In addition, many new Christian words have been adapted into their Akha language and a new style of singing has been adopted from Western style church music. Moreover, Christian Akha songs have changed in their orientation to ‘Jesus’ and ‘God’ rather than the ancestors and so forth. More broadly speaking, the few elements of *Aqkaqzanr* that continue to be found in the religious practices of Protestant Akha no longer serve the same social functions and have acquired different meanings according to Christianity.

5.2 Catholic Villagers

5.2.1 Catholics and Their New Religion

There is one Catholic Church and community in *Arbawr* village to which roughly 90 households belong. Akha Catholics refer to their new religion in Akha as *Kovqdawqzanr* or ‘Catholicism’, and identify themselves as *Kovqdawqzaq* or ‘Catholics’. In contrast to Protestants, Catholics view the Virgin Mary as being worthy of the same degree of reverence, if not more, as her son Jesus. In explaining this to me one of the Catholic villagers exclaimed matter of factly, “Without the mother there could be no son!” Catholics find it difficult to understand why Protestants show such little reverence towards the Virgin Mary. For Catholics, Mary is an equally significant, if not greater, source of blessings in their everyday lives as Jesus. Numerous Catholic villagers informed me, furthermore, that their religion is both the most supreme as well as oldest religion in the world with roots in Italy.

Not unlike Protestants, furthermore, Catholics believe that non-Christians will go to *Xiqbeer Lanqma* or ‘hell’ when their lives end, while they will go to *Mqtav* or ‘heaven’. At the same time, however, Catholic villagers believe that by praying for the souls of the deceased who are not in ‘heaven’, including former non-Christians, their souls may some day be able to enter into ‘heaven’. A hardworking middle-aged Catholic woman originally from Kengtung, Myanmar told me that she often prays for her late relatives who were not Catholics and passed away carrying *Aqkaqzanr*. She asks the Mother Mary and God to forgive them and wash away their impurities and sin so that their souls may enter into ‘heaven’.

As in the case of Protestantism, many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* are incompatible with the Catholic tradition. As a result, Catholic villagers have largely abandoned their traditional beliefs and ritual practices. Catholics have replaced their former ancestral altars with images of ‘Mary’ and ‘Jesus’. They no longer practice the annual round of rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Catholics no longer participate in the communal rituals and celebrations organized by Neo-Traditionalists according to *Aqkaqzanr*. They similarly avoid the sacred spaces of Neo-Traditionalists that are located in different locations throughout the village and beyond. Catholics also refuse to either partake of any offerings made in honor of the ancestors or participate in healing rites involving the tying of strings around a person’s wrists. In general,

however, Catholics, not unlike Protestants, tend to only participate in what they believe to be the non-religious aspects of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives' or neighbors' religious ceremonies – i.e. helping with the preparation of meals, setting up eating spaces, serving meals, cleaning, during funerals and so forth.

Catholic Akha have developed a new set of ritual practices according to their new religious belief system. For example, when a member of their families is not feeling well, Catholics no longer hold a ceremony during which strings are tied around the ill person's wrists but rather pray to Mary, Jesus, and God for that person's recovery while holding the person's hand or laying their hands on the person's back or shoulder. Their former tradition of partaking of the offerings to the ancestors has similarly been replaced by that of partaking of the 'body' (bread) and 'blood' (wine) of Jesus who is believed to have been offered as an ultimate sacrifice to God on behalf of all humankind.

Catholics have further created their own ritual space referred to as the *Uqduqtanqnymr* or 'Church'. The Catholic Church, as in the case of Protestant churches, plays a significant role in both the ritual and everyday lives of Catholic villagers. It is the place where Catholics go each Sunday and on special religious holidays to worship and honor the Mother Mary, her son Jesus, and 'God the Father'. The *Uqduqtanqnymr* is the place where Catholic villagers go in order to ask for blessings from the Mother Mary, her son Jesus, and God the Father for their family's prosperity, health and so forth. The Catholics in *Arbawr* village often informed me, "*Uqduq Tanqnymr Irnei Geevqlanq Xarir ma*" or "We go to church to ask for blessings".

Catholics, furthermore, observe a much larger number of holy days throughout the year in addition to those observed by Protestants. These holy days include a feast for Mary, the Mother of God, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, Divine Mercy Sunday, The Ascension, Pentecost Sunday, Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christi, The Assumption of Mary, All Saints Day, the First Sunday of Advent, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 'Thanksgiving', and Christmas. The most significant Catholic feasts, however, include the Assumption of Mary, Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter.

In the Catholic context, furthermore, the ritual specialists are divided into a hierarchy with unmarried male priests at the top followed by unmarried female nuns and then community-level male teachers who have not yet attained the status of priest. In Akha language, Catholic villagers refer to priests as either *Aqda* or *Aqbawr Kovqdawq* ('Father or Grandfather Catholic', depending on age) and community-level teachers as '*Saqlaq*' as used in the Protestant context to refer to 'pastor'. There is no resident priest in *Arbawr* village and so the ritual life of the community is generally led by a community-based *Saqlaq* who is a middle-aged male. *Saqlaq*, however, are not able to lead the community in observing the ritual of Holy Communion as they are not full fledged priests. As a result, once a month or so a Priest based in a Catholic center in the nearby lowland district town of Maesuai comes to the village to hold an official mass during which Holy Communion is offered to the community.

During their church serve, the *Saqlaq* leads the community in carrying out various rituals and praising the Mother Mary, her son Jesus, and God the Father by way of song and prayer. The *Saqlaq* also instructs the community about various aspects of their Catholic tradition by reading from the Bible and giving sermons or teaching based on the particular reading for the day. The *Saqlaq* also officiates in various ceremonies such as baptisms, naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and so forth. As a result, *Saqlaq* and particularly full-fledged priests must be formally educated males that are literate in one or more languages and able to carry out various organizational responsibilities, including corresponding with various Catholic centers in larger towns and cities in Thailand. In general, as in the case of Protestants, these requirements are more easily met by younger Akha that have had an opportunity to attain a formal education by way of the Catholic Church or Thai government.

Baptisms, furthermore, are considered one of the most important rites among Catholics. It is through baptism that one enters into the larger Catholic community and is washed clean of their original sin. In terms of baptismal rites, the Catholic tradition differs from that of Protestants in several ways. Catholic villagers told me, for example, that in the past, the priest would carry out baptismal rites for all of the community's newborns. Similarly, Akha converts to Catholicism were baptized very early on during their conversion process. They added, however, that the regulations governing baptisms have changed more recently. It is now felt that baptism should

only be carried out when individuals are at least eighteen years of age as they can make a more serious and conscious decision to participate in the ritual than newborns. In addition, baptismal rites can be held at anytime during the year among Catholics. This contrasts with Protestants for whom only one communal-level baptismal rite is held per year.

Catholic ritual specialists, like those of Protestants, forbid their followers from seeking out the help of various traditional healing specialists such as *Pirma* and *Nyirpaq*. During times of difficulty or illness, Catholics are encouraged to pray to the Mother Mary, her son Jesus, and/or God the Father and if required seek medical attention from doctors in the nearby town. In contrast to Protestants, however, I learned that many more Catholics than Protestants do not heed the words of their ritual specialists and often seek out the help of various traditional ritual specialists. A middle-aged Catholic father, who is himself a herbal medicine specialist, informs me:

“In the case of illness some Catholics still ask for help from the *Pirma*, *Nyirpaq* and/or traditional herbal medicine practitioner. If we do this, however, we must do so in secret so that our church leader does not know. Our former *Saqraq* was very serious about enforcing this prohibition. If he learned that someone had sought out the help of a *Pirma*, *Nyirpaq*, or traditional medicine specialist, then he would inform the head priest in Maesuai who would then come to the village and scold the family for breaking this taboo. We have since gotten rid of our former *Saqraq* and our new one is much better. Even if he knows that some villagers are seeking help from traditionalist ritual specialists he does not inform the head priest in Maesai (personal communication, January 15, 2012).⁹

He further adds, however, that not all Catholic households are the same. Some, he notes, are more open to *Aqkaqzanr* than others. It was clear to me that his own position was one of being more open and that if necessary he would have no problem seeking help from a traditional ritual specialist. As noted above, furthermore, this man himself was a traditional herbal medicine specialist who was often asked to treat other villagers, particularly Catholics. When I asked about his methods, however, he stressed that they differ from traditionalists in that he heals in the name of the Mother Mary, her Son Jesus, and God the Father.

⁹ The Catholic man tells me this information over dinner one evening at his household along with his wife and daughter. While eating his wife further tells me that their son who lives and works in Chiangmai city hurt his left leg and was treated by her husband with herbal medicine. As she told me this story I asked if these actions were not against their Catholic faith. The husband in turn replies to my question with the quote as noted above.

As part of their new faith, furthermore, Catholics, like Protestants, are required to attend church services each Sunday. The church service of Catholics, however, differs from that of Protestants in that it generally only lasts for roughly an hour. In contrast, Protestant services tend to run from the early morning until the early afternoon. The Catholic service begins early in the morning before breakfast. On Sundays, furthermore, Catholics are supposed to stay in the village and refrain from working in their fields. They are also required to pray prior to the start of each meal and before sleeping in the evening.

Moreover, Catholic villagers are encouraged not to over indulge in either smoking cigarettes or consuming alcohol. This is particularly the case on Fridays during which Catholics are supposed to refrain from either eating meat or drinking alcohol. However, as in the case of Protestants, not all of these regulations are followed. For example, a Catholic family whom I often visited in *Arbawr* village nearly always had a bottle of Lisu corn whiskey on hand for a special occasion. Each time that I visited for dinner, including one Friday, the bottle was brought out and we were all treated to several small glasses of the strong liquor. The family told me, furthermore, that they purchase the whiskey in secret so as to not let the other Catholic villagers know.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Catholic Akha in *Arbawr* village have developed a new set of religious beliefs and ritual practices according to the Catholic tradition. They have formed their own Catholic community with a particular set of beliefs and practices. Through this process, the Catholic tradition has become an integral part of their new Akha identity. In the following section, I discuss Catholic's perceptions of *Aqkaqzanr* and how these perceptions relate to their new sense of Akha identity.

5.2.2 Catholic Views of *Aqkaqzanr* and their Akha Identity

In their views of *Aqkaqzanr*, Catholic villagers, like Protestants, have been greatly influenced by the ideas of early Western missionaries. Throughout my research I interacted with many Catholic villagers who spoke of *Aqkaqzanr* with a great deal of disdain. For example, on one Sunday afternoon I visit the Catholic

family referred to above and end up staying for much of the remainder of the day chatting with the mother, father and daughter.

Each time that I visit the family the mother talks for many hours about her life experiences in general and Catholic beliefs in particular in relation to both her earlier days in Myanmar and more recent days in Thailand. At various points in our conversations we would touch upon issues relating to *Aqkaqzanr*. On one particular afternoon she tells me her family history. I am surprised to learn that her now deceased mother had at one point in the past shown signs of becoming a *Nyirpaq* in the tradition of *Aqkaqzanr*. She tells me:

“I was born into a Catholic family in Kengtung, Myanmar and am now the third generation to follow the Catholic tradition. I grew up in the Catholic tradition and so I don’t have any experience with *Aqkaqzanr*. I do not feel *Aqkaqzanr* to be my religion in any way. Rather, Catholicism is my true religion. Besides, there are many bad things about *Aqkaqzanr*. It is too heavy, difficult, and complex to carry. It involves worshipping evil spirits.....

.....You know, when my mother was young she began to show signs of being a *Nyirpaq*. According to *Aqkaqzanr* we were supposed to hold a ritual for her so that she could fully become a *Nyirpaq*. However, my family could not afford the expenses for the ritual. At the same time, we did not want my mother to become a *Nyirpaq*. We are Catholics and want nothing to do with *Aqkaqzanr*. We did not want to maintain any kind of relations with the evil spirits. And so we never carried out the ritual. As a result, my mother was often sick. Our family prayed to the Mother Mary to heal and protect her and her health slowly improved. By the time of her passing, my mother was freed from the evil spirits that had inflicted her for so long. She passed away peacefully and is now in heaven with the Mother Mary” (personal communication, January 20, 2012).

She continues to tell me that her own health is often poor and that she often gets quite sick. She notes that she believes that she is facing a similar situation as her mother before her. In order to deal with her recurrent illnesses she fervently prays to the Mother Mary to help and protect from being inflicted by the evil spirits. She notes that she has been very near death on several occasions and that each time Mother Mary comes to visit her. Shortly after each of these visits she recovers from her illness.

In contrast, 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*. It is generally believed among Neo-Traditionalists that only special individuals are chosen by *Aqpoeq Miqyear* or the ‘Supreme Creator’ to become *Nyirpaq*. It is something that an individual cannot choose but that rather chooses an individual.

As noted in chapter three, *Nyirpaq* are endowed with the ability to travel to the unseen world of the spirits (including both ancestral spirits as well as benevolent and malevolent spirits) in order to find the causes of illness and misfortune among the living and negotiate for the health and well-being of the afflicted. *Nyirpaq* are highly respected by Neo-Traditionalists. In the Catholic as well as Protestant contexts, however, if an individual begins to show signs of being a *Nyirpaq*, it is seen very negatively as a sign of being afflicted by ‘evil spirits’ or ‘the devil’. Ironically, however, as noted in chapter three, many Catholic and Protestant villagers continue to ‘secretly’ seek out the services of *Nyirpaq* when necessary while publicly claiming their disdain for *Aqkaqzanr*.

While visiting the household of the woman quoted above, many of their Catholic neighbors would stop in to visit. As a result, I had an opportunity to learn their views of *Aqkaqzanr* as well. In general, they told me that those who carry *Aqkaqzanr* worship ‘evil spirits’. They noted that in the past when they carried *Aqkaqzanr* they and/or their family members were constantly being inflicted by ‘evil spirits’ and were required to make costly animal offerings in order to stop the infliction. They added that this requirement created many economic problems for their household. They stressed, furthermore, that they lived in constant fear of the ‘evil spirits’. Following their conversion to Catholicism, however, they stress that they no longer live in fear as they are now under the protection of Mother Mary.

More generally speaking, Catholics tend to believe that their religion is both the best as well as oldest religion in the world with very ancient roots in Italy. For example, on one occasion the same Catholic woman quoted above tells me:

“There were no other religions before Catholicism. Catholicism first appeared long ago in Italy, the most powerful country in the world. All of the other religions in the world today have separated from their early roots in Catholicism (personal communication, November 28, 2011)”.

Interestingly, on one occasion as we were discussing the different annual rituals that take place according to *Aqkaqzanr* and Catholicism, the same woman commented that many of the rituals in both traditions take place during the same time of year and share similar kinds of meanings. She explained this correspondence by noting that *Aqkaqzanr*, like all other religions, has its early roots in Catholicism. This led me to consider the irony that if *Aqkaqzanr* did indeed have its roots in Catholicism then surely Catholicism was just as much about the worship of ‘evil spirits’ as *Aqkaqzanr*.

Catholics, not unlike most Christian Akha today, furthermore, tend to see a separation between religion and culture. For example, when the woman quoted above made a note on the similarities between some of the annual rituals of *Aqkaqzanr* and Catholicism, she later clarified that these similarities exist only in terms of their cultural and not religious aspects. Catholic villagers, not unlike Protestants, tend to view religion as both separate from culture as well as replaceable with another religious system. They feel that they are still Akha and continue to carry Akha culture, but not *Aqkaqzanr* interpreted as traditional Akha ‘religion’ and not culture.

5.2.3 Catholic Beliefs and Ritual Practices

As in the case of Protestants, early foreign Catholic missionaries encouraged their converts to more or less replace their traditional beliefs and ritual practices with those of Catholicism. They encouraged their converts, “to retain their culture by keeping their language and their traditional clothes” (Kammerer 1998:268-273). Early Catholic missionaries forbid their converts from either practicing or participating in their earlier ritual life, which was to be considered part of their “backward” and primitive” past under the “servitude of the devil”. It was further stressed that their past traditions were a heavy economic burden that could not be sustained. As a result of these early influences, converts made little or not attempt to incorporate their traditional cultural patterns into their new religious life.

In contrast to Protestant missionaries, however, Catholic missionaries permitted a greater degree of syncretism between certain “cultural” aspects of

Aqkaqzanr and Catholicism.¹⁰ For example, Catholic Akha have long been building the traditionalist *Lavqceq* or swing and largely hold the same ideas for doing so as Neo-Traditionalists. As in the case of Protestants, they consider the swing in of itself to be an important part of Akha culture and not religion – and yet they have similarly given the swing a new religious meaning within the Catholic context. They stress that when they build the swing they do so minus the traditional rituals normally associated with doing so. Catholics add, furthermore, that prior to building the swing they pray to Mother Mary, for whom the swing is ultimately offered in honor of.

In the Neo-Traditionalist context, the swing ceremony is considered to be held in honor of women. During the ceremony, Neo-traditionalists make offerings to their ancestors in order to ask for blessings in the form of a bountiful rice crop, prosperity, and good health. Interestingly, the social functions of the swing ceremony in the new Catholic context are more or less similar to those in the older Neo-Traditionalist context. For example, Catholic villagers told me that their celebration of the swing ceremony is held in honor of women. They told me that they built the swing in honor of Mother Mary who is a larger symbol for all mothers and women in general. In addition, the Catholic swing ceremony is held each year on a fixed date, namely August 15th, which is the day on which all Catholics in the world observe the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. They told me that the swing ceremony is also a time for young Catholics to pay respects to their elders, particularly their female elders, by way of presenting them with gifts.

In addition to the swing ceremony, Catholic villagers celebrate a number of additional rituals with interesting parallels to those observed by Neo-Traditionalists. For example, the Catholic celebration of Easter occurs around the same time as the Neo-Traditionalist celebration of *Khmqxeevq khmqmir Aqpoeq Lawr-e* or the ‘Minor New Year Ancestral Offering’. During the latter ceremony, Neo-Traditionalists prepare red-dyed hardboiled eggs, which are offered to guests that visit their homes. Young children in particular will go from one relative’s home to another asking for these eggs, which they collect in a small bamboo basket.

¹⁰ Kammerer remarks that, “unlike Protestants, Akha Catholics were not required to discard all their traditional ritual practices” (1990:335).

The children also play games with the eggs, competing with their friends in hitting their eggs together to see whose egg breaks first, and of course eventually eat the eggs that they collect. This tradition of making red-dyed hardboiled eggs, and the games played by children can be observed in the Catholic observance of Easter. In contrast, however, the Catholic celebration of Easter is held in honor of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, while the Neo-Traditionalist *Khmqxeevq khmqmir Aqpoeq Lawr-e* is held in honor of the ancestors and involves the making of an ancestral offering by each household.

Another ceremony with interesting parallels between Catholics and Neo-Traditionalists is that of Thanksgiving. The Catholic celebration of Thanksgiving takes place around the same time as the Neo-Traditionalist celebration of *Caerxeevqdzaq* or the ‘New Rice Ceremony’. In the ‘New Rice Ceremony’, Neo-traditionalists make offerings to their ancestors to show their gratitude for the blessings they bestowed on them during the recent harvest season. They also do this in order to inform their ancestors of the abundance of the harvest.

Catholics in turn have adopted the older term, *Caerxeevqdzaq*, to refer to their new Catholic celebration of the harvest (Thanksgiving). In their celebration, however, the ‘New Rice Ceremony’ has acquired a new meaning within the Catholic context. For example, Catholics show their gratitude not to their ancestors but rather to Mother Mary, Jesus, and God the Father, for the blessings they bestowed on them during the recent harvest season. Therefore, from their perspective, their particular celebration of Thanksgiving has nothing to do with the Neo-Traditionalist celebration of the ‘New Rice Ceremony’.

In addition, on one occasion, I am invited by a middle-aged Catholic woman to join her as she goes to her fields to collect vegetables and check on her rice crop. On the way to the village, I notice that she has a white string tied around the upper part of her lower left leg. Surprised to see the string, I ask her if this sort of thing is not in violation of her Catholic faith. She replies:

“Oh, no, this does not violate my Catholic faith. Actually, the string was placed around my leg by an elderly Catholic woman as she prayed that my leg, which is often sore, would be healed through the intervention of the Mother Mary. It has nothing to do with *Aqkaqzanr*. Rather it is part of our *Kovqdawqzanr* (Catholicism)” (personal communication, November 20, 2011).

In conclusion, Catholic villagers have developed a new community, religious identity, and overall way of life that differs in significant ways from that of Neo-Traditionalists. The elements of *Aqkaqzanr*, furthermore, that can be identified in the beliefs and rituals of Catholics no longer serve the same social functions and have acquired different meanings in relation to the Catholic tradition. In the context of their new Catholic faith, Catholic villagers identify themselves first and foremost as *Kovqdawqzaq* or Catholics, separate and apart from *Lawrcivqqzaq*, a derogatory term used to refer to those who (continue to) carry *Aqkaqzanr*.

At the same time, the elements of Akha identity that Christians more generally identify as representing the core of their Akha identity, particularly language and dress, have similarly been modified within their new religious tradition. Many new Christian words have been adapted into their Akha language, the meanings of old words have been transformed, and a new style of singing has largely been adopted from Western style church music. The Christian symbol of the cross is also used widely as a pattern in their dress. Therefore, generally speaking, Akha Christians, inclusive of both Catholics and Protestants, no longer practice any elements of *Aqkaqzanr*.

5.3 Buddhist Villagers

5.3.1 Buddhist and Their New Religion

Conversion to Buddhism is a relatively new phenomenon among Akha in north Thailand and even newer to *Arbawr* village. It is only within the past three years or so that the first Buddhist funerary rite involving cremation was carried out on behalf of a young Akha woman from the village. Neo-Traditionalists, like Christians, bury their dead in their respective communal cemeteries and would never consider burning the bodies of their deceased relatives.

There are currently 20 Buddhist Akha households in *Arbawr* village. While there is no formal Buddhist temple in the village, there is a Buddhist park, shrine, and small monk's residence located in the forested area above the village and government agricultural research station. Two to three monks, all of Thai ethnicity, reside in the village at various points throughout the year.

The Akha term for Buddhism is *Parxeerzanr*. The Akha Buddhists refer to these monks as *Aqbawr Parxeer* or ‘Grandfather Buddhist’. Villagers that convert to Buddhism generally replace their former ancestral altars with a statue of the Buddha and accordingly no longer perform any of the ancestral rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr*. This is not to say, however, that they no longer participate in any rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Rather, as I further note below, Buddhist villagers continue to practice certain elements of *Aqkaqzanr* alongside of their new Buddhist practices depending upon their particular needs at the moment.

In terms of communal level rites, Buddhists tend to participate in the various national-level Buddhist celebrations held throughout the rest of Thailand such as *Makha Bucha*, *Songkran*, the Buddhist Lent, and *Loi krathong*. Unlike many other Buddhists, however, the Akha Buddhists of *Arbawr* village only give alms to their very small number of residents on special occasions such as the communal level celebrations noted above. On each of these special occasions several of the Thai Buddhist officials that work at the government agricultural research station make arrangements for a merit making ceremony to be held in a large room in one of offices associated with the station.

The Akha Buddhists participate in these ceremonies in order to gain merit for their overall prosperity and well being. In the Buddhist context of *Arbawr* village, furthermore, merit making ceremonies also provide an opportunity for Buddhists to pay respects to their deceased ancestors, albeit by way of the monks rather than their former household ancestral altar. It is in the latter respect that a fundamental similarity exists between *Aqkaqzanr* and localized practices of Buddhism. Indeed, this similarity is noted by Akha Buddhists as the main reason behind their decision to convert to Buddhism as opposed to Christianity.

The Buddhist monks that are resident in *Arbawr* village, furthermore, differ from their Protestant and Catholic counterparts in that they do not forbid their followers from either carrying out or participating in various rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr*. The senior monk in the village informed me:

“I have no interest in trying to control the lives of the Buddhist villagers. Rather, I want them to be free to make their own decisions and to be comfortable. It is not for me to tell them what is right or wrong. They can surely do this for themselves. I only ask for two things. First, I ask that they

take down their traditional ancestral altar. Second, I inform them that if they decide to make a sacrificial offering as part of some ritual, which is against the fundamental precepts of Buddhism, then I ask them not to tell me about it and to do so in my absence (personal communication, October 12, 2011)”.

As a result of the leniency permitted by the monks, many of the Akha Buddhists tend to practice *Aqkaqzanr* and Buddhism interchangeably.

Moreover, Akha Buddhists generally feel that there are more similarities between *Aqkaqzanr* and Buddhism than between *Aqkaqzanr* and either Protestantism or Catholicism. This view seems to be one of the reasons behind their decision to convert to Buddhism. Buddhists tend, furthermore, to retain some aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* in terms of their religious beliefs and practices. Most significantly, their new Buddhist practices, particularly merit making ceremonies, allow for them to continue both paying respects to their ancestors as well as asking for blessings from their ancestors, albeit by way of monks rather than their former household ancestral altars. At the same time, many Buddhist villagers informed me that depending upon their particular situation and needs they practice *Aqkaqzanr* interchangeably with Buddhism. For example, many Buddhists continue to seek out the services of various traditional ritual specialists such as *Pirma*, *Nyirpaq*, and Traditional Medicine Specialists.

As noted earlier, furthermore, in strong contrast to Christians, Buddhists are free to fully participate in the rituals of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and friends. Both the middle path approach of Buddhism as well as the tendency for monks to not outright forbid any particular practice seems to explain the flexibility with which Buddhist villagers mix their Buddhist and traditionalist beliefs and practices. At the same time, however, Akha Buddhists, not unlike Christians, tend not to participate in the various communal level rites being observed by Neo-Traditionalists throughout the year. Buddhists also do not observe any of the Neo-Traditionalist rituals that are carried out in conjunction with the cultivation of rice.

5.3.2 Buddhist Views of *Aqkaqzanr* and Their Akha Identity

In general, Buddhists informed me that they decided to abandon *Aqkaqzanr* because it was both too complicated to carry and also a heavy economic burden. In sharp contrast to Protestants and Catholics, furthermore, none of the Buddhists that I

talked with ever referred to *Aqkaqzanr* as a “backwards” or “primitive” form of “demon worship”. On one occasion an elderly woman who converted to Buddhism three years ago following the death of her husband tells me:

“If we were still able to, I would prefer to carry *Aqkaqzanr* as it has been handed down to us by our ancestors. However, following my husband’s death it became increasingly difficult for us to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr* and so we decided to become Buddhists. When my husband was still alive we carried *Aqkaqzanr*. And when he passed away three years ago we held a traditional funeral rite for him during which we offered three buffaloes. I was very happy that we were able to hold that rite for him and I believe that he is now living happily in the land of the ancestors” (personal communication, November 15, 2011).¹¹

Following the death of her husband the elderly woman’s family was faced with a decision to convert to either Christianity or Buddhism as her son lacked the knowledge required to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr* for their household. Traditionally, males are the ones who are responsible for making their household’s ancestral offerings. Women, of course, play a fundamental role in preparing the offerings and often instructing their husbands in carrying out the offering. Ultimately, however, only males are able to place the offerings on the ancestral altar. There is, however, a special category of post-menopausal women that have undergone an initiation rite whereby they become ‘white-skirted women’ that are able to carry out these offerings (see Kammerer 1986).

At the same time, *Aqkaqzanr* had become too much of an economic burden for the woman’s household. In the end, however, they decided to convert to Buddhism rather than Christianity as they feel that Buddhism is both more similar to *Aqkaqzanr* and also permits them more flexibility in their religious beliefs and practices. During

¹¹ I first meet this elderly woman one evening as I am searching for a Neo-Traditionalist household where a healing ceremony is being conducted by a *Nyirpaq* or Shaman. At the time, I am unsure of where the ceremony is taking place and stop to ask a group of women who are sitting and chatting on the porch of a house located along the way. They tell me that the ceremony is going to be held the following night and that I should return then. Meanwhile, they invite me to join them sitting and chatting. Through our extended conversations I learn that the eldest woman is Buddhist while another two women are Neo-Traditionalists. The Buddhist woman further notes that she will also join the healing ceremony the following night. I am surprised to hear this and ask, “Given that you are a Buddhist it is alright for you to join the ceremony?” In reply she laughs and comments, “We (Parxeerzaq or Buddhists) are not like the Kaqliqzaq (Protestants) and Kovqdawvqzaq (Catholics) who refuse to join other rituals. Rather, we are able to join any rituals or ceremonies as we see fit” (personal communication, November 15, 2011). She then continues to share her family’s story with me, including her comments on why they initially decided to become Buddhists as noted above.

our exchanges, furthermore, this particular elder never once used the derogatory term *Lawrcivqqzanr* to refer to *Aqkaqzanr* as in the case of most Protestants and Catholics. Rather she used the term *Aqkaqzanr*.

In general, Buddhists differ from Protestants and Catholics in their tendency to not look down upon *Aqkaqzanr* as a “backwards” form of “demon worship”. Buddhist villagers further differ from Christians more generally in tending not to identify either their language or traditional dress as a fundamental part of their Akha identity. They just state that they are still Akha with carrying out *Parxeerzanr*/Buddhism, and at the same time to practice many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr*. Many Buddhist villagers still maintain many of their traditional practices as a result of the fact that many elements of *Aqkaqzanr* are compatible with their new Buddhist belief system. In sum, Buddhists, like Protestants and Catholics, have created a new religious identity for themselves. The new religious identity of Buddhists, however, differs less from that of Neo-Traditionalists when compared to both Protestants and Catholics. This is due to the fact that the new religious identity of Buddhists represents the blending together of certain elements of *Aqkaqzanr* and Buddhism.

5.3.3 Buddhist Beliefs and Ritual Practices

As noted above, Akha Buddhists generally feel that there are more similarities between *Aqkaqzanr* and Buddhism than *Aqkaqzanr* and Christianity. As a result, Buddhists have retained more elements of *Aqkaqzanr* in their everyday lives than either Protestants or Catholics. At the same time, they have adopted a number of new ritual practices according to the Thai Buddhist tradition, including *Makha Bucha*, *Songkran*, the Buddhist Lent, and *Loi krathong*.

Buddhist households have nonetheless abandoned their ancestral altars and no longer make ancestral offerings according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Indeed, it is only by way of the traditional ancestral altar located in the woman’s side of the house that such offerings can be made. At the same time, however, Buddhists stress that in their new tradition they are able to continue paying respects to their ancestors, albeit by way of Buddhist monks. Moreover, as mentioned above, Buddhists no longer take part in the traditional communal-based rituals and festivals organized by Neo-Traditionalists. They also no longer carry out any of the traditionalist rituals relating to the cultivation

of rice. Nonetheless, Buddhists have no qualms in partaking of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives' offerings made in honor of the ancestors as well as participating in Neo-Traditionalist healing ceremonies.

While in *Arbawr* village I participated in several Neo-Traditionalist households' ceremonies held in honor of their elders. One household held the ceremony in honor of their senior most male elder who had been ill for more than a week already. During the ceremony I noticed the presence of his Buddhist daughter who happily participated in the ceremony by offering certain kinds of food and drink to her father and tying a black colored string around his wrist while offering him blessings for good health and a long life. On each of the other occasions I observed that Buddhist relatives were similarly happy to participate in the Neo-Traditionalist healing rites of their elders. In contrast, I have both directly observed as well as heard of numerous cases of Protestant and Catholic villagers refusing to participate in these aspects of their elder's healing rituals as carried out according to *Aqkaqzanr*.

In addition, as noted earlier, Buddhists tend to mix certain elements of *Aqkaqzanr* together with their Buddhist practices depending on their particular situation and needs. For example, I once met an Akha Buddhist from another village that had come to *Arbawr* village to participate in the wedding ceremony of his Neo-Traditionalist relative. He informs me that he can only stay for the first two days of the ceremony as he has to return to his village in order to help with the preparations for a healing ceremony carried out by a *Nyirpaq* on behalf of his mother. He further notes that the majority of his fellow villagers are Buddhist and that they generally never refuse to participate in rituals carried out according to *Aqkaqzanr*. He notes that they continue to partake of the food offerings made to the ancestors by their Neo-Traditionalists relatives and friends as well as participate in the latter's healing rites. He adds that the monks in his community have never forbid them from continuing to engage in their ritual practices. Finally, he notes that they were asked to remove their traditional ancestral altars from their households as part of becoming Buddhists.

In summary, while Buddhists have abandoned their ancestral altars and no longer observe many of the fundamental rituals of *Aqkaqzanr*, they nevertheless continue to practice as well as participate in many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* as carried out by their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and friends. Buddhist villagers further tend to

practice certain aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* interchangeably with Buddhism according to their particular situations and needs. Ultimately, however, Buddhists identify themselves as *Parxeerzaq* or ‘Buddhists’, thereby reflecting the fact that their new Buddhist tradition has become an integral part of their Akha identity.

5.4 Summary

Protestant villagers have largely abandoned their traditional Akha belief system. They no longer observe any of the rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr*, including the annual round of twelve ancestral services, rituals relating to the cultivation of rice, as well as various communal level rites relating to the village gate, swing, sacred spring, the ‘Lord of the Water and Land’ and so forth. Protestant leaders or *Saqlaq*, furthermore, forbid their followers from either seeking out the help of various Neo-Traditionalist ritual specialists or participating in the rituals of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and neighbors.

Protestants have essentially adopted a new set of religious beliefs and practices that they identify as *Kalizanr* or ‘Protestantism’ in contrast to *Aqkaqzanr* or ‘traditional Akha culture’. In the context of their new tradition, they have created a new identity for themselves. They identify as *Kalizaq* or ‘Protestants’. Their new ritual life primarily takes place in the context of a new ritual space referred to as the *Uqduqtanq-e nymr* or ‘church’ (literally translates as ‘the building for bowing one’s head’). A new ritual leader/specialist, the *Saqlaq*, leads them at the church in carrying out their ritual practices and other related activities.

In terms of their religious practices, Protestants primarily attend church each Sunday during which they read and listen to words from the *Javrli* or Bible as part of their worship of Jesus and God. They have created many new Akha words, songs, and clothing patterns, which reflect their new Protestant identity. Protestants, furthermore, no longer depend upon either their former ritual spaces or ritual specialists according to *Aqkaqzanr*. All of these aspects of their former identity have been replaced in the form of their new ‘Protestant’ identity and related practices.

As noted earlier, Protestants have been greatly influenced by the earlier views of foreign Christian missionaries in their tendency to view *Aqkaqzanr* as a “backwards” and “primitive” form of “demon worship” that is both difficult to carry

and also poses a heavy economic burden on its followers. Protestants claim, furthermore, that their *Kalizanr* or 'Protestantism' is the greatest and most righteous 'religion' in the world. They consider themselves to be more educated, "modern", and "civilized" than Akha that continue to practice *Aqkaqzanr*.

In a similar fashion, Catholic villagers no longer observe any of the rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr*, including the annual round of twelve ancestral services, rituals relating to the cultivation of rice, as well as various communal level rites relating to the village gate, swing, sacred spring, the 'Lord of the Water and Land' and so forth. Catholics have developed a new set of religious beliefs and practices according to their new Catholic tradition. They observe a much greater number of holy days throughout the year in addition to regular Sunday church services and those observed by Protestants. These holy days include a feast for Mary, the Mother of God, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, Divine Mercy Sunday, The Feast of the Ascension, Pentecost Sunday, Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christi, The Assumption of Mary, All Saints Day, the First Sunday of Advent, the Immaculate Conception, 'Thanksgiving', and Christmas.

Catholics identify themselves as *Kovqdawzaq* or 'Catholics' and their new tradition as *Kovqdawzanr* or 'Catholicism', in contrast to *Aqkaqzanr*. Catholics, furthermore, go beyond Protestants in not only claiming that their tradition is the best and most righteous tradition, but also the oldest religion in the world originating in the most powerful country of Italy. In their new faith, Catholics worship the Mother Mary in addition to Jesus, her Son, and God the Father. In contrast to Protestants, Catholics hold the Mother Mary in equal if not higher regard than Jesus, her son. Catholics stress that without the mother there would be no son. Catholics in turn have difficulty understanding the lack of veneration that Protestants show towards the Mother Mary, for whom they often turn in times of need.

Like Kalizaq, furthermore, *Kovqdawzaq* no longer depend upon either their former ritual spaces or ritual specialists according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Rather, they have created a new ritual space referred to as the *Uqduqtanq-e nymr* or 'Church'. Their new ritual specialists include *Aqda* or *Aqbawr Kovqdawq* ('Father or Grandfather Catholic'; i.e. 'priest'), or *Saqdaq*. Their *Saqdaq* leads them in their ritual practices each Sunday and during each of the numerous additional holy days that they observe.

Readings from the *Javrli* or 'Bible' play an important part of their ritual life. Catholics also sing numerous Catholic songs in Akha language during their ritual services in praise of the Mother Mary, her Son, Jesus, and God the Father.

In sum, Catholic and Protestant villagers tend to see *Aqkaqzanr* or their former identity prior to conversion as a "primitive" and "backwards" form of "demon worship". They further identify *Aqkaqzanr* as "religion" rather than "culture", paralleling the earlier as well as current views of various foreign and now Akha Christian missionaries. In support of this view, Christian Akha generally argue that "religion" is only one part of their greater Akha identity that can be replaced without changing their "culture". Christian Akha identify "culture" largely in the form of language and dress. Along these lines they hold that they are Akha by virtue of continuing to speak Akha language and wearing Akha dress. A few Christians, however, go further and argue that they are Akha by virtue of the Akha blood that they carry in their bodies, noting that this is something that can never be diminished.

As noted earlier, however, in actuality the language and dress of Christian Akha has been transformed and adapted to their new Christian identity. Many new Christian words have been adapted into their Akha language and a new style of singing has been adopted from Western style church music. The meanings of numerous older Akha terms have also been modified to better fit their new Christian beliefs and doctrine. Moreover, Christian Akha songs have changed in their orientation to Mary, Jesus, and/or God rather than the ancestors. The Christian symbol of the cross is used widely as a pattern on Christian Akha dress.

More broadly speaking, the few elements of *Aqkaqzanr* that continue to be found in the religious practices of either Catholic or Protestant Akha no longer serve the same social functions and have acquired different meanings according to Christianity. In reference to the Karen, another minority group in north Thailand, Chumpol argues that while those, "who converted to Christianity are still Karen, they are Christian Karen. They create a new identity as Christian Karen (1993:5)". Akha converts to various denominations of Christianity have similarly created new identities as Catholic or Protestant Akha, separate and apart from Akha that continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr*.

Buddhist villagers in turn similarly no longer observe the annual round of ancestral services, communal level rituals, and rice cultivation related rites proscribed according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Buddhists have replaced their traditional ancestral altars with a statue of the Buddha. At the same time, however, Buddhists differ from Catholic and Protestant villagers in their tendency not to look down upon *Aqkaqzanr*. In further contrast to Christian converts, Buddhists generally attribute their initial decision to convert to Buddhism to the heavy economic burden as well as complicated nature of *Aqkaqzanr*. As noted earlier, Christian converts tend to attribute their decision to abandon *Aqkaqzanr* to what they identify as its association with the “devil” and “constant fear” in addition to being a heavy economic burden.

Buddhist monks, furthermore, do not forbid Buddhist Akha from practicing *Aqkaqzanr*, with the exception of requesting that they remove their ancestral altar from their household. As a result Akha Buddhists remain more open to *Aqkaqzanr* and often seek out assistance from various traditional ritual specialists such as *Pirma* and *Nyirpaq*. In strong contrast to Christians, furthermore, Buddhists are free to fully participate in the rituals of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and friends. The middle path approach of Buddhism as well as the tendency for Buddhist monks to not outright forbid this or that practice seems to explain the flexibility with which Buddhist villagers mix their Buddhist and Neo-Traditionalist beliefs and rituals. Most importantly, Buddhists stress that in their new tradition they are able to continue paying respects to their ancestors, albeit by way of Buddhist monks.

In conclusion, while Buddhists have abandoned their ancestral altars and no longer observe many of the fundamental rituals of *Aqkaqzanr*, they nevertheless continue to practice as well as participate in many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* as carried out by their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and friends. Buddhist villagers tend to practice certain aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* interchangeably with Buddhism according to their particular situations and needs. Ultimately, however, Buddhists identify themselves as *Parxeerzaq* or ‘Buddhists’, thereby reflecting the fact that their new Buddhist tradition has become an integral part of their Akha identity.