

CHAPTER 6

TENSIONS AND DIVISIONS AMONG VILLAGERS FROM DIFFERENT “ZANR”

As discussed in chapter five, Akha Protestants and Catholics in *Arbawr* village tend to look down upon *Aqkaqzanr* or ‘traditional Akha culture’ as a “backwards” and “primitive” form of “demon worship” with a heavy economic burden. Their views of *Aqkaqzanr* generate numerous divisions and conflicts within the community. Akha Protestants and Catholics tend to divide Akha identity into different parts such as ‘religion’ and ‘culture’. They hold that *zanr* is ‘religion’ as separate and apart from ‘culture’, and can accordingly be replaced without changing their Akha identity. At the same time, however, Neo-Traditionalist villagers argue that to be Akha means to carry *Aqkaqzanr* or ‘traditional Akha culture’ as fundamentally rooted in ancestral services. As a result, Neo-Traditionalists hold that individuals that convert to the ‘religions’ of others simultaneously adopt the ethnic identity of those others and are in effect no longer Akha.

Numerous social problems arise within *Arbawr* village as a result of a rising number of conversions to the *zanr* of others, particularly various denominations of Christianity. Communal divisions develop within the village along the lines of individual’s *zanr*. Tensions further develop within and between households. For example, Christians and Buddhists no longer take part in the traditional communal-based rituals organized by Neo-Traditionalists. In addition, Christian converts refuse to either partake of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives’ ancestral offerings or participate in their healing ceremonies involving the tying of strings around the ‘patient’s’ wrist. In this chapter, I discuss the various kinds of tensions and divisions that exist between villagers from different “Zanr”. I divide these tensions and divisions into three levels, ranging from the village to clan, and finally household level.

6.1 Divisions and Tensions at the Village Level

6.1.1 Neo-Traditionalists & Christians (Catholics and Protestants)

Protestant and Catholic villagers not only abandoned their traditional practices of *Aqkaqzanr*, but also tend to view the latter as both a heavy economic burden and also “primitive” form of “demon worship”. Moreover, Christians and Neo-Traditionalists have different views of *zanr*. Christians tend to identify *zanr* with ‘religion’, while Neo-Traditionalists see *zanr* as their “ethnic identity”, inclusive of culture and religion. Numerous intra-village divisions and tensions develop among Neo-Traditionalist and Christian villagers on the basis of their *zanr*. For example, Protestant and Catholic villagers no longer participate in the ritual life of the Neo-Traditionalist community. By virtue of their refusal to participate in these communal rituals the traditional social fabric of the village is irreparably ruptured.

Moreover, the Christian church leaders forbid their followers from participating in any rituals carried out according to *Aqkaqzanr*. In spite of these prohibitions, however, some Protestant and Catholic villagers continue to seek help as needed from Nyirpa or Shamans and Traditional Herbal Medicine Practitioners. On one occasion as the senior Traditional Herbal Medicine Practitioner is treating a young Neo-Traditionalist man who badly injured his back after falling from a tree, he tells me:

“Even though I know that many of the Christians look down upon *Aqkaqzanr*, I still treat them if they come to me for help. I am unhappy with their views and yet I cannot turn them away when they ask for help. At the same time, I inform them that if they want me to help them, then it must be done according to *Aqkaqzanr* – meaning that once they recover from their ailment they must carry out a small ceremony involving the tying of strings around my wrist in order to honor me and my ‘medicine owner-spirit’. In the past, many of the Christians would refuse to do this. More recently, however, I told them that if they want to receive my treatment then everything must be done according to *Aqkaqzanr*. And if they refuse to follow these rules then I refuse to treat them” (personal communication, November 7, 2011).¹

¹ The injured man is the brother-in-law of the former village headman, whose home I generally stayed in throughout my time in *Arbawr* village. As the traditional medicine practitioner is treating the young man I am sitting across the way in a small, thatched pavilion-style hut along with some elders. Following his treatment the medicine practitioner joins us in the pavilion. As usual, when the elders gather together their conversation generally touches upon issues relating to *Aqkaqzanr* at some point or another. At the moment they are talking about the “power” and efficacy of *Aqkaqzanr*. Several elders comment on the medicine practitioner’s ability to heal broken bones in a much more effective and resilient manner than the lowland Thai doctors. They continue to note that while many Akha

Neo-Traditionalists find it difficult to understand Christians who tend to look down on *Aqkaqzanr* on the one hand while occasionally seeking help from traditionalist ritual specialists on the other. Neo-Traditionalists also have trouble reconciling Christians' decision to abandon *Aqkaqzanr* while retaining certain practices according to *Aqkaqzanr* such as the annual rebuilding of the village swing, albeit minus the necessary rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Neo-Traditionalists tend to see Christians as hypocrites whose beliefs often contradict their practices, particularly when it comes to *Aqkaqzanr*.

Neo-Traditionalists hold that everyone should practice their own particular set of traditions according to their *zanr*, and should not mix together the practices from more than one *zanr*. Throughout my time in *Arbawr* village many Neo-Traditionalists inform me, "We carry our *Aqkaqzanr*, and only our *Aqkaqzanr*. We do not mix our *zanr* with the *zanr* of others. It is not right to mix *zanr*. Doing so can have bad consequences." At the same time, Neo-Traditionalists inform me that while many Akha have converted to the *Zanr* of others, they nevertheless continue to depend upon traditionalist ritual specialists in order to address many of their problems and illnesses. Neo-Traditionalists further stress that they themselves can get by just fine without having to rely upon the help or advice of either Christian or Buddhist ritual specialists.

Further *zanr*-related communal divisions can be seen in the fact that Christians, unlike non-Christians, are able to take advantage of a number of benefits on the basis of their membership in particular church-based organizations. For example, Christians can receive discounts for medical care in certain hospitals affiliated with their church organization. They can also receive financial assistance to educate their children the generally better schools located in the lowlands. In addition, some missionary groups, particularly Catholics, help their converts to obtain land and legal citizenship – two very prominent areas where Akha in Thailand have experienced great difficulties. For example, a middle-aged Catholic woman from *Arbawr* village tells me that:

Christians look down on *Aqkaqzanr*, they seem unable to get by without having to ask for help from traditional ritual specialists from time to time. It is at this point in our exchanges that the medicine practitioner shares his thoughts as quoted above.

“If it weren’t for the *Aqda Kovqdawq* (Catholic Priest) we would have nothing. He gave us the land on which we built this house in advance and then slowly let us pay the money back little by little. The lawyer in the Catholic center also helped us to process our citizenship applications. I have no relatives here to depend on, and so without the help of the *Aqda Kovqdawq* I don’t know how we would have been able to survive after coming from Myanmar where we experienced many hardships” (personal communication, November 20, 2011).

Later, I learned that all three of the woman’s children have received educational scholarships from Catholic centers located in Maesuai and Chiangmai. Two of her children, furthermore, were able to find full-time work in Catholic centers following their graduation from secondary school. It is clear from these examples that some Christians, by virtue of membership in particular church-based organizations, have certain opportunities relating to healthcare, education, land, citizenship, and employment that are closed to non-Christians.

Further tensions develop in connection with the two year project documenting traditional Akha culture as described in chapter four. As noted earlier, in September of 2010 a group of Neo-Traditionalist Akha working under the Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability or MAPS begin a two year project documenting *Aqkaqzanr* in *Arbawr* village. Funding for the project comes from the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. The project is a collaborative project between the Akha staff of MAPS and a large group of Neo-Traditionalist villagers in *Arbawr* village.

The primary goal of the project is to document the Neo-Traditionalists’ full round of annual rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr* in written, audio and video form. Another goal of the project is to document and preserve the ancestral genealogies of all of the villagers in *Arbawr* village, regardless of their particular *zanr*. The documentation group uses a recently unified international Akha writing system in their documentation efforts, making it a project truly ‘by and for Akha’.

At the same time, however, none of the Protestant and Catholic villagers choose to participate in the ritual documentation project, and most of them further refuse to be involved in the side project to record each household’s ancestral genealogy. In general, the Protestant and Catholic villagers feel that they have no need to record their ancestral genealogies as they no longer have any use for them, particularly in the context of their new religion. Nevertheless, many of the Protestant

and Catholic villagers complain that the funding for the project has been applied for in the name of the entire village and yet the Neo-Traditionalist villagers receive all of the benefits.

Many of the Neo-Traditionalists are unhappy to hear of these complaints from their fellow Protestant and Catholic villagers. The following comments of one Neo-Traditionalist villager represent the views of Neo-Traditionalists more generally:

“We do not understand how they could make such statements. At the beginning of the project we stated that we were happy to have everyone participate in the project, regardless of their *zanr*. We also made it clear that the project was to document our traditional rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr* and that this would be beneficial to all Akha. In the end, however, none of them joined the project. Moreover, all of the funding that we received was used to document *Aqkaqzanr*. None of the funding went into the pockets of any villagers” (personal communication, November 21, 2011).

Neo-Traditionalists further note that the Protestant and Catholic villagers have received and continue to receive a great deal of support from different foreign missionary organizations. None of these funds, they argue, have been used to support our *Aqkaqzanr* but rather for the benefit of their own church leaders and communities. Many Neo-Traditionalists further note that nearly all of the leading Akha Christian missionaries own luxurious homes and cars.

As might be expected, however, Akha Christian leaders argue that their efforts are being done on behalf of all Akha. Nearly all of them further believe that by becoming Christian they have learned to embrace their Akha identity. It is also through Christianity, furthermore, that they are able to receive an education and rise to a level of leadership within their respective Christian organizations. In short, there is an assumed equation between Christianity, education, modernization/civilization, and the overall development of the Akha people. One leading missionary associated with the Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF) informs me:

“I am very fortunate to have had an opportunity to learn about the love of God and accept Jesus into my heart. It was also through the help of the church and Paul Lewis that I was able to receive an education as a young boy and eventually study all the way to a Ph.D. I am forever indebted to Paul Lewis and think of him like a father. You know, before I became a Christian I was very shy to be Akha. I tried to hide the fact that I was Akha. After becoming Christian, however, and realized that God also loves the Akha I changed. I began to feel proud of being Akha. Moreover, I could have stayed in the US or Bangkok and made more money by teaching after I completed my Ph.D.

However, I chose to return to Thailand and to work for our Akha people. There is much work to be done to improve our condition, particularly in the areas of education so that we can improve our social status” (personal communication, June 21, 2012).

This missionary is the director of one of the largest Christian organizations currently working with Akha not only in North Thailand but also increasingly across the border in Laos and China as well. This organization, the Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF), is based in a large complex of buildings on a large area of land on the outskirts of Chiangrai city in North Thailand. This complex of buildings includes a large school, gymnasium, church, and dormitories where Akha of varying ages reside while either studying at a nearby Thai government school or attending Bible and evangelical training at the center itself.

The AOF, furthermore, has an extensive network of churches and communities located throughout much of North Thailand, including *Arbawr* village where there are two AOF-affiliated churches. It is the graduates of their three year long Bible/evangelical training programs that eventually become the pastors/leaders (*saqlaq*) of these village-based church communities. In addition, as noted earlier, a large number of Akha youth reside at the center while attending nearby government schools in Chiangrai. While staying in the center the children must study Christianity and ultimately live according to the Christian way. Some of the more promising children are chosen to receive additional Bible/evangelical training following their government schooling and eventually find positions as pastors in various village-based AOF affiliated churches. From the missionary point of view, all of the work being done at the center is in the interest of the greater Akha community – both in terms of bringing Akha to Christianity and improving the overall condition of Akha, two goals which are seen as synonymous with each other.

From the perspectives of many Neo-Traditionalists, however, the work of Christian missionaries tends not to help but rather harm Akha society by creating disunity and striving to destroy *Aqkaqzanr*. For example, many Neo-Traditionalists tell me that the missionaries not only teach their followers about Christianity but also about the ‘evils’ of *Aqkaqzanr*. The missionaries label *Aqkaqzanr* as a “backwards” and “primitive” form of “demon worship” that poses a heavy economic burden on its

followers. They accordingly forbid their Christian followers from participating in the rituals and ceremonies of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and friends. As a result, Neo-Traditionalists cannot believe their ears when they hear of Akha missionaries claiming that they are helping their Akha people.

The Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village are generally of the feeling that religious conversion, particularly to Christianity, is the primary cause for all of the communal disunity and conflict they are experiencing at present. One Neo-Traditionalist elder tells me:

“If these Akha missionaries really care for and love our Akha people then they would not be following the example of the numerous foreign missionaries before them in trying to convert out people and destroy our culture. In fact, it is more hurtful as well as difficult to accept the fact that these are Akha people themselves that are trying to convert and destroy their own people” (personal communication, March 15, 2011).

Neo-Traditionalists further note that Akha missionaries tend to focus their conversion efforts more on Akha Neo-Traditionalists than Akha that have converted to other religions such as Buddhism or Islam. They metaphorically refer to missionaries as ‘tigers’, ‘bears’, and ‘wolves’ that are trying to ‘hunt’ and ‘attack’ Neo-Traditionalists and *Aqkaqzanr*. “We must construct a strong and sturdy fence around our communities”, Neo-Traditionalists add, “in order to protect ourselves from these ‘predators’ ”.

From the above descriptions, it is clear that rising rates of religious conversion greatly impact the community of *Arbawr* village. Numerous communal divisions and tensions arise within the village. In spite of residing within the same administrative village, intra-village boundaries develop among Neo-Traditionalists and Christians on the basis of their *zanr*, further understood as ‘religion’ by Christians on the one hand and ‘ethnicity’ by Neo-Traditionalists on the other.

Earlier foreign scholars and missionaries, however, note that in the past converts to the *zanr* of non-Akha ‘others’ were not permitted to continue residing within the village gates (Nightingale 1968:265; Kammerer 1990:282). The same conditions applied to converts in *Arbawr* village until roughly 20 years ago when the members of one of the founding households of the village first begin to convert to Christianity following the lead of their three sons, two of whom eventually become

prominent leaders in the Akha church.² As a result of these initial conversions, the remaining Neo-Traditionalists gradually lose their former ability to enforce the law against converts continuing to reside within the village gates.

One of the Neo-Traditionalist elders who is a ritual specialist currently in his eighties once told me of his disappointment when he learned that the head of the above mentioned household decided to convert to Christianity at the urging of his three Christian sons:

“He, my elder brother, and some other households were the first to come from Myanmar and establish *Arbawr* village. Sometime later we chose him to be the assistant to our village headman who happened to be Lisu at the time. At the time, furthermore, we had agreed that we would all support each other in maintaining our *Aqkaqzanr* and not adopt the *zanr* of others (*‘aqcawq-e zanr’*). In the end, however, he abandoned *Aqkaqzanr* and adopted *Yesu-zanr* (*‘The zanr of Jesus’*)” (personal communication, November 28, 2011).

A number of other households, especially those belonging to the same clan, also converted to Christianity following the lead of the assistant village head as note above. As a result, the formerly Traditionalist village was split between Traditionalists and Christians. At the same time, as a result of the position of the assistant headman who led the conversions, the converts were able to remain living within the boundaries of the Traditionalist village. Many of the Neo-Traditionalist elders informed me that ever since this split occurred they had hoped to be able to establish a new and separate Traditionalist village wherein everyone continued to practice *Aqkaqzanr*. In the end, however, they were never able to achieve this goal due to land and administrative limitations imposed on them by the Thai government. In the following section, I discuss the divisions and tensions that develop between Neo-Traditionalists and Buddhists.

6.1.2 Neo-Traditionalists & Buddhists

As noted earlier in chapter five, Buddhist monks, unlike Protestant and Catholic missionaries, do not forbid their Akha followers from practicing *Aqkaqzanr* with the exception of requesting that they remove their ancestral altars from their

² All three of the household’s sons are among the first Akha from both *Arbawr* village as well as Thailand to receive a formal education in the lowlands. Their educations are financed by Christian missionaries, particularly the American Baptist Missionary Paul Lewis.

households. Buddhists further hold that Buddhism, when compared to Christianity, is much more compatible with *Aqkaqzanr*. In further contrast to Protestants and Catholics, Buddhists tend not to look down upon *Aqkaqzanr* as a “backwards” and “primitive” form of “demon worship”. At one point during my stay in *Arbawr* village an elder Neo-Traditionalist tells me:

“Buddhists, unlike Protestants and Catholics, do not look down upon *Aqkaqzanr*. The Buddhist monks also allow them to participate in our rituals and ceremonies. Moreover, they are permitted to seek out the services of various ritual specialists such as *Nyirpa* (Shaman) and *Pirma* (Ritual Reciters) as necessary” (personal communication, November 21, 2011).

Neo-Traditionalists further stress that they see more similarities between *Aqkaqzanr* and *Paerxeerzanr* (Buddhism) than between *Aqkaqzanr* and either *Kalizanzr* (Protestantism) or *Kovqdawqzanr* (Catholicism). Some Neo-Traditionalists further compare the roles of Buddhist monks to that of Neo-Traditionalist *Pirma* or Ritual Reciters. For example, some of them comment that these two different kinds of ritual specialists seem to play more or less similar roles in the context of funeral rituals.

Buddhist monks, furthermore, not unlike Neo-Traditionalist ritual specialists (*Pirma* or Ritual Reciters), assist Buddhist villagers in countering the effects of malevolent ‘spirits’ through certain ritual practices. As a result, Neo-Traditionalists feel ‘closer’ to their fellow Buddhist villagers than either Protestant or Catholic villagers. Neo-Traditionalist ritual specialists, furthermore, often comment that they are more open to help their fellow Buddhist villagers who do not hold condescending views of *Aqkaqzanr* as in the case of Protestants and Catholics. On one occasion as I spoke with the senior-most Ritual Reciter of *Arbawr* village he tells me:

“I am happy to assist *Parxeerzaq* (Buddhists). Unlike *Kalizaq* (Protestants) and *Kovqdawqzaq* (Catholics), they never talk about *Aqkaqzanr* in a negative way and continue to seek our help in performing various rituals as needed. *Kalizaq* (Protestants) and *Kovqdawqzaq* (Catholics), on the other hand, not only look down on *Aqkaqzanr* but also particularly dislike Ritual Reciters such as my self. They believe that in the past their *Yesu* (Jesus) was killed by Ritual Reciters like myself. As a result, we tend not to get along” (personal communication, December 8, 2011).

From the above descriptions, it is clear that there are less tensions between Buddhists and Neo-Traditionalists than between Neo-Traditionalists and Christians. Nevertheless, Akha Buddhists, not unlike Christians, generally do not participate in

the annual round of Neo-Traditionalist communal level rituals. In this respect, a major division exists between the Neo-Traditionalist and Buddhist communities. Apart from this communal-level division, however, there are few other divisions between Neo-Traditionalists and Buddhists. In the following section, I discuss the various kinds of tensions and divisions existing between Buddhists, Protestants, and Catholics.

6.1.3 Protestants, Catholics, & Buddhists

In addition to the tensions and divisions between Neo-Traditionalists, Christians, and Buddhists, it is important to note the numerous divisions existing between each of these ‘non-Traditionalist’ groups in of themselves. For example, Christians not only refuse to participate in the rituals of Neo-Traditionalists but also those of both Buddhists as well as Christians belonging to different denominations or organizations. Christians associated with different denominations or organizations further tend to look down on each other, believing that their particular ‘Christian way’ is more authentic or in line with the teachings of the bible. For example, Catholics tend to see *Aqma Maria* (The Virgin Mary) as being worthy of even greater reverence than her son, Jesus, as, “without the mother there would be no son”. In contrast, *Kalizaq* (Protestants) hold Jesus in a much higher position and pay little attention whatsoever to his mother Mary.

Moreover, as noted earlier, Catholics tend to think of their *Kovqdawqzanr* (Catholicism) as both “the oldest as well as best *zanr* in the world”. On one occasion, the middle-aged Catholic woman referred to earlier talks to me about her fellow Protestant villagers in a condescending manner:

“I do not understand why Protestants cannot share the same church. They are all carrying ‘Protestantism’, and yet as you know there are no less than seven different Protestant churches here in *Arbawr* village. All of their church leaders have difficulties getting along with each other and so their communities are similarly divided. The leaders of our *Kovqdawrzanzr* (Catholicism), however, do not permit us to have more than one church per community. And so we have only one Catholic Church and community here in *Arbawr* village” (personal communication, January 14, 2012).

She further notes that no matter where *Kovqdawqzaq* (Catholics) are in the world they all share one *zanr* and belong to the center of the Catholic world based in Italy. As a

result, she continues, *Kovqdawqzanr* (Catholicism) is the oldest as well as most authentic, unified, and powerful religion in the word.

Christians further tend to look down on Buddhists whom they see as having a ‘Godless’ *zanr* that is inferior to Christianity. On one occasion I while in *Arbawr* village I have a chance to talk with two middle-aged Akha male villagers working for the government agricultural research station located at the upper end of the village. One of these workers is Buddhist while the other is Protestant. Our conversation is very interesting.

After some general introductions I ask them about which *zanr* they carry. One of the men proudly informs me that his family no longer carries *Aqkaqzanr*. He adds that they have all become Protestants and received the rite of baptism. He further adds that their life is much better today than in the past when they had to carry the heavy and complicated burden of *Aqkaqzanr* and “worship evil spirits” (i.e. demons in the Christian context). He notes that Protestantism is much easier to carry and that his family is now protected and blessed by *Yesu* (Jesus). Finally, he tells me that his 86 year old mother is currently in the hospital for eye treatment and that a few days ago a huge tree fell onto and broke the roof of his house. He adds, however, that through the blessings of *Yesu* (Jesus) his mother’s eyes are improving and his house is being repaired.

His Buddhist co-worker, however, humorously points out the irony of his claims of being blessed amidst all of the calamities that are striking his family. The Buddhist man in turn states that while he thinks of *Aqkaqzanr* in a positive light, in the past he and his family had to convert to Catholicism while living in Myanmar due to the heavy economic costs of carrying *Aqkaqzanr*. He further notes that they decided to convert to Buddhism after coming to Thailand as they feel it is more similar to *Aqkaqzanr* than Catholicism. He further notes that Buddhist monks, unlike their Christian counterparts, do not forbid their followers from continuing to practice rituals according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Finally, he stresses that his family looks forward to returning to *Aqkaqzanr* in the near future once the Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village begin to follow a modified version of *Aqkaqzanr* that is “lighter” and “easier” to carry.

In addition, as noted earlier, in *Arbawr* village there are currently five different Akha Christian churches funded and supported by different Christian organizations in Thailand and abroad. The village-based leaders of each of these organizations are all competing for converts in *Arbawr* village. For example, the senior Thai Buddhist monk in the village tells me that until very recently the majority of Akha residing in the upper section of the village near the government's agricultural research station were all Buddhists. He adds, however, that after he returned to the village from a year long stay in the south of Thailand some time ago he found that nearly all of the Buddhists had converted to Protestantism under the guidance of a recently arrived South Korean Protestant missionary.

He further notes that he subsequently learned that the Korean missionary offered his potential converts land and money in exchange for joining his church. The majority of former Buddhists in turn took him up on the offer and converted to Protestantism. The senior monk continues to note, however, that following their conversion the Korean missionary told them to no longer pay any attention to him and the other monks. He sadly notes that even to this day many of these former Buddhist villagers refuse to even look at him in public, let alone respectfully acknowledge his presence.

The monk adds in turn that on one occasion a Protestant woman who used to be Buddhist went out of her way to give an alms offering to him as he passed through the village. He sadly notes in turn that he later heard that the woman's husband beat her upon learning of her actions in violation of the teachings of the Korean missionary. Interestingly, the senior monk further informs me:

"You know in my younger days I was a Pentecostal minister in the Christian tradition. Following the death of my wife, however, I decided to leave the church and become a Buddhist monk. I also decided that I was no longer interested in being born again and again in an endless cycle of death and rebirth. At the same time, I came to disagree with the often narrow minded and self-serving practices of Christian missionaries. It is disheartening to see Christian missionaries working to convert people through methods that are dishonest and manipulative. In contrast, I do not seek out or take advantage of potential converts, but rather help all who come to ask for my help, regardless of whether they are Christian or Buddhist or 'Traditionalist' "(personal communication, October 12, 2011).

Like many Neo-Traditionalists, furthermore, the senior monk agrees that religious conversion has brought about numerous tensions and divisions within *Arbawr* village. From his perspective, however, these tensions and divisions are rooted in the often narrow-minded and self-serving practices and teachings of various church leaders who are in competition with one another. The senior monk adds in turn that if these leaders actually taught and lived according to the example of Jesus then there would be not tensions or divisions within the community. In the following section, I discuss the various kinds of tensions that arise within and between clans and households.

6.2 Tensions Within and Between Clans and Households

In previous chapters, I discussed the various kinds of tensions and divisions that arise at the communal level within *Arbawr* village as a result of religious conversion. In the following section I discuss the divisions and tensions that arise between and within clans and households within the village.

6.2.1 Tensions Within and Between Clans

There are more than twenty different *Guq* or ‘clans’ in *Arbawr* village, including the *Saeduq*; *Saelar*; *Saepar*; *Yarbyan*; *Zaelmq*; *Zaexawq*; *Zanrmeeq*; *Arnyi*; *Byevtseir*; *Byevtu*; *Ceimeeq*; *Ghoeqmaer*; *Ghoeqzeep*; *Jeqxanr*; *Khandzei*; *Laerce*; *Manqpov*; *Mazev*; *Poemyaq*; and so forth. Clan membership, furthermore, tends not to directly correspond to *zanr*. Neo-Traditionalists, Protestants, Catholics, and Buddhists can all be found in varying numbers among the members of each of these clans. The *Saeduq* and *Yarbyan* clans, however, are primarily comprised of either Neo-Traditionalists in the case of *Saeduq* or Protestants in the case of *Yarbyan*. These two clans, furthermore, are the most influential clans in the village. For the purposes of my discussion, I will limit myself to the various kinds of tensions and divisions that arise between the members of these two clans.

Numerous clans are represented among the 142 Neo-Traditionalist households of *Arbawr* village. These households include members of the *Saeduq*, *Byevtseir*, and *Arnyi* clans. Members of the *Saeduq* clan, however, form the majority of Neo-Traditionalist villagers and ritual specialists. As a result, villagers from various *zanr* backgrounds see *Saeduq* clan members as the leaders of the Neo-Traditionalist

villagers. Villagers further see the *Saeduq* clan as both playing a major role in maintaining *Aqkaqzanr* as well as being one of the wealthiest clans in the village. In fact, one of the *Saeduq* clan members is the owner of the largest and most successful coffee processing factory in the village. In addition, several other members of the *Saeduq* clan have established smaller coffee processing factories of their own.

Protestant villagers are similarly comprised of individuals from a variety of clans. Yet, the *Yarbyan* clan is generally viewed as a leader among Protestants. This division between Neo-Traditionalist *Saeduq* and Protestant *Yarbyan* is rooted in an earlier communal divisions that takes place within *Arbawr* village some years ago. As noted earlier, it was a leading male member of the *Yarbyan* clan, who was at the time the assistant village head, that began the initial conversion process to Protestantism within the village. He decided to convert at the urging or pressure of his three sons, all of whom became Protestant Christians at very young ages while receiving a formal education in the Thai lowlands with the help of foreign Christian missionaries. One of his sons is currently the most influential Akha Christian missionary in Thailand and director of the Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF). The majority of Protestant villagers in *Arbawr* village belong to one of the two AOF-affiliated churches in the village.

The situation among Catholics and Buddhists is similar and different from each of the above bases. First, Catholic and Buddhist villagers are similarly comprised of villagers from different clans. Second, Catholics and Buddhists differ in that no single clan is seen as being the dominant or leading clan.

As noted earlier, the tensions and divisions that exist between the largely Neo-Traditionalist *Saeduq* and Protestant *Yarbyan* clan members are the most pronounced in the village. For example, when many Neo-Traditionalist villagers talk about their fellow Christian villagers they often remark that certain members of the *Yarbyan* clan are the very first villagers to convert to Christianity and discard their ancestral altar by burning it – an act that they have difficult comprehending. They further note that a major division develops within the village following their conversion, leading to numerous conflicts between and within clans and households.

In contrast, many Christian villagers remark that if it were not for the *Saeduq* clan's strong support of *Aqkaqzanr*, then all of the villagers would be Christian given

the “heavy” and “complicated” nature of *Aqkaqzanr*. Other Christians tell me that the *Saeduq* take great pride in their practices of *Aqkaqzanr* and tend to look down upon Christians and Christianity. As can be seen from the above, generally speaking the clans in *Arbawr* village, particularly the two most influential *Saeduq* and *Yarbyan* clans, are largely aligned with different *zanr*. As a result, *Arbawr* village is generally divided into separate communities along the parallel lines of clan membership and *zanr*.

At the same time, however, some tensions and divisions have arisen among individuals belonging to the same clan. Some individual clan members and/or households have converted to a different *zanr* from the majority of their other clan members who continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr*. For example, a male member of the *Saeduq* clan is the leader of the largest AOF-affiliated church in *Arbawr* village. In the eyes of his fellow *Saeduq* clan members, who are largely Neo-Traditionalists, this individual is no longer considered a relative. Rather, he is considered both a betrayer of their clan as well as a threat to the continuation of *Aqkaqzanr* given his concerted efforts to convert *Arbawr* villagers to Christianity.

On one occasion as I am talking with a Neo-Traditionalist woman who is married to one of the *Saeduq* clan members, she informs me that one of the homes across the way belongs to her uncle. As we sit across from each other picking out the good coffee beans from the bad ones, she continues to tell me:

“Even though he is my uncle we rarely have any contact with each other. Some years ago his household decided to convert to Protestantism. Since that time they have never joined any of our family rituals or ceremonies. It is as if we are no longer relatives. It makes me sad when I think of how many relationships have been broken because of individuals converting to the *zanr* of others (personal communication, October 7, 2011).”

She continues to tell me that her uncle’s son is a Christian missionary residing in a different village. She notes that he has been trying to convert her family to Christianity for many years now. On one occasion, however, as he was doing this her husband asked him to either stop trying to convert them or stop visiting altogether. I came across numerous other examples of these kinds of tensions and divisions among clan members while in *Arbawr* village. In the following section, I will discuss the various kinds of tensions and divisions that occur within and between households.

6.2.2 Tensions Within and Between Households

As mentioned earlier, the intra-village communal divisions that develop among Akha carrying different *zanr* take a variety of forms. These divisions can also be found between different households. For example, during my stay in the village I observe that in their everyday lives the Neo-Traditionalists and Christians (including Protestants and Catholics) rarely visit each other's homes, in spite of often residing next door to each other. Moreover, when different villagers are looking for other villagers with which to exchange labor for agricultural work or house building etc. they tend to do so with villagers carrying the same *zanr*. For example, on one occasion as we sit chatting and drinking hot tea, two middle-aged Neo-Traditionalist women who are sewing traditional Akha bags tell me:

“We generally don't work with Christian women in our fields because when we do they tend to talk about their *zanr* and how much better it is than *Aqkaqzanr*. They like to tell us of how we are worshipping ‘evil spirits’ and living in fear and darkness. They tell us that their lives are free and bright as they are no longer living under the burden of *Aqkaqzanr* and the ‘evil spirits’. Moreover, they tell us that after they found Christianity their marital relationships improved as their husbands were required to stop drinking alcohol and smoking” (personal communication, December 23, 2011).³

The women further add that they have lost several best friends following their conversion to Christianity. They note that their former friends changed greatly following their conversion and seem to have lost all ‘common sense’. During my time in the village I hear additional stories like this one leading me to the conclusion that ‘religious’ conversion is a major factor contributing to the severing of relations between neighbors and friends within *Arbawr* village.

On another occasion, a elderly male Neo-Traditionalist in his late seventies talks to me about his personal experiences with these kinds of conflicts and divisions. I often visit with this elder during my time in *Arbawr* village. He tells me many stories of his life experiences within and beyond the village. He once sadly tells me that he is no longer able to talk with some of his former friends about *Aqkaqzanr* as he

³ Our exchanges took place over the extended Akha New Year Celebration when Neo-Traditionalist villagers refrain from working in their fields and tend to stay home relaxing and chatting with family and friends. During these ritual observances it is easy to distinguish the Christians and Buddhists from the Neo-Traditionalists as the former two groups can be seen going to and from their fields.

used to enjoy doing in the past. He notes that their relationship changed drastically following their conversion to what he refers to as either *Myavneev miv-e zanr* (“the zanr of those with their eyes closed”) or *Myavkhanq-aw beq-e zanr* (“the zanr of those who touch their face”).

Myavneev miv-e zanr (“the zanr of those with their eyes closed”) is an additional term used by some Neo-Traditionalists to refer to *Kalizanr* or Protestantism. It refers to the Protestant practice of ‘closing their eyes’ as they pray. *Myavkhanq-aw beq-e zanr* (“the zanr of those who touch their face”) is another term that some Neo-Traditionalists use to refer to *Kovqdawqzanr* or Catholicism. The term refers to the Catholic practice of ‘touching their face’ before and after they pray.

In the past, he adds, they used to be very close and often enjoyed sitting and talking over the many feasts that took place according to *Aqkaqzanr* within each of their households and lineages. He notes in turn that today it is very difficult for them to spend time together as his friends always want to talk about their *Myavneev miv-e zanr* or *Myavkhanq-aw beq-e zanr* and inform him of how much better they are than *Aqkaqzanr*. He continues:

“When they started to talk badly of *Aqkaqzanr* I became very angry. We got into an argument and ever since that time we have not visited each other even once. We still greet each other in passing on the street but generally have become like strangers to one another (personal communication, November 26, 2011).”

He continues to tell me that many tensions have arisen within particular households wherein some members have become Christians and other still carry *Aqkaqzanr*. He notes that those members that convert to Christianity tend to no longer participate in their family’s rituals and ceremonies, most importantly those related to the ancestors and healing ceremonies. In particular, he cites their refusal to either partake of the food offerings made to the ancestors or tie strings around their ill relatives for whom a healing ceremony is being performed. He adds that these tensions within households are much more difficult to bear than those between households and neighbors as they destroy the very unity of a household.

He stresses that as a great-grandfather, grandfather, and father it is particularly difficult and saddening to have a child, grandchild, or great-grandchild refuse to participate in their household rituals. Many Neo-Traditionalists tell me that normally

all of their household members partake of the food that is initially offered to their ancestors. They believe that this food is ‘blessed’ by their ancestors and that by partaking of the food they receive their ‘blessings’. Most importantly, they stress that the food offered to the ancestors is a powerful symbol of their family unity. By partaking of the blessed food as a family they are ensuring that their family is a strong and united family. If a family member refuses to share in this blessed food then it is as if they have cut off their relations with their family and become ‘Others’ or ‘Outsiders’.⁴

During my stay in *Arbawr* village I learn of numerous other examples of tensions developing within households as a result of the conversion of one or more member to Christianity. For example, late one evening over a blazing fire a Neo-Traditionalist male tells me and several others about his family’s experiences with his nine year old brother who stayed at the Christian Akha Outreach Foundation while studying at a government school in the lowland city of Chiangrai:

“Once after spending some time in the Christian center my brother came home during the school break. It was during the time of one of our ancestral rituals. When it came time for the offering to be given to each family member, however, my brother refused, saying that he would not partake of food offered to ‘evil spirits’. He also refused to take part in other rituals such as a healing ceremony held on behalf of one of our elders. The missionaries in the center taught him to look down on *Aqkaqzanr*. And now it is as if he is no longer a part of our family. He’s a completely different person. Moreover, each time that he comes home he tries to persuade us to become Christians. He tries to teach us the words of *Miqyear* (‘God’)” (personal communication, November 8, 2011).

He adds in turn that they eventually arranged for his brother to move out of the Christian center in order to prevent him from becoming a Christian, realizing that it would only lead to increasing tensions within the family. A number of other Neo-Traditionalist families had similar experiences with their children and also decided to have them move out of the center. In spite of their efforts, however, some children from Neo-Traditionalist households decide to continue on their paths to becoming Christians and often cause a great strain on their families.

⁴ Neo-Traditionalists often tell me that, “Christians who refuse to partake of the ancestral offerings are effectively telling us that we are no longer like you, we are no longer Akha, but rather some ‘Other’ people”.

On another occasion, an elder Neo-Traditionalist man told me of a related incident that took place within his extended family. One of his nieces and her husband wanted to hold a ceremony in honor of his 86 year old mother in order to ask for her blessing and ensure her a long and healthy life. His niece and her husband, however, wanted to hold the ceremony according to the Catholic way as they both carry *Kovqdawqzanr* (Catholicism). He informed them, however, that if they wanted to hold the ceremony then it would have to be done according to *Aqkaqzanr* and not *Kovqdawqzanr*. They initially protested but eventually agreed to hold the ceremony according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Towards the end of our conversation he complained, like many other Neo-Traditionalist elders, about how ‘religious’ conversion has brought about many problems and divisions to *Arbawr* village.

Finally, I will share one last example that has left a deep impression on me. Late one evening as we are sitting around a simmering fire, a young Neo-Traditionalist man in his late thirties told me and several others about the problems his family has faced due to some of his relatives conversion to Christianity. He told us about his grandmother that lives with his uncle who is Catholic. He noted that she is quite ill and has asked to be treated by a *Nyirpaq* or Shaman. The uncle, however, will not permit the healing ceremony to be held in his home as he feels it is against the doctrines of Catholicism. His uncle in turn proposed that the ceremony be held in his home. He adds, however, that his family decided against this as the grandmother is no longer carrying *Aqkaqzanr* and they feel that they should not mix *zanr* as something bad might happen.

He adds that he and his family feel very distant from his uncle’s family who never joins their ritual activities. He sadly notes that they rarely even know each other and seem to have turned into “enemies” over the issue of *zanr*. He further stressed that he feels as if he has only a few real relatives left in the village as most of his other clan members have become either Protestants or Catholics. As a result, he half jokingly told me that he has a plan to either travel around the Mekong Region in order to locate more of his fellow clan members that are still carrying *Aqkaqzanr* or have numerous wives in order to strengthen his clan before they “disappear”.

6.3 Summary

Numerous tensions and divisions arise within *Arbawr* village as a result of rising rates of ‘religious’ conversion to Christianity in particular. These tensions and divisions develop at various levels ranging from the village to clan and household. Communal divisions develop within the village along the lines of individual’s *zanr*. Tensions further develop within and between clans and households. For example, Christians and Buddhists no longer take part in the traditional communal-based rituals organized by Neo-Traditionalists. In addition, Christian converts refuse to either partake of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives’ ancestral offerings or participate in their healing ceremonies involving the tying of strings around the ‘patient’s’ wrist.

Akha Protestants and Catholics in *Arbawr* village, moreover, tend to look down upon *Aqkaqzanr* or ‘traditional Akha culture’. Their views of *Aqkaqzanr* generate numerous divisions and conflicts within the community. Akha Protestants and Catholics tend to divide Akha identity into different parts such as ‘religion’ and ‘culture’. They hold that *zanr* is ‘religion’ as separate and apart from ‘culture’, and can accordingly be replaced without changing their Akha identity. At the same time, however, Neo-Traditionalist villagers argue that to be Akha means to carry *Aqkaqzanr* or ‘traditional Akha culture’ as fundamentally rooted in ancestral services. As a result, Neo-Traditionalists hold that individuals that convert to the ‘religions’ of others simultaneously adopt the ethnic identity of those others and are in effect no longer Akha.

In contrast to Protestants and Catholics, Buddhists do not look down upon *Aqkaqzanr* as a “backwards” form of “demon worship”. Rather, Buddhists hold that Buddhism, when compared to Christianity, is more compatible with *Aqkaqzanr*. Buddhist monks, furthermore, do not forbid Buddhist laypersons from practicing *Aqkaqzanr* with the exception of asking them to remove their ancestral altars from their households. Neo-Traditionalists also stress that they see more similarities between *Aqkaqzanr* and *Paerxeerzanr* (Buddhism) than between *Aqkaqzanr* and either *Kalizanzr* (Protestantism) or *Kovqdawqzanr* (Catholicism). As a result, there are less tensions and divisions between Neo-Traditionalists and Buddhists than between Neo-Traditionalists and Christians (including Protestants and Catholics).

In addition to the tensions and divisions between Neo-Traditionalists, Christians, and Buddhists, it is important to note the numerous divisions existing between each of these 'non-Traditionalist' groups in of themselves. For example, Christians not only refuse to participate in the rituals of Neo-Traditionalists but also those of both Buddhists as well as Christians belonging to different denominations or organizations. Christians associated with different denominations or organizations further tend to look down on each other, believing that their particular 'Christian way' is more authentic or in line with the teachings of the bible.

In terms of clan divisions, there are more than twenty different *Guq* or 'clans' in *Arbawr* village, including the *Saeduq*; *Saelar*; *Saepar*; *Yarbyan*; *Zaelmq*; *Zaexawq*; *Zanrmeeq*; *Arnyi*; *Byevtseir*; *Byevtu*; *Ceimeeq*; *Ghoeqmaer*; *Ghoeqzeep*; *Jeqxanr*; *Khandzei*; *Laerce*; *Manqpov*; *Mazev*; *Poemyaq*; and so forth. Clan membership, furthermore, tends not to directly correspond to *zanr*. Neo-Traditionalists, Protestants, Catholics, and Buddhists can all be found in varying numbers among the members of each of these clans. The *Saeduq* and *Yarbyan* clans, however, are primarily comprised of either Neo-Traditionalists in the case of *Saeduq* or Protestants in the case of *Yarbyan*. These two clans are the most influential clans in the village.

This division between Neo-Traditionalist *Saeduq* and Protestant *Yarbyan* is rooted in an earlier communal division that takes place within *Arbawr* village some years ago. As noted earlier, it was a leading male member of the *Yarbyan* clan, who was at the time the assistant village head, that began the initial conversion process to Protestantism within the village. He decided to convert at the urging or pressure of his three sons, all of whom became Protestant Christians at very young ages while receiving a formal education in the Thai lowlands with the help of foreign Christian missionaries. At the same time, however, some tensions and divisions have arisen among individuals belonging to the same clan. Some individual clan members and/or households have converted to a different *zanr* from the majority of their other clan members who continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr*.

Finally, the intra-village communal divisions that develop among Akha carrying different *zanr* can also be found between and within households. For example, during my stay in the village I observe that in their everyday lives the Neo-

Traditionalists and Christians (including Protestants and Catholics) rarely visit each other's homes, in spite of often residing next door to each other. Moreover, when different villagers are looking for other villagers with which to exchange labor for agricultural work or house building etc. they tend to do so with villagers carrying the same *zanr*. During my stay in *Arbawr* village I also learn of numerous examples of tensions and divisions that develop within particular households as a result of the conversion of one or more member to Christianity.