CHANGING MINDS, CHANGING HATS
Construction and Expression of Akeu Ethnic Identity in Thailand and Myanmar

Master's Thesis
University of Oulu
Cultural Anthropology
January 2014
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1 Introduction

Ethnicity has been a growing field of study in anthropology and sociology at least since the late 1960's, coinciding with the increased appearance of ethnicity in both political and everyday discourses (Eriksen 2010:1). In the first half of the 20th century many scholars had predicted that modernization, urbanization and industrial development would weaken ethnic ties and different groups would finally assimilate in one huge melting pot. Ethnic reality, however, proved these assimilationist models wrong. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 6,7,9.) Ethnic conflicts, independence and liberation movements, and increased migration to urban areas and foreign countries have intensified group contacts, but despite the often high rate of cultural and social change taking place, ethnic identity has been found out to persist throughout generations (Eriksen 2010: 12-13). Ethnicity has a significant impact on everyday lives of people around the world in various different contexts. Ethnic and national identity have, according to Richard Jenkins, ”replaced class conflict as the motor of history” as a basis of claim for rights and duties (Jenkins 2002: 115).

Ethnic conflicts which appear in the media are usually major in scale and often of violent nature. There are also more quiet processes going on around ethnicity. I encountered one of these in northern Thailand in 2011. I volunteered there via Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM) in a literacy project coordinated by SIL International (former Summer Institute of Linguistics), an organization working on linguistic research, Bible translation and minority language and culture development. The project which I took part in produces mother tongue literacy training material for the Akeu people who are an ethnic minority group living in small numbers in the mountainous regions of northern Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and southern China. The Akeu have formerly been – and partly still are – swidden cultivators of mountain rice, with animist religion, oral traditions and genealogies, and have no political organization beyond village level. In both literature and in local ethnic classifications, the Akeu are sometimes regarded as a sub-group of the Akha (see for example Bradley 1996: 21), one of the larger and well researched mountain peoples of inland Southeast Asia. Akeu and Akha languages, both belonging to Southern Ngwi branch of Tibeto-Burman language family (Ethnologue 2013), are closely related and occasionally regarded as dialects of the same language even though they are mutually unintelligible. Most of the
Akeu themselves are strongly opposed to being classified as Akha, although they admit that they have common ancestors. Some of them had expressed a wish to SIL employees in Thailand that someone would write about them and make them visible to outsiders as a separate people. I was asked if I as an anthropology student could realize this aim. I was intrigued by a rare possibility to write a study on an unresearched group, and even more by the fact that they want to be studied themselves. Apparent differences between their self-identification and classification by outsiders made me interested in focusing on Akeu ethnic identity, its components and construction. I made a short field trip to Thailand and Myanmar in November and December of 2012 and collected data by interviewing and observation in several Akeu villages in both countries.

The Akeu have been mentioned in only few publications written about other groups, and usually they only mention the Akeu by name providing hardly any other information. One indicator of their unfamiliarity is that they appeared in Ethnologue, an encyclopedia of "all of the world’s known living languages" published by SIL, only in its 16th edition in 2009. As there are very few printed sources concerning the Akeu, most of the information about them that will be presented in this research is based on my own data. Extensive research has been conducted on many other peoples of the area, on their cultures and ethnic patterns, and I have been able to use these as comparison with Akeu culture, since the Akeu have much in common with their neighbours and have been affected by the same political, economic and social processes.

Theoretical considerations on ethnicity have been widely influenced by Fredrik Barth (1969) who challenged the notion that increased interaction would lead to assimilation. Melting pot theorists saw diversity as a result of geographical and social isolation, but Barth argued that ethnic distinctions are not dependent on seclusion, and instead emphasized ethnic groups as symbolic categories of identification created by the members of such groups themselves. (Barth 1969a: 9-11.) Cultural contact and interaction in fact create ethnic groups, because without contact there is no need to define either "us" or "the others" (Eriksen 2010: 14). Theoretical responses to unrealized melting pot produced two different views about the nature of ethnic ties and their persistence. These

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1The field trip was enabled by a grant from the Guild of Humanities Students of the University of Oulu.
views are known as primordialism and instrumentalism. Primordialism states that ethnicity survived the modernist melting pot because it is "fixed, fundamental, and rooted in the unchangeable circumstances of birth". Ethnic ties are blood ties and that makes them so enduring in circumstances that encourage their disappearance. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 48.) The instrumentalist view on ethnicity regards ethnic identities completely situationally manipulable, and argues that ethnicity is emphasized only as means of pursuing political or economic interests (Jenkins 1997: 44-45). Both of these extremities are problematic in themselves, but they have been synthesized by Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann (1998), whose constructionist theory will be my own theoretical standpoint in examining Akeu ethnicity.

The remainder of the introduction will offer background information for my research, introducing the Akeu and the social and cultural context in which they live, as well as the research objectives, my fieldwork process, and data on which I will base my analysis. In chapter 2 I will present theoretical framework including the constructionist ethnicity theory. Chapter 3 contains a more detailed presentation of Akeu culture; Akeu ethnicity, its construction and expression, will be analysed in chapters 4 and 5.

1.1 Research context and subject

Continental Southeast Asia is divided between seven countries: China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia. None of these countries are nation states in the ideal sense of including one nation, one language and more or less uniform culture. China acknowledges 55 ethnic groups inside its borders (Chit Hlaing 2007: 115), Union of Myanmar is officially inhabited by "135 national races" (Gravers 2007a: 4) and all these countries include speakers of different languages numbering from around 20 to over a hundred\(^2\) (Ethnologue 2013). The mountainous regions of southern China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam are inhabited by numerous interspersed ethnic groups of varying sizes, many of which live in more than one country. Their languages belong to several language groups from Tibeto-
Burman and Tai languages to Mon-Khmer and Hmong-Mien; they have often distinctive, yet in some aspects related cultures. For centuries Chinese influence has been strong mainly in the mountains, Indian influence in the plains, and in 19th century European colonial power extended its own influence in the area (Marlowe 1979: 166; Heikkilä-Horn & Miettinen 2000: 158, 183, 196, 244). The area is also religiously diverse. Theravada Buddhism is predominant in the plains and an officially recognized part of Thai and Burmese nationalisms (Heikkilä-Horn & Miettinen 2000: 176, 218; Platz 2003: 476). Many mountain peoples follow animistic religions. Christian missionaries have been active in the area since the 19th century and gained converts mainly among minority peoples (Platz 2003: 477-479). During the last century this cultural complexity has been further increased by wars, revolutions and internal conflicts, which have caused sometimes very extensive migrations to new areas (Cribbs & Smith 1999: 199, 204). According to Peter Kandre (1976: 187), drastic and complex population movements for various reasons have been characteristic of the area for centuries. This physical and social environment, described as a collage of interconnected, overlapping cultural traditions (Adams & Gillogly 2011: 2-3, citing Zialcita 2003: 37), is the context of my research: the reality which shapes the sense of self of the people and peoples living within it.

The most significant ethnic groups in my research area, northern Thailand and Shan state in Myanmar, are the national majority groups, Thai and Burmese. The majority languages are regarded crucial to national identity in both countries (Heikkilä-Horn & Miettinen 2000: 183). The Shan, local majority in the Shan state with population of 3.6 million (ibid.: 241), whose language is related to Thai, appeared in Edmund Leach's classic monograph Political systems of Highland Burma (1954). In addition to these bigger groups there are various mountain-dwelling peoples who have been classified in Thailand as "hill tribes" (chao khaeo, literally "hill people" with no indication to their cultural or linguistic differences) (Keyes 1979: 13). Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Karen, Hmong and Mien are some of the larger groups and the first ones the Thai government acknowledged, and all except the Karen have received strong cultural influence from the Chinese (Lewis & Lewis 1984: 7, 9). In Thailand these groups have been labeled as opium growers and destroyers of forests, and gaining citizenship rights has been a long struggle for many of them. (Heikkilä-Horn & Miettinen 2000: 242).
Among Southeast Asian ethnic groups the Akeu are a comparatively small one. According to their oral legends they originate in Tibet, where the Akeu, Akha and Hani (a minority in China) lines separated. It is estimated that these languages were the same language still about 800-1000 years ago (Lewis & Bibo 2002: 1). The Akeu left Tibet because of an unknown war in remote history and moved to Yunnan in southern China, where they lived until the last century and where most of them still live. The situation began to change in the 1940's, as the Chinese government started to extend assimilation pressure on cultural minorities. Because some Akeu people had fought in the Kuomintang army, negative attitudes among the Chinese population intensified after the communists had taken over the region and occasionally attitudes led to violence. Some of my informants who were born in China told how Akeu villages were emptied, the villagers forced to leave and houses torn down after them. Several Akeu groups left China for Myanmar and Laos, and a small amount of them moved from both countries to Thailand, where the first Akeu groups came in around the 1960's and others followed later. Migrations both inside and between countries have continued until the 21st century because of civil war and political unrest especially in Myanmar.

The estimates of the total Akeu population vary in different sources. Ethnologue (2013) estimates it around 12,400, one thousand living in Shan State in Myanmar, another one thousand in Laos, around 400 in Northern Thailand, and the rest in China. Chazée (1996: 133-134) mentions a little known and relatively isolated group called Keu with population of 2,000 in Laos. Schliesinger (2003: 69, 109), also writing about Laos, gives a census figure 1,639 from the year 1995 for Keu, also called Akeu or Khir. Paul Lewis in his Akha-English dictionary from 1968 estimated speakers of Akeu, an Akha dialect according to him, numbering up to 8,000 in Burma and 5,000 to 10,000 in China. These last figures are quite dated and it is therefore hard to estimate their accuracy. The population numbers are nevertheless highest in Yunnan and lower in other countries. According to one of my informants there might also be some Akeu villages in Vietnam. In this research I concentrate, due to easier accessibility, on the Akeu in Thailand and Kengtung area in Myanmar. Facts and analysis presented do not necessarily apply to the Akeu in China, Laos and other parts of Myanmar, even though some of my informants have recent first-hand information concerning these areas. In Thailand the Akeu live mostly in three villages in Chiang Rai Province, one of the villages having exclusively
Akeu population, the others made up of both Akeu and Akha inhabitants. In Kengtung area there are six Akeu villages, size ranging from 6 to more than 40 households. A growing number of Akeu are living in and near towns in both countries.

Picture 1. *Areas with Akeu inhabitants.*

The Akeu call themselves Gaolkheel\(^3\), which is also a name of one of their clans. There are at least 12 exogamous clans, and the clan names are used as surnames. According to the legend, the Akeu lived in Tibet in one big village where most of the inhabitants where members of the Gaolkheel clan, thus

\(^3\)I will use Akeu alphabet for writing Akeu words. Consonants l, q and v at the end of a syllable are not pronounced but used to mark high, low and glottalized tones respectively.
giving their name to the whole people. The name Akeu comes from Chinese officials. I heard two different versions of its origin. In one of them many ethnic groups who had lived side by side with the Akeu in Yunnan started to migrate south. The Akeu, however, didn't move because they didn't know the way, and finally the Chinese started to call them *keu lo*, which means “go away”. The other version states that Chinese government wanted to give official names to all ethnic groups in the area and called their representatives to register their names. The Akeu representative came very late when the office was already closing, and was told to go away, and hence the name. In this research I will use the official ethnonym Akeu, because the Akeu themselves use that name when talking to outsiders in other languages than their own. That is also the name mostly used in those few publications in which they appear, along with variations of that name such as Akheu, Keu or Khir.

1.2 Research questions

The Akeu have previously lived in mono-ethnic villages located in relative isolation from other groups (see Chazée 1996: 133-134, cf. Tooker 2004: 252). As the group itself is small and the villages have, at least since the 20th century migrations, often been far from each other, interaction with people from other groups has been a necessity. Relationships to other ethnic groups have intensified and changed in quality during the last decades. As Fredrik Barth noted, maintaining ethnic distinctiveness does not depend on isolation from other groups. Their self-identification as Akeu and the relatively common classification by outsiders as an Akha subgroup, however, makes the Akeu identity and its persistence more problematic than in cases where self-identification and outside definitions coincide. The aim of this research, along with making the Akeu better known, is to examine *how the Akeu construct and express their ethnic identity* in their poly-ethnic social environment. I will answer my research question with the help of the following questions:

1. What elements of culture, material or immaterial, are emphasized as central symbols of ethnic identity?

2. How are these symbols of identity used by the Akeu and what kinds of meanings are given to them?
3. How are differences between self-identification and external classification managed?

4. How does social change affect Akeu identity?

5. What is Akeu ethnicity, in general, based on?

In chapter 4 I will discuss questions 1 and 2 concerning ethnic symbols. Chapter 5 will deal with constructing Akeu ethnicity against outside classification (question 3) and social change (question 4) as well as Akeu ethnic identity construction in general (question 5).

1.3 Fieldwork and data

I travelled to Thailand for the first time as a volunteer worker. I had applied for volunteering or an internship post at Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, wished to work somewhere in Asia and ended up spending three months in Thailand in 2011, drawing illustrations for literacy material for the Akeu of which I had never heard before. My instructor was Tuula Kosonen, a SIL employee who works with the Akeu as an advisor for their Bible translation project. She first presented me the idea of researching Akeu culture and later provided me with plenty of information based on her own experience of working with the Akeu. She also translated the interviews that I did in Thailand. During the first trip I worked mainly in Chiang Mai city and a border town of Mae Sai at the northernmost point of Thailand. I only briefly visited one Akeu village called Huay Nam Khun, to attend an opening ceremony of a new village assembly house. In November and December of 2012 I spent about six weeks in Thailand, visited two Akeu villages there and did a short trip to Myanmar where I very briefly visited six villages. My final data consists of interviews, observation recorded in a field journal, and photographic and video material. I conducted 10 half-structured interviews with 17 people all in all: one was a group interview of five people and three were interviews of a husband and a wife together. One of the informants, a 35-year-old man whom I had already met in 2011, served as a key informant. He was interviewed several times on different topics concerning Akeu culture, for example the Akeu calendar and some of the important festivals and rites. A list of all interviews is included in Appendix 1.
The first village visit during the 2012 field trip was at Huay Nam Khun Akeu village where I had already been the previous year. On this two-day visit I was mainly an observer. The main guest in our party was a FELM employee, a videographer who recorded material for a short film introducing the FELM/SIL work among the Akeu. His work set the terms for our timetables and it limited my possibilities to conduct interviews, because Tuula Kosonen, whom I needed as an interpreter, was mostly occupied assisting him. I followed them closely being thus able to observe the way people presented their culture to the camera and to possible foreign audiences. Especially the elderly ladies were very eager to present traditional clothes, songs and more practical routines such as threshing rice. I also had a possibility to conduct a group interview with the village elders.

The initial plan was to return to the same village later, just before my departure back to Finland, for a three-day New Year festival. Then I was to interview more people and observe and photograph the festival itself and the ways ethnicity is portrayed by the villagers during its course. In the hope of receiving funds for culture preserving projects that the elders had planned, local Thai officials had also been invited to attend and get accustomed with the little-known Akeu and their culture. This political motive would have made this particular festival and its ethnic representations even more interesting as research material. These plans were, however, cancelled about three weeks before the intended festival. The Akeu New Year is timed according to their traditional calendar. We were informed that the timing had been first counted wrong and the whole festival must be held two weeks later, when I would not be in Thailand anymore. This opportunity was thus missed but instead I got access to almost eight hours of unedited video material of two events recorded by an American missionary, Blake Staton: the Akeu New Year festival in 2007 and a village gate ceremony held in spring 2008. These recordings were made as an ethnographic project and are mostly focused on ritual activities. I will analyze the New Year festival recordings – commentated for me by my key informant who was present when the recordings were made – as part of my data, as well as my own observations from the village visit in 2011 and photographic material received from Tuula Kosonen from her trips to various Akeu villages in Thailand, Myanmar and China between 2003 and 2010.
To Myanmar I travelled with an Akeu couple, who are SIL employees. They were to assist me in all the practical arrangements as well as translating. They also had their own work project – finding voices for a film that will be dubbed in Akeu – to do during the same trip. We crossed the border at Mae Sai and spent the first day in the border town of Tachilek. Near the town there is a village, or rather a suburb, composed of people with Akeu, Akha and ethnic Burmese backgrounds where I was given a short tour but no interviews were made. The next day we travelled four hours by bus to Kengtung, now accompanied by an official tour guide that every foreign visitor must hire according to Burmese tourist policy, even if travelling with locals. Two days in Kengtung area were used for village visits, some of which were very short, mostly depending on my companions' purposes. My official guide, himself a Shan from his ethnic background, followed us to the villages and eventually translated the interviews. In most of them another interpreter was needed because the Shan guide did not speak any Akeu. Three different people acted in this position and one of them also contributed to my data by answering some questions himself instead of translating. Two of the interviews in Myanmar were made with only one interpreter, one in Burmese language and one in Shan. On the first village day I did five interviews in two villages, which I found very tiring even though none of the interviews lasted for more than one hour. The next day we visited three villages with one interview each. After returning to Thailand I conducted some more interviews in Chiang Mai city, and also visited one village with mixed Akeu and Akha populations where I got observation material.

1.4 Problems of process and position

I intended to get as diverse group of informants as possible regarding their age, gender, religion, and place of living – whether in town, mixed village or an exclusively Akeu village. Genders are represented in roughly equal numbers, but the elderly, Christians and village dwellers are overrepresented in the final material for several reasons. Village visits in Kengtung area all happened during the daylight when most of the younger adults were on the fields and mainly elderly, most of them women, had remained at home with small children. Most of the interviews were done in villages which were exclusively Akeu – therefore overemphasizing inhabitants of mono-ethnic villages – and exclusively Christian. Two villages in Kengtung were Buddhist, but I got only
one interview each, compared to four that I did in one Baptist village. Huay Nam Khun village in Thailand was the only animist village within my reach. There are more animists in remoter areas of Myanmar but I was not able to travel there because of the tourist policy which requires visitors to stay overnight in town hotels. Because the second visit to Huay Nam Khun was cancelled, I was not able to interview there as much as I wished. Eager interviewees would have been available there because of the strong conviction of the elderly about the importance of their traditional culture and therefore appreciation for everyone interested in it.

Because of the often busy timetables on village visits and my dependedness on interpreters in doing and arranging interviews, I had limited possibilities to choose my informants according to, for example, their knowledge or interestedness in ethnic issues. Most of the Akeu I interviewed got selected quite randomly and in some cases I only later heard about other people who would have perhaps known more about the topic. I am, however, grateful to my interviewees, because what looks like a random sample gave me an insight to "ordinary" Akeu views on ethnicity – ethnic activists would probably have told a whole different story. Most of the interviews ended up quite shallow, due to sometimes insufficient language skills of the interpreters, concentrating difficulties created by double translation, and no doubt my own inability to express myself clear enough. The only exceptions to these language barriers were interviews of my key informant which were made in Thai with translation in Finnish. I believe that many ideas, notions and experiences which would have been informative were probably never talked of in most other interviews. Also, I wasn't able to return to the informants to ask further questions and clarifications that came to my mind later, and I had to rely on my key informant on what the other informants would probably have meant with their words.

During the history of anthropological research long fieldwork periods and competence in local language have been regarded as crucial, and on this I can fully agree. It would prevent for example getting answers to questions that were not asked instead of the ones that actually were asked, which happened a few times, or information changing or getting entirely lost in translation, of which I cannot be aware how many times it happened. Double translation further increased the risk of errors in the data which should be remembered in the analysis. Language competence would also make it possible to observe the
informants' attitudes in practice. Another problem caused by interpreting was that the interpreters mostly translated indirectly ("she said that she thinks" instead of "I think"), which makes most of the interview material unsuitable as quotes, at least when it concerns personal experiences. Especially in case of double translation it would be quite inaccurate to talk about direct quoting. I will nonetheless use some quotes to bring forward notions that appeared in interviews, but reword them back to direct speech.

Other aspects that must be taken into consideration while analysing the data are possible biases caused by my own position and that of my interpreters in relation to the informants. I did all the village visits with people previously known in those villages and some of the interviewees were relatives or friends to my companions. In spite of these connections, as a white foreigner I was an obvious outsider. In Thailand I visited villages with other whites, some of whom were well known there, which possibly made me less of a stranger. In Myanmar the situation was quite different. In one village some of the interviewees had worried that they had not been able to give me good answers, because they were not used to visitors who actually want to know what they think. They were accustomed to occasional Westerners coming in with their tour guides, taking photos and bringing in extra income as they bought craft items, but a foreigner asking questions about their culture was something quite special.

This concern of giving good answers reflects some of the remarks David Banks made about the impact of ethnic identity and relative status of the researcher on the nature of the data gathered. He claimed that in many countries colonialism – and I would add also tourism – has left an idea of whites living totally apart from the local laws and norms and only having interests of their own. Many Western researchers failed to act in communities through dyadic patron-client type relationships which were essential to many local social systems, and instead tried to approach the community as a whole and impose on them their own concepts of general equality (Banks 1976: 36, 38). Banks referred to Clifford Geertz's famous cockfight experience which helped him to "establish rapport" in a Balinese village (see Geertz 1973: 413-417). According to Banks, Geertz did not in fact gain an insider status, but was rather "regarded as another temporarily unconnected visitor with a job to do" and was offered information about topics which the villagers themselves thought of as interesting to
audiences for which Geertz was writing: something that was special and outside their normal routines. Real insider status grown out of typical Balinese relationships would have produced wholly different data and analysis. (Banks 1976: 28-29.) I was most probably classified as an “outsider with a job to do” but of a much more casual type: not a government official but a tourist who pops in, gathers some perhaps odd details of Akeu life – only in the form of questions compared to normal tourists who just take photos – and leaves without forming any deeper relationships. People might have been concerned to have helped me, but not simply by telling me their own ordinary notions and experiences but wishing to present me the exact information that they assumed I wanted to hear. As they had no previous experience of researchers they were just not sure what it was that I wanted.

Another possibly biasing aspect in interview situations in Myanmar was the status of my interpreter. My official guide who translated interviews is a member of the Shan people, who, being one of the biggest ethnic groups in Myanmar and the local majority in Kengtung area, are also on the higher levels of the local ethnic hierarchy (Kosonen 2012, personal communication). His higher ethnic status may thus have affected some responses of my informants especially regarding the relationships between the Akeu and other ethnic groups around them. This is especially the case with one younger informant: if for example his Shan classmates at school had despised him because of his ethnic background, would he have talked about it in the presence of a Shan of his own age? The elderly did not seem to have problems talking about occasional disdain from other groups to a Shan considerably younger than themselves.

The last but definitely not the least of the problems affecting my work is my position as a Christian anthropologist with close connections to missionaries, although my study is itself not related to missionary work. I had expected problems finding non-Christian interviewees because of these connections, but the only ones who refused from being interviewed were Christians. Even if religion did not have any visible effect on doing fieldwork, I am aware that it will affect my analysis – as any world view of any researcher inevitably shapes their premises and attitudes. Religion has been, and still is, a very sensitive topic politically in Southeast Asian context. As previously mentioned, Buddhism has an important position in Burmese and Thai nationalist
ideologies. After Burma became independent, some military separatist movements have been organized around Christianity as an opposition to the Buddhist state religion, and state has been attacking both Christians and Muslims to erase political separatism (see e.g. Sakhong 2007: 223). Religious divisions have also caused internal conflicts and tensions among some ethnic groups (Gravers 2007b: 228). The situation is slightly different in Thailand because there has been no direct colonial rule. However, both missionaries and anthropologists have often been parts of larger political processes regardless of intentions, and even after the end of colonialism they both have a potential to cause negative political and social consequences as their work can be utilized to control people and resources. I am also studying effects of social change, and religious conversion often is a fundamental change that impacts individuals and communities on various levels. Partiality of a researcher in analysing conversion in a missionary context can cause a notable bias in research results, and I am aware of carrying such a risk because of my positive views of Christianity. I have tried to minimize any such partiality which would hinder objectiveness of my analysis, but to some of it I may have been blind.
2 Ethnicity in Anthropology

2.1 Defining the concept: blood, boundary and culture

Ethnicity is, in Fredrik Barth's words, individual's "basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background" (Barth 1969a: 13). Common ancestry – real, fictive or metaphoric – is always essential to ethnicity (Eriksen 2010: 17, 42). This was noted already by Max Weber in *Economy and Society* (1922) where he defined an ethnic group as a group of people bound together by belief in their common origin, which is in turn based on similar appearances, cultural similarities or shared history (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 16-17).

Ethnicity deals with contrasts: defining selves and others against the self (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 20). Ethnicity as a phenomenon needs contact between groups to exist: without a group of people who are seen different from "us" there can be no "us" as a defined group, nor can there be "them" against which "us" is defined. Ethnicity is thus a characteristic of a relationship rather than that of a group (Eriksen 2010: 16). According to Richard Jenkins (1997: 13-14) ethnicity is "a dialectic between similarity and difference", and this dialectic depends on and is formed in social interaction.

Barth placed an emphasis on group boundaries which define who belongs to a group and who does not. Ethnic boundaries are simply criteria of membership, features marking ethnic distinctions. However, only those factors matter which are socially relevant: some substantial cultural differences may not be emphasized while other minor differences might be seen as crucial. (Barth 1969a: 14-16). Ethnic boundaries can be marked with modes of expression such as language, gestures, rituals and customs, or with values, world views and social structures (Izikowitz 1969: 141). Markers can change as culture of the group changes, but the boundary itself may survive. In fact, maintenance of the boundary is, according to Barth, a critical factor of group continuity. (Barth 1969a: 14-15). Ethnic differences must be made especially clear when contacts between groups increase. At the same time increased contact intensifies flow of cultural influences across the boundary, and groups can paradoxically become more similar at the same time as their ethnic distinctions are made clearer. (ibid.: 23.)
Ethnicity and culture do not have a clear one-to-one relationship, but the actual content of ethnicity is always culture in one way or another (Jenkins 1997: 105). Charles Keyes states that ethnic identity consists of those particular cultural traits that are used to express that identity. Common origin which ethnicity is based on is communicated through myths, history, rituals and customs, and it is these that become essential cultural differences between groups. (Keyes 1979: 4.) Differences in turn can exist only when there is similarity within groups. Culture of any ethnic group is not homogenous but contains internal variations, and respectively, cultural traits are often shared across group boundaries (Eriksen 2010: 40-41). If we are to study how differences are constructed socially we must pay attention to how similarity – the content of ethnicity – is constructed (Jenkins 1997: 168). Community boundaries are not drawn along the same lines as cultural differences. Rather boundaries are the community's ”public face”, a simplified mask that is shown to outsiders instead of the complex reality. (Cohen 1985: 74.)

2.2 Constructed ethnicity

Different theoretical viewpoints on ethnicity can be located on an axis between primordial and instrumentalist views. Primordialism argues that ethnic identity is natural, determined by one's biological origin automatically causing certain stereotypical behaviour, and because of its naturality it also endures in changes. This is common everyday thinking in many societies, but it appears problematic in practice. Primordialism does not explain identity change, variations or multi-ethnic identities. If ethnicity is natural and fixed, why is it so crucial to some people but almost meaningless to others to the point that it can be given up? Or if a person has ancestors of several contradicting ethnic groups, which one of them does he inherit in blood? (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 48-50.) People have also other identities, which might become more relevant than ethnicity. Ethnic, local and national identities are often segmentary and different identities are activated in different social contexts. (Eriksen 2010: 32, 37.)

According to the instrumentalist view, ethnic identity is significant as a means to achieve various political and economic interests (Jenkins 1997: 44-45). Unlike primordialists, instrumentalists regard ethnicity as prone to change and variation. Interests – for example resources available to members of certain
groups – are produced by circumstances which are subject to change, so importance of identity and even ethnic identification itself can change according to situation. Social change is thus a crucial factor in ethnic processes. This perspective sees identities as flexible, dependent on and produced by specific social and historical contexts. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 57-60.) However, the instrumentalist view also has its practical problems. It claims that ethnicity depends completely on economic or political interests, but offers no explanation to why do some people hold on to identities which are not in any sense profitable. (ibid.: 64-65.) Ethnicity is a collective identity, but it also has deep, personal and emotional roots grown since early childhood from experiences of who we are. Even though ethnic identity can be negotiable, it is not necessarily so in every context and changing one's identity can be extremely hard due to its close connection with personal integrity and security (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 52; Jenkins 1997: 46-47, 51). Ethnic identity is assumed at the same time with its cultural markers such as language and behaviour. Jenkins argues that for this reason ethnicity can be primary feature of identity, even if it is not primordial. (Jenkins 1997: 47.)

In *Ethnicity and Race: Making identities in a Changing World* (1998) Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann formed a constructionist ethnicity theory as a synthesis of primordial and instrumentalist views. It combines negotiability, flexibility and importance of historical context emphasized by instrumentalists, but takes seriously primordial arguments of deep, non-rational affections that ethnicity can generate. In short, the meaning of identities depends on social, economic and political circumstances, and change in circumstances may make previous identities inappropriate, forcing people to find new ways of thinking about both themselves and others. However, even though ethnic identity is situationally constructed, the group members see the result as primordial identity with "the quasi-mystical significance often attributed to blood ties" (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 72, 77, 89).

Importance of change for ethnicity has been realized since Barth, who argued that when social change affects individuals' possibilities to meet standards attached to their identity, it will be either changed to another more relevant identity, or criteria and meaning of identity itself must be adjusted to fit changed reality (Barth 1969b: 132-134). To the force of circumstances Cornell and Hartmann add "a large dose of activism: the contribution groups make to
creating and shaping their own identities”. People often actively use new circumstances along with their previous identities, social networks, political and economic resources, cultural practices and other characteristics to define who they are. Contexts in which people live regulate and sometimes strictly determine the ways in which people can use these resources. Therefore, identity construction is an interactive and unfinished process where external forces – both passive circumstances and active classifications by outsiders – and active groups and individuals meet (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 72, 80, 195, 231). Jenkins noted that rather than being something that people “have”, both ethnicity and culture are “complex repertoires which people experience, use, learn and 'do' in their daily lives”, this way constructing understanding of themselves and others (Jenkins 1997: 14).

Shared political and economic interests do bind ethnic groups together, but as interests change situationally, they may not be as important for group integrity as are shared institutions and shared culture. Attachment is always stronger if more than one of these are present. Institutions simply mean fixed social relations through which various problems are solved: the more group members share the same institutional networks, the more contact they have inside ethnic boundaries, which makes ethnic identity more important than if the members constantly interacted with other groups. Culture on the other hand refers to “a conceptual scheme for making sense of the world”. Shared ideas and understandings of reality, of the group itself and its place in the world are expressed in stories and rituals and learned through socialization and shared experiences, and can provide a strong basis of emotional attachment for group members even without common interests. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 86-88.)

Even though ethnicity is constructed, just any identity is not possible. Common ethnic identity can only be accepted with people who are culturally related. (Eriksen 2010: 110-112.) The necessary common denominator can be found either in history or in current circumstances and experiences. Once constructed, identities start to lead their own lives modifying people's daily experiences where they are again reproduced. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 92-93.) Because of its seeming primordiality, ethnicity has great potential to be personally and emotionally meaningful to group members. It is constructed through and lived in everyday social action and repeated experience and is thus seen as objective reality (Barth 1999: 21-22).
2.3 Inter-ethnic relations: categorization and power

Because ethnic identities are linked to economic and political interests – e.g. access to natural resources, available jobs or high status in society – it necessarily implies competition against other groups who pursue the same interests. Ethnic boundaries are emphasized to protect what is seen as "ours” by denying "their” access to it, or to claim rights to certain resources. Some ethnic groups have better possibilities to achieve their ends. For this reason power, the relative position of groups in society, is an essential feature in ethnicity. One way of exercising power is categorizing groups. Categorizations of selves and others and reciprocity of these categorizations is a crucial feature in identity processes. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 61-64, 73.)

Ethnicity is sometimes ascribed from outside by dominant groups on people who themselves reject this imposed identity (Eriksen 2010: 39). Jenkins makes a distinction between identification by group members themselves and categorization by outsiders. Identification can take place collectively or by individuals. Individual and group identities are connected, because individual identities always need a reference point in other group members who recognize the same collective identity. External categorization on the other hand is a process where one person or a group defines others as members of a certain group, which isn't always in line with the others' self-identification. Internal and external definitions, though separate processes, are linked very closely. In daily lives of individuals, outsiders' categories affect people's sense of self, and their understanding of themselves affects the way they in turn categorize others. Any interaction across ethnic boundary necessarily involves classification of some kind, in both ways. In fact the initial self-identification of every individual is a result of an external process, as children learn through socialization who they are and how they should behave as such-and-such people. The more practical significance ethnicity has in daily lives, the earlier it is assumed. (Jenkins 1997: 23, 53, 57-58, 168.)

Categorizations can become effective, if the categorizing group has enough authority to define identity of others. External category may be accepted if it is close enough to the group's own identity, if classification follows fundamental changes in group's culture which make identity change easier, or if the categorizing group has a higher status and is thus seen by the categorized as
having the right to define them. Often the categorizers have greater coercive power, which the classified group can not object to and are then forced to act according to external definition imposed on them. Some groups actively resist classifications by more powerful groups: in these kind of cases the external categorization is also internalized but only in reverse, strengthening the groups' self-identification. (Jenkins 1997: 53, 70-71.) Both internal and external definitions of identity involve power: external as using it on others, internal as claiming authority in personal matters against others who would possibly deny this authority. Thus there is a great potential for conflicts when there are disagreements in definitions of identities and their meanings.

The act of classification is always more than naming. Social identities have consequences in daily lives of the people. Jenkins writes about nominal and virtual aspects of identity. Nominal identity refers to the name and classification of groups and individuals, whereas virtual identity is what the name means in practice: rights, duties and access to resources of groups carrying the names. Just as group boundaries and their markers, nominal and virtual identities are inseparable in practice but can nevertheless change independently. The same name can have different practical implications in different situations and for different people. Virtualities are more likely to change than the names to which they are attached. Names and meanings of identities can also result in different processes of identification and categorization. (Jenkins 1997: 41, 56, 72, 167.) Virtual aspect of ethnicity can be further divided in position and meaning. Position means relative status of the group in wider social and political context, which directly involves power and resources. Meaning attached to identity can range from rather simple – we are good, others bad; winners, losers or survivors – to very complex ideas which have great potential of producing shame or pride. Ethnic boundary, position and meaning are often all affected both from inside and by external circumstances and categorizations, and change in any of them changes the identity as a whole. Categories may first be imposed from outside but if the people start to change the content of those categories and redefine their meaning, they are already actively constructing their own identities. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 30, 81-82.)
2.4 Ethnic symbolism

The supposed common ancestry of an ethnic group is crystallized in certain symbols. These symbols can vary from geographical area, language or religion to physical features or shared history. Importance of these symbols in everyday life is not essential, they may affect most aspects of people's interaction with others, or they may affect very little. Symbolic resources are nevertheless one of those characteristics that ethnic groups use to construct their identities. They use symbols to represent themselves, to communicate meanings given to their identities, and to create a sense of solidarity among group members. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 19, 221-222.) According to Anthony P. Cohen's definition in Symbolic construction of community (1985), a symbol is an entity that stands for another entity. However, it is also ambiguous: it stands for something, but it does not tell exactly what it stands for, and can contain a wide variety of meanings. Like spoken language, symbolic language of any given culture is learned through socialization and shared by the people who use it. Words are symbols themselves, and comparison to language is very useful in understanding other kinds of symbols: they facilitate us to make meaning and to communicate, without telling us exactly what we should say and mean. People can easily use the same symbols without ever examining if they share the meanings as well. This makes symbols so powerful: different people who interpret the same symbols each in their own way according to their individual circumstances and experiences, can be joined together precisely because the symbols they use are shared. (Cohen 1985: 14-16, 18, 21.)

Any categories of knowledge are marked by symbolic boundaries which distinguish them from other categories. The actual content of some categories is so vague that their existence is based mainly or only on their symbolic boundaries. Such a category is community. Cohen notes that community boundaries are mostly symbolic constructions which exist in people's minds rather than in objective reality. Because of this symbolic nature, boundaries can be perceived and interpreted in different ways by different people. In fact communities are symbols themselves. The sense of belonging to the same community is shared by its members, but different members perceive and orientate themselves to it in distinct ways. Cohen defines community as a group that is larger than family and kin but smaller than abstract ”society”. Community is where individuals learn cultural concepts and social behaviour,
i.e. the symbolic equipment which makes it possible to live in that exact social
environment. These symbols help people to communicate, to orientate in, and
interpret the world around them, but they do not necessarily interpret it the
same way or express the same meanings. Possible variety of interpretations is
limited by a common framework of language and culture. However, because of
individual variety in interpretations, people's experience of a community is
largely based on their common symbols. It is the form (ways of behaviour) that
is shared, not necessarily the content (meaning given to that behaviour).
(Cohen 1985:12-17, 20.)

Processes of globalization and urbanization have increased a flow of cultural
influences across community boundaries, which has made different
communities at least superficially more similar. However, periods of rapid
social change and increased cultural influence are crucial to identity
construction and adjustment of old identities, as was noted earlier. The more
similar the communities become on the observable surface, the more they must
reinforce symbolic boundaries that separate them. (Cohen 1985: 44.) The
purpose of any symbols is to give form to experiences (Geertz 1973: 45), so if
the symbols cease to give an appropriate image of reality they must be
somehow adjusted.

A common response to change is syncretism: combining new, adopted forms
with traditional, native meanings and values, or generating traditional – or neo-
traditional – forms that are used to express contemporary meanings. The
possible weakening of the boundary on the level of forms is compensated with
meanings that reinforce the boundary and people's sense of self. Explicitly
symbolic forms of behaviour, such as rituals, help people to orientate in a world
where reality does not meet ideals. They allow people to experience things that
are otherwise invisible: in a context of cultural homogenization community
consciousness is often possible to experience only when it is symbolically
enacted. Because symbols never carry any unambiguous meanings even in
stable contexts, they can give people an appearance of continuity even if either
the form or the content changes radically. (Cohen 1985: 46, 81, 82, 91, 92.)
Groups can also create totally new symbols to suit new situations. These help
to maintain group consciousness and solidarity, but they also necessarily
change both group and individual identities and their meanings even though
group boundaries might persist. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 228-229.)
Cornell and Hartmann (1998: 226-227) argue that symbolic behaviour – acts which are supposed to communicate meanings – differs from many other cultural practices because it is always used consciously: "Stories, celebrations, and the iconic forms of dress or food or ritual are used to signify an identity, to mark it, and in some sense to 'tell' it, to condense and capture part of what that identity means to those who carry it, or what they want it to mean.” For example stories remind people of their identity as they are retold: they reinforce people's notions of who they are and where they belong and this way generate emotional attachments, solidarity and action (ibid.: 222-224). Rituals that mark community boundaries – such as carnivals, agricultural feasts and local fairs – are often very explicit and thus have high capacity to increase community consciousness. Rituals, as all symbols, are capable of responding to each participant's emotional and social needs. (Cohen 1985: 50, 54.)

2.5 Ethnicity in Southeast Asia

Tooker (2004: 249) describes Southeast Asia as "a classic breeding ground for discussions of ethnicity”. Since Edmund Leach's classic study (1954), there have been many studies which underline relativistic and socially constructed nature of ethnic identities in the area. In general, Western notions of groups and their functions which tend to lean on the primordial side were noted to be inappropriate in Southeast Asian context (Dentan 1976: 79; Marlowe 1979: 168, citing Lehman 1967A). For example the common Western term ”ethnic minority” is mostly unknown in local languages – though introduced in Myanmar by British colonial administration – and Southeast Asians themselves do not consider anyone a ”minority” (Heikkilä-Horn & Miettinen 2000: 240).

Southeast Asian labels for ethnic categories often do not refer to cultural groups. One label can be used for several culturally and linguistically distinct groups with different historical backgrounds. (Dentan 1976: 74-75.) Local village names, clan names, references to dress colours or variations of ethnonyms can all be used as self-identification, and different labels are used in different contexts (Schliesinger 2003: 50; see also Feingold 1976: 87 on Akha subgroup labels). Names refer to different criteria and for this reason one group can be called by different names according to the criteria that is chosen (type of clothing, housing, or dialect) and the same label can be used for mutually
exclusive groups (Evrard 2007: 141). Thai concept *chao khao*, "hill tribe" as it is usually translated, is an administrative concept, not cultural (Kunstadter 1979: 122), referring to a structural category to whom categorizers relate in similar political or ecological manner (Dentan 1976: 75; Lehman 1979: 230).

David Marlowe described the pre-colonial Southeast Asian social system as based on local hierarchical relationships. Relative positions and statuses of different groups varied according to their “seniority” or “juniority” in their local context. Ethnic categories were principally structural categories, defined through their place in the hierarchy. Similarity was felt between groups who occupied similar position in that structure, not necessarily between those who were culturally or linguistically related. In this system local attachments were much more important than ethnic attachments outside one's local context, but local hierarchies still stressed differences, and that way reinforced boundaries between categories. (Marlowe 1979: 191-196.)

A common cultural boundary in Southeast Asian social system was drawn between hills and valleys, and ethnic identities were largely formed in these relationships. Despite cultural differences in livelihood (wet rice – swidden agriculture), religion (Buddhism – animism) and political system (centralized – village based), economic interdependence and political relationships have existed between these two spheres for centuries. Alliances have often left highlanders relatively autonomous, rather than integrating them to centralized political systems of lowlands. Even though assimilation has sometimes taken place, influence has also strengthened and transformed ethnic boundaries, and cultural influences from lowlands have been transformed into practices which reflect the uplanders' values. (Marlowe 1979: 166; Evrard 2007: 128, 143; Tooker 2004: 251.) Politically the fundamental difference between hills and valleys was in their distance from power centres, and thus their differential access to different kinds of power. People living in forests were far from the patronage of lowland princes, but they had their own sources of power related to forests, their animals, plants and spirits. Because of its different power, forest always carried a potential for revolution. (Gravers 2007a: 11-12.) According to Tooker, lowlanders in general regarded mountain groups as uncivilized and dirty, and even though symbolically including them in local hierarchies, tended to avoid them in person. Upland groups also preferred to keep away from lowland reach as much as possible, and this defensive
distancing formed an essential part of their identity. (Tooker 2004: 252, 256.)

Marlowe describes the cultural boundary less strict: both hill and valley peoples worked and travelled in each others' area, the hills and valleys being in a sense each other's extensions rather than exclusive domains. (Marlowe 1979: 194.) The differences in Marlowe's and Tooker's interpretations might be explained by different upland groups' different degrees of integration to their neighbouring lowlanders.

Ethnic identities have often been assumed to be mutually exclusive, so that one person can only belong to one ethnic group (Dentan 1976: 72). This is obviously a problem in context where ethnic definitions change situationally and categories are generally open and inclusive. Southeast Asian mountain peoples also seem to have a rather common ability to situationally change ethnic affiliation (Dentan 1976: 76). Structural categories described by Marlowe were themselves stable and unchanging, but individuals could rather freely move from one category to another. Membership was defined mostly by behavioural criteria: categories were inseparable from certain behaviour connected to them. Mastering the language, dress, custom, ritual and so on made a person a member of that category whose language, dress and custom were in question. Appropriateness of behaviour was judged according to the ethnic context in which it was performed, not according to its performer. (Marlowe 1979: 168-169, 174; Tooker 2004: 257.) Many Southeast Asians have cultural competence in more than one ethnic group and may be accepted as members of each in different situations. Biological origin is irrelevant: affiliation is chosen according to the context. This might even be a necessity in multicultural environments. (Dentan 1976: 76-77.)

Colonial administration and later development of nation states changed the social system based on inclusive hierarchies. The earlier system in which various culturally and linguistically distinct groups could be all included in larger categories as “similar”, has increasingly been replaced by a pluralistic system, where groups are seen as culturally exclusive. Ethnic boundaries are emphasized more than movement across them, because membership of certain groups is often advantageous. In a modern nation state different cultural groups are seen as ethnic minorities and they are all included in one large category of citizens. In this kind of a system, cultural behaviour is the necessary requirement for an ethnic group membership. Both traditional and pluralistic
systems agree that people who act like Thais are Thais, but in the traditional system one could be a Thai even if not acting like one, if included in a hierarchy in which Thais were on top. (Marlowe 1979: 202, 203, 207, 208; Gravers 2007a: 13-14.) In practice pluralistic thinking has lead to assimilation politics in the name of national integrity. Assimilation has recently given way to more accepting attitudes on minority cultures, however presenting them as living in traditional past opposite to the ideals of Thai modernization. (Jonsson 2004: 674-675.)

There are thus different ways in which identity is ascribed in Southeast Asia: structural, inclusive categories that are defined according to their mutual relationships; vertical hierarchies where different groups are included in the one on top; and performative categories where identity is ascribed according to proper behaviour. These different levels of ascription can be seen, for example, in Leach's observation, that ordinary Kachin people could change their ethnic identity to Shan by leaving the Kachin category and assuming Shan features like religion and kinship system, but Kachin chiefs on the other hand could “become Shan” by establishing a relationship with Shan chiefs, and when doing this they did not lose their position as Kachin chiefs or ethnic affiliation as Kachin (Leach 1954: 222). In this case chiefs and commoners were classified on different levels, the first on structural, the latter on performative levels of ethnicity. According to Jonsson, pre-national identities in Southeast Asia were “about rank and rights”, with significant cultural differences between chiefs and commoners on one group, who in turn shared a similar position within a regional structure in relation to lowland rulers (Jonsson 2004: 697).
3 The Way of Life

On the following I will compare various aspects of Akeu culture to other ethnic groups in the same area. As there are very few published sources about the Akeu, all descriptions about them are based on my own observations and on interviews with my key informant which emphasize the situation in Thailand. Some of the ethnographic accounts about other groups which I will use as comparison are rather dated, and therefore might not describe the present situation among those groups accurately.

3.1 Villages, economy and administration

One of the very basic elements of Akeu culture is rice. It is the self-evident basis of their economy, to the point that when I asked about farming in different villages, practically no-one answered that they cultivated rice until I specifically asked about it: at first only the additional cash crops were
mentioned. The annual calendar, many traditional festivals and rituals are centered around planting and harvesting rice: celebrating good crops and preventing bad ones (Staton 2012, personal communication; see also Chazée 1999: 140 about similar relationship to rice among the Akha). Previously the Akeu have practised subsistence economy based on swidden cultivation of mountain rice⁴. In more densely populated areas including northern Thailand and Kengtung, swiddening has been given up due to shortage of land. In Thailand swidden cultivation is also illegal, and the government restricts land use by taxation, demanding land ownership (which requires citizenship as well as money) and establishing nature reserves which all affect the possibilities to maintain a traditional economic system (Tooker 2004: 253, 263; Jonsson 2004: 676). In Akeu villages rice is now cultivated in existing fields, complemented by various cash crops such as tea, coffee, peanuts and pineapples. Trade, construction work, transportation and various other professions are also

![Huay Nam Khun Akeu village, Thailand. (Photo: Kimmo Kosonen 2011)](image)

⁴A different variety of rice than the one grown in lowlands. Mountain rice requires less water and cooler temperatures to grow. Some Akeu who have moved to lowlands have tried to grow mountain rice there because of its different – better or simply nostalgic – taste, but did not succeed.
represented among the Akeu especially in and near towns. Out-migration to urban areas is increasing because of a desire to improve the standard of living, which is difficult in villages due to land use restrictions and lack of wage labour.

Picture 4. A new house in an Akeu village in Thailand built in traditional style with partly modern materials. Walls are made of split bamboo, to be replaced later with wooden ones. (Photo: Kaisa Niemi 2012)

Akeu villages were traditionally located at mid-altitudes of the mountains. Houses were built on stilts, with walls and floors made of split bamboo, with no windows, and thatched roofs (see picture 3 at the centre). Nowadays migrations have brought many Akeu villages to lowlands. Traditional houses are no longer preferred and families replace them with modern ones if they can afford them. Tin roofs are favoured instead of thatched ones which are laborious as they must be renewed every few years. In Thailand new houses are often built in traditional fashion on wooden or cement poles, with wooden walls and storage space under the house. Occasionally houses are built in several phases: the foundation and the tin roof are built first and the bamboo walls are replaced with wooden ones later. According to my observations, in
Myanmar many seem to prefer brick houses built on the ground. Running water – flowing by gravity from sources high in the mountains – is common in mountain villages in Thailand. Many villages that I visited have electricity. Utility items such as fluorescent lights, refrigerators, water boilers for showers and washing machines are bought and used with pleasure when possible. Satellite televisions bring the urban culture to many remote houses in the Thai hills (see picture 3 on the left). Even in wealthier households cooking is still done on an open fire because it gives the food more flavour.

Akeu villages are administered by a secular headman and a religious leader. There is no political integration above village level (see Tooker 1992: 801 and Lewis & Lewis 1984: 13 for similarity with other groups; Platz 2003: 474 reports the Karen in Thailand having only village level integration unlike the Karen in Myanmar). Both leaders are assisted by village elders, who are required to know the oral traditions. The two leaders have different roles and responsibilities. In animist villages the village priest takes care of all spiritual issues and performs important rites. The headman holds authority in secular affairs and is, for example, called to settle arguments. In decisions that concern the whole village they consult each other. For example, when the village must be moved, the priest has the necessary knowledge of where to move and when, and the headman decides about all the practical arrangements. Thai administration mostly deals with upland peoples through their village headmen, who have been at times appointed because of their Thai language skills rather than abilities to lead, which has caused conflicts between villages and officials, or often just ignorance to the laws and rules by villagers (Lewis & Lewis 1984: 13; Kunstadter 1979: 149). In the village of Huay Nam Khun in Thailand, where I visited, the inhabitants are mostly animist but they no longer have a priest: the previous one died a few years ago and a new one has not been appointed in the lack of good candidates. The group of elders is also getting smaller as the members of the younger generation no longer possess the required knowledge of traditions and thus are not able to fill the positions as the older ones pass away.

3.2 Religion, ritual knowledge and traditions

Most Akeu in remoter areas practise a religion combining animism and ancestor cult. According to my key informant (himself a Christian and a son of
an animist priest) the most significant spiritual beings for the animist Akeu are their ancestors, namely the three previous generations of them, who are still believed to be present among the living. The generations older than them have already moved along to heaven. Along with the ancestors the Akeu pay respect to the lord of the land, a spirit who owns the land including the rice fields, and is therefore responsible for a good harvest and the well-being of people and animals living on earth. The Hani in China have a similar world view in which the ancestor cult is combined with rituals addressed to various spirits (Lewis & Bibo 2002: 129-137). The animist Akeu generally believe in the existence of a creator god, but this deity has no significance in their religious practice: all ceremonies and rituals are addressed to either local spirits, or the ancestors who are believed to be middlemen between people and god.

Religious and agricultural knowledge, rituals and customs – basically the whole traditional way of life – are defined with the term *aol saol kovq*, which could be translated as customs, traditions or culture. Every group of people is thought to have an *aol saol kovq* of their own. The Akha have a resembling concept, the *záŋ*, a strict behavioural and legislative code against which ”each movement, activity or even thought of individuals must be measured and balanced” (Chazée 1999: 133). Deborah Tooker translates *záŋ* as customs or religion: religious and secular aspects of behaviour are not separated from each other. According to the Akha, *záŋ* was given by their ancestors. Its rituals, like those of the Akeu, are centred around the ancestors and the fertility of land. Even though *záŋ* can be called religion, correct beliefs are not essential to it: rather correct ritual performance is the most important element in proper following of *záŋ*. (Tooker 1992: 800-803.)

Christianity and Buddhism have become more common for the Akeu living in and near towns. Buddhism is considered an important part of both Thai and Burmese national identity and a part of political integration of minorities especially in potentially insecure mountainous border areas (Platz 2003: 476-477; Heikkilä-Horn & Miettinen 2000: 183). In Myanmar, conversion to Buddhism is seen by the government as a means to weaken potentially separatistic ethnic identities (Sakhong 2007: 223). In Thailand, Buddhism is one of the main components of national ideology, and in the 1960's loyalty to the Thai nation was established as an important Buddhist doctrine. Missionary work has been organized as a part of programmes that aim for the integration
and assimilation of the upland peoples. These types of goals remain important to the government in the 21st century. Some Buddhist temples have special hill tribe programmes or free boarding schools for children, and teams of monks teach Buddhism in villages. (Kunstadter 1979: 154; Lewis & Lewis 1984: 27; Platz 2003: 476-477).

Christian missions have been active in Thailand and Myanmar since the 19th century. Because of little success with Buddhist majorities, much of Christian missionary activities have been targeted on mountain groups (Platz 2003: 477). As was mentioned in chapter 1.4, religion has played an important role in Burmese ethnic conflicts. Conversion also has a potential to cause in-group tensions, as has happened among the Christian and Buddhist Karen in Myanmar whose conflict escalated to violence (ibid.: 479) and in a smaller non-violent scale in Thailand among the Akha Christians and animists, who both tend to criticize each other for rejecting the "true" Akha záŋ (Tooker 2004: 275-276). Gravers (2007b: 228-229) points out that in Myanmar differences are not only religious, since Christians are often wealthier and better educated. According to my observations, wealth differences exist in Akeu villages but they do not seem to depend on religious orientation but rather on the access to wage labour.

Two of the villages I visited in Myanmar were Buddhist, one of them just because they were living on government land and were told to either convert or leave. One Buddhist informant told that Buddhists can still practise ancestor cult. Also among the Karen Buddhism has a syncretistic nature, but Karen Buddhists usually abandon complicated ancestral rituals and continue practising animist rituals connected with rice production (Platz 2003: 475). Generally, the mountain peoples in Southeast Asia have noted to be more receptive to Christianity than Buddhism, precisely because Buddhism is mostly seen as the religion of the dominant lowlands. The uplander identity is often based on opposition to lowlands, and Christianity can be seen as a means to set one's identity against that of the lowlanders'. Being a Christian also gives access to a "world religion" comparable to Buddhism and brings institutional advantages in dealing with dominating groups. (Lehman 1979: 248; Platz 2003: 478; Tooker 1992: 801.) Conversion to either Buddhism or Christianity often happens out of convenience especially alongside migration to towns: animist practices depend largely on village community structures, and are therefore
difficult to follow in a mostly Buddhist environment, or in Christian ethnic communities within the Buddhist majority (Tooker 1992: 802; Kunstadter 1979: 133-134).

There are a few dozen of Christian Akeu in Thailand and probably a few hundred in Myanmar. Many Christian Akeu are themselves active missionaries among the non-Christian especially in Myanmar. Local Christians from other ethnic groups do missionary work among the Akeu as well, and some foreign missions work among them mainly in Thailand. Reasons for converting can be various. In two villages in Myanmar where I was told about conversion, the motivation had been fear of evil spirits. In one of the villages in the 1990's, many people had died within a short period of time and this was seen to be caused by the spirits. Necessary sacrifices were made with no effect. The death epidemic ceased after a group conversion of the whole village to Christianity. Another village also converted as a whole after their priest died and they could not find a new one, and they did not want to live without a person who could communicate with the spirit world and keep them safe from illness and death. Among the Karen, crisis and failure of traditional rituals are also often noted as reasons for converting (Platz 2003: 482). Christianity, especially Protestant, is not as flexible regarding animist and ancestor rituals as Buddhism, and often non-religious cultural practices are abandoned along with religious ones at the time of conversion.

Among the animist Akeu in Thailand Christianity has been discussed as a potential new framework because knowledge of animist rituals and traditions is declining. Until very recently the Akeu traditions, history and long genealogies back to the mythical "first Akeu" have been transmitted orally. Passing these traditions to the next generation has been disrupted due to influences by the majority culture received e.g. in state schools, where children learn the language and culture of the majority. An increasing amount of young people are no longer interested in learning aol saol kovq (see Platz 2003: 482 for the same phenomenon among Karen). Those who still know the traditions are getting older, and the right ways to perform rituals might disappear with them. The animist rituals are also sometimes found to be burdensome: both Christian and Buddhist informants have told me how their life is now much easier than before because they do not need to sacrifice their few animals just because the village leaders tell them to. These same reasons are often given by Karen
animists who convert to Christianity or Buddhism: they expect freedom from spirits and costly sacrifice rituals (Gravers 2007b: 232-233, Platz 2003: 478).

Some Akeu have now put their hopes on writing as a means of preserving their way of life. Written Akeu language was developed in the early 2000's for the purpose of Bible translating and still very little literature of any kind in Akeu exists. Even though literacy could be associated with Christianity, is has also been adopted by animist elders as a suitable means to transmit traditions. Culture recording projects are planned and some festivals and rituals have been recorded on video. Akeu language is still learnt by most children. Situation is different only in mixed Akeu-Akha villages, where some Akeu children learn Akha as their first language.

3.3 Clothing

A prominent feature of Akeu culture is their traditional dress with its unique style of decoration and high black turbans used by women. The traditional Akeu costume includes long wide trousers and a long-sleeved jacket in Chinese style for men, and a wrap skirt, leg-covers, a sleeveless top and a short, long-sleeved jacket for women (see pictures 5 and 6). The men cover their heads with turbans also and children of both sexes wear embroidered caps. Men's clothing is usually black with modest embellishments around the edges. Women's clothes, especially striped skirts, are more colourful. Black jackets are richly decorated at the hem and sleeves. Silver jewellery, bead necklaces, belts made of cowry shells, and various other decorations are added for full festive outfit. Traditional clothing has its regional variations, for example, a woman's birthplace can be identified by the style she wraps her turban.

Nowadays clothes of this style are everyday use mainly among elderly women and in remoter areas, otherwise being used only as festive outfits. Most Akeu still own traditional costumes, or at least some modernized parts of a costume, for example sleeveless vests instead of long-sleeved jackets (see picture 6. at the centre). In special occasions especially older women can use a lot of time and effort to look fine in their traditional garb, but jackets or vests can as well be worn with jeans. In 1984, Lewis and Lewis already noted that wearing either Thai or western clothing had increased among mountain peoples in Thailand.
Synthetic materials were already then replacing hand-woven fabrics from self-grown cotton and other natural materials which were used for traditional clothes. (Lewis & Lewis 1984: 11, 206.) In the 21st century western style market-bought clothes are the norm in everyday use (see e.g. picture 3.) simply because making traditional clothes requires much time: according to one informant it takes about nine to ten days to make an Akeu jacket. Also the techniques are widely known only among the middle-aged and older generations. The young Akeu follow the fashions of urban culture. In Myanmar, long Burmese style wrap skirts are popular among Akeu women of all ages. Elderly women still cover their hair either with a turban or a scarf as a sign of being an adult woman, and in Thailand many older men favour knitted hats instead of turbans (see picture 6. on the left). Akeu-style shoulder bags are widely used as practical items with western clothing.
3.4 Calendar: rice and rites

The traditional Akeu calendar is complex and has many elements that resemble the Chinese calendar. The years are named after animals and follow a twelve-year cycle. Also days form a same kind of a cycle of twelve (as does the equally complicated Akha calendar, see Chazée 1999: 142-143), named after the same animals as the years. Years and days have ritual significance in both village rituals and domestic ones, as some animals and combinations of animals are more auspicious than others. Months, contrary to what one might expect, do not follow the same line of twelve. In Akeu calendar a year consists of 13 months. Twelve of them are “ordinary” months, not named but numbered, and they roughly correspond to the western calendar, the first month starting in December and ending in January and so on. The Akeu New Year festival called *aol thaol thaol nail*, is considered to be the 13th month. It is not actually a calendrical month but a ritual one, lasting for less than one month...
and overlapping the 12th and the 1st months (see picture 7). It is counted as both the first month of the coming year and the last of the passing year thus binding them together. The special status of the 13th month can be seen for example in lives of children born during that month. In the second month of the new year those children – babies less than two months old – will be regarded as two-year-olds.

Picture 7. Agricultural and animist ritual cycle.

The New Year festival must always begin on the day of that animal whose year is about to begin (if the coming year is the year of the buffalo, the New Year festival must begin on the day of the buffalo). The exact timing of the New Year can vary in different villages and is subject to some interpretation, as I witnessed during my field trip when the festival I planned to attend was suddenly postponed for two weeks. Knowledge of the Akeu calendar is...
important in determining not only the right day when to begin the feast but also where to begin it. The festive rituals must start in a family whose parents' birthdays are auspicious, i.e. the animals of the day and the year of birth make a good match with the animal of the coming year. During the New Year the village elders, both men and women, go to every house in the village to perform rituals of blessing. It is a time of showing respect to the elders and the ancestors and preparing for the coming year, but also for having fun. There is plenty of feasting, singing, dancing and heavy drinking going on, and previously the New Year also used to be an important time for young people to look for a spouse. I will describe the festival in more detail in chapter 4.4.

The next important calendrical event is the "Egg festival" in the 2nd month. It is celebrated by baking rice cakes that resemble eggs. The cakes are eaten with sugar and spices. Also chicken eggs are boiled, coloured, and given to children. An egg is a symbol of perfectness due to its perfect form, and by giving egg gifts people wish all kinds of perfectness in life to each other. This is also the time when babies born during the New Year have their second birthday. The time following the New Year celebration is mostly free from agricultural activities, and is therefore an ideal time for arranging weddings or building houses. Especially traditional houses that are made of bamboo are built during the first months because bamboo is at its strongest at that time. After the necessary materials have been gathered the building process takes only one day as the whole village participates. Modern wooden and brick houses are built any time of the year, when the family can afford it.

In the third month rice fields are cleared and prepared for planting. Traditionally one field was used for about ten years, after which all the nutrients were consumed from it and the field was abandoned and a new one cleared. Primary forests would ideally make the best swidden fields, but these have not been available for a long time, and even secondary forests old enough for making a good swidden fields are scarce (Chazée 1999: 23; Lewis & Lewis 1984: 15). As population pressure and Thai laws prevent clearing entirely new fields, Huay Nam Khun villagers use three shared fields in a three-year cycle. Rice is planted for one year, then other crops for two years, after which the field is burned (a common practice in Thailand despite laws against burning fields) in order to raise nutrient levels.
Ritual preparations of the fields take place during the fourth month. One of the most important annual ceremonies of the animist Akeu, along with the New Year, is the village gate ceremony held before rice planting. Every village used to have, and many animist and perhaps also Buddhist villages still have, two wooden gates which separate the village as a human world from the forest that is governed by spirits, which can cause diseases and other misfortunes. The living people are supposed to enter and leave the village through one of the gates and the dead are supposed to be carried though the other one to the cemetery. The same kind of protective gates are found both among the Hani and the Akha. (Lewis & Bibo 2002: 44; 51, Lewis & Lewis 1984: 224). The gates are renewed every year during the fourth month, and decorated with symbols woven from split bamboo, which keep the spirits out (see Chazée 1999: 147 for Akha). The new gate for the living is built right next to the old one on the side that faces the village and thus it moves closer to the village every year, and the other gate moves closer to the cemetery in a similar manner. When a new village is established its gates are built as far from it as possible to allow the village to grow and the gate to move towards it. When the gate reaches the nearest houses, or the cemetery gate reaches the graves, the village must be moved which happens approximately once every one hundred years. In the village of Huay Nam Khun in Thailand – the only one where I actually saw the gates – people nowadays enter and leave the village without passing through the gate, but it is still considered the village's spiritual border which keeps all the evil outside⁵.

All male villagers except those whose wife is pregnant participate in building the gate, so that as many villagers as possible could learn how to do it. Finishing the gate is followed by a sacrifice ritual, which is one of the two "high sacrifices" in the Akeu animist ritual cycle (Staton 2012, personal communication). A pig and two chickens along with rice, tea, liquor and salt are sacrificed to the lord of the land, who is asked to give good crops, good health and prospering to all villagers. After this ritual the village priest plants

⁵Some years ago some Buddhist monks wanted to live in the village, possibly as a part of national programme of spreading Buddhism among minorities (see e.g. Platz 2003: 476-477). Village elders denied the monks a permission to stay in the village and only allowed them to build their dwelling outside the ritual gate. The monks left after four years with no converts. Taiwanese missionaries have built a Christian church so close to nearest houses that it is practically in the village, but as it is built on land owned by the nearby Chinese village, the Akeu could not prohibit it. However, the church, just as the dwellings of the Buddhist monks, stands empty.
the first rice seedlings and the villagers follow by sowing various different plants and flowers to the fields. These will come up later when the rice grows. The late village priest in Huay Nam Khun was not aware of any reason for sowing flowers other than that it had always been done. My key informant had found out that they do have a practical purpose: for example marigolds keep locusts away with their smell and sunflowers attract bees.

Planting rice takes place in the fifth month, and is usually completed by the halfway of the month. The monsoon rains begin around that time, in May by the western calendar. Traditionally the planting was followed by a hunting season in the fifth and the sixth months, as there was nothing to do on the fields. Nowadays the forests and animal populations have decreased, and some Akeu have replaced hunting with fishing. Other activities such as collecting tea leaves also take place when the rice fields do not require much attention. Vegetable gardens are planted during these months and harvested before the rice harvest. During the sixth and the seventh months the fields usually must be weeded, sometimes more than once. Also an additional sacrifice ritual is required to ensure sufficient crops: as many as seven or eight chickens per family are sacrificed.

The following months are spent waiting for the rice. The latter of the two ”high sacrifices” takes place in the tenth month, when evil spirits are driven out of the village on a day of the tiger (Staton 2012, personal communication). Rice harvest begins in the tenth or the eleventh month and is usually finished by the end of the eleventh. During the harvest families celebrate it by eating new rice. Each family chooses an auspicious day when they gather to eat rice from the new harvest and may also sacrifice a chicken or a pig. After the rice has been harvested the year comes to an end.

This kind of a ritual and agricultural cycle is followed in animist villages, but obviously in towns everyday life is organized differently according to the global and Buddhist calendars (see Tooker 2004: 267-268 for effects of wage labour to the ability to perform rituals). Knowledge of the traditional calendar has the same problems in transmitting as other oral knowledge. The younger

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6I do not have any further knowledge of this ritual: my Akeu informants did not mention it and the American missionary who told me about it had never seen the ritual in person and could not offer any more information.
generation no longer masters all its complexities, auspicious days and ritual
details. However, the Akeu still commonly know at least their birthdays
according to this calendar, and printed wall calendars are available in Akha
language which are used in Akeu households as well. Religious conversion also
changes the way the calendar is used. Christian converts regard it merely as a
means to count time, but they do not apply its ritual aspects. For example
birthdays are important for knowing one's age rather than knowing which days
are auspicious. My informant expressed it as freedom: there is no need to be
afraid just because it happens to be an unlucky day according to traditional
calendar. The ritual pattern of the year cycle changes as well, as ancestral and
animist rituals are replaced with Christian celebrations, except for the New
Year which is still celebrated, though without sacrifice rituals. Christianity
brings the seven-day week also to rural villages where urban time concepts
otherwise do not count. As church services are held on Sundays, the seven-day
week regulates their daily life more than the twelve-day week.
4 Symbols of Akeu-ness

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Akeu are in many ways culturally similar to other ethnic groups in the area. On the following I will discuss how ethnic distinctions are expressed within this framework of cultural similarity. This happens by means of symbols that carry and communicate ethnic meanings. According to Cornell & Hartmann (1998: 195-196), any cultural features which create contrast between groups can be used as ethnic symbols to draw boundaries and signal identities. I will describe symbols that the Akeu use for this purpose, how they are used, and also some of the possible meanings given to them as far as they can be found in the data.

To receive information about ethnicity, I asked what the interviewees consider important in the Akeu way of life and what makes them different from other peoples around them: in short, what makes an Akeu. I also asked about changes in the Akeu life, about relationships to other groups, possible ethnic categorizations that the interviewees had encountered, and their own attitudes to these outside forces. I assume that these kinds of questions shed light on ethnic markers which the Akeu regard as separating them from other culturally and linguistically related peoples, and also tell about the circumstances which drive changes in ethnicity.

4.1 "You can change your mind but not your hat"

Clothing came up in every interview as an important, distinguishing feature of Akeu culture. The importance of clothing as a symbol of identity in Southeast Asia has been noted by many authors (see e.g. Cribbs & Smith 1999: 200; Evrard 2007: 142; Kunstadter 1979: 125-126). Decorations and especially women's hats were mentioned as important details. Many elderly women wore their traditional turbans even if they were otherwise dressed in store-bought clothes.

Other features of appearance apart from clothing items that mark out an Akeu were told to be stretched earlobes and black teeth. These are still a common sight among elderly women and in more remote areas also for younger women. One informant told about a saying that if your teeth are not black, you are not a real Akeu. Teeth were blackened by first chewing lemon or something else sour
that makes teeth soft and then adding the colour. Stretching earlobes is a practice that separates the Akeu and the Akha. Ears are pierced at an early age and gradually stretched. Adult women use round, heavy silver earrings that are pulled through the earlobes. Neither of these markers is not exclusive to the Akeu, but practised by some other ethnic groups as well; also they are not shared by all within the boundary. In spite of this they are still regarded as markers of Akeu ethnicity, at least by those who have them.

The Akeu have a saying that it is allowed to change one's mind or thoughts, but not one's headwear, which tells about the significance given to outer appearance. Several elderly interviewees, for example a couple from Kengtung in their early 60's, chrystallized children's and young people's attitudes to traditions in their attitude to clothes: “We try to teach [what it means to be Akeu] but they are not interested. They don't want to wear their traditional clothes.” (Int. 10) To wear the Akeu clothes is to value traditions and Akeu cultural identity; not wearing them poses a threat to the existence of that identity. Clothes are the cultural element that many wish to transmit to the next generation: however educated – and culturally similar to their classmates – the children become at school they should at least wear Akeu clothes on festive days. Women try to keep the tradition alive by making clothes to their children and grandchildren.

Sometimes using items defined as ethnic markers is what Edwards (1985: 111-112) refers to as public markers of ethnicity: part of ordinary life of group members rather than a statement. One younger informant had asked elderly women why they bother wearing the turban every single day, and got an answer that as they are women they must cover their heads – implying that the turban is the only right way to cover one's head. The oldest of my informants, an 80-year-old woman, knew no special reason for wearing traditional Akeu clothes, she simply grew up wearing them just like every other person of her generation. For them clothing is definitely a public marker rather than a symbolic one. In one casual conversation an Akeu woman told, pointing to my T-shirt and jeans, that she did not even know that these kinds of clothes existed before she moved away from her native village in Myanmar. When everyone in the same village habitually looked the same, and people of different backgrounds looked different, clothing marked distinctions in a very different way than now that the options are wider. Market clothes even out distinctions
between groups and create more variations among members of one group, and thus changes in clothing require adjustments in their meaning as well.

One couple that I interviewed told that clothes are the most important feature of Akeu culture, and "you must wear them". However, for most Akeu they have become a speciality, a festive outfit used only in special situations. Even the husband of the couple who declared an obligation to wear Akeu clothes, in fact wore store-bought clothing during the interview. "Must" has become relational, mainly referring to festivals, New Year celebrations and weddings, when also the younger generation is more often seen in Akeu clothes. Even this obligation seems to depend on the person and the location: on my video data about the New Year festival in an Akeu village in Thailand, many of the elder men did not wear traditional clothes. Some young people, especially men, do not wear them at all7, and wedding clothes are increasingly rented from the town. Those who still daily use Akeu clothes have had to admit that their own habits are not relevant to the next generation. There are, however, some exceptions. One woman in the Kengtung area told that the young people of her village like to wear Akeu clothing in a "modern" way. I did not see examples of this adaptation, but elsewhere I have seen traditional Akeu jackets used with western shirts, trousers and skirts, and both men and women, especially the young generation, using sleeveless vests decorated in Akeu style with T-shirts and jeans.

Despite – or perhaps due to – the changes in wearing them, traditional clothes have a great ethnic significance. Akeu clothes can still be a taken-for-granted part of life for some people, but they are also consciously used to express ethnic identity. The elders I interviewed in Thailand told that if they are invited to feasts outside their village, they often dress in traditional clothes to show who they are. Some informants told that if their ethnicity is questioned, they can just show what kind of clothes their people wear and differences in clothing mostly make it clear that they are, for example, a separate people from the Akha. Clothes thus communicate ethnic distinctions even when they are not worn. Looking different means being different. This recognizing function of identity markers does not even end at death: the dead Akeu are buried in full

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7According to Edmund Leach, women's clothes usually retain differences between groups whereas men's clothes imitate those of lowlands. This reflects upland groups' pressures to both adapt and distance oneself from lowlanders. (Leach 1954: 20.)
traditionla outfit, in order for the deceased to be recognized as Akeu in afterlife and to find one's own people, clan and family members there. Even many of those who have dressed only in a western way are still often buried in Akeu clothing. Ethnic identities are not the only ones shown in clothing: Akeu Christians, especially pastors, often have crosses embroidered on their jackets or shoulder bags, which add another dimension to the meaning that is communicated through them.

As a symbol of identity traditional clothes can be ambiguous. They are a source of pride used to pay respect to special situations, to show off, to express fellowship and solidarity among other Akeu, and to stand out among neighbours from other ethnic groups. On the other hand traditional clothes can also be a source of shame: they communicate not just the ethnic category but also the meaning given to that category, and are therefore capable of carrying the same symbolic burden as the identity itself. One elderly informant in Kengtung told that if she goes to town traditionally dressed, as she usually does, and meets young people of her village, they pretend not to know her. According to another woman from the same village, the Shan use more durable clothes because they are more clever than the Akeu: quality of clothing demonstrates the quality of their wearers. In local ethnic hierarchies the Akeu as a small group are at the bottom levels, and lower than the Akha despite the closeness of language and culture (Kosonen 2012, personal communication). Many of my informants told that other groups generally consider the Akeu as poor, uneducated, and thus "useless". This denotation has been at least partly accepted by the Akeu themselves: they tell stories about competitions with the Shan, which the Akeu always lose.

One remarkable feature that came up in the interviews concerning clothing was the meaning given to shoes.

"When I was young I didn't have shoes, I never wore shoes. I have been wearing shoes only since I moved here, for 16 years. And now young people can't even make the clothes by themselves, but they can wear lots of clothes. I used to have only one set of clothes and one pair of shoes that my parents bought me one time a year ---" (Int. 3)

Two informants from different villages, one of them a 65-year-old woman cited above, responded to my question about cultural change by telling that when
they were younger they did not have shoes, or if they had, they had to make do with just one pair for a long time. Now they own many pairs and can wear shoes all the time. I see the significance of shoes in their association to wealth: clothes are perhaps easier to make by oneself from self-grown cotton, but durable shoes have to be bought, and therefore require money. The absence of shoes is a sign of either extreme poverty, not being able to afford even the cheap market slippers; ”backwardness”, living outside the market economy; remoteness from marketplaces where they are sold; or all of them. This message is not a pleasant one to communicate, and for this reason the ability to wear shoes all the time is something to be pleased about.

4.2 Spoken and written words

The Akeu language was also of the most significant ethnic markers which appeared in the interviews. Also the Hani in China (Lewis & Bibo 2002: 6) and the Karen in Thailand (Stern 1979: 77; Kunstadter 1979: 140) share this idea of the language as an important ethnic marker. Language makes the Akeu different from the Akha, and that way from everyone else, because the Akha are their closest linguistic relatives. Many Akeu are multilingual, which is necessary in order to survive as a small group among many bigger ones. Some informants told that it is common for the Akeu to understand and speak Akha – which might be one of the reasons why they are often classified as Akha – but not the other way round. The smaller group is often the one to adapt and learn the ways of bigger groups. Which languages people actually learn depends on the local context: not all Akeu speak Akha if there are no Akha villages in the same area. Nowadays all children should learn the official languages at school, but there are people among the older generation who do not speak the official language of the country at all, but might speak other minority languages instead.

The Akha occasionally regard the Akeu language as a dialect of Akha. My key informant told that if he hears such statements he gives an example, saying ”where are you going” in Akeu, and demonstrated to me how different it sounds in Akeu and in Akha. Just as clothing is used to explain ethnic differences even if not worn, so is language used deliberately to demonstrate the existence of ethnic boundaries between people. Because Akeu clothes are not worn every day, language is also the most obvious way of recognizing
other Akeu outside one's village. According to Cornell & Hartmann (1998: 227), language is a powerful ethnic symbol because of its capability to create and express boundaries: speaking a language which is not shared by all people present excludes those who do not understand it and creates a sense of belonging among those who do. Choosing one language instead of another "is a ritual act, it is a statement about one's personal status” expressing either solidarity or distance (Leach 1954: 49).

In several interviews ethnic identity was equated with language, just as relationship to tradition was equated with wearing Akeu clothes. A child from a mixed marriage is an Akeu if he or she speaks Akeu, and those Akeu who live in towns remain Akeu even though they speak other languages daily, because they still speak Akeu when they return to their home village. A 65-year-old woman from Myanmar expressed this notion in the following discussion:

KN: "Can Akeu ever stop being Akeu? Is it possible that someone who is born as Akeu changes to some other people?"
Int 3: "No. Even if they move to other country, they are still Akeu."
KN: "If they speak another language?"
Int 3: "They never forget their language."

Also one town-dwelling informant thought that the most important way to transmit "Akeu-ness” to children is to teach them the Akeu language: through language children can experience what it means to be Akeu. It was a common notion that however modern they become, however they look like everyone else, Akeu children should not forget their language, and it is an alarming trend that Akeu children in mixed villages do not always learn Akeu as their first language. Language can therefore be seen to contain the identity: it is capable of passing it to the next generation as well as making it visible to outsiders.

It is not merely spoken language that carries symbolic value as an identity marker, but also written Akeu language, which has existed only for about ten years. Literacy carries a very specific meaning for the Akeu. They have a legend which tells that once, a long time ago, god called representatives of all peoples in order to give all of them writing. An Akeu priest went to god, who gave him writing on a buffalo skin. On the journey back to his people, the priest became hungry, lit a fire, roasted the skin and ate it, and for this reason
the Akeu never learned how to read and write. Losing the written language is a common mythical theme in Southeast Asia among culturally and linguistically different highland groups e.g. the Akha (Lewis & Lewis 1984: 222), the Karen (Kunstadter 1979: 154), and the Mon-Khmer-speaking Khmu in Laos (Evrard 2007: 152). This myth is usually used to explain why uplanders are economically and politically disadvantaged compared to lowland groups (ibid. 152-153), because literacy is understood as a symbolic connection to power and wealth (Kunstadter 1979: 153). Another possible interpretation of the myth is that they are now carrying the divine wisdom inside them (Lewis & Lewis 1984: 222). One Akeu woman told this story as an answer to my question of what makes Akeu different from other peoples. My translator explained that she might have understood the question as why the Akeu are poorer or less educated than others. In highly hierarchical societies ethnic differences are not merely differences of category but of status as well.

It is no wonder then, that literacy, especially in their own language, has a huge significance to many Akeu. Some elderly informants who themselves regard clothes as the most important ethnic symbol, in fact stressed that they do not want to give too much significance to clothing because the young Akeu are not so interested in it. Instead they, probably illiterate themselves, see literacy in the Akeu language as the "new symbol" of Akeu culture. Also my younger informants see language as a more important ethnic marker than clothes. While outer appearance is getting more similar, speech still remains different, even for multilingual people.

4.3 “Know where you come from”

"You can go to heaven or you can go to hell, but you must not forget your ancestors!” (Int. 1)

Ethnicity is essentially based on kinship, real or fictive. The Akeu have a strong sense of kinship: genealogies are generally known for dozens of generations all the way to the mythical "first Akeu". The way the Akeu give names to their children reflects continuity of generations: the last syllable of the father's name is the first syllable of all his children's names. This system is common to Lolo(Ngwi) languages (Sadan 2007: 68), though these genealogical names are sometimes not used in public, for example the Akha believed that using them
brings bad luck (Lewis & Lewis 1984: 232). A continuous line of names makes it easier to remember long genealogies. The first ancestor Thao Phaoq is not just the forefather to the Akeu, but to the Akha and the Hani as well. Feingold (1976:88) describes how connection to the common ancestor is essential to Akha ethnicity, even to the point that a clearly fictive connection is deliberately constructed to incorporate those who are adopted from other ethnic groups and "become" Akha. The adoption usually concerns men who marry Akha women; a non-Akha woman who marries an Akha man automatically becomes an Akha. The adopted man's name is placed on the 15th level of generations and the name Ton Pon (I suppose a variation of the same name as Thao Phaoq8) is added in front of his name. A new Akha is thus placed in the same genealogy with other Akha, right next to the supposed common ancestor. The shorter the genealogy of a lineage, the more recent newcomers they are. (ibid.) I have no knowledge of this kind of practices among the Akeu, but I have been told that different Akeu families have genealogies of notably different lengths, which gives a reason to suppose that at least some Akeu genealogies have been constructed at some point to give certain people fictive, but still "real" blood ties to all other Akeu.

According to the elders of the village of Huay Nam Khun in Thailand, the most important features of Akeu culture are the ancestors, the source of blood ties between family members, lineages and finally the whole people. As important as other things e.g. aol saol kovq – rituals and traditions – and the Akeu language, are, they can be given up; ancestors cannot. According to Lewis and Lewis, also the Akha have a very strong relationship to their ancestors: every Akha feels that he or she is a part of a continuous chain of people, starting in the remote past and going on into the future. Continuity is an essential value on which much of Akha culture has been based on. (Lewis & Lewis 1984: 10; see also Chazée 1999: 137.) The Akeu elders' attitude to their own ancestors resembles this appreciation of continuity. The Akeu must know where they come from, and in order to do so they must remember their ancestors, namely the three previous generations who are addressed in rituals. Remembering is

8According to Lewis & Lewis (1984: 204), the first Akha was called Dzoe Tah Pah, who lived 13 generations after the first human. Lewis & Lewis note the ability of the Akha in Thailand to remember not only their genealogy but the routes which their ancestors took from China to Burma and further to Thailand, and for a people with no written history, the stories of the Akha in different locations show a remarkable coherence in details.
not merely knowledge of who the ancestors are, but it is something that happens through the ancestor cult and makes people's personal histories present in everyday life (Staton 2012, personal communication). The elders seemed to value other cultural features as means to respect the ancestors in a proper way. For instance, they can not be remembered if one loses the Akeu language because then one can not use the right words when talking to the ancestors. Identity is hence very closely tied to a seemingly religious practice, just as for the Akha, an Akha is a person who follows the Akha traditions (Tooker 1992: 800, 803). It is the behaviour that matters, the hat worn on the head as it were.

Ancestor worship is usually abandoned by Christians who tend to draw a sharp line between the old and the new. Buddhists are more tolerant for syncretism, but because Buddhism, like Christianity, is seen as a means to escape from costly rituals, the role of ancestors can diminish especially among urban Buddhists who do not have the social environment of an Akeu village which supports ancestral and animist practices. In rare cases animist religion is seen as a predecessor to Christianity. My Christian key informant is very interested in Akeu history, both recent and remote, and sees the Akeu world view including many elements – belief in existence of a creator god and heaven, a concept of sin, and ideas how to protect people's souls on earth and on the way to heaven after death – that are to him perfectly compatible with Christianity, though rituals will be unnecessary or even dangerous after converting (similar views of animism as a pre-Christian religion are common among the Karen, Platz 2003: 483). Thus history and continuity can in some cases be important even for those who aspire change, and one's identity can still be based on roots, on "where you come from": the past can be seen through the present.

One ambivalent aspect in Akeu history regarding their ethnicity is the common ancestry with the Akha. Some of my informants in fact told that they do not mind that much if they are called Akha, because the Akeu "come from" the Akha. On one hand history and ancestors reflect who they are as a people, on the other hand, if they go far enough to the past, they might come to the conclusion that their separateness is only relative. The Akeu want to make a clear difference between themselves and the Akha, but the Akha are still their closest ethnic relatives along with the Hani in China, and mixed villages are formed with the Akha more often than with other groups. Indeed emphasizing ethnic boundaries is needed the most when they become ambiguous (Eriksen
2010: 23), and it is namely the Akha against whom the Akeu are defining themselves. Using history as an ethnic marker in such a situation requires a selective approach.

According to Cohen, one of the ways to achieve continuity in times of change is to refer to history. When past is used as a symbolic resource it is selected to fit present purposes. Written histories, stories of the old days, and genealogies are all employed and interpreted in accordance to contemporary needs to express meanings given to community. Symbols referring to the assumed past and their "timelessness masquerading as history" have great emotional potential which makes them an especially effective integrative force during periods of rapid change. (Cohen 1985: 99, 101, 102, 104.)

4.4 Traditions: dividing and integrating

Also among the things that distinguish the Akeu, vague categories of “culture” and “traditions” appeared, including e.g. rituals of ancestor worship, annual festivals, wedding customs, folk songs, and traditional house constructions. *Aol saol kovq*, the Akeu complex of traditions and rituals, covers much of this category, even though the word *aol saol kovq* was not used in every interview, at least not by the translators who were not aware that I was familiar with the term. Many of these traditions are alive and well, though often combined with practices adopted from outside. For example, certain marriage ceremonies are performed even in partly modernized weddings, traditional house constructions are sometimes adopted to new houses with modern comforts, and annual festivals are celebrated especially in villages, where life is more closely connected to the agricultural cycle. Outside influences are, however, seen even in cases where cultural change is less valued, for example, some Thai Buddhist elements have been adopted to ancestral rituals of the animist Akeu.

Akeu culture and customs, everything from clothes and houses to crop protecting rituals, is perceived as coming from the ancestors. Therefore the word "tradition" can have a very different sound to it depending on the person. The effect of religious conversion to Akeu ethnic symbols is felt the most on the traditions and the ancestor cult, and there is a disconnection with traditions among many Christians. Early missionaries who worked in the area transferred their own negative attitudes to traditional cultures to young local churches.
(Kosonen 2012, personal communication). Both animist and Christian Akeu often see the whole *aol saol kovq* as connected with ancestor and spirit worship, leading to different results. Christians often discard *aol saol kovq* as a whole, and often it is not replaced by new "Christian Akeu customs" but leaves a vacuum instead (ibid.). Christians' attitudes are emphasized by focusing on the more unpleasant side of animist practices, such as excessive animal sacrifices, or the animist Akeu's attitude to twins which one informant in Myanmar told about. If an Akeu woman gives birth to twins, the babies are killed and their parents banished from the village (a practice common with the Akha, see Tooker 1992: 799). Many animists also see *aol saol kovq* as an indivisible whole and thus reject conversion because they see it as abandoning the whole culture. According to my key informant, the difference between religious and secular customs is indeed often difficult to see, because all parts of *aol saol kovq* are somehow connected to the ancestors. The equivalent Akha traditions are also not possible to divide to secular and religious (Tooker 1992: 803). Some of the Akeu do, however, see this perhaps newly invented difference. Some of my Christian informants talked about the importance of traditions for the Akeu way of life, referring to secular customs when I asked for details.

Disconnection from traditions does not always depend on religion. More urbanized or urban-oriented younger Akeu may see majority culture more appealing than the traditional way of life which might seem backward. In any case many traditions are not meaningful outside the Akeu communities. When the younger Akeu are interested in traditions their interest is often selective: some, as my key informant, focus on history, others on rituals; but there is still an increasing amount of those who are completely indifferent to traditions.

In times of social change traditions are the very elements that are seen to be under threat, and they are often consciously used to achieve a sense of continuity (Cohen 1985: 99). Despite numerous changes, there are still traditions which can integrate more than divide, and have a strong potential of reinforcing, reproducing and also changing ethnic identity of the Akeu. One such tradition, the New Year festival, will be discussed next. Description of the festival is based on video material and on explanations which my key informant gave about the filmed events.
Case: the New Year

The Akeu New Year festival and the ancestor ritual starts in a household which is chosen in advance (see chapter 3.4 about the Akeu calendar). Women get up before sunrise to cook glutinous rice, a special variety of rice that is reserved for festivities. Cooked rice is formed in a lump which is placed in a bowl and two people pound the rice in turns with wooden clubs. In fact the Akeu name for the festival, *aol thaol thaol nail*, means "pounding glutinous rice". Most villagers take part in the rice pounding during the festival. When the rice is ready it is rolled into small cakes that are wrapped in banana leaves and used in an ancestral sacrifice ritual. Two cakes are wrapped separately in small leaves, and one long leaf is folded to wrap nine other cakes. In addition, a pig and a chicken are sacrificed. If the family owns a rice storage, the pig will be killed there and then prepared for the meal. If the family can not afford a pig they can use meat bought in the market. Some clans use only chickens, but usually a pig is preferred especially if the family is in need of some special blessing.

One of the elder men leads the ancestral ritual. He puts some rice and meat with tea, liquor, salt and ginger on the family's ancestral altar. Then he calls their ancestors to participate in the meal and asks their blessing for the household in return for the sacrifice. Relationship between generations, the deceased included, is reciprocal: blessing flows down the line from the old to the young and prayers are addressed from the younger to the older. As the blessing is mediated through village elders, families also show them respect in return. Rituals are performed in a special high ritual language which is no more common knowledge. Especially younger people – including my informant who described the festival – can only understand it a little. The elders are therefore a necessary connection between families and their forebears.

After the sacrifice the elders share a meal with the hosting family. Men and women sit around different tables in prescribed order according to their ages. Sacrificial rice cakes are eaten – the two cakes wrapped separately belong to the parents of the household, the nine wrapped in one leaf are for everyone else – and in addition to these, more rice is served. During the meal the elders ask for blessing for the family, thanking the lord of the land for the year's harvest and asking for protection from illness caused by evil spirits. Future of the family is predicted from the liver of the sacrificed pig or from chicken bones.
In the last part of the ritual some rice is put in a cylindrical container made of bamboo (which can be substituted with a tin can as on the video) and tea and liquor are poured over it, and one of the elders recites the cycle of rice cultivation to ancestors, and asks them to protect it and provide a good harvest and plenty of animals. The meaning of the sacrifice, according to my informant, is to return the crops to ancestors who in turn bring it back to god. The whole ritual from preparing rice to the final sacrifice takes several hours. After it is finished, the elders move to the next house where the whole process is repeated. The festival lasts as many days as is required to perform the rituals in every household. In bigger villages the elders can form smaller groups that scatter into different houses to shorten the festival time.

Wealthier houses often invite the whole village in for food, drink, song and dance in the evenings. Young people used to regard these occasions especially important, and they often used time and effort to look attractive in their finest outfits. In one dance particularly connected with the New Year the women dance in a circle with bottles of liquor in their hands, and men dance around them trying to impress them with their dancing: if they succeed they will be handed a bottle. Those of the men who are more skilled dancers might also perform dances with swords. Songs are sung in the high language, they might be improvised and tell about ordinary life, New Year feasting, and often about love. Men and women sing verses in turns, which used to be part of courting. Things were often settled between young couples during the New Year, and weddings arranged before the next rice planting. One girl might have had several admirers and she was free to choose any of them. The Akeu generally married young, at the age of about 15-16 years, because "they had nothing better to do".

After the rituals are finished in all the houses the celebration ends with a "picnic", where the villagers go out to the woods together. They gather vegetables and herbs from the fields and catch small fish from ponds and cook them outside. More singing and dancing follows and courting goes on. It is remarkable that most of the singers and dancers on the video were middle-aged or elderly people, even though these used to be mainly young people's activities. The younger generation, I suppose, has other preferences of music and dance and other ways of courting adopted from the majority culture. Also the high language that is mainly used in songs restricts the young from
continuing this tradition as they do not speak or understand it. On the video the older people present the traditional Akeu New Year as it used to be in their youth, and in this aspect the video shows more an artificial cultural performance than a real-life ethnographic observation. New Year rituals, however, are performed in the same way even without the camera.

Ancestors have a central place in the Akeu New Year celebration. It is one of the most important occasions when descendants show them appropriate respect. Every Akeu is connected to their ancestors through rice, the source of life. The New Year celebration emphasizes continuity of both lineages and traditions which are at least ideally transmitted unchanged down the line. The ancestors are “where we come from” and rituals remind the Akeu of who they are, where they come from, and where they are going: to continue the same line, to become ancestors whose children will continue to remember them. Even the young people's courting during the New Year could be interpreted as a part of this continuity. A marriage leads to a new family and children, a birth of a new generation who will continue the line.

According to Anthony Cohen, rituals are symbols which are especially capable of heightening people's consciousness of their community and reinforcing its boundaries, because they provide a means to experience community and social identity in practice. Rituals communicate both the group’s relationship to other groups and its individual members' relationship to their group: who we are against others, and where do I personally belong. (Cohen 1985: 50, 54). So is the case with the Akeu New Year festival. It places people from various different social locations in relation to their contemporaries, as well as to previous generations. Along with its spiritual side, it is also the time for having fun, and nowadays when many people work outside the villages, it is a time when families get together and those living in towns come back to spend time with their own. During the New Year even the more “thaificated” town-dwellers can experience their Akeu-ness: speak their mother tongue, eat their own special foods and wear traditional clothes without feeling different.

As rituals do not carry fixed meanings, individuals are able to adapt the meaning they give to the ritual to their own experiences and emotional and social needs (ibid.: 54). Because of its different activities and associations, the meaning of the New Year can vary greatly between individuals, most visibly
regarding to ancestor cult which is not followed by Christians. There are other remarkable variations as well. The video material that I used as data focused on the ritual side of the celebration. Sometimes the camera followed just one of the elders chanting prayers, leaving everything else out of the picture. Apart from seeing what happened in front of the camera, I was able to observe a little what happened behind it by the sounds on the background. Children's squeals and singing, women's loud chatting and Thai music playing on the radio somewhere outside tell that there was a lot more taking place than just the ritual. I suppose rituals do not require much audience. Even if the whole family is present at the ritual in their own house, it goes on just for a few hours in one day. For the rest of the festival all other activities take people's time and interest. Because of the high language the younger generation is mostly unable to follow the rituals, which might thus not appear interesting, if it is also possible to go out to play games and chat with friends. The ritual content of the festival might in fact change thoroughly – either with conversion or because the elders who possess the required knowledge pass away – but its meaning can appear unchanged to the young Akeu who have never learned the ancestral rituals.

According to Cornell and Hartmann, festivals function as identity constructing symbols, as they can transcend barriers of history and social difference. Social boundaries may be crossed or even forgotten temporarily as people get together to celebrate common heritage. The celebration and its specific foods, clothes, etc. symbolize the community which is the subject of celebration, and presenting these shared symbols both reinforces solidarity within the community and draws visible the boundary between themselves and others. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 225-226.) The Akeu New Year can work in the same manner transcending barriers between the Akeu. Through the various meanings that can be incorporated into the same festival, it can be meaningful to all its participants, even for those Akeu who are not interested in spiritual matters, or for Christians who do not take part in the ancestor cult. It brings people from various contexts to celebrate their identity as Akeu, manifested in their common language, their roots, their social connections as relatives, clan members and friends; and their culture, crystallized in food, clothes, ancestor rituals if animist, and ultimately in the New Year itself.
5 Constructed and Re-constructed Identity

Who, then, is an Akeu? What is Akeu ethnicity based on, behind the cultural symbols which are used to express it? Three general factors appeared in the interview material as the most crucial in making a person Akeu: way of life, blood ties, and social contacts.

5.1 "If you speak and live like Akeu"

Several interviewees expressed that there is something that can be called "Akeu way of life" which is different from other peoples' lifestyle. Way of life, or culture, marks them out collectively as a people and individually as members of the Akeu ethnic group. Some of my interviewees talked about themselves as thinking, talking and acting completely differently from others. Clothing and language are more visible and audible features of Akeu culture. Especially elderly women, I suppose, consider wearing Akeu clothes as an important part of living like an Akeu. Language was most often seen as the core of their culture. Otherwise its exact content was ambiguous. For example, I was told that the Akeu do not practise any other occupations than farming, though I am sure the respondent knew that many Akeu have urban professions. One of the informants told that apart from language and clothing Akeu culture used to be very similar to the cultures of the Akha and other upland groups, and current differences lie mostly in the speed of modernization. The Akeu lived a more isolated life longer than the others, and are now leaving their traditional way of life faster and consequently becoming similar with other ethnic groups. However, when questioned about the importance of traditional clothes to their identity, the same informant said that owning and wearing Akeu clothes does not matter as much as "speaking and living like Akeu", thus admitting that a specific "Akeu way of life" really exists. Identity is seen, in one way or another, to be closely tied to culture even if culture itself is relative and interpreted situationally.

KN: "What kind of things, then, are included in [Akeu] way of life?"

Int. 2: "That we know who we are. How we live in society, how we speak and use language."
"How we live in society” may include numerous things that can be difficult to name, including language use, ceremonies, rituals and festivals, relationships to other groups, marriage customs, naming children, counting time, making and wearing clothes, building houses and planting rice. Even the ones that are not unique to the Akeu can be attributed to Akeu culture. Many informants seemed to regard village life as being ”more” Akeu than town life. For example my key informant who lives in town told that he probably thinks differently than other Akeu because he does not live in a village, perhaps considering himself in that sense less ”authentic”.

Defining ethnic membership through appropriate behaviour attached to that identity is common in Southeast Asian concepts of ethnicity as was seen in chapter 2.5. For example the Akha, as Deborah Tooker researched them in the 1980's, thought that their ethnicity consisted of carrying out a complex whole of customs, contrasted to those of other groups. Akha identity meant living according to záŋ, custom or tradition – close to the Akeu concept aol saol kovq. People following the Akha záŋ were Akha, and other ”types of people” had their own záŋs, and changing behaviour meant a change in identity. (Tooker 1992: 800-801.) Behavioural models of identities were shared by many other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia and often included an occupational dimension, where groups were allocated to different, complementary professions or ecological niches (Tooker 2004: 257-259). This has been the case for the Akeu as well, which can be seen in the certainty with which some informants declared that the Akeu have no other occupations than farming.

According to Chit Hlaing (2007: 108-111), not only Southeast Asians but most people tend to claim that any ethnic group has a distinctive culture common to its members. In attributing a culture to a group, it is usual to ignore well-known local and individual variations, which might in fact be greater than differences between the group in question and its neighbours. In Chit Hlaing's words ”'a culture' as 'a distinctive way of life' is [---] in fact something that any set of communities systematically attributes to itself. Any attempt to establish objective criteria for determining the 'real' boundaries of a culture, e.g. the 'common language' criterion, is bound to fail because cultures are not things out there but rather attributional categories.” Such criteria often end up being circular, attributing a certain way of life on a people and then defining all groups fitted to that way of life as belonging to that people. (ibid.: 111.) Thus
Akeu "culture" is consciously attributed to a group of people called Akeu. Contents of that culture can be adjusted to context and possible variations ignored. If any cultural element such as clothing or language is first claimed to be essential, it can however be given up if ethnic membership of people who do not carry those elements is questioned.

Simplistic models of identities are necessary to make sense of the social world. Taking all the possible behavioural variations into account would make any social interaction impossible to predict. Relationships work when people know what to expect, what kind of norms and customs other people are supposed to follow, and what kind of meanings they are to give to other people's behaviour. This is especially the case with those who belong to the same community. "One needs some illusion [...] of common beliefs, knowledge and expectations about social relations, if one is to know how to be 'of the same group' with others.” (Chit Hlaing 2007: 120) Since the Akeu live scattered in four countries, an ideal of a common way of life shared with other Akeu across the borders makes the identity as a member of a small group more meaningful, even if the reality is known to be something else than the ideal.

"Way of life” is more than just doing things in a certain, shared way. Chit Hlaing (2007: 109) notes that especially among many Southeast Asian "tribal” peoples, culture and customs are often given a sort of primordial air expressed in a mythology of their divine or ancestral origin in the remote past. As my informant cited previously, internal knowledge of one's identity can be included in an otherwise external idea of a way of life. "True”, authentic cultural practices reflect where one comes from: language, rituals and patterns of everyday life are seen as something that has been received from ancestors. The same idea can be found in the interviewed elders' strong conviction that ancestors are the single most important element of being Akeu. Remembering the ancestors can in fact contain everything from knowledge of individual's genealogy to spiritual and ritual knowledge to everyday habits of work, dress and relationships learned from one's parents and grandparents. Therefore, "our way of life” in its most ideal, holistic and exclusive (though not realistic) understanding, can be rightfully said to mean "knowing who we are”. Even in a context of social change, knowing one's roots can be an important feature distinguishing one's own ethnic group from all others.
5.2 "It runs in the blood"

Knowing that identity changes are commonplace in Southeast Asia, I asked about them in the interviews. Surprisingly to me, most interviewees had a decided, primordialist opinion, that an Akeu is and always will be Akeu. Despite the same decidedness about the existence of the Akeu way of life which defines them, Akeu-ness is also seen to run in the blood. A person born Akeu can never become anything else. Informants who live in Thailand told me unanimously that the Akeu will always know who they are even though essential cultural features like language might be lost. A child of Akeu parents is an Akeu even if he or she learns Akha as first language. Even the elders from an animist village, who regarded ancestor cult and language as essential symbols of their ethnicity, told that the Akeu can not change their identity even if they converted to Christianity and stopped carrying out ancestor rituals, or forgot their language.

The significance given to customs as components of ethnicity seems to disappear here. When in theory "you could change your mind but not your hat", in practice it seems that changing one's hat does not affect the essence of what is under it. This might be due to the sheer reality of increasing cultural and social changes. Language might be thought of as the most essential part of being Akeu, but as more and more Akeu children do not learn it, it seems a better option to widen the definition of an Akeu than draw an ethnic boundary between parents and their children. Also classification – or even self-definition – of the culturally changed Akeu as members of some other ethnic group does not change the fact of who they really, essentially, are in the eyes of my informants. Natural category has at least partly taken the place of the behavioural one.

Interviewees from Myanmar took a slightly different position, stating that the Akeu remain Akeu because they simply can not forget their language. Primordiality is thus not in the person's origin itself but in certain features, which are internalized to such extent that it is impossible to part with them. Identity was most often crystallized in language skills. One informant said that children of mixed Akeu-other-marriages will automatically be Akeu and learn the Akeu language. The same people who insisted on the primordiality of their own identity had, quite inconsistently, a very different view on other peoples.
Whereas it is almost ridiculous to think that Akeu could become Akha, the Akha might become Akeu if they moved to an Akeu village and learned the language and the customs. Some informants told that they have personally seen such a change happen, some even declared knowing an Akha who has forgotten the Akha language and become thoroughly Akeu.

I interpret these inconsistencies reflecting informants' personal observations of identity change. As one of my translators told, many Akeu seldom leave their village, so that is where their daily experience is generated. Those who claim that the Akeu can not lose their language and cultural identity have probably just not witnessed such change personally. Certainty of other groups' more fluid identity is based on those outsiders who have married and moved to an Akeu village, and "become" Akeu by adopting the language and the lifestyle of their social environment. The same way those Akeu who rarely leave their own village form an opinion of an "Akeu way of life" based on the life they see in that village, not necessarily considering how similar it might be to other ethnic groups, or how different it might be from the urban Akeu. These views reflect a more behavioural view on ethnicity despite their primordial appearance, claiming an existence of a true way of life which makes an Akeu.

Three interviewees in Myanmar admitted that change is possible in both ways, and even gave examples of people whose ethnic identity had changed from Akeu to Shan as they moved to live in Shan villages. Most of the examples were of children who moved away very young. Those who have seen their relatives or friends become Shan or Akha are more ready to think that the Akeu identity is not more permanent than any other ethnic identities, but more dependent on one's social context.

5.3 Social contacts

In general, the most important factor in Akeu ethnicity is the social environment, which directs much if not most of cultural behaviour, language use and sense of belonging. Early childhood socialization is especially important to the formation of identity and practices related to it. My informants' opinions reflect this idea. Children from mixed marriages grow up as Akeu if they learn Akeu culture and especially the Akeu language, and this happens automatically if they live in an Akeu village. Kunstadter (1979: 141) notes the
same tendency among the Karen and their neighbours: the village where an inter-ethnic family lives determines the language, the culture and the practices they carry out, and children become members of that group. If children of Akeu-other-marriages learn the languages of both parents the stronger of the languages – and the community where it is learned – usually determines which identity is more relevant. In Thailand a mixed identity of a "half child" is possible, but interviewees from Myanmar were more strict and said that in an Akeu environment children with one Akeu parent grow up thoroughly Akeu, and some were convinced that they will "become Akeu" even outside the Akeu villages, because they will – without a doubt – learn the Akeu language. One town-dwelling informant makes sure his children get to visit their father's native village to get familiar with the Akeu lifestyle there.

Adults can also change their ethnic membership by adapting to their social, cultural and linguistic environment, even though I suppose that most outsiders can live in Akeu communities for years and still be classified by their original identity. On the whole, losing contacts to other Akeu means leaving the ethnic group, as one informant told about an Akeu woman who married a foreigner, "disappeared", and for this reason stopped being an Akeu. The Akeu generally prefer to live with their own people. For example when the first Akeu came to Thailand, they had an opportunity to settle in a village with Chinese inhabitants, but they did not want to, because they would have had to adapt to Chinese culture and customs. Preference of living near one's own people seems to be common among different ethnic groups, simply because living close to one's own language community and relatives makes life easier (see e.g. Platz 2003: 487). Those Akeu who live in the countryside in mono-ethnic villages often spend most of the time with other Akeu. Those living and working in towns keep in contact with relatives and friends in villages, and connection to the community exists even though most contacts in daily life happens across ethnic boundaries.

The boundary between the Akeu and outsiders has been previously strictly maintained. One or two generations ago inter-ethnic marriages were prohibited, and even though inter-ethnic alliances are now increasing, a young informant married to an Akha has still heard negative remarks from the elderly generation. The Akeu social context was protected by restricting possibilities for outsiders to settle in Akeu communities through marriage. Tooker reports
that Akha communities also had a strict barrier between safe inside and
dangerous outside worlds, which was symbolically maintained through
practices such as excluding outsiders from the village during important
ceremonies, and performing soul-calling rituals for villagers who had travelled
in the lowlands, just in case they had lost their souls in the outside world. Their
attitude towards relationships to outsiders functioned as a constructing force of
collective identity. (Tooker 2004: 258, 260.)

Social contacts among the Akeu are regarded important not only by those
informants who connect identity with behaviour but also by those who take a
more primordial position. Primordiality is in this case combined with both
behaviour and environment. The Akeu identity is thought to be fixed and
natural because its cultural markers are seen as fixed as well. However,
behaviour is usually adjusted to context because the surrounding community
makes certain practices more relevant than others (Tooker 1992: 802).
Retaining social contacts to the community that shares the same language and
culture is thus essential in preserving a meaningful ethnic identity. Animists
become Buddhists, or at least attend Buddhist rituals while living in a mostly
Buddhist environment, and majority languages are commonly spoken in towns
and cities. Losing contacts to the native community therefore bears the risk of
losing those cultural markers which are related to ethnic identity. Carrying out
the way of life is in some cases entirely dependent on social context. Tooker
(1992: 805) notes that the proper following of Akha customs is only possible in
an Akha village where everyone else follows the same customs. Outside the
Akha context another behaviour must be adopted, and another behavioural
identity with it.

Despite the importance of the way of life practised among one's own people,
Akeu-ness does not decrease from learning customs and languages of other
groups. Speaking and behaving like an Akeu in an Akeu environment makes an
Akeu. Temporarily speaking and behaving like a Shan in a Shan-dominated
environment is mere adaptation to the situation and beneficial to the person in
question. The same informants who talked about the essentiality of language to
identity often wanted to encourage the children to learn as many other
languages as possible to have more opportunities in life. Dentan (1976:77-78)
writes about a similar situation in Malaysia, where the Semai ethnic minority
group regarded language as one of the most essential factors of the Semai
identity. Speaking the Malay language was likewise seen a definition of an ethnic Malay, but neither of these facts hindered the Semais from learning fluent Malay even in several dialects and using them in appropriate contexts. However, changing languages did not indicate ethnicity switch but merely good manners, as languages are switched to make communication easier. Denta argues that in the Southeast Asian multicultural environment, many people have several, situational social identities, or modes of self-representation which, despite using the same cultural features as definitions of ethnic groups, have very little reference to actual ethnicity.

5.4 Constructing forces at work

Identity construction processes are driven by social change. The Akeu, especially those who have moved to Thailand and the Kengtung area have experienced often radical changes during their lifetime, and this has necessarily led to changes in thinking about who they are as a group and what kinds of meanings are attached to that identity. Many changes in the Akeu ethnicity are on their way, but as I have collected my data during a short period of time, I have not been able to observe those changes. Some traces of an identity construction process are nevertheless visible, and these will be discussed next, though in some cases I must settle to speculation. I will focus on the contexts which Cornell and Hartmann (1998: 154) describe as ethnicity ”construction sites”: formal politics, job market, place of residence, social institutions, cultural models of reality, and daily experience. They all contribute to people's identities as contexts where people act, make claims and definitions of themselves and others, use power and pursue status. People are engaged in various activities in more than one venue, so they are often closely related with one another and affect each other's roles in identity construction. (ibid.)

It must be noted here that what I describe in this study as ”previous” state of affairs should not be labelled ”traditional” in a sense that this is how the Akeu have lived and thought for generations until the 21st century modernization”.

9In classical anthropological fantasy researchers are expected to find isolated jungle tribes, who have preserved their lifestyle through generations of everlasting ethnographic present, and will preserve it further if protected from destructive outside influence. According to Jonsson (2004: 694), these notions have roots back in Ancient Greece, where developing, modern and complex societies where placed in lowlands and cities, whereas mountains were thought to be home to unmodern groups whose life reflected the past. These expectations of traditionalist peoples in remote places have influenced much of Western thinking, including anthropological research in the
Rather, cultural and identity changes have most probably occurred multiple times in their history – beginning from their definition as Akeu people rather than one of the Akha clans – and various economic and political processes have affected the Akeu ethnicity; market economy, Western colonialism, local nationalism and independence movements in the 19th and 20th centuries being some of the most recent.

*Politics* affects ethnicity through power inequalities, which reinforce boundaries between groups. Differences in rights and obligations make the identity more salient in everyday life. Ethnic policies may be adopted to either even out economic and other differences between groups, or to promote them to the advantage of one group against others. Both of these motives can cause conflicts. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 155, 157.) The same political processes which have impacted other upland groups have touched the Akeu as well. According to Tooker, the most significant changes in the lives of the mountain groups in Thailand during the last decades are the capitalist economy, the integration to a nation state, and increased contacts between groups. Cash crops and wage labour have taken over subsistence economy since the early 1980's; money is needed for taxes and buying land that has been taken under government control; laws and population pressure restrict farming practices resulting in changes in farming patterns and migration to towns to look for work; national identity cards, land registration, public welfare institutions and schools have been extended to previously rather independent groups; mass media brings in ”modern” majority culture, and roads have increased the flow of people both away from and into the mountains. (Tooker 2004: 249, 260-263.) Since the 1950's mountain peoples have been subject to assimilation projects because of the potential threat which they pose to the nation state by their position as recent, often illegal immigrants, their semi-autonomous lifestyle, opium growing and supposed connections to communists. Means of integration have varied from administrative and educational control to settlement deportations and violence. Even though violence has since the 1980's given way to minority rights, the public image of ”hill tribes” is still often that of backwardness and unmodernity which needs to be developed into educated and democratic citizenship. (Jonsson 2004: 677, 682.)

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20th century, and have ”systematically mis-characterized the social world” (ibid.).
Relationships towards the government were not discussed in the interviews in Thailand. If market economy and government control have been a reality for the Akeu for three decades, it has probably become a self-evident part of their reality. Change often takes place so gradually that it might not be seen as such at all, and when it is perceived to happen, it can also be seen as an inevitable development (Tooker 2004: 279). Still these fundamental changes are in the background, affecting Akeu ethnicity.

Employment has a lot in common with residence and social institutions as facilitators of ethnicity construction. They all have a tendency to either reduce or increase contacts across ethnic boundaries. All of these can be equally available to all groups, which reduces salience of ethnicity in everyday life. If access to certain jobs, neighbourhoods and institutions is restricted, it produces stronger ethnicities through common experiences of discrimination, or simply through facilitating interaction between group members and simultaneously limiting inter-ethnic relationships. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 167-169.) All of these domains are combined for those Akeu who live in mono-ethnic villages and mostly interact with their co-villagers, thus creating a strong identity attached to a specific locality and relationships within it. Situation is more complex for the town-dwellers. There is no formal discrimination in the job market neither in Myanmar nor Thailand, but groups with low level of education, usually rural, have more limited employment possibilities than groups with better access to high schools and colleges, which is a common reason to ethnic division in the labour market (ibid.: 163). Those Akeu who move to towns often end up in low-paid jobs, but as these jobs are open to all ethnic groups, it will also facilitate interaction across ethnic boundaries and probably create solidarity among fellow workers irrespective of their ethnicity. On the other hand, some Akeu make a living by trading agricultural products, and entrepreneur networks that are often built around family, clan, and ethnic background.

Place of residence is often connected to ethnic identity also outside mono-ethnic villages. Living close to one's own ethnic group – and namely one's relatives – is preferred, which makes ethnicity more meaningful in a town environment, where contacts across ethnic boundaries are otherwise the norm. Because the Akeu are a small group they are not able to form strong ethnic communities in towns. In Tachilek they share a neighbourhood with Akha and
Burmese populations, and any newcomers move in to the same area to live near their relatives. Mixed residence is also formed in the countryside as small groups of Akeu end up living together with the Akha or other ethnic groups. This facilitates interaction both within and across ethnic boundaries, which has a double effect of strengthening ties within groups, and creating a sense of belonging with other groups living in the same village. Intensified cultural influence becomes a daily experience in mixed settlements. Children often learn the language of the bigger group, and other features are adopted as well: in one mixed Akeu-Akha village an Akeu woman showed me Akha style clothing she had made for herself simply because she liked the style. Wearing other people's traditional clothing, a prominent symbol of their ethnic identity, did not seem to bother her.

Social institutions – schools, medical services, religious institutions etc. – are mostly shared with other groups in my research area, and therefore they facilitate contacts across boundaries. Christian churches seem to be the only exception since they are often organized along ethnic lines. Shared religion can create ethnic solidarity beyond village level thus strengthening ethnic identities (see e.g. Gravers 2007b: 251 and Sakhong 2007: 223), but religious divisions within an ethnic group also has a potential for creating conflicts. I did not see traces of conflicts among the Akeu and especially the interviewed animists seemed quite tolerant of other people's conversions, but religion can affect Akeu ethnicity in various other ways. Conversion to Buddhism can erase boundaries between them and the majority groups and lead to assimilation especially among those who are more drawn to urban culture than their own traditions. However, as Buddhism tolerates syncretism, it also allows the Akeu to hold on to the symbolically important ancestor cult. For the Christian Akeu religion can serve as a feature distinguishing them from majorities, but it often encourages abandoning secular cultural practices along with religious ones, which homogenizes cultures of ethnically diverse Christians. Christianity can also increase assimilation to the Akha, because in towns the Akeu Christians are too few to form their own churches and they usually attend Akha services. Identifying with another Christian ethnic minority who moreover shares the same genealogical origin may weaken ethnic ties. On the other hand, if the Akha church members question the Akeu identity, ethnic consciousness may in some cases increase as resistance. The few Akeu congregations in Myanmar are organized under the Shan church (Kosonen 2012, personal communication),
which can also make local ethnic power inequalities effective in Akeu churches.

Schools are available to all ethnic groups, but as they only use the majority language and many children only speak their mother tongue when they start school, education can foster inequalities. Education is also an important means to promote national integrity (Jonsson 2004: 677), and as most children in Thailand and the Kengtung area attend schools, the influence of the majority culture is perhaps at its most effective in the education system. If there are no schools nearby, children are often sent to dormitories which might be located hundreds of kilometres away. The children may grow up practically isolated from their culture and language communities, adding to other mental consequences following from early separation from one's family. Most of the Akeu villages I visited had primary schools close by, but still many elderly Akeu complained that traditional knowledge is disappearing because the young people no longer learn it. Previously "education" took place exclusively within one's own ethnic group. In the Akeu villages, building village gates or houses or performing rituals were all collective efforts, where everyone did one part of the job to learn how to do it, and the most skilled elders taught the younger. This method no longer works when the children are in schools and teenagers perhaps in high schools further away. Unlike their parents and grandparents, they also grow up in a literal culture, therefore perhaps not prepared to learn old oral knowledge.

Marriage is a social institution with vast potential to affect ethnic identities. In general, endogamy tends to strengthen ethnicities and exogamy to weaken them. Inter-ethnic marriages tend to change the meaning of ethnic identities. Contacts across ethnic boundaries increase for the spouses with new relatives, and their children will grow up into more than one culture, regarding more than one ethnic identity relevant to themselves. Preserving a separate collective identity may become problematic if inter-ethnic marriages increase, because a growing percentage of the population has mixed roots. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 170-173.) Inter-ethnic marriages have become common among the Akeu just as other inter-ethnic relationships, despite restrictions which existed only a few decades ago. The young unmarried Akeu have wide contacts to other groups, and living scattered in a vast multi-ethnic area definitely has an effect on finding spouses among one's own people. Probably this tendency will
increase due to residence in mixed villages and neighbourhoods, and assimilation especially to the Akha may take place, if children from these unions grow up monolingual in Akha. Akeu-Akha-families and children might see the common ancestry of their groups as a connecting link between their two identities thus narrowing the gap between the groups. In towns, children might culturally relate to the majority, perhaps speaking one or both of their parents' languages, but otherwise consider their origin as a matter of internalized knowledge and relationships to relatives of different ethnicities more than a cultural identity.

Ethnic relationships and institutional structures reflect *cultural concepts* of group identities, their statuses and meanings. Cornell and Hartmann define culture as "interprative processes through which we organize the world, first in our heads and then in practice”. Identities are part of this process. Especially ethnic concepts of the majority – official and unofficial categorizations – affect the self-understanding of the minorities. Power relations are closely connected to labelling processes, because some groups have more power than others to decide which identities are acceptable and how their boundaries should be defined. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 174, 180-181.) Sometimes outsiders' categorizations can be internalized as higher level identities, especially if it is possible to deal with the state only as members of those categories. This has happened in China where administration has consciously created inclusive ethnic identities for linguistically and culturally distinct groups. (Chit Hlaing 2007: 111, 115.) Different levels of ethnicity are used segmentarily in different occasions. Using different labels reflects, according to Chit Hlaing (ibid.: 118), an emphasis on political aspects of relationships between groups rather than actual change in ethnic identity.

In Myanmar, in their ID's entry for nationality the Akeu are generally classified as Akha, simply because the officials have mostly never heard of the Akeu. Identification by powerful individuals or groups can thus be caused by ignorance as much as deliberate labelling. This has caused more active attempts among the Akeu to distinguish themselves from the Akha, rather than acknowledging their ID nationality. On the other hand, there have been Akeu groups who admit being "Akeu-Akha”, and some of my informants did not mind being called Akha, because of their shared ancestry. In Thailand, the label "hill tribe” (*chao khao*) persists both in administration and tourism and has a
potential to be internalized besides other ethnic identities, though my material contains no references to hill tribe identity.

The most common and the most powerful context of identity construction are daily experiences, where all the other contexts meet. Identities are signified in various ways from open discrimination to small signals which communicate boundaries, stereotypes and meanings of who people are. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 184-186.) My informants' experiences on other ethnic groups' attitudes towards the Akeu varied from good relationships to open disdain, either weakening or strengthening the meaning of ethnic boundaries for individuals. Negative stereotypes are especially connected to traditional appearance. Despite this negativity, elderly women have not given up wearing Akeu clothes in public. In Thailand, village representatives who are asked to come to official meetings are sometimes told to appear traditionally dressed, consequently reproducing majority stereotypes of "hill tribes". Assumptions that the Akeu are Akha, and the repeated need to claim an identity as Akeu, can cause confusion, especially in relationships with the Akha. On one hand, they must be kept at some distance in order to maintain a right to define one's own identity. On the other hand, the Akha are still the closest ethnic relatives to the Akeu, and a balance must be found between proximity and distance.

Regarding cultural change it must be remembered that despite many negative causes and consequences, change is not necessarily perceived as loss. In many cases in Southeast Asia small groups have been forced to inhabit less desirable climates and ecological niches. The group's way of life does not always derive from its inherent values, but may simply be a necessity, as for the Hmong in Laos. The Hmong are well-known for their destructive swiddening of mountain tops and tendency to migrate often, but as soon as they are given a chance they readily settle in valleys as sedentary wet-rice farmers, because this allows them to live near their family members and close relatives which they consider an ideal mode of living. Change may be seen as a desired development which was impossible to pursue under the old circumstances. (Ovesen 1995: 11, 76-78.) What might seem like a fundamental change in identity to an external observer may in fact be of minor significance for the people themselves. According to Edmund Leach, “it is a prejudice of the ethnocentric anthropologist to suppose that change is 'destructive of law, logic and convention'”. (Leach 1954: 287.)
In the case of the Akeu, all of my informants except one have experienced effects of either the Burmese civil wars or the political unrest in China. Many of them have left their native villages as refugees, some interviewees have lost family members and many have experienced extreme poverty. When I questioned them about the changes in Akeu life I expected to hear accounts of losing tradition, some sort of nostalgic stories of how life used to be. However, nostalgia seems to be very far from the attitude of the most of the Akeu to their recent past, and change was generally described positively: life used to be hard but not anymore, now everyone has enough food and clothes, people are healthy and children can go to school. Concern about tradition did come up often in interviews but in other contexts. Also Tooker (2004: 270, 279) has noted of the Akha groups she studied that despite occasional nostalgia, not many Akha would be ready to return to their past conditions. Jonsson (2004: 681) found out that the Mien much rather lived under state control in Thailand than moved to Laos, where they could have lived an autonomous life but without ”progress”. My question of what is important in the Akeu way of life twice got a response that most important is to have enough work on the fields (which means good crops and secure living) and to stay healthy. These are not especially cultural features, but highly valued aspects of life for people who have seen their absence.

5.5 Reconstructing meanings

Along with contexts in which ethnic identities are formed, ethnic groups have inner factors such as relationship networks, resources, capacities and characteristics which limit, facilitate or are actively used to construct their sense of self. Previous identities are important group characteristics in dealing with social change, because when an identity is adopted, it will direct identity processes in the future. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 195, 197-198.) Symbols are one of the resources used to construct and communicate the importance and meaning of identities. Symbols function to ”reinforce the sense among group members of sharing something special [...] that captures the essence of their peoplehood”. (ibid.: 221-222.) The importance and meaning of the Akeu ethnic identity is under construction, and on the following I will describe some lines along which the Akeu attach and adjust meanings to their identity.
"Tradition" is a concept often loaded with emotions: negative and rejecting or positive and preserving. Traditions in general are often seen and openly represented as ancient and unchanging world views and behavioural patterns, which are usually threatened by processes of modernization. Jonsson, however, notes that what is usually called "tradition" is often generated by contemporary processes. In Southeast Asia, upland peoples are commonly viewed as unmodern, as modernity's Others, and this view has a long history dating back at least to the colonial era. (Jonsson 2004: 675-676.) Concepts of tradition, modernity and development have been and still are actively used as political rhetoric in building a nation state. On one hand, local modes of livelihood and culture have been subjected to modernizing projects to bring communities under state control, on the other hand, certain selected local practices have been appreciated and adopted as part of national "heritage". Modernity, according to Jonsson, does not replace tradition but defines it: it chooses the exact cultural practices which come to be called traditions. (ibid.: 680, 684.)

Traditions are an important area of Akeu identity construction. Akeu elders in Thailand, who were all born in China, told that Akeu culture in China has changed since they left the country because the government deliberately directs cultural practices of minorities. They were proud of having more "original traditions" than the Chinese Akeu. For instance, I was assured that there have been no fashions affecting Akeu clothing, though influences from Akha clothes are clearly seen and acknowledged in their decorations and synthetic materials and colours have been supposedly quite recently adopted. Traditional attire has most probably never been immune to influences, but its ethnic character has nevertheless been preserved through changes. All other Akeu traditions have also been shaped by the circumstances in which they live. The way of life of the so called traditional societies is always a product of specific historical processes: being "traditional" does not mean being unchanging. However, traditionality constructed as an opposite to modernity has such implications, because modernity itself is synonymous to development or improvement, i.e. change. In the recent situation of rapid social changes, change is linked to disconnection with the past, and thus continuity as its opposite is highly valued among Akeu elders, who declare the present 21st century practices to be "authentic" traditions.
Which practices are selected as "traditions" is not automatic. Jonsson notes that Thai officials value ceremonial aspects – rituals, festivals, and arts – of ethnic minority cultures, but anything related to the domain of "politics" is condemned as unmodern, because ethnically specific political practices pose a threat to national integration (Jonsson 2004: 683). According to Tooker (2004: 245, 278), it is namely comprehensive identities which permeate through all levels of social life which are not compatible with a modern nation state, and promoting selective traditionalism is therefore politically advantageous.

I observed an occasion of presenting "culture", when I visited the village of Huay Nam Khun in the company of the Finnish videographer in 2012. Akeu elders were eager to give "cultural" performances to the camera. This consisted of dressing in traditional clothes, singing songs and playing a reed flute. The videographer also took his camera to the field where women were threshing rice, and some of the women took their turbans or other traditional – festive – garments with them, wearing them while the recording was on. The recording of the New Year festival included in my data which was made in the same village contains mainly rituals, dances and songs. In 2012, some government officials were invited to attend the New Year festival for the purpose of applying for funds for culture preserving projects, and I, a researcher studying their culture, was invited as well. According to Blake Staton (2012, personal communication) festivals are especially important for the Akeu because of their symbolic connection to the ancestors, but the emphasis on festivals along with clothing and songs can also be seen as valuing and presenting certain aspects of Akeu life as "culture": traditional, endangered, and in need of documenting and preserving. Official ideals of minority cultures, their appreciated features and their place within the nation state are reflected in these representations. However, by inviting officials to attend the festival, and to some extent also by performing to foreign cameras and audiences, the Akeu elders promote their political goals of recognition and culture preservation. Their goals which have been impacted by majority ideals of culture were pursued by actively using the very same ideals.

Even the emphasis laid on traditional clothes in my interview material might be a part of depoliticizing of minority identities. Most of the remarks on the importance of Akeu clothes were from Myanmar, where cultural assimilation of minorities has been attempted by, for example, distributing Burmese style
clothes to other ethnic groups (Geertz 1973: 276). Even though distinct appearance has political significance, it is probably still a less threatening feature than independence from lowland rulers or other explicitly political characteristics of mountain groups. In a situation where apolitical identities are favoured, it would be easy and safe to crystallize identities in clothing rather than notions of political autonomy.

Preserving traditions becomes necessary only when they are not preserved without deliberate actions, and this is increasingly the reality among the Akeu. As the oral knowledge and ritual practices are not widely learned, they must be transmitted in an alternative way. Retrospective preservation of traditions often includes inventing them (Michio 2007: 197), and quite paradoxically literacy, a new and absolutely untraditional invention for the Akeu, is wished – together with digital recording methods – to be the means of transmitting oral culture. Formerly, the lack of literacy belonged to the understanding of Akeu identity, but it is now accepted as a legitimate culture preservation method, even by older people who might be completely illiterate themselves. Even though writing down oral culture and ritual practices does not actually ”preserve” them – because the written format changes their meaning – it is seen as the second best way, and more appealing to the youth to whom the traditional way of life as such is mostly out of question. Even though these initiatives are against change they also express change, fighting influences of modern society with modernity's own weapons. Transcribing lived practices and ordinary people's knowledge into written form is, according to Jonsson, ”characteristic of contemporary identity work”. Traditions as lived practices represent unmodernity; as written knowledge they can be valued as cultural heritage. (Jonsson 2004: 696, 704.) Appreciation of cultural continuity has, however, deeper roots in the Akeu world view because of the spiritual connection between traditions and ancestors, and therefore traditionalism should not be seen only as a means to modernize in a politically appropriate way, but also as a genuine worry over a disappearing way of life.

Trans-village identity

Akeu legends state that once in the remote past they had a king who ruled the whole people, and in those days all the Akeu lived in one village. Akeu language still does not have words for different political rulers indicating their
levels or relative positions: a vassal prince of Chiang Mai would be called with
the same title as the king of Siam or the emperor of China. According to Akeu
legends, their political co-operation has never been extended beyond village
borders. Other kinds of social contacts have, however, been extended further
than one village for quite some time. As the Akeu were formerly endogamous,
wives and husbands were sought either in one's own village or in other Akeu
villages sometimes remarkably far. The Akeu used to know each others' locations, and indeed still do: many have exact knowledge of locations of Akeu
villages in all four countries. They keep in contact and visit their relatives and
friends across borders. Spouses are sometimes still found in this way: in
Kengtung we visited a house with a wedding photo on the wall and our host
told that the bride is her daughter who married to China. Later in Thailand I
interviewed a man who turned out to be a cousin of the photo's bridegroom.

Former connections between Akeu villages have most likely been personal
connections between relatives, friends and clan members with whom a closer
connection is felt. The Akeu still talk about their fellow clan members as "my
people" (Kosonen 2012, personal communication). Belonging to a family has
probably been more meaningful than being a member of a widely dispersed
ethnic group, and possible political alliances have been formed locally between
ethnically diverse villages rather than with other Akeu further away. Jonsson
reports how "the efforts to become ethnic" among the Mien people in Thailand
have shifted the focus of social organization from households to villages and
ethnic associations (Jonsson 2004: 692). The Akeu have not yet formed
associations, but similar processes of social organization are emerging.

One of my translators told that the Akeu living in the Kengtung area worry
about how they are seen in public. Akeu from different villages have gathered
together to discuss how they could make themselves known as not being Akha.
This desire to establish an Akeu identity known to outsiders has led to new
kinds of social organizing. The most visible expressions of this are common
New Year meetings between all six Akeu villages in the Kengtung area, which
are organized in addition to each village's own festivals. The common
celebrations were started after the local Akha asked the Akeu to join an inter-
village Akha New Year festival. Akeu New Year meetings were thus born as an
ethnic statement against the categorization as Akha, and can further strengthen
the sense of common ethnicity between the Akeu and expresses their identity as
separate from Akha, both to the Akha and to the Akeu themselves. Formerly New Year was celebrated only within one's own village, and even though it consisted of individual household rituals, various non-ritual activities functioned as strengthening ties between co-villagers. Now the Akeu are gathered together specifically as members of the same people, creating ethnic ties which are wider that just ties between relatives and friends.

Alongside the feasting which strengthens the feeling of community between participants, there is also concrete integration beyond village level taking place. During the New Year meetings leaders of different villages come together to plan further co-operation between villages. Actual village administration still happens within villages themselves, but as mutual projects include for example visits to Akeu villages in China, this co-operation has a strong ethnic quality and potential to connect Akeu people not only beyond village level in the Kengtung area, but also across greater distances and state borders. One informant in Kengtung, when I asked him what he would especially wish me to know about the Akeu, emphasized that the Akeu as a people are united. Whether this notion about Akeu unity is a reason or a result of inter-village co-operation is difficult to say, but co-operation is nevertheless likely to increase the feeling of unity and a trans-local ethnic community among those Akeu who are part of it.

Destigmatizing identity

In societies with a strong ethnic hierarchy, low-ranking identities are often perceived and actively represented by the higher-ranking groups as connected with undesirable and inferior features (e.g. primitiveness and uncleanliness). Stigmatized groups often accept the dominant views of their culture and try to escape the stigma by under-communicating their identity in public and striving to pass as members of the dominant group. Over time, this can lead to assimilation. (Eriksen 2010: 35-36.) Akeu ethnicity has been connected with strong negative connotations of poverty, illiteracy and lack of education. As was seen in the case of clothing, expressions of traditionality are easily connected with backwardness and therefore can cause negative attitudes. Traditionality itself, regardless to ethnicity, is opposed to modern and urban, and especially the young generation of the Akeu seem to distance themselves from it. Traditional clothes are literally old fashioned and can be accepted only
in special occasions among other Akeu. This might also simply reflect a generational gap: the young people rather blend in among their peers than follow a way of life of their parents and grandparents, who in turn complain about the bad quality of the today's youth. Using traditional items in a modern way, as one informant told happened in her village, can be seen as an attempt to remove the stigma by making identity symbols appear more urban. If a full hand-made traditional outfit reflects the backwardness of its wearer, the modern fashion can lift the tradition with which it is mixed to the positive side of the scale, enabling the wearer to express ethnic identity without social rejection.

Apart from adjusting meanings of clothing, there are other, perhaps more profound processes of constructing meanings going on. Ethnic groups can modify the symbolic resources they use to communicate their identities, and new symbols can be created deliberately to give new representations of the group. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 228-229.) Written language and literature were explicitly mentioned to me as new ethnic symbols replacing clothes. Selecting literature as a new Akeu symbol communicates the aspiration to change the meaning of Akeu identity altogether. To be an Akeu used to mean being poor, uneducated and low ranking on ethnic hierarchies even compared to other minority groups. With writing, the Akeu can now perceive their language to be on the same level with Akha, Shan and even Burmese. Emphasizing literature – and also teaching the Akeu to read and write their own language – is a means to destigmatize the identity, to present it as educated and capable and hence "better" than the old identity. The Akeu language still barely has any literature apart from literacy training material directed to children, and portions of the New Testament, which most Christians are anyway able to read in other languages. Educating non-Christian Akeu has value as a means of missionary work, but the general educational value of Akeu literacy is necessarily low due to the lack of having anything to read. Thus I see spreading literacy – also among Christians who are not in need of converting – as a part of an ethnic identity project where new meanings are constructed. Among Christians who generally have used Akha Bibles, the ability to read in Akeu is a crucial part of distancing oneself from the Akha category. In fact the whole Bible translation project was initiated by the Akeu Christians themselves.
Changing the meaning of Akeu ethnicity through literacy goes beyond removing previous stigma. As Akeu writing was created as a Christian project, it also reflects Christian appreciation of written word, which can be seen in practice among other ethnic groups as well. For example, among the Karen in Thailand, mother-tongue literacy rates are notably higher among Christians than Buddhists (Platz 2003: 479). Those informants who regarded literacy as the most important symbol of Akeu culture were Christians, though the animist elders valued it as well. Christian Akeu have been affected on the subject by pastors who have perhaps internalized the value of writing deeper than the lay people have. Even though the empowering meaning of literacy in general can be found in Akeu oral traditions, the possibility of creating literacy of their own has only become important via the Christian influence. Literacy brings fundamentally new values to the Akeu world view. Education within majority culture has already brought the younger Akeu from oral to literal culture, and literacy in their own language furthers the change of Akeu culture towards those of the West and local Buddhist majorities. For this reason appreciation of literacy and education will affect Akeu understanding of their own identity, but also their integration to the nation state and the globalizing world.

One informant proudly told that the Akeu children, now that they can go to school, are doing better than the Shan. Stories are one of the powerful symbolic resources which are used to reproduce people's understanding of themselves (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 224), and a common theme in Akeu stories used to be losing competitions against the Shan. These powerful mental hierarchies are now being turned upside down and Akeu ethnicity is gaining positive meanings at least among the Akeu themselves. The Shan probably still hold on to the previous concepts. However, this reconstruction of meaning can strengthen the Akeu identity as it is made something to be proud of and thus more meaningful in everyday life. Some Akeu groups have called themselves Akeu-Akha, accepting outside categorization as an Akha subgroup, probably because they have seen themselves as a group that is too small and powerless in its own. Because a meaningful social framework consisting of other Akeu was not available, an identity as an Akha subgroup may have provided it instead. As the Akha are a bigger group with a more established status, Akha identity gives some social advantage. According to one informant, after some of these Akeu-Akha were introduced Akeu writing, they started to claim an Akeu identity without the suffix "Akha". Acquiring written language, a sign of power they
formerly lacked, has given Akeu the identity the relevance it needs to be maintained as a meaningful identity.

The Akeu are pursuing power to define themselves against classifications by others, who also strive for power. The Kengtung Akha had invited the Akeu to join them, reasoning that it would give the Akeu more possibilities. I suppose the Akha also see their own possibilities increasing if smaller groups join to increase their numbers. Small size is a disadvantage for an ethnic group, and political organization often takes place across ethnic, linguistic and cultural boundaries (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 200-202), but the Akeu are still mostly resisting this tendency. My key informant had heard some Akha people telling that the Akeu had at some point distanced – deliberately, it seems – their language from the Akha language, so that the Akha are no longer able to understand them. I do not know how common this kind of thinking is, but it opens an interesting viewpoint on Akeu ethnicity as something that has been actively constructed in the past as opposed to Akha, and is still resisting the categorizations that try to erase their separateness.
6 Conclusions

Akeu identity is based on interlinked blood ties, cultural behaviour and social environment. Ethnic symbols communicate all these three aspects of Akeu identity. According to Cornell and Hartmann, ethnicity is based on contrast, and any cultural features which create contrast between groups can be used to draw ethnic boundaries and signal identities, but they have social significance as ethnic symbols only if the community so decides. (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 195-196.) The Akeu informants emphasized clothing, language, traditions, and ancestors as distinguishing markers. Some of these symbols, such as language in a village environment, are self-evident parts of daily life, but they are also consciously used to draw the boundary between groups in situations where its existence is questioned. The most important meaning that ethnic symbols communicate is simply difference from other groups. Other meanings could be seen as secondary, telling about characteristics of the group. How different the symbols actually are from those of other groups is irrelevant. Clothing that has been influenced by Akha styles, or ancestors shared with the Akha, can still be used to tell that these groups are different. Clothing, language and traditions are expressions of the Akeu "way of life" which separates them from other groups. Generally Akeu identity is seen more as behavioural than primordial, but cultural behaviour is often connected to primordial notions according to which the Akeu language and culture are impossible to forget. Because the ancestors are seen as the origin of Akeu culture, language and cultural practices also symbolize their blood ties. Social contacts to other Akeu are the most important factor in maintaining identity, since following practices related to it is mostly dependent on a social environment where other people live by the same rules and speak the same language.

Akeu ethnic symbols are undergoing change in both their form and meaning. Traditional clothing has become festive rather than everyday wear. The Akeu language is classified as shifting (Ethnologue 2013), meaning that it is not transmitted to children. According to my data, this is mostly a problem in multi-ethnic and urban settlements. However, the amount of Akeu living in such conditions is likely to increase in the future and cause more profound changes in language use. Ancestor cult and traditions in general have the same, though in some cases more acute, problems of transmitting. Old symbols are also transferred to completely new forms such as the inter-village New Year
festival or written language. Despite new forms and meanings, these symbols still continue to express Akeu culture and identity. The potential of cultural symbols to contain various meanings can also help some of the symbols, such as the New Year festival, to connect the Akeu from different social, economic and religious backgrounds. Cohen argues that while different communities become more and more similar on the surface, they creatively use these apparently similar cultural forms to communicate their own meanings and express ethnic boundaries that still exist. Boundaries become more conceptual than cultural and often difficult to recognize for an outsider. (Cohen 1985: 37-38.)

Cultural and social change is the driving force of ethnic identity construction, causing changes in its content and meaning (Lehman 1979: 248). Different processes of social change drive the Akeu identity construction. These processes often affect one another. For example, political processes of taxation and land use regulations force economic changes: abandoning swidden cultivation and turning to cash crops and wage labour because of the need for money. This in turn causes migration out of the villages and settling in multi-ethnic environments, which results in increased contacts across ethnic and cultural boundaries in daily life, leading to an increasing number of inter-ethnic marriages and a disruption in transmitting the Akeu language to children. Simultaneous processes may also have joint effects which are difficult to predict. The most visible change concerns contacts with other groups. Just a few decades ago the Akeu lived comparatively isolated. Moving to lowlands and more densely populated hills has drastically changed this situation. Now cultural differences are increasingly evening out as influences from the majority culture are adopted through education and mass media. In towns social networks are built across ethnic boundaries, and multilingualism, as well as multiculturalism, has become necessary to most Akeu, whereas earlier it has been possible for many of them to be monolingual and live mainly within one village. Increased contacts may have several kinds of effects on ethnicity. Contacts may strengthen the boundary between groups, as boundaries are always dependent on, and in fact created by contact (Eriksen 2010: 14). However, individual relations across the boundary may also cause the importance of ethnic identity to decrease, as some common language and cultural codes are shared on both sides, and people from various backgrounds
interact daily, for example, at work and in the marketplace (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 213, 219).

Constructing ethnicity involves the construction of ethnic boundary, status, and meaning (ibid.: 81). In the case of the Akeu, especially boundary – or category – and meaning are seen to be in construction. Getting a foreign researcher to write about their culture, organizing inter-village festivals, and various other reactions to classification as Akha or to being totally unknown to outsiders, are all expressions of constructing an ”Akeu” category, separating it from other categories and making it visible. Changing the status of a small ethnic group within a hierarchical society is not an easy task, but establishing the category and changing its meaning can have an impact on relations to other groups. Meaning of Akeu identity is constructed through selective traditionalism, creating an inter-village ethnic organization, and erasing stigmas connected to identity. Cultural features which comply to majority ideals of ceremonial ethnic cultures such as festivals and costumes are emphasized as valuable Akeu ”traditions” which need preserving. Formerly independent villages co-operate to establish a visible identity, simultaneously creating and reinforcing ethnic ties between the inhabitants of different villages. The former stigmas of ignorance, poverty and inferiority are actively fought against by modernizing old symbols such as clothing, or creating completely new symbols equal to those of groups positioned higher on local hierarchies. Literacy plays an important role in this process as a means to both preserve threatened oral culture, and destigmatize old Akeu identity. Tradition and modernity are combined in an effort to deal with the loss of some previous cultural practices – such as swidden economy – and identities attached to them. One of my informants expressed this very clearly explaining that literacy both gives a means to record and preserve traditions, and also helps the Akeu to live in a modern society. There is willingness, whether eager or reluctant but willingness nonetheless, to be able to live in a contemporary society and adapt to its ways: to preserve traditions and simultaneously create contemporary Akeu culture.

Both preserving and creating ethnic culture necessarily involves selection. In addition to selecting certain practices as suitable features of Akeu culture, it also means selecting practices that perhaps only a part of the Akeu follow. Jonsson describes Mien identity projects as promoting the agendas of those more well-off and connected to state agents and non-governmental
organizations, and muting other Mien voices. Especially poor farmers and workers are usually not heard as representatives of ethnic groups, and according to Jonsson this bias may reflect an aspiration to hide the existence of poverty among the group from public view. (Jonsson 2004: 690, 692.) Different views on their ethnicity exist also among the Akeu, and several are represented among my informants. There are animist traditionalists who declare some traditions being inalienable but have adopted some modern means to help preserve them; there are Christians and Buddhists who see their traditional past as a life of hardship and poverty; those who value cultural symbols like language and clothing but use them in new ways; those who wish their cultural practices to be maintained but are rather indifferent if being classified as Akha; and those who identify themselves as Akeu but are not passionate about preserving traditional culture. A voice of those calling themselves "Akeu-Akha" is not present in my material at all. There are differences between the urbanized and the rural Akeu, differences between four countries; there are the wealthy and the poor, the business people and the subsistence farmers. If the Akeu ethnic project will become more organized, it is likely that some or most of these voices will not be included in it. If poverty is seen as a stigma, it is very likely that the more wealthy villagers with a desire and means to modernize, or the urban, educated Akeu will have the voice of the "true" Akeu identity.

Changes going on in the Akeu social life, identity projects included, can be connected with the concept of modernization. Modernization is a controversial term in itself. In classical social science it has been defined as a break from traditional past to a new, "modern" reality, with implications of positive, rational and democratic progress (Appadurai 1996: 3). This notion has been extensively debated for a reason, and according to Jonsson (2004: 673) there is nowadays no real agreement on definition of modernity. It has been linked for example with capitalist economy and state regulation of individual subjects (ibid.: 674), and extensive migrations and mass media (Appadurai 1996: 9). As a vague concept based on a "comparative adjective" – ancient vs. modern – (Kelly 2002: 258, 269), modernity gains significance only in contrast with unmodernity, a state of tradition that it is supposed to follow (Jonsson 2002: 676). The concept of modernity as contrasted with assumed tradition is useful in understanding identity work in Southeast Asia, both external state influence on minorities through education, land regulation and capitalism (ibid.: 694) and
in the case of my study, the Akeu attempts to become recognized, literal and educated people with a positive identity, and striving for an urban standard of living. Even preserving a selected set of traditions is a modernist project, because "modernity" does not so much follow "tradition" but rather creates it (ibid.: 676). Relationship to the past varies among the Akeu, but generally my informants expressed ideas of contemporary life being better than the past, thus repeating the ideas of modernization and progress adopted and promoted by the state at least in Thailand (ibid.: 697-680).

Tooker (2004) observes how the Akha understanding of collective identities has changed from seeing each ethnic group with a different comprehensive lifestyle, to having a specific "ethnic compartment" consisting of similar categories of cultural presentation – dress, food, music etc. – which groups fill each with their own content. Ethnic distinctions are no longer present in the everyday life of more urbanized and superficially similar groups, and ethnic symbols such as dress or selected ancestral practices are reserved for spheres designed specifically for that purpose. Previously Akha identity was constructed in relation to other, contrasting ethnic groups: to be an Akha meant being different from the Thai or the Chinese. As everyday cultural contrasts have mostly dissolved, contemporary Akha identity is increasingly constructed against the past of one's own group which is presented as backward. (Tooker 2004: 275-278.) Also for the Akeu, current modernist identity processes gain significance in relation to their own past. Especially written language as a symbol of identity is meaningful only against the previous stigma of illiteracy.

According to traditional Southeast Asian understanding, ethnic categories have often consisted of culturally and linguistically different groups which merely occupy a similar position in the local social structure (Kunstadter 1979: 120). For outsider officials or some members of the groups themselves, cultural and linguistic differences between the Akeu and the Akha might not matter if seen from this kind of structural perspective. They occupy a similar position in relation to the local administration as small mountain groups, and as the Akha have previously assimilated other smaller ethnic relatives (Chazée 1999: 138), some of them might not see the need for a separate identity for the Akeu. Also some Akeu might have adopted an identity as an Akha subgroup as an act of structural, rather than cultural, identification. In addition to structural identities, also behavioural and primordial identifications are used among the Akeu, and
applied according to situation. Especially for the educated generation who have
not learned oral traditions, ethnicity may become more internalized – in one's
mind rather than worn visibly on the head – or limited to only few behavioural
features which are called into play if needed. Now that cultural differences
between groups are diminishing, I see internal identities based on blood ties
important for the long-term survival of minority identities. If ethnicity is
dependent on displaying its symbols in everyday life, it is more likely to
disappear when culture changes. Flexibility is also a crucial feature for identity
survival. If strictly defined cultural codes break down because of economic
changes, acculturation often follows if any new references do not replace the
old ones (Chazée 1999: 133, 162). Tooker noted that even though the Akha had
lost much of their previous autonomy and their interests had largely complied
to majority ideals, the new, less comprehensive identities have enabled them to
adapt to the new economic and political circumstances and to defend their
interests within it (Tooker 2004: 275-279).

Modernization has often been idealized, but I would rather agree with
Appadurai (1996:9) who sees it as an ambivalent and a largely unpredictable
change. As a study of social change my research is incomplete due to the lack
of a long-term perspective, so I must leave the results of Akeu modernization
and identity construction open for further observation. The modernization
process as a dialectic of preservation and development is, I suppose, a result of
changes in the Akeu social environment, but it is also a reason for further
changes in the Akeu ethnic identity. Not just the change in wider economic,
social and political circumstances but also in the standard of living and the
material goods of everyday life will continue to shape Akeu understanding of
themselves. Cultural change may in some cases lead to assimilation and
identity change, but at least currently among the Akeu this does not seem to be
the case. They are actively resisting outside classifications and strengthening
Akeu ethnicity. It is, however, a wrong assumption that Akeu identity itself will
persist unchanged. Rather, the Akeu are in the middle of a process of changing
both their minds and hats, as well as finding new ways to use their old hats.
References

Unprinted references:


Printed references:


Appendix 1

Informants (gender, age, religion, interview date)

Thailand:


Myanmar:


7. Woman, 70, Buddhist, 28.11.2012

