Indigeneity and fluid ethnic identity: Recognition of Akha group in Thailand

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Abstract:

The concept of Indigeneity has expanded in recent decades and scholars who have been working closely with Indigenous Peoples started weaving the network more widely to increase public awareness of the local and ethnic minority ways of life. This article discusses the concept of Indigeneity through the lens of indigenous people's identification in Thailand and unpacks Akhaness from the perspective of religious affiliation in northern Thailand. Base on published materials and fieldwork data, the conclusion drawn is that although many Akha people hold different ideas about what being Akha means religiously, the ideal of sameness within the village at the level of social practices still lingering upon, which I argue characterizes all Akha. Meanwhile, Christian Akha are criticized for distancing themselves from Akhaness. The Christian Akha want a seat in the table where they are part of the community and to be treated fairly. Akha does not associate their ethnic identity with religion, those who stick to the traditional customs (Akha*Zah*) assert they are closer to the ancestors and the Akha spirit.

Keywords: indigeneity, identity, Thainess, Akhaness

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of Indigeneity has no longer been constrained to the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand, but spread across the world from the Arctic to the South Pacific. Communities in Asia and Africa have begun to focus their efforts on the plight of Indigenous Peoples (hereafter referred to as IPs) and scholars and agencies who have been working closely with IPs have started weaving the network more widely to increase public awareness of the local and ethnic minority[1] ways of life.

Ethnic people in Thailand have been struggling with their cultural identity for decades. The year 1932 marked the end of absolute monarchy, nonetheless, legacy of the monarchy has been employed to determine the cultural themes and practices of nation construction, which brought up a series of issues about ethnic identity. Theoretically, in accordance with Western models of minority rights and international norms, people in northern Thailand should be designated as "indigenous people" and as such should be accorded rights to land and to self-government (Kymlicka, 2011, p.2), however this is not the reality.

This article reinterprets the concept of Indigeneity through the lens of indigenous people's identification in Thailand and unpacks the concept of Akhaness from the perspective of ethnic identity, taking religious affiliation as an example. To that end, the article comprises three sections: First, it provides an overview of the Indigeneity both in global discourse and in Thailand. Base on the examination of documents and literature, juxtaposing it with the second part, which is the current categorization of the ethnic groups under changing situations. Third, it will explore the growth of Christianity in Akha villages to highlight the fluidity of ethnic identities. The conclusion drawn is that most of the markers attempt to define Akhaness are complex and relative. Akha does not particularly associate their ethnic identity with religions, but those who adhere to the ancestral customs (Akha*Zah*) claim that they are closer to Akha spirit. This leaves those who have been converted into a place to rework the expectations in a matter that demonstrate their own belongings to Akha. Globalization and technology have impacted the drastic change in the cultural assimilation for the younger generation. They have to adapt to the fluid world and in search of what it takes to becoming an Akha. The Akhaness is based on the recognition of individual's unique connection to the group, and these phenomena may not constrain to Akha, but happen to other ethnic groups. The fieldwork data were collected during an intense six-month from December 2021 to June 2022 and a causal visit in September 2022 in Akha villages in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai Province, Thailand.

2. Indigeneity in Thailand: "We support the concept, but not here"

Although the concept of "Indigeneity" holds significant juridical and political weight at the international level, there is much controversy about the definition (Bennett, 2005, p.72), who can be regarded as IPs, and what political consequences should be entailed . It is estimated that there are at least 370-500 million IPs spread across all regions of the world and represent the greater part of the world's cultural diversity[3]. IPs in Asia retain their unique characteristics which are obviously different from those in Americas, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Considering the diversity of IPs, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples[2] declares that self-identification as indigenous is considered a fundamental criterion, this means people have the right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions. The Declaration also recognizes that the situation of IPs varies and that the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical and cultural backgrounds should be taken into consideration. This may take a while for the national governments and local people to catch on and respond to constant the IPs. In other words, the government and its people need time to acknowledge that all ethnic groups have contributed to the diversity and richness of the country's civilization and culture, this constitute the common heritage of all mankind.

The modern Thai nation-state is a constitutional monarchy, it voted in favor of the Declaration, but the central government has rendered the concept of Indigeneity irrelevant by declaring that none of the people are Indigenous because of the strongly monoethnic framing of Thai nationalism. Currently there is no Thailand's laws or regulations mention IPs, only recognize them as ethnic groups/minorities who still maintain their cultural and linguistic uniqueness. Unintentionally, this recognition provides an opportunity to connect ethnic groups into the global indigenous movement. Indeed, Thailand has been the most important regional base of IPs events and advocacy organizations since the late 1980s, AIPP (the Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact), NIPT (the Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand, 2007) and CIPT (the Council of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand, 2015) have been quite successful in drawing connections with other sectors[4] to approach IPs' movement in Thailand after the year of 2000 (Leepreecha, 2019, p.47). In recent years, governments, NGOs and civil society in Asia have expanded the concept of indigenous people considerably (Baird, 2017，2019).

The term "indigenous" in Thailand is ambiguous, but there is a preference for other geographical terms used interchangeably with "Indigenous Peoples" and "ethnic groups", which are the *ChaoLey* /Sea gypsies (lowland fisher communities in the south); the *Isan* (people in the northeast and east); the *ChaoKhao* (highland peoples in the north and north-west) (Mamo,

2021, p.302). The Thai government has been labeling the highland peoples as "the *ChaoKhao*[5]" since the end of the twentieth century, a label that does not simply indicate the minority people who live in the uplands, but has specific geo-political implications in terms of making a distinction between those who can be included as Thai citizens and those who cannot. The word *ChaoKhao* literally means "people of the mountains/hill tribes" and "the other" in Thai, its derogatory usage is a marker to distinguish members in a group from the central Thai intentionally. Needless to say, the notion of being named *ChaoKhao* has negative connotations, namely that these peoples are undeveloped and uncivilized. This inevitable political act, naming groups is controlled by the government and depends on the population size and the comprehensive economic strength of the group. These names of ethnic groups of Thailand have always been the root of struggle, reflecting various socio-political backgrounds in different periods. Each ethnic group has its own history of interaction, inter-ethnic relations, and communication with the mainstream. In this article, the readers may find I use the term "ethnic groups/ethnic minorities" from now on, however, I must refer to Indigenous Peoples when I cite other scholars comments.

Ethnic minorities in Thailand have reframed the concept of Indigeneity, to not only highlight their distinctive identities, but also pointing out their experiences of internal colonialism and marginalization at the hands of modern state administrators and global capitalists. Therefore, the localization and regionalization of the concept of Indigeneity can be understood by looking at the assimilation and selective integration practices within non-Thai groups. The discourse of a modern nation usually presupposes a two-way identification: namely by some common nature, identity, interests; or by the differences with other nations (Winichakul, 1997, p.3). The modern Thai nation-state was built on a policy of ethnic, religious and cultural homogenization, which was begun early in the twentieth century. The ethnic majority group in Thailand is Thai, and they form part of the Tai ethnolinguistic people found in the Southeast Asia. During the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925), the notion of nationalism developed into the three pillars of Thainess (*khwampenthai*/ความเป็นไทย), which are nation, religion and monarch as a strong core to avoid the situation that the Thai monarch is in control of merely a territorial boundary during post-colonial periods (Sofman, 2007, pp.34-5) . However, hill tribes were among one of the most distinct minority populations that were not included in the early state-building efforts (ibid) , therefore, there was not much government presence in their lives at the first half of the twentieth century.

The change of the system in 1932 came with a shift in the core of Thainess, but did not affect the "nation-religion-king" triad. From this point on, Thainess keeps developing gradually despite the fact that Siam[6] has been transformed greatly toward modernization in the last two centuries. Furthermore, Thai nationalism is not only a process of creating a national identity as "Thainess", but is also a production of internal threats and enemies (Laugaramsri, 2003, p.161). Meanwhile, geographical and cultural boundaries of modern Thailand led to the territorial incorporation of people and the cultural exclusion of ethnic groups (ibid). What is worth mentioning is that the Thainess is quite broad, various interpretations have been given, but it is never clearly defined. Simultaneously, what is not Thai (non-Thai) is identified from time to time from the outside. That is to say, reference to Otherness is made by identifying it as belonging to another nation, what Winichakul (1997, p.5) calls "negative identification". Throughout the past fifty years, the state has been attempting to create and re-create congruency between territory and nation through the identification, monitoring, and enforcement of identity among peoples at the margins (Flaim, 2017, p.220), hence has long perceived these yet-to-be recognized IPs as "illegal migrants" (Morton, 2017, P.684) or the *ChaoKhao* (the Others).

Growing awareness of the Hill tribes loss of identity and the development of IPs movement have shifted the ethnoscapes from "hill tribes" and "ethnic minorities", which imposed by outsiders, to IPs based on self-definition and advocacy by the younger generation of highland peoples (Leepreecha, 2019, p.50). While the Thai central government denies the relevance of the concept of Indigeneity to Thailand, IPs in Thailand are simultaneously asserting their compatibility with the nation and their cultural distinctiveness (Morton, 2017, p.684); The local communities have already engaged in cultivating special meanings and practices of Indigeneity in Thai state and constructing their ethnic identities under these conditions. An intangible ethnic groups network has been mapped out, a network of ethnic groups and people whose varying interests rely on, and a channel by which people could negotiate with the local and central government through venerable representatives.

The network is not static and harmonious, as a matter of fact, factional competition has spilled out into open conflicts, as the interests and needs of its members and their ideas and visions for a sustainable development in the future may be different. In other words, ethnic people must both advocate for their group existence and identity as distinct from the Thai majority, and also characterize themselves as competitors in rights and resources assigned to one group over another. People from the lowlands often have much in common with other neglected groups in the highlands, i.e. lack of public voices, lack of access to welfare services, marginalization and poverty, but they also strive for recognition of their ways of life, their rights

to lands and traditional resources. In addition to the distinctiveness of ethnic culture, religious affiliation is often used as a marker of one's orientation towards ethnicity of the community. The Thai state has long downplayed ethnoreligious diversity, but in southern Thailand, ethnic identity reflects the political-religious history of the region, where the major population are Muslims who engage in land agriculture and coastal fishing (Laungaramsri, 2003, p.162). On the contrary, a large number of the northern people have converted to Christianity or have adopted Buddhism or Islam and practice swidden agriculture from the outset.

As the foregoing discussion indicates, "We support the concept of Indigeneity, but just not here". Thailand is a good example of a country where a number of people self-recognize as being indigenous, even when the central government does not extend this recognition to them (Baird, 2019). The IPs' movement in Thailand is developing through a process of ongoing negotiations with various internal and external sectors, those who previously identified as *ChaoKhao* or Others are now self-identifying as natives whose basic rights must be recognized and who advocate to be treating as citizens equally (Leepreecha, 2019, p.32). What we can see is that IPs have recently been recognized as holders of a wide range of collective rights, from cultural and identity rights to the rights of self-governance and of self-determination (Inman, 2016, p.47) in accordance with their own needs and interests. Meanwhile, the ethnic people in the northern parts are now facing an uncertain future due to a drastic change in the state's policy of land. Territoriality is the thread of indigenous cultures (Gibert, 2016, p.1). The National Park Act came into effect on 25 November 2019 will sure become a problem later on as some villagers could lose their lands (Mamo, 2021, P.305).

After providing brief background information on Indigeneity, the following parts will discuss categorization of the ethnic identity and will focus on Akha people due to their fluid identity. What is ethnic identity in the context of Thailand? What is the core of Akhaness? In what ways does religious affiliation contribute to their sense of belong? How far can they go before they are not categorized as Akha?

3.Categorization of the ethnic groups: Changing situations

Scholars have long noted the problematic nature of the concept of Indigeneity in relation to the construction of ethnic identity. The strong trend of IPs movement has brought up questions like who IPs are and how many groups are there in Thailand which accurately demonstrate how various ethnic groups settle in the state. Ethnic categories represent a powerful instrument of confinement and control by the modern state instead of simply constituted by shared identity, which is constantly created through a process of negotiation in ethnic people's

responses to government intervention (Laungaramsri, 2003, p.157). Barth (1998, pp.11-4) assumes that if we regard morphological characteristics of the cultures as their primary characteristic to identify and distinguish ethnic groups, he then claims ethnic categories provide an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural systems.

In Thailand, four sets of information and classification methodologies have been used to identify ethnic groups, which are:

1) Historical records: the ways of life and patterns of mobility

2) Linguistic classification[7]: languages and variations

3) Anthropological classification: politics and culture

4) Self-expression and identification: preferences of people

(Leepreecha, 2019, pp.36-39)

The complex classification standards are one of the causes of identity ambiguity. This had led to the development IPs movement have accentuated the enhanced awareness of ethnic identity. Over time, this process has sometimes included the voices of these upland peoples, who have gradually gained strength in shaping the discourse. The frame of reference is now the modern nation-state of Thailand, where the diversity, even exoticism of the upland peoples, has been increasingly recognized (Walker, 2009, p.162), within individual regions, even though the discrimination is stubbornly embedded in people's recognition.

3.1 My language, my people

Each group is regarded as a distinct ethnic group, or *klum chatiphan* in the current Thai terminology (Morton & Baird 2019, p.25), which is classified according to language. From the linguistic point of view, the future of a language is the future of society. Unlike most countries in Asia, releasing and promoting policies to encourage ethnic groups to maintain their heritage cultures and languages, the suppression towards ethnic groups in Thailand starts from the denial of their cultures and languages. Take a diachronic look upon Siam history, the idea of nation is based on identifying the similarities and differences among cultural heterogenous groups in an ethnocentric view of the central Thai, and the Thai language specifically spoken in the capital area. There was no nation-wide explicit minority language policy or planning in Thailand. Through the homogenization process, standard Thai language (central Thai) as the national language has been implemented and reinforced by compulsory education system as the instruction language, leaving other ethnic languages (Non-Thai languages) in an inferior place.

Smalley(1988, p.245) examines linguistic diversity and multilingualism in Thailand, and in his hierarchy model, he points out that Thais accepted social hierarchy as the norm governing their lives, so Thailand's diverse languages and dialects have become subordinate to the national official language (standard Thai) which is spoken by the higher levels of the social elite. However, this monocentric perspective of the national hierarchy does not fit the social, cultural, economic cross-border and international interactions. In recent years, people are witnessing a significant shift away from the monocentric nation-state legacy to a polycentric one in the study of multilingualism (Blommaert 2015; Pennycook 2010).

There is no one-to-one correspondence between languages and ethnic groups. Many ethnic groups who were differentiated from each other by language and culture, were nevertheless identified as "Thai" people. Yun (2017, p.258) proposes that language alone cannot be the demarcating unit for ethnic identification, but is one of the most significant markers of ethnicity. So like Yun argues, the ideal way to demarcate ethnic identification and delimit ethnic boundaries is with those crucial culture-bearing-units and the ethnic people themselves.

3.2 My territory, my people

There are three key characteristics of northern Thailand that made the region a central counterinsurgency battleground, which include geographical, demographic and cultural historical settings (Hyun, 2014, p.228). Geographically, this area is mountainous together with sporadic plains along the valleys where the abundant natural resources have great significance to national security, provinces like Mae Hong Son, ChiangMai, ChiangRai, Tak, Nan and Uttaradit are directly bordered by Myanmar and Laos, offering an ideal cover for people who transgress the nation's borders. The Thai in the North are probably more culturally involved with the Central Thai than are either the northeasterners or the southerners, and dissent among the ethnic Thai who farm the lowland river valleys is low (Hanrahan, 1975, pp.12-17). More specifically, lowland Thais (forest people) in northern Thailand were considered more or less integrated into the Thai nation while the ethnic minorities in the mountainous areas near boarder were not (Hyun, 2014, p.230), hence the latter (hill people) have always been regarded as a problem in the process of nation building. They pose major threats to national security, namely, migration, opium cultivation and shifting cultivation (Laungaramsri, 2003, p.165) and echo perceptions of non-Buddhist, primitive peoples, and more recently, destroy the forests and watersheds.

Historically speaking, concerning their own subjects, the Siamese rulers conducted a project on the "Others Within", roughly in 1885-1910, which reaffirmed their superiority, hence

justifying their rule over the country within the emerging territorial state by categorizing people into the *ChaoPa*[8] (the forest) and the *ChaoBannok* (multi-ethnic lowland villagers) under the supremacy of Bangkok (Winichakul, 2000, p.41). This ethno-spatial discourse differentiated Thai subjects with the geo-body in relation to the superior space of Bangkok (Winichakul, 1994, pp.166-7), which is more influential on Thai's policies and treatment towards ethnic minorities than academic identification. For example, the state-led movement to revitalize Khmer heritage in the lower northeast Thailand is taking place in a regional arena of ethnic identity politics, with different minority groups vying for visibility and recognition within the nation-state. The revival of Khmer heritage has hardened the political boundary dividing Thailand and Cambodia and reinforced Thailand's claims of entitlement to Khmer heritage, hence the Khmer were incorporated and, assimilated to the Thai nation to some extents (Denes, 2012, pp.168-169). In another regard, obviously, the monarchy has played a key role in incorporating IPs and their ancestral territories in Thailand into the national and global capitalist economies via numerous royally sponsored development projects (Jonsson & Hjorleifur, 2005, pp.66-67).

The state's categorization, administration, and stigmatization of hill tribes as a collective group gradually contributed in part to the scaling-up of a pan–hill tribe identity in Thailand during the 1970s and 1980s (Morton, 2017, p.687). The distinctive identifications of Thais and non-Thais represent a significant mechanism of political and cultural negotiation. Nation-state ideology has created an ambivalent and fluid transformations within groups, which means members from different ethnic groups may be forced to integrate into national cultures, economies and political systems or become subordinate to the mainstream. In other words, ethnic identity in Thailand involves changing alignments of communities within flexible boundaries and shifting constructions of the Thai and non-Thai identities.

Ethnic identification is politicized, due to the politicization of space, in which the notion of the bounded territorial nation-state and supposed cultural homogeneity within the territory problematized the hill minorities (Hayami, 2006, p.394). In this regard, the historical views toward ethnic groups and the boarder population demands recognition, because perceptions toward the people in northern Thailand eventually became the most powerful criteria to define the national identity among the ethnic Thais and non-Thais throughout the Cold War and into the present day (Hyun, 2014, p.231). Morton (2017, p.690) argues that very little interethnic mingling is a major obstacle for promoting a larger subnational collective identity as IPs. Lack of communication between interethnic borders can be attributed not only to the geographical distance in the country but also to Indigenous groups' divergent histories of engagement with the state and stereotyped positions within the national imaginary.

3.3 What should I do to be ethnic enough?

There is a Karen tribe, informally known as Long Neck people, located in ChiangRai. They also have Akha, Lisu, Lahu people living in the tribe. Women wear rings not only around their necks but also around their extremities (eg. Lisu), as a self-defense system from attack or some may say for beauty.

> *"If I don't wear neck rings, don't knit or weave fabrics, but live like city people, how do I express myself? What do I have left?"*
>
> (From a personal communication, December 2021)

However, apart from cultural appearances, there are more economic reasons behind why people maintain these cultural traditions. Until 1990, the government has been carrying out the policies of "accepting" minorities cultures by showing more minority lifestyles on TV and in museums, focusing on their traditional costumes and ceremonies. Such as tattoos, earrings, and collars, strengthen ethnic identity by changing the body itself as an extension of physical features. These kinds of expressions are not objective cultural characteristics of defining ethnic groups, but tools for people to subjectively address or cover up ethnic identity. In other words, they are practicing their traditional lifestyle, but do depend on tourism for daily livings. Real life are put on display, and tourism has contributed to a large number of there exotic Other, a friendly, commercializable, exhibited Other (Winichakul, 2000, p.56). Wearing neck rings and leg rings have remained strong in Thailand and have become a gimmick to tourism industry.

The recognition of identities remains disputable, which means the alleged recognition doesn't come up with the acceptance by the officials, but exploitation of the ethnic groups through advertisements and tourism (Meadows, 2013, p.63), taking advantage of their "otherness". By promoting the otherness/exoticness of ethnic groups, Thai government exploits minority groups and reinforces identity for economic gain, which does not benefit the ethnic groups to identify themselves. Jonsson (2005, p.5) has observed that upland "identities have been contingent and contested, never descriptively adequate, and always anchored to tenuous conflations of nature, culture, society, identity and history". The main factor that makes cultural similarities and differences salient or opaque is how ethnic groups negotiate power relations within and outside the groups, and at the same time, balance ethnic contradictions and struggles caused by economic interests and political status. One corollary is that ethnic cultural performance and displays have been essential to the authenticity of their identity, but new identity options have encountered strong attack from internal differentiation and external influence caused by a high degree of spatial mobility and ethnic fluidity.

Self-identification, group differences, internal diversity, and inter-ethnic interactions produce diverse angles on how group boundaries come about and become blurred. In Mingke's （2006）book *On Chinese Borderlands Historical Memory and Ethnic Identity*, he proposed that making boundaries among ethnic groups is essential to the maintenance of identities. These boundaries are influenced by time, geography, self-identification etc. In the end, the fuzzy boundary is made subjectively by a group of people's senses of otherness and the primordial attachment which originated from an imagined community.

In Thailand, the categorization of the ethnic groups has been ambiguous due to the under changing situations, by which means inter-ethnic interactions happen more frequently because of the dynamic and fluid boundaries among groups. Let's reconsider the structure of the society in which these ethnic people live. Since 2019, Thailand has been nominally a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. However, in practice, the army's control of power is ensured in the Constitution. There is an ongoing program to register all people who live in remote areas as citizens, as long as they have evidence that at least one parent was born in Thailand or obtained temporary legal status[9]. In rural areas, there are various mechanisms to grant temporary residential status as well. Gaining a citizenship accelerates the mobility of ethnic individuals, which is on the rise in indigenous communities of intertwining with the external environment. As discussed above, as a result of their positioning as Within Others, ethnic people in Thailand are asserting not only their distinctiveness as IPs, but also their compatibility with and membership in the Thai nation (Morton, 2017, p.687).

4. The recognition of Akha people in Thailand: flexible and open

When national boundaries in South-East Asia were drawn during the colonial era, many people living in the mountainous areas and forests were divided, so Akha people could be found in Laos, Myanmar, South-west China and northern Thailand. As a cross-border ethnic group, Akha is a typical hill tribe. In Burmese ChiangTund, Shan state, the Akha form the second largest population group and a small group first migrated to northern Thailand in the late 1920's, then in the 1960's a much larger group arrived to escape war and oppression. In contrast to Karen, which have a longer and more legitimate historical presence within the nation (Morton, 2017, p.690), the Akha are perceived as more recent and illegitimate migrants. In addition, a significant number of Akha have converted to Christianity, Islam or maintain Akha*zah* rather than adopt Buddhism as one of their multireligious practices. This has attribute to be seen as more full-fledged yet culturally distinct members of Thai society. It is generally held that the

Akha does not have a long historical presence in Thailand, or have an intimate alliance with Thai kings.

There are approximately 20,000 Akha[10] in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai areas. The number of silver ornaments worn by women helps to distinguish different subgroups[12] according to their hats, costumes and appearance. Although as one of the poorest of the hilltribes in Thailand, the Akha stand out spectacularly in appearance, due mainly to the headdress of the women (Figure1a-c). Akha representations of Akhaness served to not only fulfill the more "positive" Thai stereotypes of Akha, but also reposition Akhaness as a distinct way of being and becoming Indigenous (Morton, 2017, p.690).

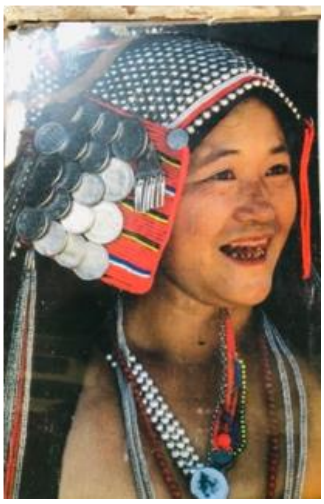

Figure 1a Picture of Akha woman at the Ban Hmong Doi Pui Museum in ChiangMai (photo by Jia Wu, 31 December 2021)

Figure 1b Picture of Akha woman in ChiangRai (photo by Jia Wu, September 2022)

Figure 1c Picture of Akha swing festival in ChiangRai (photo by Jia Wu, September 2022)

For Akha children born in Thailand, their parents often lack documents to prove that they were born in Thailand, this makes them stateless. Hundreds of thousands of hill tribes collectively represent one of the largest stateless populations in the world (Flaim, 2017, p.213). Due to invalid citizenship, Akha children have limited access to school education, so most of them do not have a university certificates and cannot win in the job market. In order to supplement their income, many Akha adults now selling handicrafts and use traditional techniques to make their own cultural items. Before Covid19, some Akha people sold Akha food and coffee at tourist attractions, and also engaged in coffee export trade. Due to the epidemic, most young people have returned to their villages, waiting for job opportunities.

Laungaramsri (2003, p.168) points out that the shifting policies and practices of the Thai state toward immigrants reflect the changing political economy of the border identities. Seemingly, the objective of engaging the full participation of Akha people within the mainstream societies in which they live contradicts the "nation-religion-king" triad. Such goals are based on a complex balance created between ethnic identity, national definition, and multiple religious affiliations (Agostini, 2018, p.6). For example, the Mon who had immigrated from Myanmar has been able to adapt to Thai society very well, as there were supporting factors for the assimilation process and also, they were similar to Thai in their way of life and social and religious backgrounds (Chaichana et al, 2018, p.61). Another example of the integration is the inter-ethnical marriage and the mixed children, which contribute to the idea of multiple identity and fluid group boundaries. In the Akha villages, there are negotiations of power in the cohabitation of cultures, which involves economic power negotiation externally and ethnical and political power negotiation internally. That is to say, identification of Akha depends on not only how the group interact with neighboring ethnic members, but also how they categorize themselves into subgroups within the Akha clusters. Furthermore, studies have indicated different religious practices and affiliations have become a source of division among the Akha.

Ethnic groups cannot exist in isolation; they exist because of the inter-ethnic interaction with other groups. As one of the six main tribal groups, Akha belongs to groups which have their own country, how do they maintain the ethnic identities depends on how and in what situations community leaders choose to negotiate with the Thai state using other discourses. Akha cannot be viewed in isolation when decoding Akhaness, but identify them as a cross-border ethnic group which differs in nature on account of the form of combination of the entity with the nation.

5. Growth of Christianity in Akha Villages-How do I identify myself religiously?

I gain access to these respondents because I have a friend who grew up in an Akha village in Chiang Dao District, Chiang Mai province and teaches Chinese at a primary school. She introduced me to the leader of the village and I stayed in the village for six months to get contact to participants through snowball sampling. Akha village is in the vicinity of Kachin, Lawa, Lahu, Lisu, Yunnanese villages, like that of other interspersed hill tribe minorities, the identity of Akha is not linked to a unified, continuous territory larger than that produced at the village level (Tooker, 1996, p.326). In this section, I bring my ethnographic lens to bear on Christmas event in December, 2021 in an Akha village.

In downtown area of ChiangMai, there are huge posters on the walls of many temples, which say *Buddhism is a principal religion in ChiangMai*, whereas everyone in this Akha village is Christian. Celebrating Christmas in the church (Figure2/3), festive atmosphere involves prominent display of ethic markers in this village when most of the population in Thailand is Buddhist. It is an expression of the dynamic of negotiating identity and religious rights within the state. Christian Akha is more or less in opposition to Akha*Zah* and national religion. In other words, Christian conversion facilitates the construction of religious identities in ways that do not serve to bolster the authority and control of the state, but comprise a striking source influence in contrast to the Thai government's nation-building projects that revolve around the spirit of Buddhism (Vorng, 2015, p.37)

Figure 2 The Christmas dance show in Akha church (photo by Jia Wu, December 2021)

Figure 3 The Christmas lunch in front of Akha church (photo by Jia Wu, December 2021)

The first Akha conversion to Christianity occurred in 1909 and became a large-scale phenomenon in northern Thailand in the 1980s. The Roman based orthography was widely used among Christian Akha. The Bible is written in Roman scripts and priests use Akha language in preaching and church services. For ethnic people, one especially salient domain in which they are working to claim distinction and compatibility within the nation is that of ritualized performances of royalist-nationalist loyalty that creatively build on their distinct modern traditions while adhering to the basic protocols of Thai royalist culture(Morton, 2017, p.691). Converted Christians in the village show their loyalty to the monarchy by hanging the portrait of beloved King Bhumibol (*Figure* 4) as a symbol of the Thai nation writ large, yet through large-scale Christian ceremonies, they also distinguish themselves from Thais who are Buddhists and from other Akha who still practice Akha*Zah*.

Figure 4 the picture of King Bhumibol inside a Baptist church (photo by Jia Wu June 2022)

Kammerer (1990, p.278) thinks that Akha responses to Christianity have been shaped by two indigenous equations: a general one between religion and ethnicity and a particular one between Akha traditional religion and Akha identity. Religious shift or convert are not always conforming to Akha*Zah* expectations of religious display of ethnicity and belongs, leading to conflicts within Akha groups sometimes. Converted Akha are criticized for distancing themselves from Akhaness, which leaves those who converted into a place to rework the expectations in a matter that demonstrate their own belongings to Akha(Figure5-6). It is safe to say the adaptation to new beliefs and rituals involves negotiation in order to evolve their new identities and can be understood that ethnic groups choose their new beliefs to integrate with their traditional selves (Kosem, 2013, p.4). Fieldwork data shows converted Akha are primarily directing their practices of religion toward a national rather than a larger international Christianity community in rehashing themselves as Christians, asserting their compatibility with other Akha and the nation, seeking to belong as more equal, yet distinct members in the state, by which I mean, Akha Christians are not only connected to other tribal Christians within the state, but also engaged in dialogues of identity with traditional members of their own ethnic group (Kammerer, 1996, p.321).

Figure 5 An Akha new house right next to the old one (*Figure*6)
(photo by Jia Wu, June 2022)

Case1: I live in Thailand, but I am Akha

Name: Chatchai (Akha village) Gender: Male Age:49

Chatchai looks exactly like the Akha people in the travel brochures, wearing embroidered clothes and delicate headdresses. He was born in Myanmar and came to Thailand with his parents when he was a kid. His parents converted to Christianity after they moved to Thailand and Chatchai went to the church with them regularly. Chatchai's parents planted opium in ChiangRai province forty years ago, and moved to this Akha village due to the

government's arrangement. He married a Chinese-Thai woman and had two sons, who are currently in Bangkok. His wife started attending church events with friends when she was in high school. These weekly Sunday events were in her opinion a very "cool activity" as a way to connect with her peers and to worship and learn about Jesus*Zah*.

Chatchai planted rice to ensure self-sufficiency, and provided horseback riding service for tourists before the COVID-19 pandemic. He speaks Thai with an accent. He learned English to communicate with the tourists to provide his horse-riding service and Akha language. Chatchai speaks Thai to his wife and Akha language to the villagers. *"I sent my sons to Bangkok. I hope they can learn English well and help people in our village sell the handicrafts online".* He only identifies himself as Akha.

Case 2: I cannot *Wai* to a Buddha

Name : Meega(Akha village) Gender: Female Age:16

Meega studies at a local Chinese school in Dagudi. She speaks standard Thai, Akha language and Chinese. She has been learning Chinese since primary school and could speak Akha and Yunnan dialect because many Chinese immigrants in the neighboring village are descendants of Yunnanese, and people use Yunnan dialect and Akha language in public places. Her parents are descendants of Chinese, but they had been lived in Myanmar for ten years and immigrated to Thailand twenty years ago. Meega was born in Thailand. She has been raised a Christian since both parents are converted to Christianity. She remembers when she was in primary school, she passed by a Buddhist shrine and did the *Wai*[12] like Thai people do, her mom warned her that she cannot *Wai* because she is a Christian.

Akha who convert to Christianity often do so because they can no longer afford to make the sacrifices demanded by the complex and costly customs of their forebears, therefore, Akha converted to Christianity were simply seeking a replacement of Akha*Zah* that is cheaper and easier than their own (Kammerer,1989, p.274). He (1990, p.277) argues that the past rejection of Christianity on the part of Akha and the increase in conversion has less to do with Christianity itself than with Akha*Zah*. While economic determinism could not be the single explanation and minimize the importance of cultural factors. The main reason why the first group of residents gave up Akha's traditional beliefs was financial affairs. Moving to Thailand was not easy, while the original swidden way consumes lots of work, energy and resources. The other factors to help raise the family income was to farm opium – "the Cash Crop". The Thai government only allows communities to collectively manage and use State-owned land for their living. Missionaries could manage land under the name of churches, so Chatchai's parents became the first residents of the current location. The church guaranteed them that they would own the land

and could apply for citizenship on the condition of becoming Christians. Military soldiers were stationed in the village and helped the first comers to build the houses. Soon after, Ang Khang Royal Project Station (also known as Doi Ang Khang) was founded to help raise living standard of ethnic people, cultivating temperate climate fruits. Young men and women could find a job at the station and support their families.

In this Akha village, first conversion happened due to the financial shortcoming, while for the younger generation, they follow Christianity just because of everyone around them are Christians. For Chatchai's generation, they still live in a relatively traditional way, while for Meega's generation, being educated in the Thai education system, Thai values has fully penetrated in her life, she thinks that she is more Thai than Akha. Even though her parents try to preserve as much of their Akha culture as possible, her attachment to the Internet and media, her exposure to a multiethnic environment has resulted in fluidity between her Akhaness and Thainess. Consequently, as a result of economic, social, and educational interactions as well as everyday life communication in many different contexts, younger generations tend to show their multi-identities by the statement "*my family is Akha and I follow my parents' religion, but my heart is Thai*".

Mr. Athu, the current dean of Culture Network Akha Life University and the founder of Athu Akhahome in ChiangRai said, to be Akha is not only about the blood, but about the sacrifice and rituals people practice and the kinship people follow. Most importantly, being Akha, people should raise animals or do family business to support the family. While those who converted to Christianity are considered to be changed mentally, they don't practice Akha rituals anymore, therefore they may still claim to be Akha because of their blood (personal communication, April, 2022). Akha do not associate their ethnic identity with religions in particular, but those who stick to the Akha*Zah* assert they are closer to ancestors and the Akha spirit. One is not born Akha, one becomes Akha. The rituals of Akha*Zah* is considered a "Wisdom of life". Like Tooker (1996, p327) mentioned, they have this hierarchical awareness of people (human labor), crops, and foodstuffs (and money) which are regarded as Akha wisdom. Nowadays, it is more flexible to perform simple ceremonies.

I have been visiting Akha villages constantly and surprised by the diversity of each village. Each Akha village can be considered a different realm or domain (Tooker,1996, p. 333), and religious belief is one of the most salient one. Village leader (*dzoema*) have politico-religious responsibilities in watching over community-based ritual practices. It is intriguing that they are doing cultural identities based on their own choice. In other words, what other people think of them is not necessary the same as the members think of who they are.

Villages are closely linked by religion and kinship. A village level polity requires each village practice one religion, either its Akha*Zah* or Christianity or Buddhism or Islam. Although many Akha people hold different ideas about what being Akha means religiously, the ideal of sameness within the village at the level of social practices still lingering upon, which I argue characterizes all Akha. Evidently, most markers attempt to define the intrinsic element, or the essential core of Akha people are complex and relative. The adaptability of ethnic identity brings up more questions: Which features are village-level significant for purposes of assigning Akha labels? Where is the ethnic boundary? How far can they go before not being categorized as Akha? People are creatively and strategically using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming Indigenous (Hall, 1996, p.4), and they are constantly reframing and extending the ethnic boundaries to a more fluid way.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Museum Siam has 14 exhibition galleries which help people resolve what Thainess means. The pamphlet gives people a brief introduction of what Thainess it. Decoding Thainess is so difficult because it changes from era to era, but at the core is “nation, religion and king”. For decades, the process of nation-building in Thailand has been one of defining Thainess versus Otherness within and across its boundaries. As a collective identity, the construction of Thainess reflects the politics of ethnic relations in which ethnic homogenization is essential to the process of nation-building (Laungaramsri, 2003, p.170). “Others” are marginalized in the normative social order because of their various identities. The fact that the museums which represent ethnic groups now placed under the Tourist Authority are left to be quite telling of the kinds of difference the state is ready to promote. Now there is an attempt to define ethnic culture as part of a benign recognition of differences (Hayami, 2006, P396).

Elderly Akha do not see themselves as Thai because of the language and religion. Interethnic interactions, which reveal that problems labeled as “ethnic” have developed for more than one reason. Like ethnic minorities as threats to national security, the denial of recognition and the illegal citizenship, Thailand’s legal system is not set up to appropriately handle discrimination among groups, since it is not recognized in domestic legislation, and is only broadly included in the constitution, through the declaration that all Thais are considered equal under the law (Baird, et al., 2017, p548).

The data from the field revealed that Mega’s ethnic identity is given by blood, but her identities would not be static as it has been constructed flexibly to suit the situation.

Her generation define themselves in an era where the identities have had the most fluidity and cultural assimilation amidst globalization (Chaichana et al, 2018, p.69), which means they have to search for new meanings and references of being and becoming Akha, these phenomena are not constrained to Akha, but may happen to other ethnic groups. Ethnic identities exhibit greater or lesser degrees of systematicity and complexity (Kammerer, 1989, p.263). Its configuration also contributes to understanding the shifting patterns of fluidity of identity. As can be seen, indicators of Akhaness which are inherited from blood are patrilineal. Elements like ancestral rituals, language, costumes are negotiable, in other words, there are different ways to be Akha. Akha accept and are tolerant of variations at either the ethnic or the intra-ethnic level, since they assume that customs at all levels are legitimated in the same manner, that is, by being handed down from the ancestors (Kammerer, 1989, p.273).

This research discusses the recognition process of Akha group in northern Thailand. In spite of rejecting the concept of Indigeneity by officials, acknowledging ethnic, cultural and linguistic difference still provide a chance to link ethnic groups in the north to a global Indigenous Movement. Ethnic identification involves complex processes of negotiation and articulation between active self-formation of ethnic minorities on the one hand and powerful dominant norms on the other. The IPs movement is working from the grassroots level to challenge the dominant mono-cultural framing of Thailand and promote multicultural policies that better reflect the country's ethnic diversity (Morton, 2016, p.8). Akha people are marginalized in the normative social order because of their various identities. Akhaness as a collective identification has an identity-bearing unit, while as individual members in the community, members could define that unit accordingly, for instance, religion. In other words, there are many ways to be Akha, religious affiliation is to connect individuals' personal experience and choice in life.

Inevitably, the Covid-19 pandemic is reshaping geopolitics and has accelerated the transition to a more fragmented world order in which the future regionalization and localization principles of the system are unclear. Since the interaction between people to people has been changing, recognition of ethnic groups in Thailand will sure show a different picture as it stands. Like Kammerer (1989) argued, the adaptability continues to be crucial to the survival of Akha as an ethnic group, and a coherent, cosmologically-grounded cultural system may have been reached and would be reached soon.

Notes

[1] Influenced by Grillo (1989) and May (2001), I use the term minority not because of the numerical size of particular groups, but refer to the situational differences in power, rights and privileges which may cause the conflicts and issues in society.

[2] Retrieved from https://en.unesco.org/indigenous-peoples.

[3] Retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/indigenous-peoples., according to United National Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, indigenous people are those who retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live, they are the descendants of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived. For more information, go to https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_ factsheet1.pdf#:~:text=Considering%20the%20diversity%20of%20indigenous%20peoples%2C%20an%20official,and%20accepted%20by%20the%20community%20as%20their%20member.

[4] Leepreecha (2019) lists four main sectors involved with the IP movement in Thailand, which are Indigenous groups, the media and scholars, state and independent agencies, international organizations and networks.

[5] According to the National Security Council, the concept Chao Khao are reduced to six main tribal groups: Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Mien, Akha and Lisu, whereas other groups, such as Lao, the Yuan, and Khon Muang are seen as ethno-regional groups because they have never caused any problems to the government administration.

[6] Siam was a Sanskrit word adopted by the Portuguese from the early rule. After the formation of a radical People's Party in 1927 with western-style democracy, modernizer and nationalist, Phibun, changed the country's name to Thailand in 1939 with the aim to modernize and also emphasize unique Thai identity. In this article, Siam/Siamese would be used when mentioning history before 1939.

[7] Sixty-two ethnic communities were recognized in the Country Report (2016), using a scientific classification scheme rooted in ethnolinguistics and developed by the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA) at Mahidol University as part of their Ethnolinguistic Maps of Thailand project (Retrieved from https://prachatai.com/english/node/ 5738). The position of all minority languages, including the largest, is precarious given that they are not well supported in Thailand's language education policy.

[8] In recent discourse on ethnic minorities, the category of ChaoPa has been shifted to ChaoKhao.

[9] *The rights of indigenous peoples in Thailand* .2nd cycle universal periodic review thailand upr 2016 - advocacy factsheet. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/THA/INT_CCPR_ICO_THA_23570_E.pdf#:~:text=The%20Thai%20Constitution%20does%20not%20recognize%20indigenous%20peoples,rendered%20invisible%20in%20the%20national%20laws%20and%20policies

[10] Retrieved from http://www.thailine.com/thailand/english/hill-e/akha-e.htm

[11] Tooker(1988) have labelled the subethnic divisions "headdress subgroups" after the headdress style of the women, as criterion used for determining membership of indigenous groups. The well recognized subgroups are Uloh Akha, LorMee Akha, Phamee Akha, Pear Akha, NahKha Akha, Arkher Akha, UPhee Akha, ArJoh Akha. Some Akha people claim that Ake (Ah-ker) people should be included as Akha, because of the intelligibility of the language and customs.

[12] *Wai* is used in Thailand when greeting one another, to say goodbye, or show respect, gratitude, or apology. The hands are placed together in prayer and raised upwards towards the face, while the head lowers in a slight bow and the eyes are lowered.

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