

《Session 2》

Activity to Record and Pass On the Oral Traditions of the Akha and Hani Peoples

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I would like to present this onsite report on efforts to record and pass on the oral traditions of the Akha and Hani peoples, which are minority tribes in the Southeast Asian continent.

About the Akha and Hani

The Akha and Hani peoples are highland minorities living in nations of the Southeast Asian continent (eastern Burma, southern Yunnan Province of China, northern Laos, northern Thailand, and northern Vietnam). Living in regions with other minorities, they speak a language that is linked to Tibetan and Burmese. Because their languages are similar and they share genealogy and histories, the Akha and Hani are thought to be branches of the same tribe that divided several hundreds of years ago.*

Geographically speaking, the two tribes have a combined population of some 1.5 million that lives in five countries: China, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

In this report, I would like to focus on the Akha tribe, and particularly the Akha living in northern Thailand.

* The languages and lifestyles of the Akha and Hani differ significantly, and in general it is difficult to conduct a conversation in the Akha and Hani languages. However, based on an ethnicity survey that was conducted by China in the 1950s, it is understood that the Akha and Hani peoples had a shared genealogy up to 14 generations ago, and that they are both branches of the Yi people. Among the 56 minority classifications in China, the Akha (阿卡) are included as one branch of the Hani (哈尼) people. The Hani people live in Honghe Prefecture in Yunnan Province and in Lao Cai Province and Lai Chau Province in northern Vietnam. They call themselves the Hani, Yani, or Uoni, and use a variety of names to refer to genealogical branches. On the other hand, the Akha live in northern Thailand, eastern Burma, northern Laos, and Xishuangbanna Prefecture in China's Yunnan Province. The name Akha is shared by all of these people.



In addition to the Akha, there are five other tribes living in the northern mountainous region of Thailand that have different languages, histories, and cultures. These are the Karen, Yao, Hmong, Lisu, and Lawa tribes. Due to such reasons as wars and disputes, these minorities moved from Yunnan Province in China, Burma (Myanmar), and Laos into northern Thailand, and thus they are distinct from the majority Thai tribes in terms of language, history, and culture. The Akha were the first to move into the region some 150 years ago.

Because they are a nomadic people whose lives center on slash-and-burn cultivation and hunting-and-gathering, they have a unique community organization that is influenced by Chinese and Taoist cultures as well as the cultures of nearby tribes, such as those in Thailand. Neither the Akha nor Hani tribes have writing, which means they have extremely rich oral literary traditions.

The oral traditions of the Akha and Hani

The illiterate Akha and Hani peoples have preserved their identities through worship of their ancestors and strict common laws.

Their ceremonies and festivals offer glimpses of their practices and Taoist philosophy toward well-balanced coexistence between people and nature and of their ancestor worship.

Neither the Akha nor Hani have created a national identity; rather, they are tribes whose biggest unit is the village. Their community organization is as follows:

The position of the *pirma* is not based on heredity. Instead, a *piya* (person who serves the *pirma* and who is being groomed to become the *pirma* in the future) advances to take this position. The *piya* can be any boy coming from a family that has not suffered dishonor. The *piya* lives with the *pirma* since early childhood, and may become the *pirma* after gaining long years of experience in daily routines that includes memorizing long texts through daily repetition and

Within each village (Men only)	<i>Pirma</i> (reciter)	= Leader of ceremonies, reciter of texts
	<i>Dzoeqma</i> (leader)	= Person in charge in village events, traditional village chieftain
	<i>Bajiq</i> (blacksmith)	= Serves several special roles at ceremonies
	<i>Xarma</i> (Committee)	= Community gathering that meets in response to conflicts, etc.
Inside and outside the village (Men and women)	<i>Nyirpaq</i> (shaman)	= Person able to converse with the great ancestors in heaven, to receive their energy, and to comfort people
	<i>Bawqmawq</i> (traditional medicine man)	= Person who cures illness and injury using knowledge of traditional medicinal herbs and chants
	<i>Savma</i> (fortune teller)	= Person who can tell fortunes by reading a person's appearance or palm

Community organization of Akha and Hani peoples

attending ceremonies. In general, the positions of *dzoeqma* and *bajiq* are based on heredity, with children learning their skills by watching and helping their fathers from an early age.

The people who maintain oral traditions through ceremonies and important texts are primarily the *pirma* (reciter), *dzoeqma* (leader), and *nyirpaq* (shaman). When compared, the texts of the *pirma* and *nyirpaq* are nearly the same in terms of content. However, as opposed to the *Pirma*, who must be able to chant the texts based on accurate memory and proper form, the *nyirpaq* enters into a trance and chants the texts in the form of inspirations or messages from heaven, rather than



A ritual performed by the *pirma*



An Akha village

from memory.

Examples of oral traditions include family trees reaching back over some 65 generations, texts of the *pirma* and *nyirpaq*, dancing and singing, adages found in everyday life, and folktales and songs. This oral tradition-based culture has been handed down to the present day through rituals that are held between nine and 12 times a year, religious services, festivals, important ceremonies, and special events for relief from illness and natural disasters, as well as through such daily activities as singing and dancing, talks between elderly members and children, and agricultural work.

The oral traditions of the Akha and Hani serve as the only means of passing down the protocols of rituals and the knowledge that is deeply rooted in daily life.

A crisis facing the oral traditions of the Akha and Hani

Every day, the cultures of Southeast Asian minorities face the danger of being lost due to insufficient recognition that each is a unique minority and a lack of basic rights. Despite the fact that the Akha and Hani live in five countries and under various political, social, and economic circumstances, they have more and more difficulty passing on their oral traditions.

Let us take the situation in northern Thailand as an example. For hundreds of years, the Akha have continually relocated to avoid conflict with the lowland Thai tribes and to find agricultural land in the mountainous highlands. However, as nation states were born and national borders drawn, the lifestyles of the Akha - who until then had no interest in border security or the process of gaining nationality - began to feel the forces of change.

Then, during a period of worsening economic poverty that occurred in line with changes in their lifestyles and agricultural practices (around the 1970s), the Akha began to receive outside aid from Christian missionaries in exchange for their giving up their rituals. This trend has been accelerating dramatically.

Furthermore, in Thailand, where the Akha do not have rights as minorities, people who do not obtain Thai citizenship cannot live in the country. Consequently, the Akha are under pressure to obtain Thai citizenship, and their children are losing opportunities to learn their language and culture.

In the case of China, a country in which there was pressure to eliminate culture during the Cultural Revolution, there are outstanding efforts to revive cultures that have been lost as a tourism resource.

Change is not occurring at such a rapid pace in Laos, Burma, and Vietnam

because the Akha live in remote mountainous regions. However, these people are suffering from a high death rate brought on by conflict, malaria, and other causes. Thus, circumstances have reached a critical stage as there is a lack of people with cultural knowledge and elderly people who can pass on their oral traditions to younger generations.



Handing down oral tradition

Recording, preservation, and succession activities pertaining to oral traditions being implemented by an NGO (MPCD/SEAMP-HRI)

In the latter half of the 1970s, a Dutch cultural anthropologist by the name of Dr. Leo Altling von Gesau stressed that not only were the *pirma* he had met losing their rituals as a result of their conversion to Christianity, but also the Akha were losing their traditional community organization and entire oral tradition-based culture. He proposed action to record these items, which led to the launching of an NGO in 1981.

Over the course of 23 years, audio recording using tape recorders and 8 mm video was initially begun in 72 villages. Audio recording mainly focused on the *pirma*'s and shaman's words during rituals and services as well as on songs sung at various occasions. After these recordings were completed, a workshop to verify their content was held over several years, as the oral traditions as remembered by the *primas* and shamans did not always match. Work to edit and publish the results began in the 1990s, with alphabetical notation being prepared for the Akha language, which has no writing.

Since 2000, meetings that bring together the few remaining *pirmas* have been held on a regular basis. These meetings are used for repeated discussions to identify the most urgent tasks facing the *pirmas* and the activities needed to pass on what they know. As Dr. Leo passed away in Dec. 2002, the author took over the management of MPCD and projects have been going on.

Projects currently underway

- Unification and diffusion of alphabetic notation of the Akha language
- International Akha and Hani society (cross-border and cross-generational)

- meetings on Akha culture)
- Establishment of a *pirma* committee
 - Creation of a genealogical database for the Akha and Hani
 - Survey on Akha and Hani subgroups and cultural levels
 - Editing, translation, and publishing of *pirma/nyirpaq* texts (ancient Akha language, modern Akha language, Thai, Chinese, and English)
 - Empowerment and training activities through production of VCDs and audio-visual equipment
 - Chen Mai Akha Committee Law and mutual assistance pertaining to recording problems, mutual assistance during times of illness or disaster, etc.
 - Courses on Akha language and culture
 - Chen Mai Akha scholarship system

When conducting activities to preserve and hand down oral traditions, the most important factor is to establish the proper environment. Recognition from surrounding society and efforts to understand the culture from both inside and outside the society lay the basic foundation that allows people to perform these tasks. Akha society is currently finding it difficult to get its people to take an interest in its language and culture. This is because it is still not necessary for young Akha people that are educated in the Thai system to learn about Akha culture and language, and because it is difficult to maintain Akha morals due to discrimination in Thai society. Furthermore, it will be impossible to engage in cultural activities if stable living environments and means of earning income are not also firmly developed.

Bringing these two conditions in line can make it possible for individuals to begin taking pride in their culture. However, in Southeast Asia, there are still many people for which this is difficult. That is why the international community must offer assistance based on an understanding of the social and political conditions.

Efforts are underway to empower the people of the Akha tribe - who have been plagued by political, social, and economic “poverty” - a) based on a restoration of Akha morals through alphabetic notation of the Akha language and publication of oral traditions in said language, and b) preparation of databases and culture centers for the time when future members of the tribe gain opportunities to learn about their own culture.