Aqkaq Tseir Kaq Tiq Kaq Ma? or "Ten Akha Are United as One?" ¹

In late December of 2009 I traveled to the bustling Burmese border town of Tachilek by way of an expanding network of roads and river crossings connecting Southwest China, Northwest Laos, North Thailand and East Burma. I traveled in the company of three Akha from Xishuangbanna (Sipsongbanna), China – two of whom have become popular singers in both the national terrain of China and also the transborder world of the ‘diasporic’ Akha community. Akha are a Tibeto-Burman speaking group numbering roughly 700,000 people residing in the contiguous mountainous borderlands of Southwest China, East Burma, Northwest Laos, Northwest Vietnam and North Thailand.² Scholars, state officials and international investors alike are increasingly striving to envision this area as a ‘region’ in of itself as well as transform it ‘from battlefields to markets’; from the infamous and ‘unruly’ Golden Triangle to the peaceful and ‘law abiding’ Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS).

We traveled via a combination of bus, tour van, truck, foot and boat from the rapidly expanding tourist city of Jinghong in Sipsongbanna, China southeast to the Lao-China border crossing at Mohan-Boten and then south towards the Mekong River where we crossed to Chiangkhong, Thailand and then on to Thailand’s northernmost border town of Maesai. From Maesai we crossed the murky and narrow Maesai river into the Burmese border town of Tachilek where we joined a large number of Akha from various parts of the region for the second annual ‘(Neo)Traditionalist New Years Celebration’. While the rapidly expanding network of roads, towns, immigration checkpoints and so forth that facilitated as well as regulated our journey represents more of an elaboration on rather than departure from earlier

¹ In this paper, when writing Akha names and terms I use the most recent Romanized Akha writing system developed by a coalition of Akha leaders from throughout the Mekong Region during a meeting in Jinghong, China in late 2008/early 2009. In this writing system Roman characters not used to denote initial consonants are used as tonal markers placed at the end of syllables and are 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 and is not pronounced in of itself.

² In China, Akha are officially categorized and afforded special rights as part of the larger Hani National Minority. Drawing from recent government surveys in China, Akha anthropologist Wang Jianhua estimates that there are between 1.3 to 1.4 million Hani/Akha in China, of which roughly 260,000 persons are Akha (personal communication, June 11, 2010).
patterns of mobility in the region, the gathering of a large, transborder Akha community in Tachilek is a relatively new development with little or no precedence in recent historical times.

The remainder of my notes are meant as an accompaniment to a short video that I made providing a quick sketch of our journey through the contiguous borderlands of the upper Mekong Region followed by a more in-depth preview of various events that took place during the large-scale Akha New Years Celebration that we attended in the Burmese border town of Tachilek in December of 2009. The sections focusing on the New Years Celebration were initially documented independently by both me and the Akha organizers of the celebration. As such, Akha, not unlike much of the world today, are increasingly turning their attention towards documenting and disseminating various aspects of their lives and experiences through the use of a rapidly expanding array of media technologies ranging from digital cameras to DVDs and the internet.

My brief notes on the video are abridged from a paper that I first presented at Chiang Mai University in Chiang Mai, Thailand on 25 June 2010. In that paper I presented preliminary findings from a long term research project focusing on the efforts of a (Neo)Traditionalist faction of Akha elite to (re)construct a more formal transborder sense of belonging among Akha residing in the mountainous borderlands of Burma, China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. On a side note, this area comprises a significant part of the mountainous transborder region and so-called ‘zone of refuge’ referred to as ‘Zomia’ by Willem van Schendel (2005[2002]), James Scott (2009) and others. Akha, furthermore, or at least certain representations of Akha history, figure prominently in Scott’s extensive treatise on ‘Zomia’ (2009).

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3 The paper was presented as part of the Burma Talk Series organized by the Center for Research and Academic Services of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University.

4 I am grateful to the National Research Council of Thailand for allowing me to conduct dissertation research in Northern Thailand, the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Chiang Mai University for hosting me and several institutions that provided funding for the research I conducted between October of 2009 and July of 2010, including: The Institute of Thai Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, The Center for Global Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and The Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Last but not least, I am grateful to the numerous Akha who acted as my patient collaborators and generous hosts in Burma, China, Laos and Thailand. Most importantly I thank Aryoeq Nyawrbyeivq (Wang Jianhua), Miqjur Meqlaeqma (Chutima Morlaeku) and Miqkeevr Pyawqganr (Li Haiying) for their constant and generous support, feedback and criticism.
The New Years Celebration that is highlighted in the accompanying video represents just one of a number of means by which this particular faction of Akha elite is working to promote a more formal transborder sense of Akha-ness. My focus on the formal ceremonies, artistic performances and informal exchanges that took place as part of the New Years celebration aims to provide insight into the kind(s) of transborder sense(s) of belonging that are developing among Akha in the region. I also aim to highlight the innovative ways in which the elite behind these efforts are attempting to deal with the now ubiquitous political and religious borders dividing Akha communities.

“KHOVQ XEEVQ KAR TANR AQPOEQ LAWR DZOER-E”: A NEO-TRADITIONALIST AKHA NEW YEAR CELEBRATION IN HONOR OF THE ANCESTORS

Nyiq Pov Byan-e Aqkaq Zanr Tawq Luvq-e...Maer Nmr Deq Gm Leir-awr...Khovq Xeevq Kar Tanr Aqpoeq Lawr Dzoer-e.

(The Second Annual Gathering of the Akha Brothers and Sisters Who Carry Aqkaqzanr\(^6\) in Order to Celebrate the New Year and Pay Respects to the Ancestors.)

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\(^5\) Apart from briefly noting that there are a number of both strengths and also weaknesses in Scott’s notion of ‘Zomia’ it is not my intention to elaborate on these issues in this current paper.

\(^6\) While the indigenous Akha term, Aqkaqzanr, can only be rendered in English imperfectly, the phrase, ‘the AKHA way’, with an emphasis on ‘Akha’ as opposed to ‘Chinese’ or ‘Thai’ or ‘Burmese’ or ‘European’ etc., perhaps comes closest in terms of meaning.
The festival took place on the 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 23\textsuperscript{rd} and 24\textsuperscript{th} (buffalo [oxen], tiger, horse days respectively) of the 12\textsuperscript{th} month of 2009, during the transition from the year of the buffalo to the year of the tiger, in the Burma-Thai border town of Tachilek. The celebrations began on the evening of the 22\textsuperscript{nd} of December with numerous performances – on the auspicious day of the buffalo (oxen) when the “traditional” Akha New Year is generally held. On the following day, December 23\textsuperscript{rd}, a much more formal opening ceremony was held during which a number of distinguished guests from the Burmese government/military were welcomed and entertained along with a large crowd of bystanders – including Akha, Burmans, Lahu, Tai-Yai (Shan), Thai, Yunnanese Chinese and other non-Akha guests – including several foreigners from the United States. Several Akha elite based in the Tachilek area pooled their resources together along with smaller donations from other Akha in the region in order to finance and organize the celebration. One of the event’s main sponsors, hereafter anonymously referred to as \textit{Ardov Yaevq}, told me that they had neither ever received nor expected to receive financial support from the Burmese government for any of their activities.

This particular celebration was just one of numerous New Year Celebrations being held at various levels by Akha throughout the Mekong Region – including village and supra-village based celebrations. For example, in Burma just a few days after the celebration in Tachilek an additional regional-wide New Years Celebration with a much longer history was organized by Christian Akha in the town of Kengtung some 160 kilometers to the north. The Tachilek-based celebration, however, was unique in that it only began to be held in 2008, was organized by a (Neo)Traditionalist faction of Akha and attended by more than a thousand Akha from throughout the Mekong Region, many of whom either continue to “carry” or are in the process of “turning back towards and carrying” \textit{Aqkaqzanr} once again. In this context I use the term (Neo)Traditionalist to refer to individuals who are involved in a conscious effort to continue carrying what they identify as their traditions handed down to them by their ancestors while simultaneously adapting them to their current circumstances.

\textit{Four Countries, Three Borders and \textasciitilde 375 Kilometers Later}

Several days before the start of the New Years Celebration in Tachilek I departed from Jinghong by bus in the company of three Akha from two different villages in Southern Xishuangbanna, China. One of these individuals, hereafter referred to anonymously as \textit{Arnyir Tivq}, is a university educated,
thirty year old Akha woman with close kin relations in northern Thailand. The other two Akha, siblings in their mid to late twenties, were relatively famous singers now based in Beijing. Hereafter I refer to the sister as *Aqnyir Nyiq* and the brother as *Aqnyir Smr*. In fact, when we passed through China’s expansive, new immigration complex at Mohan into Boten, Laos later that morning one of the officials, a Han Chinese man, recognized Aqnyir Nyiq upon checking her brand new passport obtained just in time for our trip. One of their most popular Akha language songs, a love song sung duet style, accompanies the first ~45 seconds of the video.

Several weeks prior to the start of the celebration in Tachilek one of the events main organizers, *Ardov Tivq*, invited the sister and brother to perform in the celebration. *Aqnyir Tivq* and I in turn had been asked to accompany and facilitate their travel from Jinghong to Tachilek by way of the new, albeit incomplete, highway referred to as R-3/A-3 running in part between Jinghong, China and Houayxai, Laos - the latter being a tourism dominated town located along the Mighty Mekong River just across from the busy port of Chiangkhong, Thailand. This mainly entailed making on the spot arrangements for our travel through Laos and Thailand as well as filling out their entry/departure cards and/or visa applications as necessary at the China, Lao and Thai borders. The Akha organizers of the event in Tachilek arranged for their travel across the Burma-Thai border in Maesai.

Two other male Akha singers from Xishuangbanna were also invited to perform at the celebration. These two individuals, however, did not have time to obtain a Chinese passport and ended up taking a different, more tedious as well as expensive albeit more direct route to Tachilek by way of the China-Burma border. *Ardov Yaevq*, one of the event’s main sponsors, covered the entire groups’ travel and accommodation fees.

I was provided a unique vantage point from which to observe as well as participate in the celebrations at Tachilek by virtue of having helped to facilitate the travel of *Aqnyir Nyiq* and *Aqnyir Smr*. I was put up in the same hotel room as *Aqnyir Smr* for one night in Maesai and then two nights in Tachilek. I also joined the group at each of the meals arranged by different sponsors of the event and in the VIP tent reserved for them at the performance grounds.

*The Ancestors are Highly Venerated*
The various performances and opening ceremony of the celebration took place in a large field along the side of the bustling, dusty road running from the main border bridge in Tachilek east towards the road to Kengtung. A large open-air seating area was arranged in the center of the field just in front of a main stage decorated with flowers and a backdrop announcing various details about the celebration in Akha and Burmese, although the former was written in larger, more elegant font. In the center of this large seating area a long pole was set up on the top of which a plastic banner was placed which had the following writing on it in Akha beneath a large red circle: “Poeq Piq Jm Ma Anr Taq Heeq Ma” (The ancestors are highly venerated). During the evening performances this banner and the pole beneath it were lit up by a colorful string of lights.

Around the immediate perimeter of the central area several covered VIP seating areas were arranged. One section of this area was reserved for distinguished guests while another was reserved for a lunch sponsored by the event’s main organizers on the official opening day. Just beyond these covered areas numerous merchants from the area set up children’s games and amusement rides, adult bingo halls and stalls selling various kinds of foods and goods. In the evening this area was heavily congested with a wide variety of local and non-local festival goers.

The New Years celebration began with numerous performances on the evening of December 22. An official opening ceremony was then held the following afternoon. The following is an abridged version of my field notes focusing on the opening ceremony:

“Today seemed to be the most significant as well as formal day of the festival in terms of the various activities and performances that took place and the attendance of distinguished and general guests/participants. Akha from Burma arrived in mass in large pick-up trucks. Akha from Thailand arrived via the immigration/customs bridge and walked to the festival grounds less than 10 minutes away. Many of the Akha from Thailand - including participants and observers - came only for the afternoon on the official opening day of the festival – returning to Maesai, Thailand in the late afternoon/early evening before the border closed. In the afternoon I met several Akha and Thai friends that came for the day from Thailand. In addition, a group from Laos performed in the afternoon following the opening ceremony. A formal welcoming ceremony was organized for the Burman military governor of Tachilek, who wore a colorfully embroidered Akha jacket over his official dark green uniform, along with a number of other Burman and Akha distinguished guests. These activities all took place in the stifling heat of the afternoon sun.

The audience and performers made up a brilliant sea of men, women and children dressed in black – with many women, especially middle-aged and older ones wearing
their full headdresses and elaborate silver ornamentals. The general audience had to sit in the open air on pink plastic seats while the distinguished guests had a tent over their heads, plush leather seats to sit on and cold water served to them in fancy glasses by event staff. A large number of people were in attendance today and I was impressed by the various ways in which the higher status of the distinguished guests was displayed during the festivities. For example, during the performances that took place later in the evening, soldiers armed with semiautomatic weapons kept the general audience from blocking the view of the distinguished guests.

In the afternoon several speeches in Burmese and Akha were given by first the Burman Military Leader (in Burmese) and second Ar dov Tivq (in first Burmese and then Akha). The opening ceremony and following performances were emceed by a witty, middle-aged Akha man speaking Akha and a young Akha woman dressed in an elaborate Uqbyaq-style headdress speaking Burmese. Towards the end of the opening ceremony the celebration was officially opened by the Military Governor of Tachilek and one of the main Akha sponsors/organizers as they simultaneously cut ribbons releasing several bundles of colorful balloons into the sky to the applause of the audience. A variety of performances began on the main stage as the balloons drifted higher and higher into the sky (fieldnotes, December 23, 2010)

*Modern Traditions in the Making*

In general the musical performances were diverse and involved a great deal of hybridization between what is often referred to as earlier or more “traditional” and contemporary or more “modern” styles of dress, dance, instrumentation, music and language. Several musicians sang adapted versions of mainstream pop songs from the US, Korea, China, Burma and Thailand. A troupe of young girls dressed in black tight-fitting blouses, short skirts and colorfully beaded headdresses danced to a fast-paced, recorded Thai country or “luk-thung” song. The majority of performers, however, sang and/or danced to older as well as more recently created “Akha” songs. The musical genres on display ranged from the so-called ethnic to hip hop to pop and modern rock. There were two stages – one large central stage and a small side stage where mostly middle-aged and elderly Akha sang “old” Akha songs (using archaic Akha words) a capella style, all the while drinking rice whiskey and informally socializing. On the main stage an interesting fusion of various styles of dress, dance, instrumentation, music and language ensued.

The initial performances on both the evening of the 22nd and the afternoon of the 23rd, however, tended to focus on what we might refer to as more “traditional” aspects of Akha identity. For example, the very first performance of the festival on both the evening of the 22nd and the afternoon
of the 23rd involved a large group of Akha from all generations and both sexes, although mostly youth, adorned in various styles of “Akha” dress, reciting the first fourteen generations that all Akha (and Hani) ancestral genealogies share in common. And yet this seemingly “traditional” performance had some very “modern” elements.

For example, “traditionally” the practice of reciting genealogies appears to have been the domain of older men in general or post-menopausal women that have undergone a special initiation rite whereby the become Ya Yaer Aqma or “White Skirted Women”. In addition, it was generally recited on a more personal level - either by one individual to another as a means of determining their degree of interrelatedness or by a ritual specialist on behalf of a sick or deceased individual. In contrast, the group’s collective as well as selective recitation of the initial part of the genealogy shared by all Akha (re)presents and/or brings explicit attention from the very start of the festival to what many (Neo)Traditionalist leaders identify as being both fundamental and also unique to Akha-ness – namely their patronymic naming tradition and related genealogical system and ancestral services. Moreover the 14 generations common to nearly all Akha and Hani ancestral genealogies are said to represent the “lineage of the nations” or the names of the chiefs of a federation of chiefdoms based in Southwest China that eventually developed into Jadae state, or the Akha homeland, during the 12th and 13th centuries AD (Wang 2010:7; Yotsaphong 2009:106-107)

As for the numerous other performances that took place during the festival I have chosen to narrow my discussion to focus on the four singers from China as mentioned earlier and a self-declared “modern rock” band from Kentung, Burma that apart from presenting their own music also provided background music for many of the performances during the event. First I will discuss the Kenktung-
based modern rock band referred to as Aq Lavq Tseir Noer or “Ten Fingers”. I first met the members of the band during an informal dinner on the evening prior to the start of the festival. There were 6 members in total, including a lead vocalist, back-up vocalist, bassist, guitarist, drummer and keyboardist – all of whom were males with long either straight or curly hair dyed with streaks of blonde with the exception of the lead singer whose long, stringy hair was dyed dark black.

Over some Mekong whiskey and Golden Triangle cigarettes the lead guitarist told me in a combination of Akha, Burmese, English and Thai that he lives with his wife and four children in Kengtung where the band is based. He also noted that all of the band members have day-time jobs and some do farming in addition to playing music. He further noted:

“Cigarettes and whiskey are a part of our life. We like to play fast, heavy rock, but most other Akha, they tend to prefer slower, more traditional songs. So we often end up playing both ways, especially when we back up other performers. Some of our favorite bands include Metallica and Iron Cross (Burmese rock band). We’ve traveled to Xishuangbanna once or twice and to Thailand on numerous occasions to perform (personal communication, December 21, 2009)”.

When on stage performing the members of the band tended to dress in nearly all black, including a modified tuxedo-style vest with colorful Akha patterns woven on the front over t-shirts with the logos of various western rock bands. Most of the male teenagers that performed in the event donned a similar style of vest. Many of Ten Finger’s songs focus on issues relating to everyday life in Kengtung – including poverty, romance, unrequited love, the importance of family, the corrupting nature of wealth, the importance of education as well as Akha culture, language and solidarity. In fact the phrase used as the title of this paper, Aqkaq Tseir Kaq Tiq Kaq Ma or “~Ten Akha are United as One”, is used in one of their songs entitled, Nee sar ovq luvq-ur or “~Let there be peace”. They have produced at least one karaoke-style album including 10 songs in which the lyrics are written using a Romanized Akha writing system first developed for Akha by various leaders from the region during a meeting in Maesai, Thailand in August of 2008. This system was later slightly revised during an additional meeting held in Jinghong, China in late 2008/early 2009.

On a side note, in early March of 2010 I joined a group of Akha from Thailand and Burma on an overland tour of various Akha villages and spaces in Southern Sipsongbanna, China. On several occasions we had dinner at a well-known, up-scale Akha restaurant on the outskirts of Jinghong city. While talking with the young male and female Akha singers and musicians that performed at the
restaurant we overheard one of Ten Finger’s songs being played on one of the singer’s mobile phones. I asked her about the song and she said that she had downloaded it off of the internet after another singer at the restaurant, originally from Burma, had introduced her to the band’s music.

**Identity Exchanges**

While attending the New Years Celebration in Tachilek more than a thousand Akha from various parts of Burma, Thailand, Laos and China had opportunities to observe different styles of Akha dress, music and dance as well as informally talk and interact with Akha from diverse backgrounds. In terms of language I overheard several lively and humorous discussions among Akha from Burma, China and Thailand on variations in certain indigenous (ie. chili pepper, ice etc.) and borrowed (ie. explain, committee, beer etc.) Akha words throughout the region. The four Akha singers from China with whom I spent the majority of my time had numerous opportunities during the three day event to 1) observe and in some cases try on the official dress of Akha from other regions and subgroups, 2) observe and listen to the dances and songs of a diverse range of Akha (and in one instance participate in the traditional dance of an Akha group from Northern Laos) and 3) exchange stories and experiences with the festival’s organizers, other performers and audience members.

The four Akha singers from China in turn represented the very first group of Akha from China to either perform or attend the festival. For their debut at the festival they sang as a group. For their very first song they chose to sing a well-known song of the most famous Akha singer in China and the Mekong Region – Jarbo. The title of the song they opened with can be paraphrased as “Welcome, Brothers and Sisters, to Our Gathering...to Our Celebration!” Another well-known song of Jarbo’s, which focuses on the New Year’s Ancestral Offering and related celebrations observed by traditionalist Akha, accompanies the first four and a half minutes or so of the section of the video focusing on the opening ceremonies taking place as part of the (Neo)Traditionalist New Years Celebration held in Tachilek in December of 2009.

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8 Later that evening Aqnyir Tivq told me that the Akha singers from China had told her that they felt there was an overall lack of organization for the performances; that they never knew exactly when they might be called on to perform. They were also surprised, she noted, at receiving cash in addition to flowers and leis from various audience members during their performance, noting that this would be considered improper or rude in China.
Jarbo was a famous male Akha singer from Xishuangbanna, China that suddenly passed away while only in his thirties in 2007. In China he received several national awards for his music. It also appears that he was one of the earliest Akha musicians in China and the Mekong Region to use Akha written language alongside of Mandarin Chinese in his karaoke style VCDs – thus generating interest among Akha in general in the Akha writing system (Panadda Boonyasaranai, personal communication, June 8, 2010).9 Jarbo is perhaps the only Akha singer whose name and songs are recognized today by Akha throughout the entire Mekong Region. In addition, several years before his death he had performed at a number of events organized by Akha in Northern Thailand.

On the evening of the 21st over dinner Ar dov Tivq, one of the main organizers of the New Years Celebration in Tachileik, told me that:

“Jarbo was a very special person that I hold close to my heart (touches his heart with his clenched right hand). His songs preserve and teach a great deal about qkaqzanr. He also did a lot to help our people (personal communication, December 21, 2009)

Ardov Tivq continued to tell us how he had first met Jarbo in Mojiang, China during the 5th International Conference on Hani/Akha Culture held in 2005. And more recently he noted that after Jarbo’s passing he had visited his grave and surviving parents in the Damenglong area when he was in China for the “International Workshop on (Developing a) Common Hani-Akha Orthography” held between December 2009 and January 2009 in Jinghong, Xishuangbanna.

“Now is the time for the younger people to show off”

During the evening of the 23rd Aqnyir Tivq and I sat and watched the performances with Ar dov Nyiq, a middle-aged man who is both the official coordinator for the emerging network of (Neo)Traditionalist Akha in the Mekong Region and an accomplished musician from Thailand. We sat at a table under a canopy reserved for the main performers and organizers. We talked over beer, whiskey and thin pieces of crispy, dried goat meat. At one point I asked him, “Why aren’t you performing?” He replied, “Now is the time for the younger generations to show off. One day when they are older they will better appreciate the more traditional songs”. Meanwhile a female Akha singer from Thailand

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9 Jarbo used an earlier version of an Akha writing system developed by Chinese nationality scholars and Hani/Akha collaborators in Yunnan in 1994. This system was essentially a combined Hani-Akha orthography based on the Romanized Pinyin system.
appeared on the main stage and began singing one of *Ardor Nyiq’s* songs to a recorded instrumental accompaniment. I turned to him, “This is your song, right?” He nodded his head in agreement, stood up, approached a table of young Akha women next to us and encouraged them to raise their glasses and sing along with him. At the end of the song they all raised their glasses and drank a celebratory toast.

**Concluding Remarks on Traditions, Modernity and Transborder Aspirations**

Following Hjorleifur Jonsson I hold that ‘traditions’ have always been and continue to be constructed through individuals’ “engagements with modernity and modernization” (2004:676). Going further, however, I hold that individual’s “engagements with modernity and modernization” both influence and are influenced by their understandings of the past. Perhaps the most salient example of this can be seen in the relatively recent phenomenon of ethnic performers performing for their co-ethnics, and often doing so in seemingly “new” contexts such as a large field transformed into a festival ground in the urban center of Tachilek. Deborah Tooker argues that these kinds of staged (re)presentations of ethnicity, seemingly divorced from the “traditional” contexts where they occurred in the past (for example, the *daekhanq*, or ‘village gathering ground’ in the case of Akha), are part of the “compartmentalization” of an earlier, more holistic form of Akha identity, now “reduced to the elements of dance, dress, song, and food” on display for other Akha and non-Akha (2004:275).

While appreciative of the transformations that have taken place and are continuing to take place in Akha communities throughout the region as a result of heightened state presences and interventions, I advocate yet another approach that considers the degree to which these transformations in Akha ideas and practices of Akha-ness represent conscious efforts to maintain a certain degree of continuity with the past while adapting to new social realities and opportunities. The latter approach seems particularly salient given the larger political and economic transformations now taking place within the Greater Mekong Subregion that have made new as well as old kinds of connections possible among Akha and other communities with co-ethnics residing across the borders of multiple nation-states (see Toyota 2000 in reference to the mainly economic dimensions of these developments among Akha). This position builds on recent assertions by various scholars that the Upper Mekong Region has long been a landscape of ethnic diversity, competing powers and struggles.
over cultural and natural resources – in short that various upland groups in the region, such as the Akha, have long constructed their cultural identities and related “traditions” in relation to the contemporaneous political, economic and cultural contexts in which they were embedded to varying degrees (Giersch 2006; Gillogly 2006; Jonsson 2002).

In addition, Jonsson, in reference to the Mien, brings attention to the potential for ethnic leaders engagements with national and global discourses on ethnicity, mainly in the form of the “standardization of difference”, to create new divisions and forms of local inequalities as certain individuals come to represent and “speak for” Mien culture and language in various local, national and transnational contexts (2005:244). At the same time, however, it seems that only as the members of a distinct and unified nationality or ethnic group have various ethnic groups the world over been able to attract the attention and resources of an expanding international network of advocacy groups. For example, a leading figure in the International Romani Union notes that only as a “united nationality or ethnic group” have the Roma been able to “have a voice” in the European Council and the United Nations and gain financial support, international exposure and “credibility as an organized people” (Hancock 1988:13-16).

The potential for Akha elite, however, to standardize Akha-ness in the interests of constructing a “unified” ethnic group and in turn speak on behalf of Akha in the region is inherently limited given their cross-border distribution and divergent histories and positions in relation to particular national governments and publics. A certain degree of multi-vocality is further ensured by both the religious divisions existing within and between Akha situated in different states as well as the political divisions of Akha into five different nation-states. At the very least, when Akha leaders meet in various international contexts to negotiate a unified writing system or make official amendments to Aqkaqzanr, multi-vocality is ensured by the presence of Akha representing currently four (Burma, China, Laos and Thailand) and possibly five (if and when representatives from Vietnam become involved) different nation-states.
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