Christianity, Ancestor Worship, and Cultural Revitalization among Akha Communities in the Upper Mekong Region[1]

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Abstract

Leo Alting von Geusau defines Akha ritual practices as a form of ancestor worship, arguing that the Akha ancestor system has been traditionally the backbone of the Akha world. Anthropologists have extensively investigated ancestorhood within various contexts, many of which have characterized ancestor worship as a source of authority, morality, and kinship. Economic changes, as well as the establishment of the first Christian missions among the Akha, have gradually marginalized ancestor worship among the Akha, with the knowledge and authority held by the ancestors increasingly declining.

However, a number of associations have emerged over the past two decades to work on behalf of Akha culture, and these movements have promoted the reconsideration of the role of ancestors. Some key representatives of these Akha associations during this period have moved around the borders of upper Southeast Asia and China, interacting with the wider, transnational Akha community. This paper introduces and describes the work of numerous associations that currently revitalize Akha culture and highlights the different meanings that the group attaches to Akha ancestors. The aim of this paper is to describe the rationale behind these associations' attempt to restore ancestor worship. In addition to examining why ancestor worship occurs, this paper tackles the issue of "how" by referring to the practical manner by which a new centrality is being constructed for the Akha ancestors. Fieldwork confirms that on the one hand, Akha ancestors' revitalization seeks to create a new transnational Akha identity; on the other hand, such process questions the categories of culture and religion in relation to both traditional belief systems and Christianity.

Keywords

Introduction

The Akha New Year Festival that I attended was held on December 13–15, 2013 at the center of Tachilek, a town in Myanmar located on the border with Thailand. The Akha New Year Festival is dedicated to the group's ancestors. Numerous people attend the celebrations from surroundings villages, as do Akha representatives from Thailand and China, plus local Burmese officials and army representatives. Chairpersons of the main local Akha associations welcome these guests who are each provided with a rosette and a small Akha flag. The guests sit in a designated area on one side of the stage over which a Myanmar flag is hung. Meanwhile, most of the Akha attendees in their traditional clothing sit in the main arena. A welcome speech is given in both the Akha and Burmese languages. Immediately after the official announcement of the coming of the New Year, the head of the Tachilek administration gives a speech, during which he mentions the Burmese army's support for the continuance of traditional cultures within the country.

A retired Akha general who is described by Morton as a "charismatic reformer-prophet" (Morton, 2013, p. 42) delivers the most important speech. At the New Year Festival in 2013, he announced the establishment of a project called "House for the Ancestors" in Tachilek. He also invited the younger generations to pay their respects to the ancestors and to carry Akhazang, which has been defined as the entire Akha culture (Geusau, 1983). All Akha people share 14 common ancestors. In the past, Akha individuals were required to memorize their genealogical tree, and people from different villages could clearly establish their relations by repeating their personal lineage. The names of these shared ancestors are read aloud on stage and in speeches during the New Year celebrations. Moreover, the names are written atop an exquisite structure erected in the center of the festival grounds. During my festival visit, the retired general concluded his speech by wishing the audience a merry Christmas, while referring to similar Akha New Year celebrations transpiring in Mengla, China and Muang Long, Laos.

Methodology

The discussion presented in this paper is based on informal interviews conducted between December 2013 and August 2014 in Tachilek, Myanmar and in Chiang Rai and Doi Chang in Thailand. I joined mainly public events and meetings that the Akha associations either organized or were involved in; these participative observations provided insights into the nature of their work. In these occasions, I had informal interviews with them and group discussions on the issue of the relationship between ancestor worship and Christian faith.

The Akha

The Akha are among the many ethnic groups living around the uplands of southern China, in northeast Myanmar, and in the north of Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. The total Akha population is estimated at 500,000 to 1,000,000 (Geusau, 2000). The largest Akha community is located in China, where it is officially grouped with the Hani. The Akha belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. The Akha people were initially formed as a chiefdom near the Red and Black rivers; they moved south to Sipsongpanna and subsequently to areas that are now Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. They experienced a lengthy process of fragmentation and impoverishment. The Akha escaped from the control of other, increasingly powerful groups and eventually settled in the more inhospitable, mountainous areas of the region (Geusau, 2000). Akha, either in China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, or Vietnam, are currently integrated into national systems and their economies in various degrees. Linked to their socioeconomic integration is the growth of Christian—either Protestant or Catholic—Akha communities that have abandoned most of their traditional belief systems in which ancestors played a key role. Ancestors were indeed pivotal in ensuring the well-being of communities and individuals and regulating kinship and descent, organized in a patrilineal manner, marriages, and inter-village relations (Kammerer, 1986). Geusau (1983) defines ancestor worship as the backbone of the Akha communities' religious and social lives. Ancestors were traditionally celebrated cyclically at the household level through food offerings and in relevant moments of the year, especially in accordance to rice cultivation and harvesting.

Contextualization: Akha New Year Festival and Akha Transnational Network

The Akha New Year Festival in which I participated was somewhat of a novelty according to ethnographic records. Akha New Year was traditionally celebrated at the village level at the end of the harvesting season after the storage of new rice. The celebration used to include several rituals such as ancestor offerings conducted at the household level (Kammerer, 1986) (2). The unique aspect of the ceremony held today in Tachilek is its location: a multi-ethnic town where many Akha people live and where the events are also open to all its inhabitants. Hence, a reasonable argument in this regard is that this type of celebration clearly represents the seemingly positive balance between specific Akha identity and the integration into the wider socioeconomic urban context. Such balance consists of the process that Tooker (2004) defines as the compartmentalization of identity, recorded for minorities into broader urban contexts, and the outcome of national and economic integration. According to this argument and within the context of multiplied identities in daily life, ethnic identity is one component of this multiplicity, which is manifested especially in certain occasions such as public celebrations, and in specific social situations. Beyond the

main festival area, vendors and guests join the event by serving food, selling items, or staging games. As previously mentioned, the Akha New Year Festival in Tachilek is an event organized for the town as a whole, similar to the Lahu, Shan, and Chinese New Year festivals that are subsequently held. The public celebrations include numerous shows performed for the benefit of the Akha audience as well as the special guests and the entire township. In this sense, Akha culture, through the songs and dances performed on stage, is designed to be appreciated by both Akha and non-Akha audience members, which is a feature of more recent Akha New Year festivals. Another new aspect is the cooperation and linkage among Akha associations at the transnational level. The Akha New Year Festival is currently an international event participated in by Akha people from neighboring countries, and this festival tours the key Akha areas in Myanmar, China, Laos, and Thailand. All of these Akha associations somehow aim to conserve and revitalize the Akha culture.

Four associations can be considered as pivotal in the conservation and revitalization of the Akha culture, and three of them are involved in New Year festivals. The Association for Akha Education and Culture in Thailand (AFECT) is probably the oldest association; it was established in Chiang Rai, Thailand in 1981. Dutch scholar Alting von Geusau founded AFECT, which was initially devoted to the provision of education for Akha children. The association currently operates a dormitory for young children in Chiang Rai Province. During the years of its activity, AFECT also focused on other issues such as health and water quality. Moreover, AFECT conducts research projects to save the disappearing Akha culture in terms of traditional stories and enhance knowledge about medicinal plants, while supporting the bands that intend to play music using the Akha language. It has organized projects in Luang Nan Tha Province, Laos, with particular attention to health issues and access to education for Akha students. Mr. Athu, is the current dean of AFECT. He describes himself as a neo-traditionalist non-Christian who works to adapt the Akhazang to present life conditions.

Two Akha associations are based in the border town of Tachilek, Myanmar. One is an informal association called in the Akha language as "Mam Mirkhanq Aqkaqghanr Tawq-e Armavq" (MATA), which in English means "The Myanmar Group for Carrying Akhazang" (Morton, 2013, p. 43). The movement promoted by this association is described in Akha as "Aqka zanr tawq khovq lar-eor," or "to turn back toward and pick up or carry the ways of the Akha ancestors once again" (Morton, 2013, p. 42). This informal association is headed by a retired Akha general and is devoted to the promotion of ancestor worship (Morton, 2013).

The second association based in Tachilek, seemingly more firmly established legally, is named "Aqkaq Sanq Bovq Hawr-e Daevq Jeiq Daevq Kawv Ar Mavq Nymr Tavciqleir Dae," or "Akha Literature and Culture Association of Tachilek Township" in English. Interestingly, the term "Akhazang-Aqkaq Sanq" is translated in this paper as "literature and

culture." Founded in 2007, this association has three major goals: foster unity among Akha people, promote the production of traditional handcrafts, and preserve the Akha language and publish Akha language books. This association is responsible for organizing the Akha New Year Festival in Tachilek, for which it cooperates with NADA (see below) and welcomes representatives from other associations. The head of this association is a member of the local Akha Baptist Church, whereas his wife is Catholic.

The fourth key association is "Naqkaw Aqkaq Dzoeqcawq Armavq" (NADA), which in English reads the "Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability" (MAPS). Officially established in 2010 and based in Chiang Mai, NADA/MAPS is headed by a Chinese Akha who is also members of Chinese Akha associations. The primary goal of NADA/MAPS is to create and promote a network of various Akha associations at the transnational level. Another aim of NADA/MAPS is to function as a mediator between Akha communities and local authorities. Additionally, a primary objective of NADA/MAPS in the short term is to build and develop local language centers to teach both Akha and English. One of the principal activities of NADA/MAPS is the organization of international events, meetings, and conferences that are dedicated to Akha issues. Part of this objective is the promotion of the Akha New Year Festival. One major project has been established recently under the NADA/MAPS umbrella. It is sponsored by the U.S. Consulate in Chiang Mai and the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation. The project has used the funds provided by both organizations to produce a DVD that documents the significant Akha traditional rituals and publish books that aim to preserve traditional Akha rituals, ceremonies, and activities. The project also offers language courses to improve Akha people's knowledge of their new writing system. It likewise provides leadership training courses. These associations cooperate with each other on diverse aspects. The major reason for the different levels of cooperation is the lack of agreement on key objectives, especially on the meanings attached to the traditional Akha cultural elements.

Although the associations indeed share the goal of preserving Akhazang and the knowledge held by the Akha ancestors, differences exist in terms of the orientations and meanings attached to both by the leaders of different groups. For instance, due to differences over meanings, AFECT remained outside the network and was not fully involved in the aforementioned international events at the time of my survey in 2014. The issues of religious affiliation and the meaning attached to Akhazang are certainly critical among the Akha people, and these issues shape each association's orientation. This paper focuses on this vital point later in the discussion after it specifies the shared goals of these groups.

The Movement to Revitalize the Akha Culture

The promotion of traditional festivals or cultural traditions requires a contextual analysis. I agree with the interpretation given to the phenomenon by Reuter and Horstmann

(2013), for whom revitalization "is a form of social change—indeed a deliberate act of social engineering" (p. 4). This description implies several pre-conditions, primarily the partial decline of the traditional world and the inclusion into the mainstream of both economic and social modernity. As a consequence of this inclusion into modernity and within different cultural contexts, an "unprecedented degree of cultural and religious self-awareness" slowly emerges (Reuter & Horstmann, 2013, p.1). This self-awareness, also defined by some scholars as the distinguishing nature of self-reflexive modernity, implies the acceptance of the change and seeks to restore some elements of traditional systems through a process of adaptation to new conditions (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). The above-mentioned scholars suggest that the direction of the revitalization process is chiefly provided and influenced by the context and amount of pressure placed on different groups of people. In this sense, the context defines and determines the meaning and direction of revitalization movements. One possible outcome can be in fact the radicalization of religious intolerance and ethno-nationalism (Reuter & Horstmann, 2013). On the contrary, revitalization can have a positive effect by helping to reconstruct community ties and offering a new sense of pride to cultures that exist beyond the mainstream. This trend toward the revitalization of the Akha culture should certainly be included in this second group in terms of both the efforts made to construct a new transnational Akha community and the effects that this movement has produced.

The associations involved in this movement share this goal as well as the objective of engaging the full participation of Akha people within the mainstream societies in which they live. Such goals are based on a complex balance created between ethnic identity, national definition, and multiple religious affiliations. According to Reuter and Horstmann (2013), revitalization processes should be considered as a type of political agenda, the aim of which is the re-foundation of values. On the one hand, this value construction process promotes new issues and instruments; on the other hand, it fosters the recovery and modification of traditions. All of these associations' representatives agree on the importance of promoting the Akha people's rights within their countries of residence in terms of access to health care, education, and career opportunities; thus, the valorization of Akha culture is one tool used for ultimately upholding such rights. The New Year Festival has become a key international event as part of a wider effort to revitalize the Akha culture. The first event occurred in Tachilek in 2007 as a local experience, but it later became a transnational occasion through the efforts of NADA and its network. A number of other experiences have laid the groundwork for the internationalization of the festival over the past two decades, all of which have helped to create a new sense of belonging among the Akha people across the upper Mekong region. A major event in this sense is the International Conferences on Hani-Akha Culture, which has been held every three years since 1993; it was sustained in its early editions by the Chinese

government (Morton, 2013). Several Western scholars who had conducted research on the Akha also supported the early conferences; these scholars include Leo Alting von Geusau, Deborah Tooker, and Inga-Lill Hansson (Morton, 2013). These conferences have resulted in several major achievements since that first meeting, such as the establishment of a new Akha writing system that is referred to as "KHAS" (Morton, 2013). However, attaining full cooperation seems difficult.

A critical point in the cooperation among the associations is apparently the occasional uneasy relations between Christian and non-Christian Akha, especially with regard to the general attitude toward tradition. Christian Akha, or at least some of them, recognize the need to combine the concepts of Akhazang and ancestor worship with Christianity. By contrast, Akha who wish to defend traditional practices identify Christianity as one of the reasons for the decline of such practices. The leaders of NADA adopt the latter view in their approach, but they also acknowledge the necessity to cooperate with the Christian Akha. Different religious practices and affiliations have become a source of division among the Akha, as some studies have indicated. Kammerer (1996) documented the common practices used at the outset of the mass religious conversion process in Thailand; that is, the families embracing Christianity were forced to leave their villages and establish a new settlement, often close to the original village. This practice was discontinued after the number of Christians had reached a certain threshold; however, conflicts still ensue between groups with different religious affiliations, and even among those groups affiliated with various Christian churches (Li, 2013).

The final discussion on the language system used by the Akha ended with the self-exclusion of Akha Christian representatives. By contrast, the current New Year Festival demonstrates the possibility of maintaining a degree of unity among Akha people who follow different religions. Before discussing the nature of the problem now perceived by many Akha people with reference to their ancestors and ancestor worship practices, introducing ancestor systems as they have been generally conceptualized within anthropological debates is useful for understanding their relevance.

Ancestorhood: Kinship Authority and Identity

Scholars have intensively investigated ancestor systems and their multiple implications in the context of anthropological studies, and Gluckman and Fortes are the key scholars in this area. Gluckman (1937) is recognized for having distinguished ancestor cults from the ancestor rituals practiced after a death. Fortes (1965), substantially contributed to a wider understanding of the structural organization patterns that ancestor beliefs imply. Ancestors help to establish links among living communities, and they can regulate kinship systems and marriages and ensure community survival, usually through their benevolent influence on crop cultivation activities (Kopytoff, 1971). Ancestor authority has both a

malevolent and benevolent power over community well-being, as ancestors can punish the infraction of taboos and social rules, as well as ensure their protection once the rituals and offerings are properly performed (Kopytoff, 1971; Calhoun, 1980). In this sense, ancestors exert a type of moral authority (Calhoun, 1980). Within kinship systems, ancestorhood regulates marriages and defines the nature of relationships among people within a community and with other related groups, thus ensuring that social relations remain in place in the long term. Ancestorhood has also been defined as a form of moral kinship (Bloch, 1973). Interest in ancestor systems has declined in recent years because of the weakening of structural perspectives, within which the analysis of ancestor systems was of particular importance. However, ancestor systems themselves have recovered in a variety of contexts, changing their meaning and resisting their disappearance. For instance, in some cases, ancestor systems have become the core of millennial cults under conditions of domination, or they have been incorporated into a Christian catholic worldview and transformed into saints (Ezeanya, 1969; Lanternari, 1965; Worsley, 1957).

According to ethnographic contributions, ancestors in the traditional Akha world represent all the deceased relatives, with the exclusion of very young children, who perish before having received a proper name (Kammerer, 1986; Lewis, 1969). The name itself traditionally locates the newborn into the lineage, as a baby receives a name that begins with the last syllable of his or her father's name. As previously mentioned, all Akha and Hani people share the first 14 ancestors. These ancestors are believed to live in southern China, from which all Akha originate. Women perform the ancestor worship activity itself; once a woman is married, she becomes affiliated with her husband's ancestor line, after which she properly worships these ancestors and cares for the paraphernalia used for the offerings (Kammerer, 1986).

Geusau (2000) describes the Akha as ancestor worship practitioners, whereby ancestor worship is combined with rice fertility cults. The appropriate means of presenting offerings is codified in the Akhazang, and these offerings used to occur during all the moments of special importance for Akha communities; furthermore, the offerings were intended to ensure the ancestors' benevolence (Kammerer, 1986). One practical dimension of the ancestor worship system was the ritual meal shared by one family. With reference to this aspect, Professor Wang, head of NADA, helped me to understand the deeper significance of this practice. The sharing of food is indeed a highly tangible method of establishing links, for example, "during an Akha marriage the bride and groom break an egg, exchange the two halves with each other, then eat them" (J. Wang, personal communication, August, 23 2014). Professor Wang underscores that the ritual practices related to ancestors need to be recovered in their original state; meanwhile for Christian Akha, especially the ones affiliated with Protestant churches, the practice of food offering may be problematic to

perform. Christian missionaries in fact strictly prohibited the practice of food offering and in so doing, they ascertained the decline of ancestor worship. Additionally, changing living conditions made ancestor offering difficult to practice or extremely expensive. Little agreement exists among scholars regarding which factor has to be considered prominent in determining the crisis in the practice of ancestor worship.

Marginalization of Akha Ancestors

Dutch scholar Inga-Lill Hansson conducted a study among the Akha in northern Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s. In her paper titled "The Marginalization of Akha Ancestors" (1992), Inga-Lill Hansson argues that a deterioration process was transpiring within the traditional livelihood system at the time of her observations, to the extent that traditional ritual practices and knowledge were almost of no use for the younger generations. She argued that this factor also justified the conversion to Christianity among the Akha. The loss of traditional rice growing activities resulted in the weakening of the annual, traditional ceremony cycle, to which ancestor offerings are linked. This consideration of the marginalization of ancestors in Akha society is of relevance in this paper, as I view the new movement as an attempt to establish ancestors as being central to Akha life once again after their previous marginalization. Many Akha communities in Thailand were indeed incorporated into the market economy in the 1980s due to a number of national projects being introduced. Other scholars such as Kammerer (1990; 1996) have identified a different cause–effect relationship between Christianity and the deterioration of traditional Akha practices, arguing that the former determined the latter. With regard to this issue, I believe that both aspects should be considered and analyzed in a more in-depth manner to adequately explain the broader issue of conversion to Christianity in South East Asia, especially among minority groups.

Early conversions to Christianity among the Akha living along the Myanmar–Thailand border

In Myanmar, the evangelization of the Kentung area, in which the Akha reside, started at the end of 19th century. In particular, the process began when Baptist missionaries belonging to the American Baptist Convention reached the mountainous area surrounding Kentung. Catholic missionaries belonging to the Lombard Seminary for Foreign Missions (now known as the Pontifical Institute for Missions Abroad) soon followed. The conversion of people living in these areas commenced, and they included numerous ethnic groups such as Lahu, Akha and Wa.

Dr. and Mrs. Cushing, a Baptist couple, reached the town in 1870 and spent 11 days preaching at the town market. The Rev. and Mrs. William M. Young established the first mission station in 1901; a hospital was built shortly thereafter. This early work was aimed at Shan people, but interest in those living in the surrounding hills immediately grew. Rev.

Young also began to evangelize among the Lahu, Wa, and Akha people. The first Lahu conversion occurred in 1904, whereas some Akha became Christians in 1909. The first Akha Baptist Church in the Kentung area was founded in 1936 (Wa, Sowards & Sowards, 1963). The 3 catholic missionaries Fr. Erminio Bonetta, Fr. Leone Lombardini, and Fr. Francesco Portaluppi established in Kentung in 1912 and, after that begun to travel along the surrounding hills and reached the Lahu and Akha villages; they subsequently gained some conversions by 1913 (Gheddo, 2007).

Both churches competed aggressively in terms of their evangelization efforts, projecting old rivalries into new territories. If a certain degree of cooperation was traceable among Protestant churches, no agreement was reached among Catholics and Baptists. With reference to the Protestants, for example Presbyterians and Baptists, they decided to divide their territory to avoid conflict: Burma was assigned to the Baptists, whereas Thailand was designated to the Presbyterians (Swanson, 1983). In some cases, missionaries from other smaller-scale denominations worked in the same missions as the Baptists (Lewis & Lewis, 1981). Catholic missionaries describe the strenuous battle for control of territory among the different churches as extremely difficult for the local people to understand (Gheddo, 2007). The legacy of this struggle remains evident among those Akha belonging to different churches, as some researchers have highlighted (Li, 2013).

With regard to the presence of Buddhism, all the Christian churches concluded that an affiliation to Buddhism was an obstacle to conversion. Thus, during their journeys into new areas, all of the missionaries tended to avoid areas where temples and monks were present. The main Christian churches competed until the 1960s when the number of Western missionaries begun to decrease. Since 1966, visas for missionaries have not been renewed, whereas the issuance of new visas has ceased. Many missionaries who were forced to leave Burma moved to northern Thailand. At the same time, the Akha, Karen, and Lahu communities living along the border with Thailand and that had converted to Christianity began to flee to escape local conflicts.

Akha conversion to Christianity became a large-scale phenomenon in northern Thailand in the 1980s. Kammerer (1990) defined this event as a case of replacement, arguing that the Akha of northern Thailand at the time were merely beginning to abandon their own religious beliefs to embrace Christianity. The Akha apparently stopped following their own beliefs in greater numbers, replacing Akhazang with "Jesus Zang," in which "Zang" can also be translated as "way," in the sense of a "way of life" (Morton, 2010). Christian missionaries viewed Akhazang, and certain traditional practices that it requires, as superstition and incompatible with Christianity. Because of this approach, the Akha were required to make a clear choice, that is, to replace traditional procedures with appropriate Christian practices. Food offerings and altars were forbidden and embedded within the

rhetoric of fear, and Christianity would finally liberate the Akha from such fear. The interesting aspects were the extent to which missionary categories influenced locals, on the one hand, and the degree of the locals' meaningful appropriation of such categories, on the other hand. In the course of conversations conducted in English, I have heard many Akha referring to Akhazang as "our religion." Similar to other cases, the situation of the Akha people, originally involved Western categories' interplay with tradition, which required a re-conceptualization process. As a culturally located category, religion certainly demonstrates its limits when applied to different cultural contexts (Asad, 1993).

The reality is that Akha communities have a variety of religious affiliations. Thus, the definition of Akhazang as a religion or as a culture is a crucial issue in the field of the construction of an inclusive transnational Akha community. Both categories aim to create a sense of dignity for traditional practices that have been extensively approached as a superstition. However, the choice between these categories involves the general cultural orientation of Akha individuals or groups as well as their religious affiliation.

Conclusion: New Forms of Centrality for the Ancestors – Akha Reflexive Ethnicity in the Post-Traditional Society

Identity and its construction is a critical issue within the current sociological-anthropological debate. Two key classical contributions started the discussion: *The Invention of Tradition* by Hobsbawm (1983) and *Imagined Communities* by Anderson (1991). In both books, identity is viewed as a narrative, one that is constructed through numerous strategies and purposes. However, the process of "manipulation" varies over time and in different contexts. Heroes, celebrations, languages, clothing, and many forms of cultural production can be used to sustain a shared identity. If the contexts analyzed by Hobsbawm (1983) and Anderson (1991) consisted of a dialectical game within young nation states, the actual scenarios involved would appear to be far more complex. In other words, each revitalization movement or invention of a tradition is situated within a highly dynamic number of relations and can have diverse aims.

Akha use ancestors to reframe their identity. As a group, Akha have developed a new identity at the local, national, and supranational levels. In this sense, the revitalization movement can be considered a forward-looking movement. At the local level, Akha communities have found support through their definition of "us," and this depiction has proved useful in negotiations with "others." At the national level, states in some cases openly promote local traditions as a source of cultural pride, representative of richness, and a means of attracting tourists. The more local communities can control these processes, the more they can benefit from them. At the transnational level, a new regional identity has been constructed. This identity is

characteristic of a more effective tool for negotiation and international mutual support. Ancestors are the focal cultural objects of constructing this sense of unity and achieving a balance between the past and the future. The breadth of this unity is possible because of the increased contact possible between people living in different countries as well as thanks to new media technology (Prasit, 2008). Moreover, the rise to prominence of Akha intellectuals and activists has enabled the Akha to create new identity configurations and support them in a practical sense.

The recent growth of a transnational network among the Akha should be perceived as a conscious, cultural strategy rather than the natural result of cultural homogeneity. Current Akha celebrations transpire in urban public spaces during formalized ceremonies and shows. These events celebrate Akha identity that is shaped into a new form. The type of unity that Akha associations intend to promote is new in the sense that it differs from the form of unity that prevailed among scattered Akha communities in the past. The newness of the link being promoted relies on the creation of an impersonal and permanent connection among the Akha, because they are Akha (Morton, 2013).

Rather than referring to the general revitalization process as an attempt to protect Akha identity in itself, I prefer to follow Pieterse's (2004) argument, in addition to the interpretation of revitalization movements posited by Reuter and Horstamnn (2013). Pieterse (2004) proposes the concept of reflexive ethnicity as an alternative explanatory tool to the concept of ethnic identity. In his view, ethnic identity is fully relational, and it reflects a process whereby people and societies assume different forms under diverse conditions. The consequence of this perspective is that ethnicity is recognized as an ethnic narrative feature rather than a pervasive component. This ethnic narrative plays different roles, as framed along the possible modes of relations in terms of domination/emancipation strategies. In this manner, the protection of Akha culture is the tool to be used by the Akha for reaching numerous goals, specifically those goals that may differ from one individual to another but eventually improve the quality of life. In this sense, the attainment of wider recognition of and respect for Akha culture is also an essential part of this strategy.

In this process, ancestors play the new role of fulfilling the conditions of a reflexive assumption of tradition with novel meanings, while also constructing a different form of identity. The process is reflexive in the sense that it is somehow chosen, constructed, and then promoted through several ritualized events. As Giddens explains (in Giddens, Beck & Lash, 1994), the major difference between the past and the present in terms of the ancestor celebration lies in the deterioration of the "formulaic notion of the truth" (p. 63) which sustains traditional, non-reflexive practices. The loss of this formulaic notion of the truth is especially the case among the younger generations and is therefore at the center of Akha associations' concerns because it reflects young Akha people's lack of interest in their traditional culture.

The younger generations were once a vital part of the cultural transmission process, particularly in a world where knowledge was transmitted orally. This sense of risk, of an ultimate loss, is one reason for the intense efforts to save tradition through the holding of events and the publication of books and videos. The construction of this shared sense of belonging is threatened by the religious differentiation among the Akha and the subsequent competition or conflict that ensues in the aspect of understanding tradition. In my brief journey in Tachileck and conversations with some Akha representatives, I realized the extent of the transformation of the issue of ancestors into one of the key elements. However, a number of different meanings have been attached to ancestors, and these ancestors have been honored in various ways. For the Baptists, ancestors are the depositories of Akha culture, whereas Akhazang is intended as the set of traditional Akha culture, providing social norms and behaviors. Among some neo-traditionalists Akha Akhazang is a religion; the authentic religion of the Akha people, and the ancestors need to be honored using a form of cult still in use among those Akha who did not convert. The ancestors occupy a central position for all Akha. However, for the Baptist Akha they help define Akha identity, whereas for traditionalist and neo-traditionalists they are in addition the beneficiaries of worship. The introduction of Western categories into a non-Western context creates such division in the understanding of ancestors, which generates several attempts to control and use such categories, thus reframing tradition. Offerings are usually given to ancestors during New Year festivals, but the ceremonies related to this practice merely involve some Akha people such as representatives from certain associations.

Ancestors and Akhazang seem to have diverse meanings among Akha who shift between the two large spheres of culture and religion. Nevertheless, the goal of achieving an overall sense of unity among Akha people is helping to downplay the representation or crystallization of such differences in understanding.

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