

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Akha society, like that of many other ethnic minority groups in the world, has been and continues to be strongly impacted by experiences of religious conversion. Many Akha in Thailand and Myanmar today are either Christians or Buddhists that have abandoned many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* or 'traditional Akha culture' according to their new set of customs and beliefs. The doctrines of Christianity in particular are largely incompatible with the practices of *Aqkaqzanr*.

For example, Kammerer notes that at the behest of missionaries, Akha Protestants completely abandoned their ancestral practices, rice-related rituals and overall concern with maintaining the crucial relations between "wife-givers" and "wife-takers" (1990:332). Kammerer further notes, however, that in contrast to Akha Protestants, Akha Catholics were not required to discard all of their traditional ritual practices. She notes for instance that Catholics, unlike Protestants, still "retain certain rites performed by the mother's brother" as these were not deemed to be a part of "spirit worship" by Catholic missionaries (Kammerer 1990:332). On the other hand, ancestral services were judged to be "spirit worship" and subsequently banned on the part of Catholic converts (Kammerer 1990:332).

Akha Protestants and Catholics in *Arbawr* village today have similarly abandoned many aspects of *Aqkaqzanr*, particularly those aspects related to religious beliefs and practices. For example, Akha Protestant and Catholic communities no longer carry the annual round of ritual practices observed by Neo-Traditionalists at the household or communal level in relation to the ancestors, rice cultivation and the overall community structure and geography. Rather, Akha Protestants and Catholics adopt and develop a new set of customs and beliefs according to their new religion. Christians replace their former ancestral altars with images of either 'Jesus' in the case of Protestants or 'Jesus' and 'Mary' in the case of Catholics. Moreover, apart

from weekly church services on Sunday, the annual ritual celebrations of Akha Protestants include Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving. Akha Catholics observe a number of other ritual celebrations in addition to the three observed by Akha Protestants. For example, on the 15th of August each year Catholics observe the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. In addition, the majority of Christian ritual celebrations relating to various aspects of the life cycle differ greatly from those practiced by Neo-Traditionalists. These rituals include naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals, housewarmings, and healing ceremonies.

Christian leaders, furthermore, strongly forbid their followers from seeking out the help of various Neo-Traditionalist ritual/healing specialists such as *Pirma* (Ritual Reciter), *Nyirpaq* (Shaman) and *Naqciq* (Herbal medicine practitioner). Christian converts are similarly forbidden to participate in the rituals of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and friends. As a result, Christians largely refuse to either partake of food offerings made in honor of the ancestors or participate in healing ceremonies involving the tying of strings around an ill person's wrists. The decisions by a growing number of Akha to convert to either Protestantism or Catholicism bring about numerous changes to Akha society in terms of social structure, societal relations, ritual life, and ethnic identity.

Moreover, Akha Protestants, as in the case of Karen Baptists, are required to abstain from both "spirit worship and also from drinking alcohol, a practice which has a sacral meaning in an Animist context as it accompanies most traditional rituals" (Platz 2003:483). Chumpol further notes that apart from taboos on traditionalist rituals and alcohol, Karen Christians more generally speaking are forbidden by the church from singing Karen traditional songs (1992:176). Rather, they sing new songs "like hymns or carols which utilize Western melodies" and are generally created by Western missionaries (Chumpol 1992:176). A similar situation applies to Akha Christians, particularly Protestants.

Moreover, there are additional similarities between the cases of Akha and Karen Catholics. For example, Platz notes that Karen Catholics when compared to Protestants are more open to participating in traditional rituals, although they tend to "refrain from making any offerings" to the ancestral spirits (2003:484). Platz further notes that older Karen Catholics "may still use magic spells for curing illness, while

Protestants refrain from doing so” (2003:484). In further contrast to Karen Protestants, Karen Catholics are not prohibited from drinking liquor and will often make their own liquor for wedding celebrations (Platz 2003:484).

In contrast, Akha Protestants and Catholics in my research village are both forbidden to drink liquor. However, not all members follow the regulations of their new tradition. For example, as noted earlier the Catholic family whom I often visited during my time in Arbawr village always had either rice or corn whiskey on hand during our meals. Moreover, I often observed a middle-aged Protestant male drinking rice whiskey and beer when he joined his Neo-Traditionalist friends for dinner and various other activities.

Moreover, Akha Protestants and Catholics alike in Arbawr village are not officially permitted to participate in any of the Neo-Traditionalist rituals as they are deemed to be associated with “spirit worship”. These rituals include the full round of 12 annual ancestral services, naming ceremonies conducted at birth, weddings, blessing ceremonies, soul calling rites, annual communal level rituals and so forth. At the same time, however, some Protestants and Catholics continue to seek the help of various Neo-Traditionalist ritual specialists such as *Pirma*, *Nyirpaq*, or *Naqciq* in times of illness and misfortune. They do so, however, without the knowledge of their religious leaders. In addition, certain Christians with specialized knowledge in the healing traditions of *Aqkaqzanr* continue to employ these methods in treating others, albeit in the name of the Christian ‘God’ rather than the Akha creator or ancestors.

In conclusion, nearly every aspect of Akha Protestant’s ritual life differs from that of Neo-Traditionalists – ranging from birth rites to naming ceremonies, weddings, healing rituals and funerals. As noted by Kammerer, the first foreign missionaries to work with Akha in Thailand encouraged their 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 Akha missionaries and their followers. For example, when asked about which parts of their Akha identity are most important to them today nearly all Christians will refer foremost to their Akha 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.

Catholic villagers have also developed a new community, religious identity, and overall way of life that differs in significant ways from that of Neo-Traditionalists. As in the case of Akha Protestants, the elements of *Aqkaqzanr* 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 *Lawrcivqzaq*, a derogatory term used to refer to those who (continue to) carry *Aqkaqzanr* and worship "evil spirits" or the "devil".

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. Generally speaking, Akha converts to Christianity have formed both a new lifestyle and community as well as a new religious identity that markedly contrasts with that of Neo-Traditionalists.

In contrast, the situation of Akha Buddhists is quite different from that of either Protestants or Catholics. Buddhism has not brought as many significant changes to traditional Akha society as in the case of Protestantism and Catholicism. As noted earlier, Akha Buddhists generally feel that there are more similarities between *Aqkaqzanr* and Buddhism than between *Aqkaqzanr* and Christianity. This

view seems to be one of the reasons behind their decision to convert to Buddhism. In addition, some aspects of *Aqkaqzanr* have been retained by Buddhist converts. Buddhists tend to mix or combine certain practices and beliefs from *Aqkaqzanr* and Buddhism according to their particular situation and needs.

For example, many Buddhists openly seek out the services of various Neo-Traditionalist ritual specialists such as *Pirma* (Ritual Reciter), *Nyirpaq* (Shaman) and *Naqciq* (Herbal medicine practitioner). In strong contrast to Christians, Buddhists are free to fully participate in the traditionalist rituals of their Neo-Traditionalist relatives and friends. 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 middle path approach of Buddhism and the tendency for monks to not outright forbid this or that practice seems to explain the flexibility with which Buddhist villagers mix their Buddhist and traditionalist rituals and beliefs. 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.

On another hand, however, Buddhists have replaced their ancestral altars with a statue of the Buddha and no longer carry out the annual round of ancestral offerings according to *Aqkaqzanr*. Moreover, Akha Buddhists in general no longer participate in traditionalist communal level rituals such as those carried out to rebuild the village gates annually or make offerings to the “Lord of the Water and Land” annually. Buddhists similarly do not carry out any of the traditionalist rituals relating to the cultivation of rice. In terms of communal level rites the Buddhists tend to participate in the various national-level Buddhist celebrations held throughout Thailand such as *Songkran* or *Loikrathong*.

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.

Interestingly, in the case of Karen Buddhists, Platz notes that they only differ from Traditionalists in that they have abandoned the practice of “ancestral worship” (2003:475). Otherwise, Platz notes, Karen Buddhists continue to observe all of the “other traditional rituals linked to rice production” (Platz 2003:475).¹ He further states that “Buddhists feel close to Traditionalists, the difference being freedom from the ancestors, who have lost their power” (2003:482). Moreover, Platz notes that, “in fact, the only strictly Buddhist ritual for so-called Buddhists may be the offering of rice to the Buddha each morning” (2003:475).

Kwanchewan further notes that Karen Buddhists observe the traditional rituals during the New Year and in relation to the agricultural cycle (2003:228). Moreover, she remarks that Karen Christians often joined the traditional rituals organized by Buddhist households, although they “seldom organized traditional rituals themselves” (2003:228). She further notes that Karen Christians “would tie the wrists of Buddhist Karen, while blessing them with traditional verses” (2003:228).

This situation differs markedly from that of Akha Christians who rarely join the rituals of other non-Christians, whether they be Buddhist or Neo-Traditionalist. Moreover, in contrast to Akha Christians, Akha Buddhists are more open to *Aqkaqzanr* and tend to freely participate in the rituals and ceremonies organized by Neo-Traditionalists. However, Akha Buddhists, unlike Karen Buddhists, tend not to carry out their own traditionalist rituals – whether in relation to the ancestors or agricultural cycle.

In reference to Karen traditionalists, Platz notes that while they “do not practice any form of revitalization of their religion, they (do) more or less reject Christian missionary efforts” (2003:483). Akha Neo-Traditionalists similarly reject the efforts of Christian missionaries to convert them to Christianity. The Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village today are determined to continue in their practices of *Aqkaqzanr*. Under the guidance of a number of elders and ritual specialists, Neo-

¹ Platz further notes that, “conversion to Buddhism does not specifically require them to abandon ancestor worship, but rather provides a rationale and a ritual means for cutting ties with a ceremony which is viewed as cumbersome and often ineffective” (2003:475).

Traditionalists are making a concerted effort to carry their traditional culture in much the same way as their ancestors did before them. At the same time, however, they are not necessarily practicing *Akhazanr* in exactly the same manner as their ancestors, for certain changes have taken place in their ritual practices and they are very much aware of these changes.

For instance, an earlier taboo requiring the killing of human twins was abolished over 20 years ago. In addition, in the past a new village gate and female/male carvings placed outside the gate had to be cut from freshly cut trees. Today, however, due to state restrictions on cutting trees the Neo-Traditionalists decided to construct a more permanent gate and carvings out of cement. Changes can further be seen in the ritual process for funerals. For example, the villagers have started constructing grave markers from cement and including a picture of the deceased as well as their full name, birth date, animal year, and date of passing on the marker in Thai and/or Akha language. In the recent past there were no grave markers whatsoever.

Changes can also be seen in terms of the ritual process related to rice cultivation. As noted earlier, the majority of villagers in *Arbawr* village today are growing coffee instead of rice as their main crop. In spite of this change, however, each Neo-Traditionalist household continues to cultivate a small plot of rice for use in the annual round of rice related rituals. While coffee is currently the main source of income in the village the Neo-Traditionalists continue to value rice and the rituals related to rice as an important part of their identity.

Moreover, Neo-Traditionalist Akha in *Arbawr* village are engaged in a number of efforts to preserve, reform and maintain *Aqkaqzanr*. Their efforts to do so are taking place as increasing numbers of Akha are converting to different denominations of Christianity and Buddhism. As discussed in chapters three and four, some Neo-Traditionalists both within and outside of *Arbawr* village have come to realize the need for working to reform or modify *Aqkaqzanr* in order to adapt it to the current situations faced by Akha throughout the region. Since roughly 2008 a group of Neo-Traditionalist leaders from different parts of the Mekong Region has been working to find ways of reviving, maintaining, and simplifying *Aqkaqzanr* in order to both prevent further conversions to Christianity as well as encourage

Christians to return to *Aqkaqzanr*. One of the main goals of this group is to adapt and simplify *Aqkaqzanr* so that it can be more easily practiced by Akha living in today's rapidly changing world.

In addition, in September of 2010 a two year project documenting traditional Akha culture was started in *Arbawr* village by a group of Neo-Traditionalist Akha working under the Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability or MAPS. The project has been a collaborative effort between the Akha staff of MAPS and the Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village. The primary goal of the project is to document the Neo-Traditionalists' complete round of annual rituals in written, audio, and video form. The group is further using a recently unified international Akha writing system in documenting the traditions and publishing related texts and videos. All of the individuals involved in the project are very concerned about the future of *Aqkaqzanr* and worried that it is not being transmitted to the younger generations of Akha who are increasingly converting to the belief systems of 'Others', particularly Christianity.

At the same time, a growing international network of Neo-Traditionalists has been organizing meetings, festivals, and informal gatherings throughout the past several years during which they discuss and celebrate their Neo-Traditionalist identity. Akha from Myanmar, China, Laos, and Thailand have all been involved in these activities. Several large groups of Neo-Traditionalists from Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, furthermore, have visited Akha communities in China throughout the past several years.

For example, in late December of 2011, Neo-Traditionalist representatives from Burma, Laos, and Thailand traveled to Xishuangbanna Prefecture in Southwest China in order to attend several Akha New Year celebrations being held in different parts of the prefecture. As the group traveled to different villages they held small informal meetings with local villagers in order to exchange their knowledge of *Aqkaqzanr*. Different groups of Neo-Traditionalists from *Arbawr* village are involved in each of these activities as noted above.

At the same time, however, it is important to stress that not all Neo-Traditionalists have the same ideas of how to go about modifying or simplifying *Aqkaqzanr*. For example, there are some differences among the various generations of Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village as to their degree of openness to the

modification or simplification of *Aqkaqzanr* (see section 4.2.2 in chapter four). While individuals between the ages of 30-60 are generally open to simplifying *Aqkaqzanr*, elders between the ages of 60 and 80 are generally not so open. The elders generally feel that the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* being adopted by Akha in Myanmar that have converted back to *Aqkaqzanr* is too simple for them to adopt. At the same time, however, the elders note that if, after their passing, the younger generations can no longer practice the same way as they are now then they would rather have them reduce the number of ancestral offerings than adopt the *zanr* of 'Others'.

In fact, the elders generally hold that if anyone in the village would like to reduce the number of ancestral offerings from twelve to three then they are free to do so. As of the present moment, however, no villagers have yet to do this. For the elders this option is more suitable than losing more and more villagers to the *zanr* of 'Others' such as Christianity and Buddhism. As long as the villagers continue to carry *Aqkaqzanr* and not adopt either Christianity or Buddhism they feel as though they are all part of the same community.

The younger generations between the ages of 30 and 60, however, generally feel that the new version being practiced in Myanmar is easier to carry and more suitable to their lives today. In spite of these feelings, however, they would prefer to pay respect to the views of their elders and continue to follow their lead. However, as noted earlier, many of the younger generations note that when the elders pass away they will have to either adopt the new version of *Aqkaqzanr* or develop their own set of simplified rituals as they will not be able to continue practicing in the same way without the elders. They strongly note, however, that they are determined to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr* and not adopt the *zanr* of 'Others'.

While the younger generations may have different motivations than the elders they are nevertheless confident in both their desire to continue carrying *Aqkaqzanr* and also their feelings that *Aqkaqzanr* is best suited for Akha. As noted above, they are determined not to convert to the *zanr* of 'Others'. In this respect, the Akha Neo-Traditionalists in *Arbawr* village represent a more conservative group of Neo-Traditionalists when compared to those in neighboring Myanmar.

In sum, the Neo-Traditionalists of *Arbawr* village clearly feel that to be Akha is to carry *Aqkaqzanr*. They feel that Akha Protestants, Catholics, and Buddhists are no

longer like 'Akha', particularly the former two groups of Christians that both abandon their ancestors and no longer practice any aspects of *Aqkaqzanr*. As noted by Kammerer:

"In traditional Akha culture, while humanness is predicated on practicing Zanr of some kind, a particular identity depends upon the kind of Zanr practiced. Those who practice Akha customs are Akha, those who practice Lahu customs are Lahu, and so on. It follows, then, that those who adopt Jesus customs are 'Christ people' " (1990:285).

In the views of Neo-Traditionalists, Akha converts to the *zanr* of 'Others' effectively become 'Others' who identify themselves as *Kovqdawqzaq* (Catholics) or *Kalizaq* (Protestants). Akha Neo-Traditionalists further hold that their language and clothing are not as central to their ethnic identity as their practices according to *Aqkaqzanr*.

This claim can be further supported by a long standing tradition whereby a non-Akha man can become Akha. In the past as in the present, a non-Akha man can become Akha by first, marrying an Akha woman and having a son (an adopted son can also suffice). Second, he is required to either be adopted into an existing patrilineage or initiate his own. Third, his son must be given a genealogical name according to the Akha patronymic tradition. Finally, he is required to learn Akha language and live according to *Aqkaqzanr*. In the past, many Chinese men became Akha in this manner. A number of Akha in Thailand today trace their ancestry back some five to six generations to their formerly Chinese ancestor.

As noted earlier in reference to Akha in Thailand today there are different ideas about the relationship between religion and ethnicity. In the views of Neo-Traditionalists, religion and ethnicity are inseparable dimensions of their collective identity. Neo-Traditionalists are essentially confirming what anthropologists such as Kammerer, Geusau, and Tooker argue - namely that, "the most important thing for Akha identity is (*Aqkaqzanr*)" (Toyota 2003:306). Kammerer further argues that *Aqkaqzanr* "is equivalent to what anthropologists term ethnic identity" (1998:268-273).

In contrast, Christian Akha feel that religion is only one part of their Akha identity that can be replaced without changing their cultural identity. The views of Christian Akha support the argument that religion and ethnicity are separate aspects of

identity and that a change in one does not necessarily entail a change in the other. It is clear that the meaning of Akhaness for Akha Christians is no longer associated with *Aqkaqzanr*. As first stressed by early western missionaries, Akha converts were able to keep their “culture” by keeping their Akha dress and language. As a result, Akha Christians today have maintained their Akha identity by way of their Akha language and dress. Otherwise, they have completely abandoned the rituals and beliefs associated with *Aqkaqzanr*.

In conclusion, in today’s world the notion of a shared Akha identity has become increasingly fluid and hybridized rather than static or fixed. Akha have developed their own socio-cultural identities dependent upon a range of factors including nationality and religious affiliation. Religious conversion, moreover, particularly in Thailand and Myanmar, has greatly impacted local practices and notions of Akha identity in a variety of ways.

For example, Kammerer notes that, “these converts do not simply become Christians; they become Akha Christians. Despite the proclaimed ‘universal brotherhood of Christ’, both Akha Protestants and Akha Catholics have few ties with non-Akha-Christians (either hill-dwelling or valley-dwelling)” (1990:285-286). In reference to the Karen, Chumpol similarly notes that, “(while) Karen who converted to Christianity are still Karen, they are Christian Karen. They create a new identity as Christian Karen” (1993:5). In the case of Akha, converts to various denominations of Christianity or Buddhism are still Akha, however, they have created their new identities as Catholic or Protestant or Buddhist Akha. These new identities differ in a number of significant ways from that of Neo-Traditionalists.