Negotiating the Changing Space of 'Zomia': A Preliminary Discussion on the Role of Language in Akha Identitarian Politics [1]

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Abstract

In this article I offer some preliminary remarks on the results of my ongoing dissertation research on the efforts of members of the Akha minority group in Thailand to construct a more formal transborder sense of belonging among Akha in Burma, China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Using a language ideologies approach, I focus on the thirteen different writing systems developed for the Akha language by various local, national and transnational actors over the past ninety years as lenses for understanding changes in Akha ethnic formations at different periods of time and in relation to multiple and shifting scales. I focus on language for two reasons. First, Akha who are directly

[1] 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 and December of 2009, the Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF); The Center for Global Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and The Center for Southeast Asian Studies also at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I would also like to thank Prof. Dr. Siraporn Nathalang and Mr. Aryoeq Nyawrbyeivq for their suggestions for improving an earlier draft of this article.

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involved in the transborder movement view the need for a unified writing system as fundamental in their project. Second, I hold that individual's beliefs and feelings about language and discourse, their language ideologies, are used to construct and represent particular social and cultural identities.

Introduction

In this article I offer some preliminary remarks on the results of my ongoing dissertation research on the efforts of members of the Akha minority group in Thailand to construct a more formal transborder sense of belonging among Akha in Burma, China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Using a language ideologies approach, I focus on the thirteen different writing systems developed for the Akha language by various local, national and transnational actors over the past ninety years as lenses for understanding changes in Akha ethnic formations at different periods of time and in relation to multiple and shifting scales.[3] I focus on language for two reasons. First, Akha who are directly involved in the transborder movement view the need for a unified writing system as fundamental in their project. Second, I hold that individual's beliefs and feelings about language and discourse, their language ideologies, are "productively used in the creation and representation of various social and cultural identities (e.g. nationality, ethnicity)." [4]

I argue that the early writing systems developed for the Akha language by various non-Akha actors, such as national governments and Western Christian missionaries in collaboration with various Akha actors, both represent and (re)produce the political and religious

[3] See Table 1 in Appendix 1 for a brief description of each of the writing systems.
[4] Paul Kroskrity, "Language Ideologies," *Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) 509.

divisions that have come to dominate Akha identitarian politics during the latter half of the twentieth century. These divisions, in many ways, parallel the process of nation-state building in mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China – a relatively late process in the context of the mountainous borderlands where upland groups, such as the Akha, predominantly reside.[5]

I further argue that the more recent writing systems developed by various coalitions of Akha from Burma, China, Laos and Thailand – "by and for Akha" – represent efforts to transcend the political and religious divisions dominating contemporary Akha identitarian politics. Akha efforts to construct a more formal transborder sense of belonging and negotiate a unified writing system as a fundamental part of their efforts in many ways parallel the post-1980s rise of regionalism in mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China.[6]

In reality, however, the situation is more complex. First, the nationalist and/or religious projects of various states and missionaries in the region served in many cases to unify formerly distinct groups as members of state constructed National Minority Groups in China[7] and Vietnam or various Christian denominations in Burma and Thailand. Second, there have always been divisions within Akha communities – along the lines of socioeconomic status, locality of residence and language variety. Third, recent efforts by Akha to construct a more formal transborder sense of belonging via the "standardization of

[5] In Thailand, for example, Thongchai notes that in 1986 the central government conducted an aerial survey of its northern borders and found that minorities residing in the region "had been living without interference and moving back and forth in the territories of (Burma, Laos, and Thailand) for a long time." (Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994] 166).

[6] For example, the (re)opening of borders in China, Laos and Vietnam, the regional expansion of formal trade and labor agreements and accelerated cross-border patterns of trade, migration and communication. See Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Khuah Khun Eng, eds., *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Change in the Border Regions* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[7] In reference to the state "construction" of the Zhuang National Minority in China see Katherine Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

difference" are potentially creating new divisions and forms of local inequalities as certain individuals come to represent and "speak for" Akha culture and language in various local, national and transnational contexts.[8]

Finally, in their transnational efforts Akha are representing themselves as members of both particular nation-states and a transnational ethnic group or indigenous people. The organization of their transnational efforts reflects that of modern nation-states convening in various contexts, such as ASEAN or the United Nations, with Akha participants speaking on behalf of or representing Akha communities in Burma, China, Laos or Thailand. At the same time the politics internal to their efforts reflect the distinct historical and sociocultural experiences of Akha communities in Zomia.[9]

Research Methods

My discussion draws on fieldwork in northern Thailand undertaken between May and August of 2008 and October and December of 2009, as well as a review of literature focusing on state minority policies and upland groups in the Greater Mekong Subregion.[10] In particular, I draw heavily from direct and indirect communication in English with Mr. Aryoeq Nyawrbyeivq, a Chinese-Akha scholar who resides in Chiangmai, Thailand with his Thai-Akha

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[8] For a discussion of this process in relation to the Mien in Thailand see Hjorleifur Jonsson, "Presentable ethnicity: Constituting Mien in contemporary Thailand," *Dislocating nation-states: Globalization in Asia and Africa*, eds. P. N. Abinales, et al. (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2005) 244.

[9] For a discussion of how the organization of the sub-national Mien Association in Thailand reflects national politics and yet its internal politics are distinctly Mien, see Hjorleifur Jonsson, *Mien Relations: Mountain People and State Control in Thailand* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2002) 116-122.

[10] During the early periods of fieldwork upon which this article is based my Akha language skills were quite limited. As a result, I primarily used Bangkok-Thai to communicate with Thai-Akha informants either directly or indirectly via on the spot Thai-Akha translators. Finally, English was the primary means of communication between me and my main research collaborator, Aryoeq Nyawrbyeivq.

wife and children.[11] Mr. Nyawrbyeivq, a self-declared "Neo-traditionalist", is a key figure behind recent efforts to unify the Akha language and build a stronger Akha transborder sense of belonging. After reading a draft of this article, Mr. Nyawrbyeivq commented that it largely presents his perspective and excludes those of Akha belonging to other factions, particularly Buddhist, Catholic, "Old" Traditionalist and Protestant Akha. Religion, according to Mr. Nyawrbyeivq, is a key factor dividing Akha in Zomia.

Background

Today, Akha communities reside in the predominantly mountainous regions of an area expanding the borderlands of five neighboring nation-states: Yunnan Province in southwestern China, Shan State in eastern Burma, northern Laos, the western tip of northern Vietnam, and northern Thailand.[12] This area forms a large part of the region referred to by Willem van Schendel and James Scott as 'Zomia'.[13] Estimates of national populations of Akha in the region vary: 1) China: ~260,000; 2) Burma: ~150,000 – 300,000; 3) Laos: ~92,000 – 100,000; 4) Thailand: ~56,616 – 75,000; 5) Vietnam: ~9,000

[11] Mr. Nyawrbyeivq is an anthropology Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Riverside. His dissertation research focuses on the historical and cultural ecology of Akha communities in Xishuangbanna(Sipsongbanna) Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China.

[12] Paul Lewis, "Basic Themes in Akha Culture," *The Highland Heritage: Collected Essays on Upland Northern Thailand*, ed. Anthony Walker (Singapore: Suvarnabhumi Books, 1992 [1982]) 208; Cornelia Kammerer, "Descent, Alliance, and Political Order Among Akha," *American Ethnologist* 25.4 (1998):661.

[13] Willem van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia," *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space*, eds. Paul H. Kratoska, et al. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005 [2002]) 275-307; James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

– placing the overall population in the Mekong region somewhere between 567,616 to 744,000 persons.[14]

The Akha, as a distinct ethnic group, are thought to have originated in Southwest China with some subgroups and clans later migrating south into various parts of Upper Mainland Southeast Asia.[15] The vast majority of Akha, however, remain in the mountainous borderlands of Xishuangbanna (Sipsongbanna), China, Eastern Shan State, Burma and Luangnamtha, Laos. Like other upland minorities in Zomia, Akha have migrated for various reasons, such as overpopulation, land scarcity, sickness, warfare and repressive state policies.[16]

The earliest English-language documented presence of Akha communities in Thailand dates from 1909.[17] Drawing from Chinese written and Akha oral historical records, however, Mika Toyota argues that multi-ethnic caravan traders, including Akha leaders and hired hands, were traveling between Southwest China and areas as far south as Chiangmai during much of the nineteenth century if not earlier.[18] In addition, drawing from Akha oral historical records, Leo

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[14] Geusau 125-126, 225; Mika Toyota, "Ambivalent Categories: Hill Tribes and Illegal Migrants in Thailand," *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies at Territory's Edge*, eds. Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) 109; Nyawrbyeivq, personal communication, June 12, 2008).

[15] The ancestral groups from which the Akha are believed to have evolved, however, are thought to have originally come from areas that today comprise parts of Northern Yunnan and Tibet.

[16] Lucien Hanks, Jane Hanks, Lauriston Sharp, and Ruth Sharp, *A Report on the Tribal Peoples in Chiengrai Province North of the Mae Kok River* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Department of Anthropology, 1964).

[17] H.R. Davies, *The Link between India and the Yangtze* (Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Publishing Company, 1970 [1909]) 362. Referenced in Cornelia Kammerer, *Gateway to the Akha World: Kinship, Ritual, and Community Among Highlanders of Thailand* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1986) 73.

[18] Mika Toyota, "Cross border mobility and social networks: Akha Caravan Traders," *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Change in the Border Regions*, eds. Grant Evans et al. (Singapore: ISEAS, 2000) 206-208.

G.M.A(lting) von Geusau argues for a presence of Akha in northern Thailand as early as the mid-nineteenth century.[19]

Geusau[20], and Scott[21], in turn, see Zomia as a "zone of refuge" for groups like the Akha who, after their subordination to various in-migrating groups, moved into Zomia and developed cultural beliefs and practices, such as shifting cultivation, in order to avoid integration into early lowland polities.[22] Cornelia Kammerer in turn argues that Akha in Northern Thailand, the southern extreme of Akha migrations, no longer view withdrawal from the Thai state as feasible given their present technology, population pressure and competition for land from lowlanders and the state.[23]

Akha relations with various lowland polities in Zomia have shifted over time. The rise of modern nation-states and border regimes has limited earlier connections maintained by Akha via regional trade, migration and kinship ties. Akha have been assimilated into five distinct nation-states, each with different minority policies. For example, in Burma, Thailand and Laos, to a lesser extent, where ethnic diversity is officially downplayed in promoting a homogenous view of the nation, "more ambitious, better educated and mobile minority people" tend to

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[19] Leo G.M.A(lting) von Geusau, "Akha Internal History: Marginalization and the Ethnic Alliance System," *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, ed. Andrew Turton (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000) 150.

[20] Geusau 130.

[21] Scott 174-177.

[22] Earlier work by various scholars, however, challenges the view of 'Zomia' as a historical "zone of refuge." See Katherine Bowie, "Unraveling the Myth of the Subsistence Economy: The Case of Textile Production in Nineteenth Century Northern Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies* 51.4 (1992): 797-823 and Andrew Walker, *The Legend of the Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999). Their findings challenge the prevalent assumption that early lowland rulers were more concerned with the control of manpower than territory. An overemphasis on manpower in itself, Walker argues, "may obscure the extent to which manpower was required to maintain control of trade routes" crisscrossing 'Zomia' and entangling its residents in political and economic alliances with various lowland polities (Walker 62-63).

[23] Kammerer 421.

identify as members of the majority.[24] In China and Vietnam, on the other hand, minorities tend to identify as members of one of the state-endorsed national minority groups in order to access special privileges.[25] In China, Akha are officially categorized and afforded special rights as members of the larger Hani National Minority.[26]

Akha in Thailand today, however, are at once embedded in the Thai nation and part of a transborder movement involving Akha from throughout Zomia. Since the early 1990s, Thai-Akha have begun to (re)establish transborder connections by building on what they identify as a common language, history and genealogy. Formerly, Akha maintained a transborder sense of belonging rooted in a mythology of a common genealogy traced back at least fifty-six generations to the first Akha.[27] They are now transforming this mythical sense of transborder kinship into an actual transborder movement and sense of cultural citizenship in a deterritorialized imagined community that may potentially be used in pushing for certain rights within their particular nation-states of residence.[28]

Akha are unifying the written Akha language, organizing cultural festivals and conferences, developing multimedia and literary publications, "modernizing" ancestral rituals and reaffirming genealogical practices as part of their efforts to construct a more formal transborder sense of belonging in Zomia. For example, in February of 2009 more than 4,000 Akha from 130 villages in Zomia attended a three day festival/conference in Thailand during which eight articles of *Akhazang*,

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[24] John McKinnon, "Ethnic Minorities on the Borderland of Southwest China," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 38.2 (1997): 286.

[25] McKinnon 286.

[26] Drawing from recent government surveys in China, Mr. Nyawrbyeivq 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 12, 2008).

[27] Kammerer 662; Janet Sturgeon, *Border Landscapes: The Politics of Akha Land Use in China and Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005) 15.

[28] Renato Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism," *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, eds. William Flores and Rita Benmayor (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997) 27-38; Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007) 240-241.

or Akha customary law, were amended in order to make them "less burdensome in modern times." [29] In addition, Akha, like other transborder groups, are increasingly using digital technologies, such as radios, televisions, cell-phones and the internet, to construct a transborder sense of belonging.[30] In their efforts, however, Akha face challenges such as religious factionalism, competing Akha orthographies, divergent state policies and internal socioeconomic divisions.

Akha directly involved in the transborder movement emphasize the need for a common writing system as fundamental in achieving their goals. For example, Mr. Nyawrbyeivq informed me that:

> "We need a common writing system in order to combat, or in order to address these problems, like the divisions by political borders, and also the social divisions by different churches." [31]

Figures 1 and 2: These photos taken by the author represent the major political and religious divisions that have dominated Akha identitarian politics since the latter half of the twentieth century.

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[29] In the words of Mr. Nyawrbyeivq, the festival/conference, "was a historical moment for us and I believe that these developments will lead more Christian Akha to re-convert back to traditional Akha (customs) in the future". (Aryoeq Nyawrbyeivq, personal communication, April 16, 2009). On an earlier occasion Mr. Nyawrbyeivq informed me that several villages of Christian Akha in Burma had re-converted to traditional Akha customs (August 15, 2008).

[30] Manu Luksch, *Virtual Borders*, 91 min. documentary, DVD (UK:ambienttv.net, 2003); Stephen 279.

[31] Nyawrbyeivq, April 21, 2009.

Since 1927, at least thirteen 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, NGO workers and activists. Their influence has invariably reinforced and/or undermined state projects of integrating and/or assimilating Akha communities. The different writing systems represent and (re)create the historical divisions that have developed between Akha during the latter half of the twentieth century – particularly the divisions by national borders and religious affiliation. The different writing systems, as such, pose significant barriers towards Akha efforts to construct a transborder sense of belonging. During the past eight years, however, Akha in Zomia have been engaging in formal negotiations "by and for Akha" for a common writing system spanning the primary divisions of religious affiliation and political borders. A formal agreement reached by Akha representing various factions in the region that they would not drag the issue of religion or state politics into the meeting rooms where they meet to negotiate a common writing system has been a key factor allowing for their unified efforts to take place.

Of Language and Borders

A middle-aged, Akha male leader from Burma stands in front of the conference room, passionately pleading for more cooperative negotiations. His pleas are in response to ongoing disagreements on how to standardize certain vowels and consonants that reflect more fundamental barriers towards the transborder project, namely internal factionalism and the now ubiquitous nature of territorial states. His arms move in accordance with a deep, commanding voice. The other thirty-six representatives from Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand each remain seated. Some attendees wear indigo vests embroidered with colorful ornate patterns over their otherwise black attire. A few sit behind laptop computers. A white banner painted with large red Romanized letters hangs across the front of the room: *Khanqgm Aqkaq Sanqbof Lavsav-eu Pafdzan* (Meeting to Develop a Common

Akha Orthography), *Laqbui, Mam, Laor, Taiq MirKhanq* (China, Burma, Laos, Thailand), *Mae Sar Meuq, Taiq MirKhanq* (Mae Sai, Thailand) 07-09/08/2008.[32] The speaker ends his pleas, reminds everyone of the historical significance of their efforts to promote stronger connections among Akha in the region and leads them in a lively chant of solidarity, "*Seu, seu, seu...Seu*!"

The vignette described above took place in August of 2008 during a three day conference organized by a number of prominent Akha representing Akha communities from Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand.[33] Vietnam was the only country lacking representation.[34] On the first day of the conference there were a total of 36 participants,

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[32] In this particular 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, r, v, f* and *x*.

[33] The Akha representatives at the meeting included, but were not limited to: 1) a middle-aged male Neo-traditionalist from Burma who is the Vice President of the Traditional Akha Association based in Tachilek, Burma, 2) a middle-aged male from Chiangrai, Thailand who was the first official Thai-Akha village headman, 3) a businessman from Chiangrai, Thailand who financially supported the conference, 4) an elderly Catholic priest from Kengtung, Burma with a doctorate in theology, 5) a middle-aged male from Chiangrai, Thailand who is a Protestant NGO leader with a doctorate, 6) a middle-aged male from Kengtung, Burma who is a Baptist Minister with a doctorate in linguistics, 7) a middle-aged male Neo-traditionalist from Chiangrai, Thailand who is a musician and NGO leader, 8) a thirty-six year old male Neo-traditionalist from Sipsongbanna, China who is pursuing a doctorate in anthropology (Mr. Aryoeq Nyawrbyeivq), 9) a forty year old female NGO leader and citizenship rights activist from Chiangmai, Thailand, 10) a roughly twenty-five year old male from Northern Laos who is studying medicine at a university in Vientiane, 11) a roughly thirty-five year old Christian missionary from the United States and 12) a roughly twenty-five year old male from the United States who is completing a doctorate in linguistics.

[34] A participant from Laos who is currently studying medicine at the National University in Vientiane, told me that he had recently contacted several Akha university students in Vietnam and obtained the names and locations of a number of Akha communities in Northern Vietnam. "It's only a matter of time," he told me, "before Akha from Vietnam will be joining us in using a common writing system and building stronger cross-border connections."

including three women;[35] with a total of six representatives from Burma, two from China,[36] 14 from Laos, 11 from Thailand and three non-Akha from the United States (including the author). The conference was held at a small guest house located on the immediate outskirts of Mae Sai, Thailand, an important center of cross-border trade and migration located directly across from Tachilek, Burma in the heart of "The Golden Triangle." The organizers of the conference chose Mae Sai in order to allow for greater participation financially and logistically on the part of non-Thai Akha.[37]

As mentioned earlier, the goal of the conference was written in large red letters painted on a white banner draped across the front of the conference room: "*Khanqgm Aqkaq Sangbof Lavsav-eu Pafdzan* (Meeting to Develop a Common Akha Orthography)." The particular writing system chosen for the banner was developed by Mr. Nyawrbyeivq and others for presentation at the meeting. The writing on the banner was modified throughout the conference as various changes to the proposed orthography were negotiated and agreed upon. The proposed orthography was the result of more than fifteen years of efforts by prominent Akha and non-Akha government officials, missionaries, linguists, anthropologists, NGO workers and

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[35] One of the female participants later told me that she complained to the conference organizers about the lack of invitation extended to female representatives from each of the four countries, requesting that at least two female representatives from each country be invited to subsequent meetings. Women, she noted, bring different perspectives and considerations to the discussion than men.

[36] Participation from China, Mr. Nyawrbyeivq noted, was limited due to state constraints on government officials' travel outside of China during the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing which coincided with the Mae Sai conference. The majority of Hani-Akha leaders from China are government officials working at various levels in Yunnan Province (personal communication, August 15, 2008).

[37] The Thai state denies Burmese citizens without special visas the right to travel beyond the immediate outskirts of Maesai; this denial is enforced via the presence of two permanent checkpoints, the first manned by Thai soldiers searching for illicit drugs, the second by Thai police searching for "illegal" migrants, located a few kilometers from Maesai along the main highway running from the border to the "center" of the nation.

activists from Zomia, all of whom are committed to the goal of promoting greater regional cooperation and cross-border connections among Akha – in spite of their often diverging views of Akha culture.[38]

The initial impetus for the meeting in mid-August of 2008 grew out of a series of "International Conferences on Hani/Akha Culture" that have been held every three years since 1993, when the first conference was held in Gejiu, Yunnan Province, China.[39] The initial conferences were attended primarily by Hani/Akha and non-Hani/Akha from the formal education sector.[40] The conference organizers have since made greater efforts to include participants from the informal education sector in order to promote the creation of cross-border networks among Hani/Akha practitioners, such as ritual priests, shamans, medicinal specialists and farmers.

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[38] There are more or less significant variations in both individuals' motivations in working for as well as visions of more formal cross-border Akha relations. These differences are largely attributed to political and religious factions that have emerged as the result of historical relations between particular Akha communities, national governments, missionaries and the staff of various national and international advocacy groups. Fundamental differences can be found in individual understandings of Akha culture "past" and what are or are not considered permissible adaptations of Akha culture "present." These views, Mr. Nyawrbyeivq argues, run along a continuum from "conservative" Traditionalists to "reformist" Neo-traditionalists to "revolutionary" Christians (August 15, 2008).

[39] The initial plan was to have the venue for the conference move across international borders every three years (Nyawrbyeivq, June 12, 2008). Inter-regional movement of the venue was geared towards encouraging greater participation by Akha communities located throughout the region, especially in the case of those Akha lacking the documentary and/or financial resources necessary for cross-border travel, and building the organizational capacities of various national-level Akha communities in the region. With the exception of the second conference, however, which was held in Chiangmai and Chiangrai Provinces of Northern Thailand in 1996, each consecutive conference has been held in various cities throughout Yunnan Province, China. The Chinese state's financial support of the conference when held in China, which also allows for state surveillance and control of conference activities, seems to be the primary reason it has been held largely in China. The political situation in Burma as well as lack of state funding and/or support in Laos and Thailand have made it difficult for Akha to organize the conference outside of China.

[40] Nyawrbyeivq, June 12, 2008.

A general "breakdown in (the) intergenerational transfer of" indigenous Akha knowledge and practices emerged as an increasingly urgent theme during the second conference held in Northern Thailand in 1996.[41] The breakdown was attributed in part to the increasing incorporation of Akha youth into various national educational systems in which they were both learning national and not Akha languages as well as "a new mode of communication and knowledge transfer: writing" as opposed to the oral basis of "traditional Akha knowledge systems." [42] In addition, during the 1996 conference the participants extensively discussed "the question of how to maintain and adapt Hani/Akha ancestor service" to contemporary circumstances – including urban settings and modern agricultural practices.[43]

In response, the conference attendees proposed several strategies for "preserv(ing) traditional knowledge while adapting to new circumstances." [44] The need to "write down traditional knowledge" in Akha and employ modern technology in doing so was prominent among the proposed strategies. The needs to develop cross-border Hani-Akha connections and reach out to international funding sources were suggested as a means of both "preserving traditional knowledge" and supporting women's networks; the latter were acknowledged as an especially vulnerable and disadvantaged group.[45] Genealogical knowledge was seen as a way for Akha and Hani to create stronger cross-border networks in light of their position as minorities throughout

[41] Deborah Tooker, "No Longer the 'Other'. Hani-Akha Conference," IIAS Newsletter 9, Summer 1996 (International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1996).

[42] Tooker 1.

[43] Geusau 150; Aje Kukaewkasem, "Report of the Oral Contributions," Second International Hani/Akha Culture Studies Conference, Chiangmai/ Chiangrai, Thailand, May 12-18, 1996.

[44] Tooker 1.

[45] Akha women were acknowledged as being particularly vulnerable to human trafficking.

the region.[46] Last, the need to "strategiz(e) means of dealing with different governmental systems in different countries" was expressed.[47] The latter two goals reflect the positions of Akha as both embedded within particular nation-states and involved in a transborder movement.

The need for a "common" Roman orthography for the Akha language, however, was not formally expressed until 1999 when the "Third International Conference on Hani/Akha Culture" was held in the city of Jinghong in Xishuangbanna, China. At that time it became increasingly apparent that a standard Roman orthography for Akha would be necessary to reach each of the goals as described above. The choice of Roman rather than Burmese, Chinese, Lao, Thai and/or Vietnamese characters for the orthography stems from the widespread use of Roman characters historically in the region by various Christian missionaries in Burma and Thailand and national governments, such as China, in developing Akha writing systems, as well as Akha

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[46] Geusau argues that, "it is the Akha genealogical and kinship system and related ancestor service, underlying (traditional) lines of (knowledge transfer), which ultimately explains the striking unity of 'customary laws' between Akha groups (in the region), and which are at the core of their structural unity and survival. Ancestor service is the means for the Akha and Hani to recognize their roots, their history, and the manner of their survival. It is also a symbol of their unity, their 'cultural citizenship' in a situation of diaspora." (Li Xi Xian, "*Acts of the First International Hani/Akha Culture Studies Conference*," February 28 –March 6, 1993 [Honghe, Kunming, China: Nationalities Publishing House, 1995] [in Chinese]; Referenced in Geusau 146,150). In addition, drawing from her experiences as a participant at the Fourth International Conference on Hani-Akha Culture held in the Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan, China in 2002, Panadda argues that in spite of political, economic and linguistic differences between Hani-Akha in Zomia, the Hani-Akha genealogical system has served as a focal point in their efforts to (re)invent a transborder sense of belonging. (Panadda Boonyasaranai [ปนัดดา บุญยสาระนัย], "Revival and Construction of Akha Ethnic Identity in Thailand and Neighboring Countries (การฟื้นฟูและสร้างอัตลักษณ์ทางชาติพันธ์ของชาวอาข่าในประเทศไทยและประเทศเพื่อนบ้าน)," *Identity Discourse* (วาทกรรมอัตลักษณ์) (กรุงเทพฯ: ศูนย์มานุษยวิทยาสิรินธร (องค์การมหาชน) 2547 [2004]) (In Thai)]) 171, 189-190.)

[47] Tooker 1.

leaders' goals of transcending national boundaries and making it easier for Akha youth to acquire competency in English.[48]

"Print culture" [49] and an emerging "digital/cyber culture" [50] were seen as instrumental towards both the creation of a deterritorialized transnational Akha community and the "preservation" of Akha culture and language. Technological considerations played a significant role in influencing the criteria upon which a common writing system was later proposed, negotiated and officially ratified during the Mae Sai meeting in August of 2008, as mentioned earlier. Elsewhere, Prasit Leepreecha notes that a common Hmong script first developed in 1953, along with the diasporic Hmong community's more recent use of various media technologies, have been key in promoting the growth of a transnational "imagined community" among Hmong in Asia and beyond.[51]

A Twentieth-First Century Orthography

One of the underlying points of agreement among the participants at the August 2008 Akha conference in Mae Sai, Thailand was the need to develop a writing system that could be easily written using conventional keyboards. At the beginning of the conference an Akha Christian leader from Thailand read an e-mail message from Baptist Missionary/Anthropologist Paul Lewis who was instrumental in developing the second Roman-script based writing system for Akha language during the 1950s while working in Kengtung, Burma.[52] The

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[48] Nyawrbyeivq, August 15, 2008.

[49] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd ed. London: Verso, 1991 [1983]).

[50] Lynn Stephen discusses the increasingly significant role of digital technology for "transborder" indigenous Oaxacan migrants in Mexico and the U.S. in promoting "digital border crossing(s)...in maintaining family relationships, in cross-border political organizing, in fostering solidarity, in articulating human rights defense, and in constructing ethnic identities" (Stephen 279).

[51] Prasit Leepreecha, "The Role of Media Technology in Reproducing Hmong Ethnic Identity," *Living in a Globalized World: Ethnic Minorities in the GreaterMekong Subregion,* eds. Don McCaskill, et al. (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2008) 99,111.

[52] Paul Lewis is now retired and living in the United States.

"Lewis" script, in turn, has become the most widely used writing system among Akha in Burma and Thailand today.

In his message, Paul Lewis turned down an earlier e-mail invitation from Mr. Nyawrbyeivq to attend the meeting, stressing, "I believe it is the AKHA people who should decide how THEIR language is written." Second, he acknowledged that the system he "helped to produce 60 years ago", while "probably fairly good for that time, is not practical for the present and future since the tone marks cannot be used on computers and typewriters now." Last, he recommended that as they work together to "develop a practical orthography for the 21st century…they try to use consonants for tones which are not used as the initial consonants."

Later, during the same conference, an American graduate student of linguistics conducting research on Akha language gave a brief PowerPoint presentation about two other upland minority groups' experiences in developing indigenous writing systems. First, he discussed the Lisu, a group with close linguistic relations to the Akha. J.O. Fraser of the China Inland Mission and the Karen evangelist, Ba Tawas, began work on the first Romanized Lisu script in China during the 1900s. The script was later finalized in Burma during the 1920s.[53] The script has forty Roman characters – thirty consonants and ten vowels, fifteen of which are inverted letters.[54] Six basic and eight combined tones are indicated by various English punctuation marks. In his presentation, the American linguist noted that the numerous special characters of the Lisu script have made it very difficult for Lisu to expand its use beyond a limited range of literary publications.[55] Other linguists have noted that, "the Lisu want to be

[53] This information was found on the website of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship at: <http://omf.org/omf/us/peoples_and_places/people_groups/lisu_of_thailand>.

[54] David Morse and Thomas Tehan, "*How Do You Write Lisu?*" The Fourth International Conference of the Foundation for Endangered Languages: "Endangered Languages and Literacy," September 21-24, 2000 (Charlotte, North Carolina, USA, 2000) 1.

[55] The linguist did not mention, however, more recent attempts to reform the Lisu script in China. Morse and Tehan, for example, note that, "in the late 1980s a modified alphabet using only 'standard' Roman characters was starting to be used in China. This essentially changed only the 15 inverted characters plus the 'ah' slide tone. All the other tones were left as before (period, comma, etc.)" (Morse and Tehan 2).

able to do more with and in their own language, but are hindered by the input system." [56]

Next, the American linguist discussed the development of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) for Hmong language in 1953.[57] He noted that the RPA was initially developed with the intention of making it easy to write on conventional typewriters. In contrast to the Lisu script, the Hmong RPA does not use any special characters.[58] As a result, the linguist noted, the Hmong RPA has taken on an expansive number of uses in literary publications, e-mail correspondence, music and video compact discs, websites and even ATMs (in the U.S.A.). In concluding his presentation, the linguist reiterated his recommendation that the conference participants develop a script that did not use any special characters and would allow for a similar range of expanded uses.

The Hmong RPA

William Smalley, et al. discuss the history behind the development and prevalence of the Hmong RPA relative to fourteen other writing systems developed for Hmong since the early 1900s.[59] In particular, they identify three levels of controversy over Hmong writing systems in Laos and the West. First, in Laos, Hmong writing systems using scripts other than Lao conflicted with the nationalist aims of the government. Second, there were a series of debates within the Hmong community over which writing system to use. Third, there continue to be debates within the transnational Hmong community

[56] Morse and Tehan 1.

[57] Yves Bertrais, *How the "Hmong R.P.A." Was Created and Has Spread from 1953 to 1991* (Javouhey, 1991).

[58] In the Hmong RPA tones are marked by final consonants that are not already used as initial consonants.

[59] William Smalley, et al., *Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script*, trans. Mitt Moua (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 149-163.

over the questions of if and how the most prevalent system currently used, Hmong RPA, should be standardized.[60]

Smalley, et al. note that eight different meetings of Hmong leaders were held in Laos at the instigation of General Vang Pao prior to 1975 in order to choose one of what were at the time the four most dominant writing systems used by Hmong.[61] The main arguments put forth in favor of the RPA at the time were that it was already the most widely used system, was compatible with conventional typewriters and print fonts and represented "modernization." [62] Smalley, et al. note, however, that the official decisions reached by Hmong leaders in terms of selecting and later standardizing a common writing system tended not to "change the minds of those who espoused other systems" and/or certain ways of writing RPA that they felt better reflected their Hmong identity and variety of spoken Hmong.[63]

Arguments were also put forth in favor of other writing systems. First, some Hmong argued in favor of a Laotian-based alphabet developed by missionary Doris Whitelock in the early 1970s. They argued that use of the Whitelock script would both make it easier for those learning Hmong or Laotian to read the other language as well as "be less offensive to the (Laotian) government." [64] Second, other Hmong supported a messianic script referred to as Pahawh Hmong and developed in 1959 by Shong Lue Yang, or the "Mother (Source) of Language." This group argued in favor of Pahawh Hmong on the basis that "it was a Hmong product, and that all Hmong should use their own alphabet." [65]

Elsewhere, Christina Eira has taken a language ideologies approach towards examining language standardization efforts among

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[60] Smalley, et al. 160-1, 205n.26; Jonas Vangay, *Factors Hindering Agreement on a Common Script for the Language of Academic Communication of the Hmong in California* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California-Davis, 1996).

[61] Smalley, et al. 160; Jonas Vangay, *Hmong Language Development* (Merced, CA: Bilingual/Bicultural Department, Office of the Superintendent of Schools, Xerox, 1987) 5.

[62] Smalley, et al. 160.

[63] Smalley, et al. 160-1, 205n.26.

[64] Smalley, et al. 160.

[65] Smalley, et al. 160.

ex-refugee Hmong communities in Australia and the United States.[66] Eira argues that, "an intricate web of ideologies, intergroup relations, linguistic considerations and practical requirements motivate and shape the course (of language standardization). Speakers and researchers, the minority community and the dominant culture all influence its processes and outcomes." [67] Eira identifies six often overlapping discourses underlying individual's preferences for either Pahawh Hmong or the more "hegemonic" Hmong RPA: 1) nationalist, 2) scientific, 3) religious, 4) literacy, 5) technological and 6) western.[68] Each of these overlapping discourses have and continue to figure prominently in debates among Akha over how best to develop a common written language for Akha.

Overcoming Barriers to an Akha Transnational "Imagined Community"

The greatest barriers today towards Akha leaders' efforts to construct a more formal transborder sense of belonging in Zomia are of both a political and religious nature. First, Akha throughout the region have developed divergent ties of nationalism depending upon their particular country of residence - Burma, China, Laos, Thailand or Vietnam. Second, Akha communities throughout the region – inclusive of every level of sociopolitical organization from the household to village and so forth - have been fractured into numerous religious factions, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, "Old" Traditionalists, Neo-traditionalists and so forth.

Different ties of national affiliation stem from Akha communities' divergent experiences of integration and/or assimilation into particular nation-states in Zomia. In the case of the Hmong, Prasit notes that Thai nationalism as "channeled through a national language, a standardized curriculum, popular music, movies and

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[66] Christina Eira, *Discourses of Standardization: Case Study - the Hmong in the West,* Ph.D. dissertation (Department of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, The University of Melbourne, 2000).

[67] Eira iv.

[68] Eira 183.

religious ceremonies and practices" has gradually eroded "the sense of a common Hmong identity based on shared memory." [69] With some modifications, the same could be said of upland minorities' experiences of Burmese, Chinese, Lao and Vietnamese nationalisms respectively.

Religious factionalism, in turn, stems from the various kinds of historical relationships that have developed between particular Akha communities, Western missionaries belonging to different Christian denominations and Nationalist Buddhist missionaries, in the case of Burma and Thailand. In addition, collaborative efforts to develop a common script for Akha on the part of Baptist and Catholic factions have occurred only as recently as 1985. This contrasts with the Hmong RPA, which Smalley, et al. note was developed jointly by Protestant and Catholic missionaries from its very beginning in 1953.[70]

Additional barriers towards Akha efforts to construct a more formal transborder sense of belonging include sub-group divisions along the lines of clan/lineage, local residence, class/occupation and language variety. Akha leaders tend to downplay the significance of these sub-divisions, however by asserting that Akha throughout the region share a common language, history, and genealogy, and, most significantly, that the majority of Akha language varieties are mutually intelligible.[71]

In terms of sociopolitical divisions among Akha in Zomia, Akha and non-Akha scholars acknowledge three major divisions with "substantial differences in customary law" and language variety.[72] In terms of language, Paul Lewis suggests that there are between seven and thirteen dialects (or language variants) of Akha spoken in the region.[73] In addition, in Thailand, scholars note three major

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[69] Prasit 97.

[70] Smalley, et al. 152.

[71] Nyawrbyeivq, April 21, 2009.

[72] Geusau 127; Nyawrbyeivq, June 12, 2008.

[73] Paul Lewis, *A Ka daw, Ga La Pyu daw, Tai daw di sha na li = Akha, English, Thai dictionary* (Chiang Rai, Thailand: Development & Agricultural Project for Akha, 1989) 6-7.

subdivisions of Akha (U-lo, Loi-mi, and U-bya),[74] differentiated on the basis of women's headdresses, the historical period(s) during which they migrated south from China, Laos, and Burma into Siam/Thailand and their status as either merchants, agriculturalists, or landless laborers.[75]

In the case of the Hmong in Laos, Smalley, et al. argue that the "primary cohesive social units which typically persist among them are large extended families created through marriage and other means." [76] It is unclear, however, of the extent to which clan alliances facilitate and/or detract from transnational Hmong's sense of belonging to a larger "imagined community." In the case of Akha communities, Geusau notes: "Genealogical ('superclan' and clan) names (are used by Akha themselves) to indicate differences in language, customary law, and at least until recently geographical location." [77] In addition, members of one clan may conduct certain rituals differently from those of another.[78] Finally, there was until quite recently a "prohibition of marriage with clans deemed to be 'too low'." [79]

Towards Unification?

Akha efforts to develop a common writing system spanning religious and political divisions first began in 2001 when a coalition of mostly (Neo)traditionalist Akha from Burma, China, and Thailand,

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[74] "U-bya" Akha in Thailand are generally referred to in the literature as "Phami" Akha in reference to a village by that name located along the Thai-Burma border in Mae Sai district of Chiangrai Province. Individuals identifying themselves as part of this subgroup, however, refer to themselves as "U-bya" Akha.

[75] Geusau 127; Kammerer, *Gateway to the Akha World*; Paul Lewis, "Basic Themes in Akha Culture", 207-224; Deborah Tooker, "Modular Modernity: Shifting Forms of Collective Identity among the Akha of Northern Thailand," *Anthropological Quarterly* 77.2 (2004): 243-288; Toyota, *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Change in the Border Regions*.

[76] Smalley, et al. 7.

[77] Geusau 128.

[78] Kammerer 315.

[79] Geusau 148.

along with Dutch Anthropologist Leo G.M.A(lting) von Geusau, negotiated a common writing system combining the consonants and vowels used in the 1950 orthography developed by American Baptist missionary Paul Lewis and Akha collaborators on the one hand with the tonal marking system from the 1994 Hani-Akha orthography developed by scholars of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Hani-Akha collaborators on the other. In addition, in 2004 a coalition of mostly Christian Akha from Burma and Thailand negotiated a common writing system integrating orthographies originally developed with various Akha collaborators in Kengtung, Burma by Catholic missionaries in 1927 and 1985 and Paul Lewis in 1950.

Finally, two more recently unified writing systems have been negotiated by and for a more inclusive group of Akha spanning the primary divisions of religious affiliation and political borders. Foreign missionaries, linguists, anthropologists (including myself) and non-Akha state actors have been involved only marginally in these negotiations. As noted earlier, a formal agreement among Akha representing various factions in the region that they would not drag the issues of either religion or state politics into the meeting rooms where they have met to negotiate a common writing system appears to have been instrumental in bringing these meetings about.

First, in August of 2008, Akha representatives from Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand met in Mae Sai, Thailand, as previously described, for a sometimes tense three days of formal negotiations resulting in the "successful" development of a "New Common Akha Orthography." The often elicited group chant, "Seu-seu-seu…Seu!", adapted from existing Hani-Akha practices, came to signify both group solidarity and progress in developing the common writing system and building stronger cross-border connections. Just after the conference, however, I learned from Mr. Nyawrbyeivq, the sole official Chinese-Akha representative, that in fact all was not well. He explained that both "winners and losers" had emerged from the conference. The negotiations, he argued, were dominated by a coalition of Christian Akha from Burma, Laos, and Thailand. Mr. Nyawrbyeivq further explained that the guidelines that had been collectively established at the beginning of the meeting, which

specifically stated that religion and state politics were to be avoided, were broken by numerous participants.

> "State politics", Mr. Nyawrbyeivq explained, "is a particularly sensitive issue for Hani-Akha whose language and culture is officially recognized by the Chinese government. We are even able to use our own language on some official documents. The possibility for China to join in further efforts is now very slim because of a refusal on the part of other representatives to compromise on certain aspects of the new orthography; especially the vowels. China has been pushed into a corner. Thailand and Burma have emerged victorious, along with Laos as a supporter of 'Ar dov'[80] who financially supported their participation. I can now foresee two possibilities for the future, the first in which Thailand, Burma, and Laos unite, pushing China into a corner from which they either feel obligated to accept the new orthography and preserve the union that is under development or a second in which China breaks off from the union altogether. All in all, I have to say that I learned a lot from this conference. I learned that it is impossible to leave politics behind and that in the future I need to be more aware and political myself. My attempts at remaining neutral only served in weakening my position."[81]

An additional meeting was organized between December 31, 2008 and January 2, 2009 in Jinghong, China. The negotiations in this context were dominated by (Neo)traditionalist Akha from Burma, China, and Thailand and the earlier orthographic choices lamented by Mr. Nyawrbyeivq as quoted above were redressed.[82] This meeting resulted in the production of yet another "New Common Akha

[80] "Ar dov" is the Akha term for "older brother" and, in this case, refers anonymously to a middle-aged male from Chiangrai, Thailand who is a Protestant NGO leader with a doctorate degree.

[81] Nyawrbyeivq, August 15, 2008.

[82] At the Jinghong meeting a total of six changes were made to the Common Akha Orthography developed in Mae Sai in August of 2008. First, one consonant was changed from *sh* to *x*. Second, three vowels were changed from *e* to *ei, eu* to *e* and *ui* to *ee*. Third, two tonal markers where changed from *f* to *vq* and *x* to *vr*.

Orthography" that Mr. Nyawrbyeivq and others are currently using to develop language primers and multimedia productions for use in promoting literacy among Akha communities in Zomia.[83]

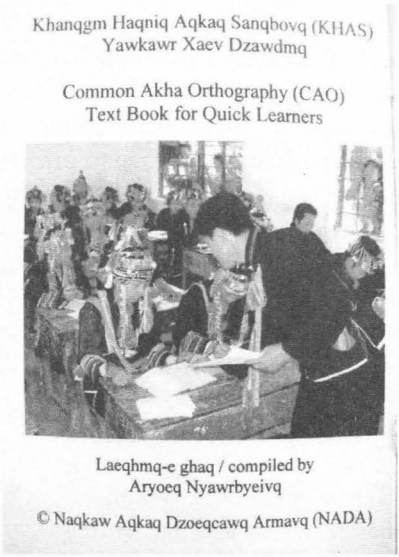

Figure 3: Inside cover of the *Common Akha Orthography (CAO) Text Book for Quick Learners* developed by Mr. Nyawrbyeivq in October of 2009. The text book was published with financial support from a private donor based in the UK. In the photograph, Mr. Nyawrbyeivq is instructing youth from his home village in Jinghong, Sipsongbanna, China in an earlier version of the "New Common Akha Orthography" developed in 2009. This particular training course took place during the summer of 2004 with financial support from the Chinese government and was publicized by the local media.

The extent to which various Akha factions in Zomia will accept the New Common Akha Orthography negotiated in Jinghong, China

[83] As of December 2009, Mr. Nyawrbyeivq had organized two courses in the new Common Akha Orthography. The first course occurred in Chiangmai, Thailand during May and June of 2009. The second course took place in Jinghong, China during July and August of 2009. The goal of these courses was to train a core group of promising students who would eventually train other Akha in their home communities and beyond in the new writing system. In addition, as of December 2009, Mr. Nyawrbyeivq had developed two texts for instructing students in the new common orthography. The first text is an introductory language primer that was developed in May of 2009 and revised in June of 2009. In October of 2009 he published a "Text Book for Quick Learners. (See, Aryoeq Nyawrbyeivq, *Khanqgm Haqniq Aqkaq Sanqbovq [KHAS] Yawkawr Xaev Dzawdmq, Common Akha Orthography [CAO] Text Book for Quick Learners* [Chiang Mai: Mekong Akha Network for Peace and Sustainability, 2009].)

in January 2009 remains to be seen. As of November of 2009, at least two major factions of Christian Akha in Thailand and Burma had decided not to use the New Common Akha Orthography. The main reason for the refusal of the latter to use the new writing system seems to be that they feel another faction of Akha, namely a (Neo)Traditionalist faction, violated their earlier agreement of not dragging the issue of religion into their language-related efforts.

Shortly after the second meeting in Jinghong, China, a (Neo)Traditionalist faction of Akha as described earlier began efforts among Akha communities in Shan state, Burma to simultaneously promote literacy in the orthography ratified in Jinghong as well as encourage (re)conversion "back to" a revised form of traditional Akha customary law. In reference to these efforts, a leading figure among Akha Protestants in Thailand and other parts of Zomia informed me that:

> Their efforts have essentially violated the agreement we reached earlier about not bringing the issue of religion into our efforts...and rather to focus on our common Akha cultural identity. As a result we have chosen not to use the writing system ratified in Jinghong. Instead we will continue to use an adapted version of the earlier writing system developed by Paul Lewis in the 1950s (personal communication, July 7, 2010). [84]

Two major Christian factions of Akha in Thailand and neighboring Burma have subsequently chosen to continue using a revised version of the "Lewis" system first developed in Kengtung, Burma in the 1950s. In Burma, a Lahu-Akha Baptist Missionary-Linguist has been using the revised "Lewis" system to train Akha

[84] The Protestant NGO leader also informed me that he felt that the first common writing system negotiated in Mae Sai, Thailand in August of 2008 was supported by a much greater representation of Akha from throughout the region. He further noted that the slightly revised writing system later negotiated in Jinghong, China on the cusp of 2009 was mainly supported by Chinese-Akha representatives whom he felt dominated the meeting's proceedings. He also informed me that he was the only representative to the Jinghong meeting to vote against some of the revisions proposed by the Chinese-Akha representatives (personal communication, July 7, 2010).

missionaries and develop Bibles. In Thailand the Akha Protestant leader whose views are noted above has been using the revised "Lewis" system to educate and ostensibly convert additional Akha from Thailand, and more recently Laos and China, to Christianity. At the same time, Mr. Nyarbyeivq, a key (Neo)Traditionalist leader, informed me that the actions of the two Christian leaders as noted above, "run counter to all of the work that we have done so far in promoting stronger ties among Akha in the region." [85]

Finally, it is still too soon to speculate on the potential roles of the New Common Akha Orthography in promoting the development of a more formal transborder identity among at least certain Akha factions in Zomia. The New Common Akha Orthography developed by Mr. Nyawrbyeivq and others in Jinghong in January of 2009 has come to represent the stance of a Neo-traditionalist faction within the transnational Akha community – a faction whose goals, in the words of Mr. Nyawrbyeivq, are to "bridge the communication gaps among all of the Akha factions divided by political borders and church-based activities." [86]

Language Ideologies

In this article, I have approached the diverse and competing writing systems developed for Akha language by various institutions and actors over the past ninety years as lenses for viewing changes in Akha ethnic formations at different periods of time and scales. I have highlighted the ways in which the divergent positions of Akha as embedded within particular nation-states and involved in a transborder movement have shaped their historical and ongoing negotiations for a common writing system. My preliminary research supports the finding that languages, in addition to communities, "must be imagined before their unity can be socially accomplished." [87]

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[85] Nyawrbyeivq, November 17, 2009.

[86] Nyawrbyeivq, November 28, 2009.

[87] Susan Gal, "Multiplicity and Contention among Language Ideologies: A Commentary," *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, eds. Bambi Schieffelin, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 317-331.

Recognizing the cross-border project(s) of Akha leaders as contentious, dynamic, and always incomplete discursive projects, I have approached the various writing systems that have so far been developed for Akha language as systems whose symbols "carry (shifting) historical, cultural, and political meanings."[88] In addition, the various Akha leaders referred to in this paper have been shown to exhibit a variety of language ideologies, or "beliefs and feelings about language and discourse", that reflect and in turn support their particular positions and interests.[89] Their language ideologies have been shown to be mutually supportive and generative of unified writing systems at certain times and places as well as conflicting and generative of competing orthographies at others. The language ideologies of various Akha leaders have been further shown to be "productively used in the creation and representation" of certain ethnic, nationalist and/or religious cultural identities.[90]

In addition, each of the writing systems developed by various national governments, Akha leaders, and foreign, as well as Akha missionaries, linguists, anthropologists and activists throughout the past 90 years, can be seen as technologies with the either intended or unintended consequences of:

1) promoting the integration and/or assimilation of various Akha communities into particular nation-state formations – in which case they should be read as "diagnostics of power" providing insight into the historically shifting positions of Akha communities at local, national and transnational levels;[91]
2) creating and/or further exacerbating earlier Akha subdivisions along religious and/or sociopolitical lines;

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[88] Kathryn Woolard, "Introduction: Language Ideology as a Field of Inquiry," *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, eds. Bambi Schieffelin, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 23.
[89] Kroskrity 509.
[90] Kroskrity 501-9.
[91] Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17.1 (1990): 41-55.

3) providing Akha communities with an alternative or opposing means for transcription[92] – an everyday form of resistance[93] against the homogenizing forces of nationalism;[94]
4) and/or promoting stronger supra-national ties among Akha in Zomia.

Conclusions

From the 1950s onward, Akha communities in Zomia have been "drawn inwards toward the center of culture and power" within different states through ties of nationalism and citizenship.[95] Contemporary borders have disrupted the earlier regional connections that Akha maintained via cross-border trade, migration and kinship ties. Different state policies have influenced sub-national variations in Akha identity formations. The divergent religious conversion experiences of Akha communities within and across borders in Zomia have further exacerbated these divisions. Today, however, real and/or (re)imagined ethnic ties are drawing Akha communities across the borders of the five nation-states in which they are embedded in ways that may potentially refashion the territorial basis of state membership.[96]

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[92] Keith Basso and Ned Anderson, "A Western Apache Writing System: The Symbols of Silas John," *Science* 180.4090 (1973): 1013-1022; Smalley, et al.; P. Probst, "The Letter and the Spirits: Literacy and Religious Authority in the History of the Aladura Movement in Western Nigeria," *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, ed. Brian Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 198-219; Yukti Mukdawijitra, *Ethnicity and Multilingualism: The Case of Ethnic Tai in the Vietnamese State*, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2007) 8.

[93] James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

[94] Homi Bhaba, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhaba (London: Routledge, 1990) 300.

[95] Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan, "Nation, State and Identity at International Borders," *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers*, eds. Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 1-30.

[96] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Wilson and Donnan 3.

At the same time, Akha at the forefront of recent efforts to construct a more formal transborder sense of belonging in Zomia face a number of significant challenges: religious factionalism, competing orthographies, divergent state policies and internal socioeconomic divisions. The extent to which they are able to overcome these barriers will be determined by their ability to negotiate shifting local, national and transnational contexts. Their efforts support a view of contemporary identity work as having complex relations to the past and involving multiple and shifting orientations to the local, national and transnational.

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APPENDIX 1:

Table 1: The Thirteen Different Writing Systems Developed for Akha Language Since the 1920s.

No.	Year	Actors Involved	Place	Script	Notes
1	~1927	Father Potaluppi (Italian Catholic Priest) and Akha collaborators	Kengtung, Burma	Roman	
2	~1950	Paul Lewis (American Baptist Missionary) and Akha collaborators	Kengtung, Burma	Roman	The most widely used system in Burma and Thailand; difficult to type on standard keyboards.
3	1957	Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Hani-Akha collaborators	Yunnan, China	Roman (pinyin system)	Hani orthography
4	1962	Burmese and Akha collaborators	Burma	Burmese	Used on Akha calendars.
5	1969	Peter Wyss (Swiss OMF Missionary) and Akha collaborators.	Chiangrai, Thailand	Thai	Associated with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF).*
6	1981	CCP and Hani-Akha collaborators	Yunnan, China	Roman (pinyin system)	Akha orthography
7	1985	Akha/Non-Akha Roman Catholic Priests and Akha collaborators	Kengtung, Burma	Roman	Roman Catholic script made more similar to Baptist script.**

* Peter Wyss, "Thai orthography for Akha," *Tribesmen and Peasants in North Thailand: Proceedings of the First Symposium of the Tribal Research Centre* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Tribal Research Center, 1969).

** Noel Heh and Thomas Tehan, "*The current status of Akha*," Payap University Linguistics and SIL International, June 2000 (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Payap Research and Development Institute, 2000) 4.

No.	Year	Actors Involved	Place	Script	Notes
8	1991	Matthew McDaniel (American Human Rights Activist) and Akha collaborators	Chiangrai, Thailand	Roman	Used by very few Akha in Thailand and Burma.
9	1994	CCP and Hani-Akha collaborators	Yunnan, China	Roman (pinyin system)	A combined Hani-Akha orthography.
10	2001/2	Leo G.M.A(lting) von Geusau (Dutch Anthropologist), and Akha/non-Akha of the NGO AFECT (The Association for Akha Education and Culture in Thailand)	Chiangmai and Chiangrai, Thailand	Roman	Combines the consonants and vowels from Lewis' 1950 system with the tonal marking system of the Chinese Hani-Akha system from 1994.
11	2004	A coalition of Christian Akha from Burma and Thailand led by a Lahu-Akha Missionary-Linguist	Northern Thailand	Roman	Developed after several decades of negotiations between Baptist and Catholic Akha.
12	2008	A coalition of Akha leaders from Burma, China, Laos and Thailand.	Mae sai, Thailand	Roman	New Common Akha Orthography 1
13	2009	A coalition of Akha leaders from Burma, China, Laos and Thailand.	Jinghong, China	Roman	New Common Akha Orthography 2