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## “If You Come Often, We Are Like Relatives; If You Come Rarely, We Are Like Strangers”: Reformations of Akhaness in the Upper Mekong Region

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*In my paper, I offer a brief analysis of just some of the ways in which certain members of the Akha transnational minority group are redefining Akhaness amidst the Upper Mekong Region's ongoing transition from “battlefields to markets”. Drawing on 32 months of research in the region, I bring attention to the efforts of certain Akha elite to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging of a profoundly religious nature. I highlight the complex ways in which certain local Akha actors are reshaping culture by way of multiple and shifting orientations to the past as well as the national and transnational in the contexts of social gatherings, communal rituals, linguistic productions, multimedia engagements, and cross-border travel. I argue that by virtue of these simultaneously multi-sited representations of Akhaness, certain Akha are composing their own theories of culture that in part challenge and incorporate dominant models of nationalism and globalization, all the while reproducing and claiming a distinctly Akha way of being in the world.*

**Keywords:** Akha; Identitarian Politics; Religion; Transborder Sense of Belonging; Upper Mekong Region

*Dieser Artikel bietet eine kurze Analyse der Art und Weise, wie einige Mitglieder der transnationalen Akha Minderheit ihre „Akhaness“ inmitten der laufenden Transition der Region am oberen Mekong vom Grenzgebiet zum Wirtschaftsraum neu definieren. Basierend auf 32 Monaten Forschung in der Region, lenke ich die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Bemühungen von bestimmten Akha-Eliten, ein formales, tief religiöses pan-Akha-Zugehörigkeitsgefühl voranzutreiben. Ich hebe die komplexe Art und Weise hervor, durch die bestimmte lokale Akha-AkteurInnen Kultur durch multiple und wechselnde Bezüge zu Vergangenen ebenso wie Nationalem und Transnationalem im Kontext von gesellschaftlichen Treffen, gemeinsamen Ritualen, sprachlichen Produktionen, multimedialem Engagement und grenzüberschreitenden Reisen neu gestalten. Ich argumentiere, dass aufgrund dieser gleichzeitigen und an mehreren Standorten stattfindenden Repräsentationen von Akhaness, bestimmte Akha ihre eigenen Theorien von Kultur herausbilden, die Teile dominanter Modelle von Nationalismus und Globalisierung gleichzeitig herausfordern und einbinden und dabei eine spezifische Art des Akha-Seins in dieser Welt reproduzieren und für sich beanspruchen.*

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**Schlagworte:** Akha; Identitätspolitik; Religion; transnationales Zugehörigkeitsgefühl; Upper Mekong Region

*Wherever we Akha may be, and regardless of the country where we reside, we are all of the same 'heart and mind'. (Aryeevq Tivq, personal communication, February 26, 2010)<sup>2</sup>*

## Introduction

In my paper, I present findings from recently completed research on the post-1980s efforts of certain members of the Akha minority group to construct a more formal sense of belonging among Akha residing in the borderlands of Myanmar (Burma), China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> This transborder area forms a significant part of a region referred to as 'Zomia' by Willem Van Schendel (2002/2005) and James Scott (2009). Contemporary Akha transnational identity exchanges are being made possible in large part by the region's ongoing transformation from the opium producing battlefields of the Golden Triangle to the expanding regional market of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) (cf. Thein Swe & Chambers, 2011).

For the most part, the ethnic bonds of kinship evolving between Akha in China and Laos on the one hand and those in Myanmar and Thailand on the other are being formed either anew or for the first time.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while Akha living in Myanmar and Thailand today have long held a mythical notion of a past homeland located at a "higher" elevation to the "north", recent identity exchanges (Schein, 2004) with Akha and notions of Akhaness from China are transforming this mythical sense of homeland into an actual homeland positioned in a particular place and time. Nevertheless,

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2 In this paper, when writing Akha names and terms, I use the most recent Romanized Akha writing system developed by an international network of Akha during a meeting in Jinghong, China, in late 2008/early 2009. In this system, Roman characters not used to denote initial consonants are used as tonal markers placed at the end of syllables and not pronounced. The consonants used for tonal markers in this system include *q* (long, low tone), *r* (long, high tone), *v* (short, mid-tone), *vq* (short, low-tone), and *vr* (short, high-tone). For example, in the word "Aqkaq" (Akha), *q* marks that each syllable in the word is pronounced with a long, low tone.

3 Akha from Vietnam, where they are officially categorized as part of the larger Ha Nhi national minority, have yet to participate in the cross-border movement that is the focus of my research.

4 In Thailand, with the exception of Akha belonging to the minority *Uqbyaq* subgroup, the idea that there are Akha currently residing in China and Laos is a relatively novel idea. The majority of *Uqbyaq* Akha in North Thailand and East Myanmar trace their ancestry back fewer than three generations to various parts of far South-West China. In contrast, ties based on historically shifting patterns of residence, mobility, kinship, marriage, and trade invariably link a majority of Akha in Thailand and Myanmar today. As a result, Akha in Thailand and Myanmar have long been aware of each other's presence.

elites' representations of the larger Akha world as a diaspora are complicated by the place and hence 'homeland' (re-)making practices of local Akha communities in the region (cf. Tooker, 1988, 2012).

These reemerging or newly forged ethnic bonds are being reinforced via the 'discovery', recognition, and endorsement by certain elite of a shared pattern of descent from a common apical ancestor to whom many Akha trace their roots back over 60 known generations. Moreover, Akha re-imaginings of the borders of belonging bring attention to the crucial role of direct or face-to-face exchanges in cultivating an actual rather than "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983/1991) that neither necessarily trumps nor is trumped by other forms of belonging ranging from the national to sub-group, dialect, clan, village, and/or household. The Akha significance of the face-to-face is reflected in the remarks of an Akha woman from Kengtung, Myanmar, during the closing ceremony of the Second International Conference for Hani-Akha Culture held in North Thailand in 1996: "If you come often we are like relatives; if you come rarely, we are like strangers" (Tooker, 1996).<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the Akha world in the remaking can be likened to a non-state formation nevertheless shaped in part in the likeness and image of a state. For example, certain Akha elite are employing a number of so-called state-making technologies (Scott, 1998, p. 78) such as creating a common orthography (cf. Morton, 2010), standardizing culture, and reproducing a particular historical narrative in forming and shaping this emerging non-state space. These elite unanimously stress, however, that this reemerging Akha world is a "non-territorial" and even "virtual" space equally molded by their common bonds of ethnic kinship and divergent experiences of national belonging (Wang, personal communication, November 29, 2011). I must stress, moreover, that these elite disagree with my suggestion that their Akha world in the remaking can be likened to a non-state formation shaped in part in the likeness and image of a state. This particular case of Akha further challenges the non-state/state binary underlying Scott's (2009) more recent treatise wherein Akha are tightly cast as the quintessential 'Zomians' (p. 177; Fiskesjö, 2010; Friedman, 2011; Jonsson, 2010, 2012; Shneiderman, 2010).<sup>6</sup>

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5 In China, where these conferences originated, Akha are officially classified as part of the larger Hani National Minority.

6 Drawing largely on the work of the now deceased Dutch priest turned anthropologist Leo G. M. A. von Geusau, Scott (2009) writes of the Akha that "it would be hard to imagine a people whose oral history, practices, and

The Akha elite that are involved to varying degrees in efforts to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging include knowledgeable elders, ritual specialists, state officials, business entrepreneurs, scholars, artists, musicians, NGO workers, and Christian missionaries from various parts of the region. A significant number of these elite hail from certain villages in Myanmar, China, and Thailand, which, in recent years, have experienced unprecedented economic prosperity as a result of regional rubber and/or coffee booms. While the majority of these elite are men, a number of women are involved with at least three in positions of leadership. Moreover, Christian elite generally only participate in activities deemed to be neutral with respect to the question of religion. The latter activities have included a series of International Conferences on Hani-Akha Culture as well as more recent efforts to develop a common Akha orthography, both of which are further discussed below.

### ***A Note on Research Methods***

To date, I have conducted 32 months of fieldwork focusing on various dimensions of the transborder movement. A majority of fieldwork was conducted in the borderlands of Northern Thailand and Eastern Shan State, Myanmar, which form the movement's epicenter. I also conducted three months of fieldwork in Xishuangbanna, China, and a brief period of preliminary fieldwork in Muang Sing, Laos. My research methods were a combination of multi-sited, itinerant, and collaborative ethnography (Lassiter, 2005; Marcus, 1995; Schein, 2004, pp. 276-277).

I focused on the transnational by way of a variety of multiple and shifting localities wherein certain Akha gathered and/or engaged with other Akha as well as material representations and ideas of Akhaness. At the same time, I joined certain Akha as they traveled across borders and engaged in various kinds of identity exchanges with other Akha. Last, throughout each stage of the ethnographic process, "from fieldwork to writing and back again" (Lassiter, 2005, p. 17), I have collaborated with several key Akha figures, most notably Jianhua Wang, who is a prominent scholar and leader in the transborder movement.<sup>7</sup> Originally from an Akha village in rural South-

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cosmology represented a more comprehensive rejection of states and permanent hierarchies" (p. 177).

7 Wang's Akha name is Nyawrbyei vq Aryoeq. 'Wang Jianhua' is his official Chinese and scholarly name as reflected on his Chinese national ID card and in his scholarship.

West China, Wang currently resides in North Thailand with his Akha wife and family.

### ***Akha in the Upper Mekong Region Today***

Akha are a Tibeto-Burman speaking people residing in the predominantly upland regions of an area expanding the borders of five neighboring nation-states: Yunnan Province in South-West China, Shan State in East Myanmar, North-West Laos, North-West Vietnam, and North Thailand (Kammerer, 1998, p. 661; Lewis, 1982/1992, p. 208). The upper section of the mighty Mekong River lies at the heart of this transborder region. Estimates of national populations vary from roughly 260,000 in China, to between 150,000 to 300,000 in Myanmar, 92,000 to 100,000 in Laos, 56,616 to 75,000 in Thailand, and roughly 9,000 in Vietnam (Geusau, 2000a, pp. 125-126, 225; Toyota, 2007, p. 109; Wang, personal communication, June 11, 2010). Based on these estimates the overall Akha population in the Mekong region is somewhere between 567,616 to 744,000 persons.

### ***From Transborder Kinship to Transborder Movement***

Akha have long maintained multiple and shifting relations with various lowland polities through time and space. However, from roughly the 1950s onward, Akha communities in the region have been "drawn inwards toward the center of culture and power" within different states through ties of nationalism and citizenship (Wilson & Donnan, 1998, p. 3). The rise of modern nation-states and border regimes limited earlier connections maintained by Akha via regional trade, migration, and kinship ties (Toyota, 2000). The rise of the Cold War and imposition of the "Bamboo Curtain" between China and South-East Asia made cross-border contact especially difficult (Geusau, 2000b, p. 1). Moreover, it was during the Cold War that uplanders' cross-border distributions and contacts first made them of direct strategic interest to various national governments in and beyond the region (Kunstadter, 1967, p. 29).

Akha have subsequently been assimilated to varying degrees into five distinct nation-states, each with different minority policies. In general, the governments of post-colonial Myanmar and Laos implemented a policy of "divide and conquer" (Evans, 2003, pp. 214, 217; Gravers, 2007, pp. vii, 4-5). In contrast, the Chinese and Vietnamese governments developed a general policy of "unify and conquer" (Kampe,

1997, p. 24; Keyes, 2002, p. 1183; Mackerras, 2003a, p. 21). Moreover, in China and Vietnam, minorities tend to identify officially at least as members of one of the state-endorsed national minority groups in order to access special privileges (McKinnon, 1997, p. 286). In China and Vietnam, Akha are officially categorized as part of the larger Hani and Ha Nhi National Minorities respectively (Kampe, 1997, p. 4; Vu, 2010).<sup>8</sup>

In practice, however, state policies towards upland minorities in China, Laos, and Vietnam have resulted in their “marginalization through inclusion”, or assimilation to a national community wherein they are viewed as “primitives” requiring the civilizing influences of the political majority (Evans, 2003, pp. 214-215; Kaup, 2000; Mackerras, 2003a, p. 21; Rambo, 2003; Sturgeon, 2005, p. 51). In contrast, state policies towards upland minorities in Myanmar and Thailand have resulted in their marginalization through exclusion as either second class citizens or illegal migrants (Chayan, 2005; Gravers, 2007, pp. vii, 4-5; Keyes, 2002, p. 1183; Sturgeon, 2005, p. 51; Toyota, 2007). Moreover, the Thai government is unique in the region for downplaying ethno-religious diversity in its portrayal of a homogenous ‘Thai-Buddhist’ nation (Keyes, 2002, p. 1176; Thongchai, 1994).

Today, however, re-imagined ethnic ties are drawing certain Akha across the borders of the five nation-states in which they are embedded in ways that are generating new forms of belonging variably molded by and/or transcendent of the territorial basis of state membership (Wilson & Donnan, 1998, p. 3; Siu, 2001; Stephen, 2007). The region’s post-1980s transition from “battlefields to markets” has been accompanied by the growth of more formal cross-border ties among groups such as the Akha. As a result, certain Akha are at once embedded in their respective nation-states and part of a transborder movement.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars have noted the reemergence of similar

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8 Drawing from recent government surveys in China, Akha anthropologist Wang Jianhua estimates that there are between 1.3 and 1.4 million *Hani* in China, of which roughly 260,000 persons are *Akha* (personal communication, June 11, 2010). However, Wang further holds that, “While all Akha are Hani, not all Hani are Akha” (personal communication, June 11, 2010). In China, the Communist state’s ethnic classification project resulted in *Akha* being subsumed within the larger category of *Hani* on the presumed basis of linguistic, historical, and cultural affiliation (Cox, 1984; Geusau, 2003, p. 2). However, this categorization is problematized by the fact that *Hani* and *Akha* languages are mutually unintelligible (Sturgeon, 2005, p. 202). In addition, Cox argues that the more frontier dwelling and less sinicized *Akha* concentrated in Xishuangbanna were subsumed under the category of *Hani*, a less frontier dwelling and more sinicized group concentrated in Honghe, for reasons of both administrative convenience as well as national security (1984, pp. 21, 34, 40). Nevertheless, Geusau argues that all *Hani* and *Akha* both within as well as beyond China “consider themselves to have descended from one apical ancestor called (SmrMirOr), who is located about 55-60 generations ago by the oldest Hani and Akha clans” (Geusau, 2000, 2003, pp. 2-3).

9 This is particularly the case for Akha who are able to exercise varying degrees of what Aihwa Ong refers to as “flexible citizenship” and hence more easily navigate the new regimes of border regulation emerging in the region (Ong, 1999). Nevertheless, a rapidly expanding regional infrastructure of highways, bridges, tunnels, and telecommunications coupled with the transborder efforts of certain elite is increasingly bringing Akha and cultural productions of Akhanness from other parts of the region into the everyday realities of local Akha communities lacking



kinds of transborder ties among members of the transnational Dai-Lue minority (Davis, 2003; Wasan, 2013).<sup>10</sup>

Since the early 1990s, a particular faction of Akha elite has been working to (re-) establish more formal ties with other Akha in the region by building on what they identify as a common history, ancestral genealogy, and language. This faction is working to transform an earlier mythical sense of transborder kinship into an actual transborder movement and sense of cultural citizenship (Rosaldo, 1997, 2003; Stephen, 2007). In this context, "transborder cultural citizenship" refers to a sense of belonging and engagement in a non-territorial and yet bounded transnational "imagined community" or "cybernation" that may be used in negotiating for certain rights within particular nation-states (Anderson, 1983/1991; Mills, 2002, p. 73; Rosaldo, 1997; Stephen, 2007).

Akha transborder cultural citizenship is being cultivated via a variety of everyday practices promoting the creation of cross-border networks, constructions of Akhanness, and a transborder sense of solidarity (Stephen, 2007, p. 279). Certain Akha are organizing festivals and conferences, developing multimedia and literary publications, reforming ancestral rituals, reaffirming genealogical practices, and unifying the written Akha language as part of their movement. They are increasingly using digital technologies such as radios, televisions, cell phones, and the Internet in this process. In their efforts, however, they face significant challenges such as religious factionalism, divergent state policies, competing Akha orthographies, and internal socioeconomic divisions.

I now turn to a brief discussion of the historical roots behind the transborder movement. In particular, I focus on a series of International Conferences on Hani-Akha Culture held tri-yearly since 1993. These conferences play an instrumental role in connecting certain Hani and Akha elite in the region. Moreover, it is in the contexts of these conferences that the genealogical and place-based anchors of an emergent non-state Akha space are first re-imagined or re-forged in relation to the larger Akha world in the remaking.

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the resources, networks and/or documents required to successfully navigate contemporary border regimes.

<sup>10</sup> Akha in various parts of the region have long maintained often contentious relations with neighboring Dai speaking groups such as the Dai-Lue (Cohen, 2000; Cox, 1983; Geusau, 2000a; Hansen, 1999).



### *The 'Post-Modern' Phase of Akha History in the Making*

A series of International Conferences on Hani-Akha Culture have been held largely in China tri-yearly since 1993. The most recent conference was held in Yuanjiang County, Yunnan, China, in late November of 2012 (cf. Figure 1). Initiated by certain Han Chinese scholars under the directive of the Chinese state, over time certain Hani and Akha elite from various parts of the region have gradually assumed the reins in organizing the conferences.



The multifaceted identity exchanges taking place during these conferences have greatly influenced the trajectory and shape of the evolving transborder movement that is the focus of my paper. Akha anthropologist Wang Jianhua (n.d.) holds that

*the First International Conference on Hani-Akha Culture held in Honghe County, Yunnan, China in 1993 marked the beginning of a new, postmodern phase in Akha history during which a sense of solidarity and belonging is reemerging throughout the region (p. 23).<sup>11</sup>*

11 Wang holds that during the preceding “modern phase” of Akha history, the Akha experience is characterized by “division, loss and deconstruction” as a result of the emergence of modern nation-states and the arrival of Western Christian missionaries (n.d, p. 21). This phase is identified as a period of “colonization” on multiple fronts by more powerful, non-Akha ‘Others’. The current “postmodern” phase of Akha history is seen as a period of “decolonization” characterized by reunion, revitalization, and reconstruction, albeit in a manner that neither supplants nor is subsumed by existing national structures.

China's ethnic minority policies following the end of the Cold War were and continue to be shaped by both economic prospects as well as national security concerns, particularly in reference to border dwelling minorities with transborder co-ethnics such as Hani/Akha, Miao/Hmong, and Yao/Mien. Moreover, in reference to Hani/Akha, the Chinese state's financial support of the conference when held in China, which also allows for state surveillance and control, seems to be the primary reason it has been held almost exclusively in China. However, not unlike many other state-led projects the world over, these conferences have generated a number of intended as well as unintended consequences.

Certain developments in China were key in initiating the conferences. Following the passing of Chairman Mao, the end of the Cold War, and the lifting of the "Bamboo Curtain" in 1989, a state-driven cultural revitalization of sorts took place among various national minorities such as the Hani, under which Akha are officially subsumed (Geusau, 2000b, p. 1). During this period the Chinese state both promoted the revival of certain ethnic festivals as well as expanded the directives of numerous Nationality Research Institutes, including the Hani/Yi Nationality Research Institute in the Honghe Hani/Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan (Geusau, 2000b, p. 1).

It was the latter institute that organized the First International Conference on Hani Culture in 1993 under the direction of Han Chinese Professor Li Zi Xian of Yunnan University in Kunming, with financial support from the Kunming Bureau for South-West Border Nationalities, the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, and the Honghe Hani/Yi Autonomous Prefecture Government (Geusau, 1993, p. 1). The official title of the first conference, however, did not include the term Akha, which was only added to Hani in 1996, when the second conference was held in North Thailand.<sup>12</sup> American anthropologist Deborah Tooker (1996) notes that the first international conference was at the time the largest of its kind ever held in the Peoples Republic of China.

Hani and Akha from South-West China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand as well as non-Hani and non-Akha researchers were invited to the conference with over 180 individuals in attendance (Geusau, 1993, p. 1). The participation of Akha from regions outside of China was facilitated by Leo G.M.A. von Geusau, a now deceased Dutch

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12 The Second International Conference on Hani/Akha Culture was held in North Thailand in May of 1996. The main organizers of the conference were Dutch anthropologist Leo G.M.A. von Geusau, American anthropologist Deborah Tooker, and Dutch linguist Inga-Lill Hansson. The Tribal Research Institute in Chiang Mai, Thailand, hosted the conference and funding came largely from the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), based in Leiden, the Netherlands, and the Asia Committee of the European Science Foundation (Tooker, 1996).

priest turned anthropologist, and Paul W. Lewis, an American Baptist missionary and anthropologist. Geusau (1993), who gave one of the opening addresses, notes that in addition to being an academic forum, the conference “was also a traveling conference (as) seven buses took participants over nearly 2,500 km to and through the Yi-Hani Red River Autonomous Prefecture, to the north of Vietnam” (p. 1).

Finally, and most importantly for the purposes of the present discussion, Geusau (2000b) declares that during the inaugural conference

*Hani and Akha, separated from each other for hundreds of years, discovered for the first time that they were actually one people (and) that they shared a common apical ancestor, SmrMirOr, and genealogical system stretching back more than 1,500 years. (p. 1)*

This ‘discovery’ was revealed during the conference by Pascal Boucherie, a French scholar working with Hani and Akha in Yunnan during the 1980s. To his surprise, Boucherie found that the first 14 names of Akha and Hani ancestral genealogies were the same beginning with an apical ancestor referred to as *SmrMirOr*.

Geusau and Thai scholar Panadda Boonyasaranai stress that in spite of political, economic, and linguistic differences between and within Hani and Akha in the region, their shared genealogy and related ancestral services have emerged as a fundamental “symbol of their unity, their ‘cultural citizenship’ in a situation of diaspora” (Geusau, 2000a, pp. 146, 150; Panadda, 2004, pp. 171, 189-190). Geusau (1983) further notes that

*Patrilineal ancestry and the associated ancestor cults form the backbone of the Akha world-view, around which is organized both everyday and ceremonial life. Major seasonal ceremonies are generally related to one of the twelve yearly symbolic ancestor food offerings, in which the deceased patrilineal grandparents participate. (p. 252)*

Moreover, for middle-aged and elder Akha and Hani participants, a highlight of the conferences has been engaging in informal exchanges with other Akha and Hani during which they recite their respective genealogies and discover exactly how far back they converge (Lewis, personal communication, February 27, 2010; Luksch, 2003). From another vantage point, Wang once likened his ancestral genealogy to an “Akha passport”. He added that wherever he travels in the larger Akha world he is able to both authenticate his Akhanness as well as position himself as a more or less distant kinsman to his hosts by reciting his genealogy and listening to theirs.

However, in spite of sharing many linguistic features (Hansson, 1982, 1989, p. 32), the Akha and Hani languages are mutually unintelligible (Sturgeon, 2005, p. 202). As





Figure 2: This photograph was taken by the author during the Seventh International Conference on Hani-Akha Culture in November, 2012. In the photo, several conference participants from China are observing and discussing a poster outlining the master patrilineal ancestral genealogy shared by all Hani and Akha in Mandarin Chinese. The poster was prominently displayed in the hotel lobby where the conference was held.

a result, apart from genealogical names, which are mutually intelligible, Akha and Hani participants must communicate via a third language or translator (Mackerras, 2003b, p. 13; Panadda, 2004, p. 189). In contrast, Akha from various parts of the region are easily able to communicate with each other in Akha following some minor adjustments for language variety and borrowed terms.

Last, a growing number of Akha participants in these conferences are engaged in a scholarly as well as social movement to reconstruct a distinct Akha identity grounded in a history, language, and culture separate and apart from Hani (Wang, n.d.; Wang & Huang, 2008). In response, a few Hani elite and Han Chinese scholars have accused these Akha ethnic entrepreneurs of attempting to secede from the larger Hani nationality and challenging the Chinese state. Wang, however, who is a leading figure in these efforts, holds that while he fully agrees with and celebrates the

ancient ties of kinship between Akha and Hani, he is merely interested in uncovering the more recent historical period during which Akha splinter off from Hani and emerge as a distinct people.<sup>13</sup> These debates highlight unresolved tensions between notions of ethnicity and belonging as constructed by the Chinese state on one hand and certain members of the Akha diaspora on the other.

### ***Of Religion, Power, and Conflicting Representations of Akhaness***

Akha elite involved in current efforts to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging tend to identify two major obstacles towards their efforts. Foremost, they refer to the religious borders dividing Akha both between and within each of the nation-states in the region, particularly North Thailand and East Myanmar. Second, they note the political borders dividing Akha into five modern nation-states on the basis of divergent experiences of nationalism.

Among elite, however, there are conflicting views of the religious borders dividing the larger Akha world. For example, Christian missionary elite envision these borders as temporary obstacles to their visions of a larger Christian and in turn “civilized” Akha world that is gradually materializing according to “God’s will”. For the Christian elite, Christianity serves as a primary motivation for reaching out to their ethnic kin, particularly in ‘unreached’ parts of China, Laos, and Vietnam. In contrast, an expanding network of self-declared ‘Neo-Traditionalist’ elite attributes what is seen as a rising degree of conflict and disunity in the Akha world to the “divisive” and “destructive” efforts of Akha missionaries along with their foreign predecessors and support networks.<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the above differences, however, elite as a whole tend to downplay the significance of the barriers posed to their efforts by either divergent experiences of state nationalisms or the differences characterizing Akha societies through time and space. The latter forms of difference can be found in historically shifting and contingent forms of belonging such as clan/lineage affiliation, customary law, locality of residence, socioeconomic status, sub-group affiliation, and dialect (Lewis, 1989, pp. 6-7;

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13 Wang (2013) argues that Akha first splintered off from Hani and emerged as a distinct people in the context of an eleventh to thirteenth century Akha state (Jadae Mirkhanq) located in the upstream areas of the Red and Black Rivers in part of what is today’s southern Yunnan, China.

14 ‘Neo-Traditionalists’ define themselves in two broad manners. First, they assert that they are “carrying” a modified version of *Aqkaqzanr* or “the Ways of the Akha Ancestors”. Second, they identify themselves in opposition to Akha converts to the religions of ‘Others’, particularly Christians.

Geusau, 2000a, p. 127; Kammerer, 1986, pp. 207-224; Tooker, 2004, pp. 243-288; Toyota, 2000). American Baptist missionary and anthropologist Paul Lewis (1989, pp. 6-7) identifies anywhere between 7 and 13 dialects of Akha.

Moreover, in terms of religious borders, the Akha stand out compared to many other upland minorities in the region for strongly resisting conversion, particularly to Christianity, until as recent as the 1980s (Kammerer, 1990; Kwanchewan & Panadda, 2008, pp. 59-60). Kammerer (1990, p. 284) attributes this resistance to what she identifies as the rigid, complex, and highly demanding nature of *Aqkaqzanr*, which I feel best translates as "the Ways of the Akha Ancestors". Rising conversion trends in the 1980s are attributed to economic deprivation and the breakdown of *Aqkaqzanr* amidst the heightened incorporation of upland borderlanders into expanding nation-states and the global capitalist economy – a situation that certain Western Christian missionaries are able to capitalize on in their efforts to transform Akha 'heathens' into Christians (Kammerer, 1990, p. 284; Tooker, 2004).

This situation, however, largely applies to East Myanmar and North Thailand where a majority of Akha now identify as Christians – primarily as Catholics in East Myanmar and Protestants in North Thailand (Geusau, 2000a, p. 125; Li, 2013, p. 26).<sup>15</sup> As a side note, in contemporary North Thailand a small but growing number of Akha households and communities are converting to Buddhism, which is seen as more compatible with *Aqkaqzanr* than Christianity (Li, 2013, p.136). This trend warrants further investigation given the longstanding assumption that Christian conversion is a primary means by which upland minorities in South-East Asia assert equality with and yet distinctiveness from lowland Buddhist majorities (Keyes, 2003).

In China, only a small number of Akha have converted to Christianity since 1994 when five female nursing students in Jinghong became the very first converts under the guidance of a Christian Han Chinese instructor (Chaiyot, 2002, p. 54). Moreover, in China, a series of state-led campaigns between the 1950s and early 1980s to promote national unity and eradicate "superstitious" practices had a profound impact on curtailing, reforming, and/or standardizing local religious practices among Akha and other minorities (Tooker, 1995, p. 31; Wang, n.d., pp. 20-21). However, beginning

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15 In a recent Masters thesis focusing on conflicts stemming from rising rates of religious conversion within a particular Akha community in North Thailand, Akha scholar Haiying Li (2013) notes a large discrepancy in various religious organizations estimates of their Akha members in Thailand. Li (2013) in turn suggests that, based on her personal observations, the majority of Akha in Thailand at present are Christian (inclusive of Catholics and non-Catholics), followed by Buddhists, and finally Traditionalists (p. 26).

in the 1980s, the Chinese state initiated efforts to “revive” certain religious practices in the form of standardized “ethnic festivals” (Tooker, 1995, p. 31; Wang, n.d., p. 21).

In a recent publication of the *Akha Outreach Foundation* – the most prominent Akha evangelical organization in Thailand today – a small but gradually rising number of Akha from Laos are hailed as “the newest believers” who have nevertheless “come under intense scrutiny and [are] being persecuted for their faith” (Akha Outreach Foundation, 2011, pp. 34, 41). In the same publication, Vietnam is hailed as “the final frontier for Akha missions” (Akha Outreach Foundation, p. 41). The governments of China, Laos, and Vietnam have taken a strong anti-proselytization stance and in recent years Akha evangelists from Thailand have been both placed on blacklists in China and Laos as well as imprisoned for varying periods of time in Laos.

To further complicate matters, in 2008, a “return conversion” movement first began among some formerly Christian Akha based in the Mongsat District (Muang Sat) of East Myanmar located directly west of the Myanmar-Thai border towns of Tachilek-Maesai. This movement is described in Akha as *Aqkaq zanr tawq khovq lar-e* or “To turn back towards and pick-up or carry the Ways of the Akha Ancestors once again” (Wang, personal communication, April 16, 2010). This return conversion movement has subsequently spread to other parts of East Myanmar, where it is currently estimated to include some 400 households. The Tachilek, Myanmar-based faction of an expanding regional network of Neo-Traditionalists is the mover and shaker behind the movement.

Interestingly, several of the Tachilek, Myanmar-based elite behind the return conversion movement have either Catholic or Baptist backgrounds. The group’s leader, a charismatic reformer-prophet hereafter referred to anonymously as Ardiv Tivq, at one time considered entering the Catholic seminary in Kengtung before deciding to pursue what became a lucrative career in the Burmese military instead.<sup>16</sup> On one occasion, one of the key Thailand-based representatives of the regional network of Neo-Traditionalists, hereafter referred to anonymously as Ardiv Nyivq, informed me that

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16 Following his retirement from the military in the early 2000s, Ardiv Tivq was appointed as one of two Akha representatives on an official Minority Representatives Council based in Kengtung. Later, however, as he began to discover what he refers to as “the rich and profound nature of Aqkaqzanr” and work on behalf of its reformation and revival, he encountered resistance to his work from the Catholic leadership in Kengtung. As a result, he resigned from his position in Kengtung and moved to Tachilek where he established an independent association to work on behalf of Aqkaqzanr. Note that this association includes in its membership a number of influential Akha with backgrounds and/or ties in/with the Burmese military government.



*the situation among Akha Christians in Myanmar and Thailand is quite different. In Myanmar, most Christians are Catholic. The Catholic leaders in Myanmar have been more open in allowing their followers to retain certain aspects of Aqkaqzanr, particularly ancestral genealogies and offerings. This contrasts sharply with Thailand where the Protestant church dominates and its leaders have outright forbidden these practices. (personal communication, November 2, 2009)*

As of 2010, Ardov Tivq and several other influential Akha from Myanmar had established an independent association in Tachilek, Myanmar, referred to as *Mam Mirkhanq Aqkaqghanr Tawq-e Arnavq* (MATA) or "The Myanmar Group for Carrying Aqkaqzanr". This local association has since grown in conjunction with the regional *Naqkaw Aqkaq Dzoeqcawq Arnavq* (NADA) or "Mekong Akha Friends Network". The shared missions of these organizations are to develop and promote a common Akha writing system, (re-) educate youth and Christian converts about their "deep and rich roots" as grounded in Aqkaqzanr, sponsor international gatherings of Akha, promote regional networks among Akha leaders, and promote a general sense of dignity and pride in being (a 'Neo-Traditionalist') Akha (Wang, personal communication, June 11, 2010).

Wang Jianhua, a founding member of NADA originally from China, sees their primary mission as that of "de-colonizing" the Akha world. Their primary aim is to counter the lingering impacts of initially foreign and more recently Akha Christian missionaries in not only "bringing about the destruction of Aqkaqzanr and promoting divisions among Akha" but also misleading their subject-converts to reframe Aqkaqzanr as a "backwards and primitive form of demon worship" practiced by "lesser heathens" (cf. Nightingale, 1990; Wang, 2013, pp. 74-75). Moreover, Wang holds that Christians have been further taught to look down on other Christians belonging to different denominations. At the same time, the impacts of various national assimilationist efforts in contributing to the marginalization of Akha culture and language, while acknowledged by some Akha elite, are generally downplayed.

I am grateful to Panadda Boonyasaranai for first pointing out to me that the issue of language unification seems to be one of only a few issues that Akha from various religious factions are able to collectively address. As is revealed below, however, even the seemingly neutral issue of language is fraught with the politics of religious and state factionalism dominating the larger Akha world. In their language unification efforts, Akha elite employ particular "language ideologies" or "beliefs and feelings about language and discourse" in constructing certain representations of Akhaness (Kroskrity, 2004, pp. 501-509; Woolard, 1998).

### ***A Transborder Language: Of Literacy, Power, and Factionalism***

Regardless of their particular visions for the larger Akha world in the remaking, Akha elite generally stress the need for a unified orthography as fundamental in their efforts. Underlying these visions is a more implicit notion of the very need for the written word (in Akha), given the oral nature of Akha culture past. Wang, for example, informs me: “We need a unified orthography in order to overcome all of our political and social divisions stemming from international borders and competing Christian organizations” (personal communication, April 21, 2009). Another elite member, hereafter referred to anonymously as Ar dov Oeq, who is the former head of a now defunct development foundation with Baptist roots in North Thailand, informs me:

*Our goal is to promote a greater sense of dignity and pride in being Akha throughout the region. Our efforts to create a unified writing system are key in this regard. Many Akha are eager to read publications in our language. However, Akha literacy rates are very low and so we also need to focus our energies on literacy training. (personal communication, January 18, 2010)*

This stress among Akha elite on the centrality of the written word towards the emergence of a non-state Akha space further complicates Scott’s controversial claim that upland groups such as the Akha may have actually abandoned their early writing systems in order to make themselves illegible to various lowland polities (Gesau, 2000a, pp. 130-131; Scott, 2009, pp. 221-224).

Since the 1920s, more than 13 different writing systems have been developed for the Akha language by various local, national, and transnational actors including Akha and non-Akha government officials, missionaries, linguists, anthropologists, and human rights activists (Morton, 2010). Each of these orthographies both represent as well as (re-)produce the political and religious divisions that have come to dominate Akha identitarian politics during the latter half of the twentieth century. Since the early 2000s, however, certain Akha have been organizing meetings “by and for Akha” exclusively in order to negotiate a “common international writing system” for use by all Akha in the region.

In their unification efforts, the elite have emphasized the importance of both print as well as digital/cyber culture in promoting a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging (Anderson, 1983/1991; Stephen, 2007). An example of the latter is a video of

an Akha written language tutorial uploaded on Youtube in August 2010.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in their orthographic choices, elite have been strongly influenced by technological considerations such as ease of writing on standard keyboards and the choice of Romanized characters (Morton, 2010, pp. 112-114). Elsewhere, Hmong anthropologist Prasit Leepreecha (2008, p. 99) notes the crucial role of a Hmong script in creating an "imagined" transnational Hmong community, particularly by way of an expanding digital/cyber culture.

In reference to the Akha, it was only after elite representing various factions formally agreed to 'put aside' religious and state politics that their language unification efforts came to fruition. Following this agreement, certain Akha elite organized two international meetings in order to negotiate a "common/international Akha writing system" referred to as *Khanqgm Aqkaq Sanqbovq* (KHAS). These meetings occurred in Maesai, Thailand, in August, 2008, and Jinghong, China, on the cusp of 2009.

The main organizers of the first meeting were a prominent female NGO leader from Thailand, a leading Protestant missionary from Thailand (referred to hereafter anonymously as Ardiv Smr), a wealthy businessman from Thailand as well as Wang Jianhua and Ardiv Tivq as noted earlier. The main organizer of the second meeting was the *Association of Hani-Akha Studies* in Xishuangbanna, China. The first meeting was attended by 36 participants – 33 Akha from various parts of Myanmar, China, Laos, and Thailand, and 3 US citizens, including the current author. A total of 40 participants – all Akha from various parts of the region excluding Vietnam – took part in the second meeting.

During each of these meetings, however, disagreements erupted over seemingly minute orthographic choices reflecting elite's divergent religio-political positions (Morton, 2010, pp. 119-123). The varying language ideologies or "beliefs and feelings about language and discourse" that elite brought to the negotiating table in each context were in large part a reflection of their particular positions and interests (Kroskrity, 2004, p. 509). For example, Wang, in his position as the sole Akha representative from China during the first meeting in Maesai, Thailand, strongly encouraged the other negotiators to create an orthography that would be more akin to rather than divergent from the official state-endorsed Hani orthography in China.

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17 Daqteir (sanq bovq aq ma deq) [Akha language]. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=ELCCwPgfB6Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ELCCwPgfB6Q) (Uploaded August 3, 2010)

Ultimately, however, several key members of the Christian elite reneged on their earlier agreement to endorse the orthography that was negotiated. These members of the Christian elite held that another faction of Neo-Traditionalists violated an earlier agreement to put aside religion in their language unification efforts by “using the new writing system to bring Akha Christians back to Aqkaqzanr”. Ardov Smr, a leading Protestant missionary in Thailand, told me:

*They violated the agreement we reached earlier about putting aside the issue of religion in our efforts and focusing rather on our shared culture. As a result we will not use the writing system ratified in Jinghong. Rather, we will continue to use a modified version of the earlier system created by Paul Lewis. (Ardov Smr, personal communication, July 7, 2010)<sup>18</sup>*

Ironically, foreign and Akha Christian missionaries alike tend to stress the appeal of Christianity by virtue of the deep sense of pride that it instills in its literate converts. Neo-Traditionalists’ efforts to literalize Aqkaqzanr challenge the hegemonic hold of Christians on Akha literacy and in turn “the modern”. Following the refracturing of the Akha elite along religio-political lines, Neo-Traditionalists began to capitalize on their newly created orthography in developing language primers, literacy training programs, publications, websites, and online forums in support of a ‘Neo-Traditionalist’ Akha sense of belonging. In short, this new orthography emerged as a ‘Neo-Traditionalist’ orthography that is being used to reconstruct a literalized, “lightened” and hence “modern” version of Aqkaqzanr. An example of the latter kinds of cultural productions is included below in Figure 3.

In reference to Karen in British colonial Burma, Japanese scholar Hayami Yoko (2004) notes that the introduction of the written word by American Baptist missionaries both afforded Karen access to power and a larger social world as well as “segregate(d) and enclose(d) its users into an imagined community” (p. 43). While similar kinds of dynamics have operated among Akha, notable exceptions can be found in both the deep sense of pride that traditional Akha ritual specialists have long held in their extensive oral traditions as well as the highly intertwined nature of particular Akha orthographies and religio-political identities.

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18 Paul Lewis, an American Baptist missionary and anthropologist who is now retired in the USA, collaborated with several Lahu and Akha figures in developing the second oldest Akha orthography while in Kengtung, Burma, in the early 1950s. The ‘Lewis’ orthography has since become the most widely used system among Akha, particularly Christians, in Myanmar and Thailand today (Panadda, 2004, pp. 177-178).

### **Transborder Rearticulations of Aqkaqzanr and Akhaness**

Since 2008, Neo-Traditionalist Akha have organized four major International Gatherings in various parts of North Thailand and East Myanmar. Aqkaqzanr or "the Ways of the Akha Ancestors" has been the main issue on the agenda for each of these gatherings. I limit my discussion here to the second and fourth of these gatherings in terms of their significance in shaping the overall trajectory of the transborder movement.

The second of these gatherings occurred in an upland Akha village in North Thailand in February, 2009, in the context of The Second Akha Cultural Festival and Academic Forum with sponsors ranging from the local Thai government to the *Akha Fellowship of Thailand (FAT)*, a non-governmental and presumably non-denominational organization. More than 4,000 Akha from various parts of the region attended the event, during which public speeches were given, performances staged, and a series of more private meetings held. The latter more private meetings, organized exclusively by Neo-Traditionalists, culminated in a ceremony during which Akha representatives from Myanmar, China, and Thailand signed an official document written in the Neo-Traditionalist orthography.

The document represented a formal agreement on the part of an expanding net-



**Figure 3:** This image was downloaded by the author from the facebook page of the *Workers on behalf of the (Akha) Ancestors*, an informal association of Neo-Traditionalists based in Tachilek, Myanmar (Poeqpiq Jmma gar mr ghar, started on July 7, 2012). The image is of a literalized, pictorial representation of the master patrilineal ancestral genealogy shared by all Akha framed against the backdrop of the cosmos. Ancestral names are written in the Neo-Traditionalist Akha orthography. This image is being mass produced and distributed among Akha in the region to be used either alongside or in place of (earlier) versions of the ancestral altar constructed out of bamboo.

work of Neo-Traditionalists to support a “lightened” version of Aqkaqzanr that can be more easily “carried” in the contemporary world. One of the most significant reformations was an agreement that Akha may choose to observe as many ancestral rites per year as possible given their particular situation and still remain ‘Traditionalist’. Akha ‘Traditionalists’ generally observe 12 ancestral rites per year. In explaining the significance of this as well as each of the other amendments, Wang informed me:

*During the meeting we agreed to amend eight articles of Aqkaqzanr. It was truly a historical event and I am confident that these developments will further support our efforts to bring Christians ‘back’ to Aqkaqzanr. (personal communication, April 16, 2009)*

Moreover, shortly after the meeting, Wang, the sole China representative and signatory, scanned and e-mailed the written agreement to certain Akha officials in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China. By doing so, Wang proudly noted, “the document became the very first Akha language document ever distributed throughout the Akha diaspora” (personal communication, April 16, 2009).

An additional gathering of equal if not greater significance occurred two years later in the lowland Thai-Myanmar border town of Maesai where roughly 100 Akha elite from various parts of the region met in December, 2011, for a four day meeting referred to as *Naqkaw Aqkaq Ghanrsanrkhovq-e Baqdzan, Ardanoq Bae-e Pov*, or “The First Mekong Akha Meeting on Aqkaqzanr”. This meeting was unique in several respects. First, an expanding network of Neo-Traditionalists from Myanmar, China, Laos, and Thailand participated in the meeting. Most significantly, large delegations from Jinghong and Mengla in Yunnan, China, were present along with a smaller delegation from *Naqbaq*, an Akha controlled territory located in the part of far eastern Shan State bordering on China, Laos, and the mighty Mekong River.

Second, during the meeting, Ardov Tivq, the charismatic reformer-prophet of the Neo-Traditionalist movement, introduced and distributed a brand new publication entitled, *Aqkaq Ghanr Tawq Pardmq* or “The Book for Carrying Aqkaqzanr”. This book, the culmination of several years of work on the part of various elite, was presented as a “manual” for both returning to as well as continuing to carry a “lightened” version of Aqkaqzanr. The meeting culminated with Ardov Tivq ceremonially distributing signed hardcover copies of the text to representatives from various parts of the Akha world. Last, the meeting was unique in that NADA, the umbrella organization under which



the meeting was held, was officially created via the selection of officers, setting of term limits, and explication of its relations with other organizations in the region.

### ***Of Festivals, Ritual, and the Scaling-Up of Akhaness Past and Present***

In late December, 2009, more than a thousand Akha from Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and China joined a three day Neo-Traditionalist New Year's celebration in the border town of Tachilek, Myanmar, just a stone's throw across a narrow, muddy river from Maesai, Thailand. The celebration coincided with the buffalo (oxen), tiger, and rabbit days, marking the transition from the end of the buffalo year to the beginning of the tiger year. The Tachilek-based Neo-Traditionalist faction that financed and organized the celebration under the leadership of Ar dov Tivq selected the auspicious buffalo day for its opening according to Aqkaqzanr (cf. Footnote 16 for notes on this particular faction).

This lowland, urban-based regional celebration of the 'Traditionalist' Akha New Year, however, differed significantly from the large number of rural, upland village level celebrations simultaneously taking place elsewhere in the region. In the 'traditional', upland setting, the celebration of the New Year is marked by both a series of household level ancestral offerings as well as the collective 'birthday' of everyone in the village. However, the organizers of the urban, lowland based celebration introduced an element of continuity by way of providing their guests with 'mass produced' ancestral offerings in the form of a small piece of pounded sticky rice and some boiled chicken meat.

On the second day of the celebration, a formal opening ceremony was held during which a large number of distinguished guests from the regional Burmese military government were welcomed and entertained along with a large crowd of bystanders who were kept from blocking the view of the former by young, heavily armed male soldiers. As the distinguished guests arrived, they were greeted by Akha of varying ages and gender standing on the sides of their pathway and decked out in full 'traditional' dress reflecting their diverse regional and sub-group affiliations (cf. Figure 4). Women of varying ages pounded ornately decorated bamboo poles on the ground in unison to the steady beat of bronze gongs and cymbals played by several middle-aged





**Figure 4:** This photo was taken by the author during the welcoming ceremony staged as the Burman regional commander of Tachilek district, located front and center, arrived along with an entourage of government officials, other distinguished guests, and military escorts. Note that he is wearing an Akha jacket over his uniform. This jacket was offered to him as a gift by the Akha organizers upon arrival at the festival grounds.

men. Nearly all of the greeters conspicuously held or displayed small flags representing either the Burmese nation or Akha ‘sub-nation’.

The opening performance involved roughly 100 Akha youth, adorned in a diverse array of Akha wardrobes, singing/reciting the first 14 ancestral names of the master genealogy shared by all Akha, while clapping their hands in unison to a recorded instrumental accompaniment blasted from gigantic speakers arranged on each side of the stage. Thus, from the very beginning of the celebration, the organizers brought into play the powerful symbolism of ‘family’ and ‘kinship’. For Neo-Traditionalist elite and non-elite alike, it is their patronymic linkage system and related ancestral services that comprise the fundamental core of Akhaness amidst the vicissitudes of modernity.

Moreover, the backdrop of the main performance stage was decorated with much larger versions of the mini-flags noted earlier, albeit with the Burmese flags hung in a more central as well as higher position than the Akha flags. When I inquired about the Akha flags, I was intrigued to learn that they represent the ancient Akha homeland of *Jadae Mirkhanq*. These (re-)constructed flags are composed of a large red circle in the center surrounded by alternating white, green, yellow, and blue triangular shaped patterns (cf. Figure 4). Throughout the remainder of the celebration, I noticed additional material representations of these (re-)constructed flags in the form of patches of varying sizes sewn onto individuals' jackets and/or headdresses.

Wang later informed me that this particular color pattern first emerged during the time of *Jadae Mirkhanq* and was subsequently maintained by Akha up until the present, albeit in the 'subaltern' form of the wardrobe rather than their former 'national' flag of *Jadae*. The idea or memory of *Jadae Mirkhanq* figures prominently in the efforts of Neo-Traditionalists to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging. In one respect, the focus on *Jadae Mirkhanq* is part of an effort to reeducate Akha, particularly youth, about their history and promote a sense of pride and solidarity in being Akha. This sense of solidarity is expressed in the popular saying, *Aqkaq Tseir Kaq Tivq Kaq Ma*, or "Ten Akha are united as one". The goal of promoting Akha pride and solidarity further relates to that of countering the long-standing efforts of Christian missionaries to "brainwash their converts into thinking of *Aqkaqzanr* as a backwards form of devil worship, and then, like deadly viruses, infect our society with conflict and division" (Ar dov Tivq, personal communication, July 24, 2010). This anti-missionary/Christian stance, however, betrays the cultural logic of the phrase *Aqkaq Tseir Kaq Tivq Kaq Ma* in contributing to the 'Othering' of Christian Akha as somehow unauthentic Akha.

In another respect, the focus on *Jadae Mirkhanq* is part of a concerted effort by certain Akha scholars from China, including Wang, to historicize the Akha (Wang, 2013; Wang & Huang, 2008). In doing so, these scholars are challenging representations of Akha as a "perennial minority" without either a history or state of their own (Geusau, 1983, 2000a; Kammerer, 1989, p. 277; Scott 2009; Tooker, 1988, p. 12, 2012, p. 32). Rather, Wang and others are constructing a historical narrative wherein Akha are positioned front and center. The main backdrop for this stage is *Jadae Mirkhanq*, an eleventh to thirteenth century Akha state during which it is believed that the eth-

nogenesis of Akha occurred.<sup>19</sup> In addition, these indigenous scholars affirm Geusau's earlier claims that the distinct genealogical system, related ancestral services, and codified system of customary law (i.e. Aqkaqzanr) forming the core of Akhaness, all evolved in the context of this short-lived Akha state and not as a means of state-evasion (Geusau, 2000a, p. 139).<sup>20</sup>

As noted earlier, in their efforts these indigenous scholars are building on and to a certain extent complicating the pre-existing multi-ethnic-nationalist narrative constructed by Han Chinese scholars in post-1950s China. Moreover, their scholarly productions can be added to a mounting and highly productive critique of Scott's re-imaginings of Van Schendel's notion of 'Zomia' (Fiskesjö, 2010; Friedman, 2011; Jonsson, 2010, 2012; Shneiderman, 2010; Scott, 2009; Van Schendel, 2002/2005). As Shneiderman (2010) notes in the case of the cross-border Thangmi in the Central Himalayas (p. 312), certain Akha variably imagine themselves as a state and/or non-state people depending upon their shifting positions and interests through space and time. In either case, however, Akha elite's contemporary representations of Akhaness as having cultural and historical continuity challenge Scott's portrayal of 'Zomian' identities as inherently fluid, shifting, and dynamic; a representation with earlier roots in classic ethnographic portrayals of the region (Keyes, 1979; Leach, 1954; Lehman, 1979; Moerman, 1965).

### ***The Scaling-Up of Akhaness in the Upper Mekong Region?***

John McKinnon and Jean Michaud (2000) note a recent trend among some upland minorities in the region, particularly the Mien/Yao, Hmong/Miao, and Akha/Hani, to organize cross-border intra-ethnic conferences. They argue, however, that the participants in these conferences are often met with "stronger divergent than unifying interests" (pp. 6-7). McKinnon (1997) further argues that state interventions have "deeply compromised" the basis on which ethnic solidarity might be constructed and that "proximity and common interest" rather than ethnicity are more likely "to serve as a rationale for group formation" (p. 300).<sup>21</sup>

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19 This state is believed to have been located in the upstream areas of the Red and Black Rivers in part of what is today's southern Yunnan, China (Wang, 2013).

20 Geusau (2000a), however, differs in both his characterization of this early political formation as a "shamanic Akha chiefdom" rather than a state as well as his claim that the position of *Akha* within this "chiefdom" was that of 'refugees of war' in a *Hani* dominated, class-based corvee system (pp. 137-140).

21 On a side note, an inter-ethnic coalition of "indigenous peoples" is currently emerging in Thailand on the basis of

In reference to the Hmong, Michaud and Christian Culas (2000) argue that as a stateless, kinship based society they "cannot readily organize into a political body based on either territorial claims or supra-clan ties" (pp. 115-116). Evidence from Indochina and the USA, however, shows that Hmong have to some extent organized on supra-clan levels (Chan, 1996; Lee, 2005). Michaud and Culas (2000) further suggest that "support for a collective self-consciousness and, perhaps, some sort of political action", may come from members of the western Hmong diaspora (p. 116). Nicholas Tapp (2001) argues that the flow of remittances and projections of Hmongness from the western diaspora are reshaping local economies and conceptions of Hmongness in Thailand and Laos. Prasit (2008) further notes that a unified Hmong orthography created by foreign missionaries in 1953 and increasingly used by diasporic Hmong in various media forms at present is promoting the growth of an "imagined" Hmong transnational community (pp. 99, 111).

Louisa Schein (2004) describes the post-1990s "identity exchanges" that develop between Hmong/Miao in the USA and China via the transnational flow of people, ideas, videos, and clothing. Schein sees Chinese Miao involvement with transnationally mobile Hmong Americans seeking homeland connections as a search for resources that they are increasingly denied in post-Maoist China due to declining state intervention on behalf of minorities (Schein, pp. 286, 293). In the case of the Mien, Jeffery MacDonald (1997, p. 245) argues that their western diaspora is key in facilitating the growth of Mien transnationalism via their enhanced political-economic status and access to technology.

In contrast, there is no significant western Akha diaspora from which Akha in Asia may draw greater political and economic capital. However, there is an Asian diaspora of Akha. Building on Schein, it is possible to view the expanding array of identity exchanges occurring between Akha within and outside of China as a result of a growing realization on the part of the latter as to the relatively better-off position of Akha in China economically and politically. Ar dov Oeq, a leading Akha representative from Thailand with a Protestant background, informed me:

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both "proximity and common interest" as well as a sense of possessing a unique identity that differs from that of the majority "Thai". Certain Akha in Thailand are participating in this sub-national-level movement, which has further links to regional and global "indigenous peoples" movements in Asia and beyond. The author is currently working with geographer Ian Baird on an article analyzing the historical roots and ongoing trajectory of this movement as contextualized in Thailand.



*China wants its national minorities to be proud of their cultures and the government and university scholars there are doing a lot in this regard. In contrast, in Thailand Akha are in a very poor position along with the Lisu and Lahu – although the Akha seem to be in the poorest position. Many Akha here (in Thailand) still have not obtained full citizenship status and are unable to access basic government services. (personal communication, January 18, 2010)*

Ar dov Oeq’s views of China as expressed above, however, must be understood in light of his disenchantment with the position of Akha in Thailand, causing him to perhaps idealize the Chinese model without realizing its downsides.

Moreover, Geusau (2004) argues that, “the Akha genealogical system and related ancestor service” are a means by which Akha can realize their unity and “cultural citizenship” (pp. 146, 150).<sup>22</sup> Panadda (2004, pp. 189-190) similarly argues that in spite of political, economic, and linguistic differences between Akha in the region, the Akha genealogical system serves as a focal point in their efforts to (re-)construct a trans-border sense of belonging. As noted earlier, for Neo-Traditionalist Akha elite and non-elite alike, it is their patronymic linkage system and related ancestral services that comprise the fundamental core of Akhaness amidst the vicissitudes of modernity. As a result, it appears that both proximity and common interest as well as ethnicity are generating a transborder sense of belonging among certain Akha. After all, as Renato Rosaldo (1988, pp. 162) argues, ethnicity tends to be both instrumental *and* expressive and theories opposing the two perspectives pose a false dichotomy.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my brief analysis of just some of the ways in which certain Akha are redefining Akhaness amidst the region’s transition from “battlefields to markets” highlights the complex ways in which local actors are reshaping culture by way of multiple and shifting orientations to the past as well as the national and transnational in the contexts of social gatherings, communal rituals, linguistic productions, multimedia engagements, and cross-border travel (Jonsson, 2005; Tsing, 2005). By virtue of these simultaneously multi-sited representations of Akhaness, certain Akha are composing their own theories of culture that in part challenge and incorporate

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<sup>22</sup> John McKinnon (2001) argues that Geusau tends towards both “essentializing the people amongst whom he has spent the last 30 years” as well as downplaying “the degree of divergence among and/or between Hani/Akha” (p. 190). The same criticism can be leveled against Neo-Traditionalist Akha elite in their efforts to promote a more formal pan-Akha sense of belonging.

dominant models of nationalism *and* globalization (cf. Stephen, 2007), all the while reproducing and claiming a distinctly Akha way of being in the world. In addition, as suggested by American anthropologist Lynn Stephen (2007), "rather than labeling their efforts as either essentialist or constructionist, I suggest that we embrace their examples of geographic, spatial, and historical multisitedness and simultaneity and let them speak for themselves" (p. 307).

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