Space and the Production of Cultural Difference among the Akha prior to Globalization: Channeling the Flow of Life

Deborah E. Tooker

The Akha were the last highland group to move to Thailand in substantial numbers. On reaching Chiang Rai, where almost all their villages are now located, they were obliged to settle in areas passed over by the groups that had preceded them. When I participated in an evaluation of an indigenous Akha NGO, the Development and Agricultural Project for Akha, in the early-1990s, their relatively late arrival and the generally remote location of their villages seemed to significantly contribute to the difficulties they were facing. Following visits to most of the Akha settlements in the province, the evaluation team could not identify even one thriving village self-sufficient in rice that was not beset with such challenges as the lack of citizenship for its members, victimization of its women such as through commercial sex, and high rates of HIV.

There are indeed thriving villages in neighboring countries at the present time, such as in Mong Long District of Luang Namtha in Laos and in the Mong Pawk area of the Wa Region in Myanmar where the villagers enjoy rice surpluses, sell handicrafts and forest items, and remain relatively free of such problems as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and social challenges. However, in Thailand since the 1990s, this has no longer been the case, with most villages suffering food shortages, the threat (sometimes the reality) of being expelled from the country, and obstacles in accessing the public education and health care to which citizens are entitled.

In Space and the Production of Cultural Difference among the Akha Prior to Globalization, Deborah Tooker reviews Akha spatial practices from 1982 to 1985. At this time, there were sustainable and thriving Akha villages in Thailand. Focusing on the use of space and how this delineated differences between the Akha and neighboring groups, she has written a focused ethnography on the Akha of the sort that is going out of fashion in anthropology that is increasingly dominated by postmodernist approaches.

This time frame, 1982–85, coincides with the start of her “participant-observational fieldwork” (p. 13) among the Akha, particularly the Lomi sub-group near Mae Sai. In 1985, not only did her initial fieldwork come to an end but she also observed “serious structural discontinuities” (p. 13) that the reader is obliged to conclude were to unsettle the practices she observed during her fieldwork. This year is also when “globalization” began to impact upon the Akha. Although she never defines globalization (despite its use in the book’s subtitle and its absence from the index), it indeed refers here to increased lowland and official Thai government mandates in the Akha hills. More specifically, globalization here refers to “the expansion of capitalism and the nation-state into the Northern Thai uplands” (p. 214).

As explained in Chapter 1, the author studies the use of space among the Akha using three interpretive frameworks. These are “the cultural meaning of space,” “the relationship of that meaning to regional meaning systems,” and “larger comparative and theoretical discussions about the meaning of space in relation to economic and political contexts . . . and identity construction” (p. 21). She explains that her focus is on space because it is “actively produced by social agents” (p. 24) and contributes to cultural differences between the Akha and others. Tooker contends that space is used by the Akha to access the “life force” that she calls “potency” (translated from the Akha term, ɕyâ). She explains that potency is the force that “maintains, and indeed, serves to construct ‘Akha’ as an autonomous identity” (p. 42). She explains that potency provides access to a “cosmic energy” that maintains and creates social hierarchies both within Akha society and between the Akha and other ethnic groups (p. 24). Spatial practices (or tactics) include the relationship established between the center and the periphery and the direction in which certain features, such as houses and gates, are placed.

She explains further that some may disagree with her viewing the Akha as a bounded culture; yet she takes this view because the Akha see themselves in this way. Similarly, while she recognizes the changing nature of village society, she explains that the main aspects of her study village did not change significantly during her three-year study period (but have since then).

Tooker describes in Chapter 2 how the Akha she studied, although living on the periphery of states run by powerful groups, viewed themselves as autonomous and having their own identity. Special reference is made to the community...
Heine-Geldern, Robert. —. pp. 259–316.
Condominas, Georges. —. clues on how to study Akha society prior to the 1980s as well.

...interest. (and/or failed to cope) with the monumental changes of increased access to the lowlands, the expansion of lowland...been encountering since 1985 in what she calls the modern age.

...All of this represents the continuing maturation of the study of highland cultures and peoples in Mainland Southeast Asia. Tooker argues that previous models of premodern “cosmic polities” in Southeast Asia, such as mandala, galactic polity, and emboxment, have been defined from the perspective of dominant lowland groups (p. 215). This has resulted, she argues, in the scholarship on the subject being skewed to represent a top-down view of premodern states that ignores other models such as that of the Akha described in this book.

It should be noted, though, that the authors of these models referred to by her (such as Heine-Geldern and Condominas, to cite two of them) did not claim to be describing all the models of Southeast Asia. They were depicting the lowland states and other lowland groups such as the Tai whose communities are in valleys.

Heine-Geldern, for example, wrote “I shall confine myself to a discussion of some fundamental conceptions of state and kingship in those parts of Southeast Asia where Hindu-Buddhist civilization prevailed” (1942, 15). Although knowledgeable of upland societies, having written a thesis at the University of Vienna on highland groups near the border of India with Burma, he wanted here to describe lowland states.

Georges Condominas’ discussions of social space and emboxment referred to the socio-political organization of Tai groups. In his book on social space, in which the concept (if not the actual term) of emboxment was introduced, he discusses Tai polities in one chapter (1980a, 259–316). In the same book, he describes how the Mnong Gar establish a new longhouse, thus covering some of the same ground examined in Tooker’s book (1980b, 411–430). His review of the spatial and political organization of the people makes no reference to anything that can be compared to emboxment and does not attempt to place how the Mnong Gar organize the longhouse spatially into the system of emboxment.

More important, however, than whether Heine-Geldern and Condominas intended to produce a comprehensive model for all the societies of Southeast Asia is Tooker’s point that there are diverse ways of spatial organization in the region. In making the case for diversity, especially among upland groups in Southeast Asia, Tooker diverges from the approach of James Scott who puts all the uplanders (and some valley dwellers) into the macro-grouping of Zomia (Scott 2009). Although his book appeared too close to the release of Tooker’s work for her to thoroughly integrate an analysis of it into her text, Tooker clearly envisions a diversity of cultures and methods of spatial organization in Southeast Asia.

As an indication of the diversity in Southeast Asia, she challenges the idea that hill people necessarily organize their societies in less hierarchical ways than lowlanders. She points out (p. 233) that “hierarchy is embedded just as much in [Akha] ritual space as it is in that of the lowland polities.” Other examples of hierarchical upland societies were in Karen and in the Palaung center of Nam San, all of which had leaders who styled themselves as Saohpa (Shan rulers) with palaces and other accouterments of royalty (in what conventionally has been associated with lowland states).

All of this represents the continuing maturation of the study of highland cultures and peoples in Mainland Southeast Asia. As the understanding of highland groups grows more nuanced, the diversity of these peoples is being increasingly recognized as well as the ways that they have changed over time.

The fact that she has studied this village for so long has enabled her to attain a comprehensive understanding of the people and the place. This has precluded the need for her to write (as sometimes happens) a revision of her dissertation to accommodate some important new information she missed while doing her initial field research.

It is hoped that Tooker will continue with her analysis of Akha society into the more troubling times these people have been encountering since 1985 in what she calls the modern age. How the Akha system of spatial organization coped (and/or failed to cope) with the monumental changes of increased access to the lowlands, the expansion of lowland political control over their villages, the spread of new diseases as well as various social problems is of considerable interest. Given her deep understanding of Akha society in the 1980s, any analytical study she might choose to undertake on Akha life since then should be enlightening to students of many disciplines. Such a study would also give clues on how to study Akha society prior to the 1980s as well.

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References


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Based on the author's extensive fieldwork among the Akha people prior to full nation-state integration, this illuminating study critically reexamines assumptions about space, power, and the politics of identity, so often based on modern, western contexts. Tooker explores the active role that spatial practices have played in maintaining cultural autonomy. The book expands current debates about power relations in the region from a mostly political and economic framework into the domains of ritual, cosmology, and indigenous meaning and social systems.

