TRADITIONS, LANGUAGE, AND LITERACY
CHANGING MEANINGS OF AKEU ETHNICITY

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ABSTRACT

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Ethnic identities are affected by social changes which force identities, their meanings, and cultural markers connected to them to be adapted to new situations. Among the highland peoples of Southeast Asia in recent decades, the degree of change has been remarkable, encompassing both economic and political transformation, and increased impact and cultural influence from majority populations. As a result, in one of the smaller upland groups of southwestern China, northern Thailand, Laos and central Myanmar—the Akeu—symbols of ethnicity which are related to traditions and outer appearance are losing their significance, while certain selected traditions are still appreciated and are undergoing modification to fit them to new circumstances. Language remains an important marker of Akeu ethnicity. Akeu identity used to carry meanings of illiteracy, poverty, and low status and, as language remains an important marker of Akeu ethnicity, newly invented writing in the Akeu language has become an important means both to preserve oral traditions and to empower the meaning of Akeu identity. However, their developing appreciation of literacy furthers their integration into the nation state and Western-oriented urban cultures.

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Keywords: ethnicity, Akeu, Akeu identity, Southeast Asia

Ethnicity has been a growing field of study in anthropology and sociology at least since the late 1960s, coinciding with the increased appearance of the term in both political and everyday discourses. The significance of ethnic and cultural identities has not decreased with global processes of cultural drift towards urban, Western-oriented cultural modes and their national variations but, rather, have been observed to persist through cultural and social changes (e.g. Eriksen 2010: 12–13), with new cultural elements being used to support ethnic identities, but also to change their meanings. This article[1] presents an example of how changing circumstances are affecting the understanding of ethnic identity of a minority group in multiethnic and multicultural Southeast Asia. I focus on the Akeu, a little-known and practically unresearched group whose language belongs to Tibeto-Burman language group and has about 12,000 speakers in southern China, Shan State in Myanmar, Laos and northern Thailand (Ethnologue 2013). I begin by reviewing some theoretical considerations concerning ethnic identities and their formation, and specifically ethnicity in Southeast Asian context. I then present the Akeu, focusing on social and cultural changes that they—as well as other minority groups in the area—have

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undergone during recent decades. Finally, I focus on some of the ways that these changes are used to modify Akeu identity.

Constructed ethnicity

Ethnicity deals with contrasts: defining selves, and others against the self (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 20). As a phenomenon it 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 (Eriksen 2010: 16). Common ancestry—real, fictive or metaphoric—is always essential to ethnicity (ibid.: 17, 42) as it binds together members of an ethnic group through belief in their common origin, which is in turn based on similar appearance, cultural similarity or shared history (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 16–17). In his pioneering theoretical considerations on ethnicity, Fredrik Barth placed an emphasis on group boundaries: cultural or other features which mark ethnic distinctions and serve as criteria for membership. Certain cultural differences are made socially relevant in defining ethnic groups and, while ethnic markers may change as culture of the group changes, the boundary itself is crucial to the group's existence but its exact markers are not (Barth 1969a: 14–16). Thus ethnicity and culture do not have a clear one-to-one relationship, although the actual content of ethnicity is always culture in one way or another (Jenkins 1997: 105). According to Charles Keyes, ethnic identity consists of those particular cultural traits that are used to express that identity. Existence of an ethnic group 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. Because of internal variation, cultural similarity of any ethnic group must be socially constructed just as the differences are (Jenkins 1997: 168).

According to Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann (1998), different viewpoints on ethnicity can be located on an axis between primordialist and instrumentalist views. Primordialism—a common everyday understanding but little supported in research—argues that ethnic identity is natural, determined by one's biological origin which automatically causes certain stereotypical behaviour, and because of its naturality it also endures through changes. It is a problematic concept in many ways: for example it does not explain identity change, intra-cultural variations or multi-ethnic identities (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 48–50). According to the instrumentalist view, ethnic identity is mainly a means to achieve various political and economic interests (Jenkins 1997: 44–45), and is therefore prone to change and variation according to changing interests. Social change is thus a crucial factor in ethnic processes. However, instrumentalist views offer no explanation as to why some people hold on to identities which are not in any sense profitable (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 57–60, 64–65).

In addition to being negotiable, flexible, and formed in historical contexts, ethnicity can also generate deep, non-rational affections. The meaning of any identity 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,

group members often perceive the result as a primordial identity with 'the quasi-mystical significance often attributed to blood ties' (ibid.: 72, 77, 89). The groups and their members are also active parts of ethnic processes, as they use their previous identities, social networks, political and economic resources and cultural practices to define who they are. Identity construction is an interactive and unfinished process in which external forces—both passive circumstances and active classifications by outsiders—and active groups and individuals meet (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 72, 80). However, because of the close connection between ethnicity and culture, common ethnic identity can only be accepted with people who are culturally related (Eriksen 2010: 110–112). Once constructed, identities start to lead their own lives, modifying people's daily experiences where, in turn, they are again reproduced (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 92–93).

Power is an essential feature in ethnicity and one way of exercising it is by categorising groups. Identification by group members themselves and categorisation by outsiders are separate processes which are, however, linked very closely. While they are not always in line with each other, outsiders' categories affect people's sense of self, and their understanding of themselves affects the way they in turn categorise others. External definitions can in some cases be accepted, but even if they are not, they affect people's self-understanding: being categorised by others can itself also strengthen or change identities through active resistance (Jenkins 1997: 23, 53, 57). Both internal and external definitions of identity involve the use of power: external in terms of applying it to others, internal when claiming authority in personal matters against others who might possibly reject the interference. In most cases identities carry various practical consequences such as resource allocation or social discrimination, which makes identity definitions and classifications important in practice and also prone to conflicts, especially if classifications cause disagreements (e.g. Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 63–64; Jenkins 1997: 71). External definitions and their consequences can be imposed on others if the classifying group has either coercive power or some other legitimation to define others (Jenkins 1997: 53), something which is often the case with states. States can classify their citizens through censuses, for example, and official ethnic categories used in administration and public discourses (ibid.: 69). Modern nation states often promote 'national culture' as a means of integration (Chit Hlaing 2007: 108), and ethnic groups may either have a clearly defined space within it, or not have a space at all (Stavenhagen 1990: 30–31). In a polyethnic state a dominant ethnic group can, in addition to exercising power at the expense of other groups, present itself as the authentic nation and its culture as the true national culture. Such an ideology usually leads to active assimilation politics (ibid.: 37–38).

Southeast Asian diversity

Southeast Asian countries are all multiethnic, containing dozens of different ethnic groups and languages. James C. Scott describes the highland area reaching from easternmost India through southern China[2] to Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam as a 'shatter zone' located at the geographically inaccessible margins of states, where different groups of people with diverse languages and cultures have escaped wars and exploitation (Scott 2009: 7–8). Ethnic groups of the area live interspersed, often in more than one country.

During the last century migrations to new areas have possibly even increased because of wars, revolutions and internal conflicts (Cribbs & Smith 1999: 199, 204). In addition to several political entities, various cosmological and religious traditions meet in the area (Scott 2009: 14).

A common cultural boundary within the mainland Southeast Asian social system has been drawn between valleys and hills, and ethnic identities have largely been formed in the relationships that have developed between these contexts (Scott 2009: 2, 32). Despite cultural differences in livelihood (wet rice/swidden agriculture), religion (Buddhism/animism) and political system (centralised/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 tightly into the centralised political systems of the lowlands. Even though assimilation has sometimes taken place, influence has also strengthened and transformed ethnic boundaries, and cultural influences from the lowlands have been transformed into practices which reflect the uplanders' values (Marlowe 1979: 166; Evrard 2007: 128, 143; Tooker 2004: 251). Scott (2009: 19, 32) argues that highland groups have migrated to marginal areas to avoid state hegemony, and that they have deliberately assumed cultural features which prevent state formation. In general, highland areas are characterised by diversity and flexibility of subsistence practices, customs, language, identities and social structure (ibid.: 18).

Since Edmund Leach's classic study (1954), considerable research has been conducted in Southeast Asia which underlines the relativistic and socially constructed nature of ethnic identities, and also that Western notions of groups and their functions are often inappropriate in the Southeast Asian context (Dentan 1976: 79; Marlowe 1979: 168, citing Lehman 1967). Southeast Asian labels for ethnic categories, especially during pre-colonial times, often did not refer to culturally or historically connected groups but to hierarchical structural categories to which categorisers related in similar political or ecological ways (Dentan 1976: 75; Lehman 1979: 230). Thus it is questionable if the term 'ethnicity'—as a category characterised by a sense of shared origin and culture—applies to the pre-colonial categories at all. According to Jonsson, pre-national identities in Southeast Asia were 'about rank and rights', with significant cultural differences between chiefs and commoners of one group, who in turn shared a similar position within a regional structure in relation to lowland rulers (Jonsson 2004: 697). An example of a structural category still in operation is that of 'hill tribe' (*chao khao*, literally 'hill people'), a label under which various upland peoples have been classified in Thailand (Keyes 1979: 13). *Chao khao* is an administrative rather than cultural concept, and includes several upland groups who do not feel any ethnic affiliation with each other (Kunstadter 1979: 122). Group names and definitions are still flexible and the criteria which are used to define them vary situationally (e.g. Evrard 2007: 141). Ethnic categories themselves might have been stable, but individuals could rather freely move from one category to another. Membership was defined mostly by behavioural criteria: categories were inseparable from certain, often quite superficial, behavioural patterns connected to them. Mastering the language, dress, custom, ritual and so on made a person a member of the category whose language, dress and custom were in question. Thus 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 mostly irrelevant and affiliation can be chosen according to the context, something which might even be a necessity in multicultural environments (Dentan 1976: 76–77).

During and after the colonial era the system in which various culturally and linguistically distinct groups could be all included in larger categories as 'similar', has increasingly been replaced by a system where groups are perceived as culturally exclusive. In a modern nation state different cultural groups are seen as ethnic minorities included in one large category of citizens while in the pre-colonial social system various different groups could be included in an ethnic category decided by their rulers even without necessary cultural competence; in a system of exclusive groups, however, appropriate cultural behaviour is the necessary requirement for ethnic group membership (Marlowe 1979: 202, 203, 207, 208; Gravers 2007a: 13–14). In practice this led to assimilation politics in the name of national integrity and, while assimilation has recently given way to more accepting attitudes towards minority cultures, they are still often presented as living in a traditional past as opposed to embracing the ideals of modernisation (Jonsson 2004: 674–675).

Changing life in the mountains and Akeu ethnicity

The Akeu are one of the smaller upland groups, whose culture has been—and partly still is—characterised by swidden cultivation of mountain rice, animist religion, oral traditions and genealogies, social structure based on exogamous clans, and political organisation that does not reach beyond village level. In both the scarce examples of literature where the Akeu are mentioned and in local ethnic classifications, the Akeu are sometimes regarded as a sub-group of the Akha (see for example Bradley 1996: 21), a larger and well researched mountain group. Akeu and Akha languages 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. Indeed, the ethnic boundary needs to be emphasised more when the groups in question are in frequent contact or are culturally similar enough to confuse the boundary (Barth 1969a: 23). Akeu identity definition and construction most often takes place against Akha identity. According to Akeu oral legends they originate in Tibet where Akeu and Akha lines separated. From there they migrated, a long time ago, to Yunnan in southern China, where they lived until the last century and where most of them still live. Political unrest following the communist revolution forced many Akeu to leave China and cross the border to Burma or Laos, and some of these groups moved further to Thailand from the 1960s onwards. Migrations both inside and between countries have continued into the 21st century because of civil war and political turmoil especially in Myanmar. Currently about 10,000 Akeu are estimated to live in Yunnan, 1,000 in both Myanmar and Laos, and about 400 in Thailand (Ethnologue 2013).

Identity construction processes are driven by social change and several coinciding processes of change have impacted the upland groups in Southeast Asia during recent decades, affecting the 'traditional' cultures described in classic ethnographies. According

to Deborah Tooker (2004), the most significant changes in the lives of the mountain groups in Thailand during the last decades have been provided by the capitalist economy, integration into the nation state and increased contacts between groups. Cash crops and wage labour have taken over the subsistence economy since the early 1980s; money is needed for taxes and buying land that has been taken under government control; laws and population pressure restrict farming practices which leads to 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 1950s 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 1980s given way in the face of minority rights, in the public discourse the 'hill tribes' are still often presented as backward and pre-modern and in need of development into educated and democratic citizenship (Jonsson 2004: 677, 692).

The same changes that have affected other groups have also touched the Akeu, both in Thailand and Myanmar. Civil war has forced whole villages to move to densely populated lowlands, where traditional swidden economy is not possible because of the lack of land. Contacts with other groups and majority cultures—both Burmese and that of the local majority, the Shan—have increased through wage labour, trade and education. When mountain groups settle in lowlands, they usually prefer to live in mono-ethnic villages among their own people, but sometimes members of more than one ethnic group settle together. The Akeu often end up sharing villages with the Akha. In both countries the number of Akeu moving to work in towns is also increasing, and though urban areas might also have their own ethnic neighbourhoods, contacts with other groups become a daily experience.

One form of cultural change common to highland groups is religious conversion to either Buddhism or Christianity. Conversion 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 urban environment (Tooker 1992: 802; Kunstadter 1979: 133–134). Crisis and the failure of traditional rituals are also noted as reasons for converting, as well as seeing animist rituals and sacrifices as burdensome to follow even in the village context due to changed economic circumstances (see also Platz 2003: 478, 482; Gravers 2007b: 232–233). Animists mostly start to follow Buddhist practices when they move to town as Buddhism is considered an important part of both Thai and Burmese national identity and is encouraged as a part of the political integration of minorities especially in potentially insecure mountainous border areas (Platz 2003: 476–477; Heikkilä-Horn & Miettinen 2000: 183). Among the Akeu, Buddhism is more common in Myanmar than in Thailand: two out of five villages which I visited in Myanmar were Buddhist. Conversions to either religion are often group conversions, so that the whole community follows the same religious practices. When animists convert to Buddhism, they may retain elements of animism or ancestor worship,

creating a syncretistic religion (see also Platz 2003: 475). Conversion to Buddhism erases one of the cultural boundaries between upland and lowland groups and can thus result in increasing assimilation, especially among the more urban-oriented, since the urban environment is characterised by Buddhist culture. According to Tooker, ethnic identity of upland groups is closely connected to religious practices, and the ritual practices which one follows is an important feature of behavioural identities (Tooker 1992: 800, 803). Thus, assuming that Buddhist behaviour affects the ethnic identities of uplanders, the Akeu among them, it constitutes them as members of majority groups at least on the surface. According to Rodolfo Stavenhagen, assimilation is usually the objective of the dominant ethnic group, but it can also be a desired strategy for minorities especially in situations where they have been historically oppressed by majority groups (Stavenhagen 1990: 38), and appearing to be a member of the ethnic majority can be advantageous.

According to my informants there are a few dozen Christian Akeu in Thailand and probably a few hundred in Myanmar. Foreign missionary activities in the area have often been targeted more towards mountain groups because, according to Platz (2003: 477), there has been little success with Buddhist majorities. According to several studies, upland groups have generally been more receptive to Christianity than Buddhism, precisely because Buddhism is seen as the religion of the dominant lowlands and assuming Buddhist religion, at least in its lowland orthodox form, would affect one's identity. Since the uplander identity is often based on opposition to lowlands, Christianity can be seen as a means to set one's identity against that of the lowlanders, as well as providing institutional advantages in dealing with dominating groups (see e.g. Lehman 1979: 248; Platz 2003: 478; Scott 2009: 21; Tooker 1992: 801). On the other hand, even though Christianity does not encourage assimilation to majorities to the same degree as Buddhism, it is not as flexible regarding animist and ancestor rituals as Buddhism, and can thus cause a different kind of disconnection to traditions. Many of the Akeu perceive their culture as given by the ancestors as a whole and thus closely connected to the ancestor cult, and their traditions are often difficult to divide into 'religious' and 'secular' (the same also applies to Akha traditions; see Tooker 1992: 803). Therefore those who convert to Christianity sometimes abandon secular practices along with religious ones at the time of conversion. Shared forms of religious life can also lead to assimilation to other Christian minorities, especially with regards the Akha whose churches the Christian Akeu often attend in towns, creating a rather homogenised Christian subculture within an otherwise Buddhist area.

Disconnection with oral traditions does not always depend on religion, however. More urbanised or urban-oriented younger Akeu often find the majority culture more appealing than the traditional way of life which might seem backward. When the younger Akeu are interested in traditions their interest is often selective: for example some focus on history, others on rituals. Furthermore, there is an increasing number of those who are indifferent to traditions even among the animist Akeu, and the young people's lack of interest in traditions was a common topic of complaint among the elderly (the same lack of interest has been documented elsewhere; see e.g. Platz 2003: 482). The influence of majority cultures on the young generation is perhaps at its most effective in the education system. Education is seen as an important means to promote national integrity (Jonsson 2004: 677) and majority languages which are used exclusively in education are

regarded as crucial to national identity in both Thailand and Myanmar (Heikkilä-Horn & Miettinen 2000: 183). Most Akeu children in both the Chiang Rai and Kentung areas attend schools. If there are no schools nearby, children are often sent to boarding schools where they may grow up practically isolated from their culture and language communities while even in the case of those children who live in Akeu communities, traditional oral knowledge is no longer transmitted as it was before. Previously 'education' took place exclusively within one's own ethnic group. In the Akeu villages, practical skills such as building houses or performing rituals were learned by doing things collectively: everyone did one part of the job just to learn how to do it, and the most skilled elders taught the younger generations. This method no longer works when the children spend their time in schools and teenagers perhaps in high schools further away. Through formal education children also grow up in a literate culture, unlike their parents and grandparents, and focusing on the written (majority) language, and knowledge attained from books, most probably affects the children's attitude to learning oral knowledge.

Along with cultural influence of various kinds, increased contacts with other groups have a direct consequence on identities in the form of inter-ethnic marriages. The Akeu were still strictly endogamous when the current elderly generation was of marriageable age and the Akeu social context was protected by restrictions on the 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, and their attitude towards relationships to outsiders functioned as a constructing force of collective identity (Tooker 2004: 258, 260). Now the young generation has wider contact with other ethnic groups: they live in the same neighbourhoods, attend the same schools, and consequently the number of inter-ethnic marriages keeps increasing. This directly affects the identities of children born from such unions. In Myanmar identity seems to be attached to the cultural environment in which the children grow up: for example, children of an Akeu and an Akha are considered Akeu if they live in an Akeu village. In Thailand a mixed identity (literally 'a half child') which includes ethnicities of both parents is possible, but if the amount of these 'half children' increases, the importance of one or the other of their backgrounds may weaken and eventually lead to large groups assimilating.

The official and unofficial ethnic categorisations of the majority also 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' categorisations can be internalised as higher level identities, especially if it is possible to deal with the state only as members of those categories (Chit Hlaing 2007: 111). As a result, different levels of ethnicity are deployed in a segmented fashion on different occasions. According to Chit Hlaing (ibid.: 118), using different labels reflects an emphasis on political aspects of relationships between groups rather than an actual change in ethnic identity. In Myanmar, for example, in their ID's entry for nationality the Akeu are generally classified as Akha, simply because the officials have mostly never heard of a group called 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 some the Akeu to distinguish themselves

from the Akha, rather than quietly acknowledging their ID nationality. On the other hand, there have been Akeu groups who admit to being 'Akeu-Akha', and some of my informants in Myanmar did not mind being called Akha, because of the shared ancestry of the two groups. 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 the one hand, they must be kept at some distance in order to maintain the right to define one's own identity, while on the other, the Akha are still their closest ethnic and linguistic relatives, and a balance must be found between proximity and distance.

According to Cornell and Hartmann, 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). My informants emphasised, for example, traditional clothing— characterised by high black turbans worn by women—customs and traditions in general, and ancestors—knowing who they are, as well as the ancestral rituals—as distinguishing markers. They are visible symbols of an 'Akeu way of life' which was generally thought to distinguish the Akeu from all other groups. Akeu identity was often described as behavioural: an Akeu is someone who lives like an Akeu, even though the exact content of the way of life was sometimes ambiguous. However, recent changes have affected the 'Akeu way of life' and the circumstances in which they live in often radical ways, breaking the rather closed community structures and changing many cultural practices. All this necessarily affects Akeu ethnic identity: their understanding of who they are as a group and what kinds of meanings are attached to that identity, and how that identity is inscribed on individuals. Many cultural features which are still considered important to ethnic identity by the elderly are not shared throughout the whole Akeu community, and therefore their significance as markers of ethnic boundaries is in need of readjustment. For example, while traditional dress has been regarded an important symbol of ethnic affiliation—a common way of thinking for many other Southeast Asian ethnic groups as well (see e.g. Evrard 2007: 142; Kunstadter 1979: 125–126)—traditional dress has changed from something to be worn every day to festive wear for most Akeu who live within easy reach of town markets, and ready-made clothing has taken its place. Ethnicity is thus presented through outer appearance only on special occasions, despite the importance given to it previously.

An emphasis on maintaining the importance of previous ethnic markers could mean that those Akeu who are not able or willing to present them should no longer be considered Akeu. According to Barth (1969b: 132), when a few group members fail to meet the criteria of group membership, these individuals usually assume some other available identity, standards of which are easier to meet. However, when such a discrepancy between criteria and reality is widely spread, it is usually the criteria that are modified (ibid.). This is the case with Southeast Asian upland groups in the face of recent changes: previous identities connected to certain behavioural patterns are no longer viable within the social system consisting of a nation state, formal education, market economy and decreasing access to swidden land. One way to adjust to this trend is indeed assimilation to the majority identity, but minority identities are also re-constructed and given new meanings that fit better with new circumstances.

Language and identity

Along with outer appearance and traditions, language has been considered important for Akeu identity and seen to be a part of the 'Akeu way of life'. The importance of language as an ethnic symbol is an idea shared with numerous other ethnic groups (e.g. Lewis & Bibo 2002: 6; Stern 1979: 77; Kunstadter 1979: 140). One of the reasons why the Akeu language is important to identity is its difference from the Akha language, their closest linguistic relatives; thus being different from the Akha also means separateness from all other groups, although the Akha occasionally regard the Akeu language as a dialect of Akha, classifying the Akeu as one of their subgroups. Situations where the existence of a separate Akeu identity is questioned are likely to increase with increased contact across boundaries, such as in multi-ethnic settlements or churches. This can erase ethnic distinctions between members and increase assimilation, but can just as well underline ethnic boundaries and increase the ethnic consciousness of those involved (Stavenhagen 1990: 17). Some of my informants told me that when their identity as Akeu is questioned, differences in language can be consciously used to emphasise the boundary by introducing phrases that the listeners are not able to understand. 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 line with this insight, several of my informants equated ethnic identity with language, asserting that a child from a mixed marriage is thought to be 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: practices related to identity are thereby judged according to context. A 65-year-old female informant (I) from Myanmar expressed the importance of language in the following discussion:

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

One town-dwelling informant in Thailand also thought that the most important way to transmit 'Akeu-ness' to children is to teach them the Akeu language: according to him children can experience what it means to be Akeu through language, even though they live outside the otherwise necessary cultural environment. It was a common notion among my informants that, however modern they become, however they look like everyone else, Akeu children should not forget their language. Thus according to my informants language can be seen to contain identity: it is capable of passing it to the next generation as well as making it visible to outsiders.

In terms of language, my informants think about their identity as something that lies between primordial/natural and behavioural. Language is a behavioural feature, part of 'living like an Akeu', and outsiders can learn it and thus 'become Akeu'. However, especially in Myanmar, the informants also saw it as a primordial feature: once learned, it can never be forgotten and keeps one Akeu for the rest of one's life. Thus primordiality in this case does not lie in the person's origin itself, but in certain features which are internalised to such extent that it is impossible to part with them. One informant went so far as to state that children of mixed Akeu marriages will automatically be Akeu and learn the Akeu language, as if behaviour was indeed inherited through blood. Yet the same people who insisted on the primordiality of their own identity had, quite inconsistently, a very different view of other peoples. Whereas they considered it almost ridiculous to think that an 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 declared knowing Akha who had forgotten the Akha language and become thoroughly Akeu, thereby equating Akha language with Akha identity. Despite their primordial appearance, these views reflect a more behavioural view of ethnicity, claiming the existence of a true way of life connected to ethnic identity. This idea is strengthened by the daily experience of living mostly among one's own people who share the 'way of life' which is supposed to be 'ours'. Cultural similarities with other groups and differences within one's own group—for example between rural and urban Akeu—are neglected even if they are known about, and a cultural construction of 'us' is formed.[3]

Language is less threatened in social changes than, for example, clothing. Transmitting language is, however, not as automatic as some informants in Myanmar declared, even in mono-ethnic families. Akeu children in mixed settlements do not always learn Akeu as their first language. Most of my informants expressed concern about this trend, acknowledging that language acquisition is not as easy as it ideally should be. In Thailand, where these problems are perhaps seen more clearly, informants took a more primordial position to identity than in Myanmar, saying that children of Akeu parents are Akeu regardless of their language skills. The significance given to behaviour as a marker of ethnicity seems to disappear here, in the face of the reality of increasing cultural and social change. Language might be considered 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 to draw an ethnic boundary between parents and their children. Furthermore, classification—or even self-definition—of culturally transformed Akeu as members of some other ethnic group does not change the fact of who they, according to my informants, essentially are. Behavioural categorisation, in this context, at least partly gives way to primordial categorisation.

In general, the most important factor in Akeu ethnicity is the social environment, which directs much if not most cultural behaviour, language use and sense of belonging. Early childhood socialisation is especially important to the formation of identity and practices related to it (Jenkins 1997: 47), and 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. Even the more primordial ideas about Akeu ethnicity are combined with both behaviour and environment. Behaviour is usually adjusted to context because the surrounding

community makes certain practices more relevant than others (Tooker 1992: 802), while losing contact with the native community bears the risk of losing those cultural markers which are related to ethnic identity. Retaining social contact with the community that shares the same language and culture is thus essential to preserving a meaningful ethnic identity. Outside the cultural 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, Akeuness does not seem to decrease as a result of learning the customs and languages of other groups. Temporarily following other people's customs outside one's own community is seen merely as beneficial adaptation to a situation, and multiculturalism and multilingualism are not seen as threats to ethnicity. The same informants who talked about the importance of language to identity often wanted to encourage children to learn as many other languages as possible to have more opportunities in life and many Akeu are nowadays multilingual, a necessary attribute in order to survive as a small group among many bigger ones. Some informants told me 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, though the languages people actually learn depends on the languages spoken in the local context. Nowadays all children 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. Dentan (1976: 77–78) writes about multilingualism in Malaysia, where the Semai ethnic minority group regarded language as one of the most essential elements of the Semai identity. Speaking the Malay language was likewise seen as defining an ethnic Malay, but neither of these facts hindered the Semais from learning fluent Malay in several dialects and using them in appropriate contexts. Changing languages did not indicate an ethnicity switch but merely good manners that eased communication. Dentan (ibid.) argues that in the Southeast Asian multicultural environment, many people have several, situational social identities which, despite using the same cultural features as definitions of ethnic groups, have very little reference to actual ethnicity.

Literacy, power, and shame

Along with the spoken language, written Akeu has also gained value as an ethnic marker. Literacy carries a very specific meaning for the Akeu. They have a legend which recounts that once, a long time ago, the creator god summoned representatives of all peoples in order to give them all 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 such as the Akha (Lewis & Lewis 1984: 222), the Karen (Kunstadter 1979: 154), and the Khmu (Evrard 2007: 152). This type of 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).

Despite its mythical framing, the story of the lost literacy can still be relevant; for example, an illiterate Akeu woman told me this story in answer to my question about what makes Akeu different from other peoples. In highly hierarchical societies ethnic differences are not merely differences of category but of status as well, and ethnic markers express not just the group and its boundaries, but also various meanings given to that group. According to Cornell and Hartmann, ethnic identities have practical consequences in the everyday lives of people, carrying an association with the relative status of the group in the wider social and political context which directly involves power and resources. Along with the ideas of hierarchy, identities also carry meanings which can range from rather simple—we are good, others bad; winners, losers or survivors—to very complex ideas which have great potential for producing shame or pride (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 81). According to Tooker, Southeast Asian lowlanders in general regarded mountain groups as uncivilised and dirty, and even though symbolically including them in local hierarchies, tended to avoid these stigmatised groups in person. Upland groups also preferred to keep out of lowland reach as much as possible, and this defensive distancing formed an essential part of their identity (Tooker 2004: 252, 256). According to Scott (2009: 220), non-literacy is the most prominent of the stigmas attached to highland groups by the lowlanders.

In local ethnic hierarchies the Akeu as a small group are located towards the bottom, lower than the Akha despite the closeness of language and culture. Many of my informants told me that other groups generally consider the Akeu to be poor, uneducated, and thus 'useless', connecting education and literacy—'civilisation' so to speak—to wealth and high status. 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. Even the name Akeu carries negative meanings. The Akeu call themselves Gaolkheel[4] which is also the name of one of their clans, while the name Akeu comes from Chinese officials and 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, did not move because they did not know the way, until finally the Chinese started to call them *keu lo*, which means 'go away'. The other version claims that the Chinese government wanted to give official names to all ethnic groups in the area and summoned their representatives to register their names. The Akeu representative came very late, when the office was already closing, and was told to go away: hence the name.

An example of how ethnic symbols communicate meanings can be found in attitudes to traditional clothing among the Akeu. The meanings they carry can be ambiguous. They are a source of pride worn to pay respect to special situations, to show off, to express fellowship and solidarity with 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, carrying the same symbolic burden of poverty and non-literacy 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 from 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 cleverer than the Akeu, as if the quality of clothing demonstrated the quality of their wearers. The ability of clothing to express ethnic identity is widely acknowledged, and thus it is telling that young people tend to avoid wearing traditional clothes outside the villages: showing them off is limited to contexts where shame attached to identity is not apparent.

The division between powerful literate and weak non-literate peoples has changed as a result of general formal education which, however, almost exclusively spreads the language and literacy of the powerful, although now many minority languages also have their own writing, often developed by foreign Christian missionaries. As identities have been associated with education, growing literacy rates probably have their effect on the self-understanding of previously non-literate groups. Certainly, the meaning of Akeu ethnic identity is also under construction, and literacy in the Akeu language plays a role in this process in two ways: as a carrier of cultural heritage and as a means of empowerment.

Modern traditions

'Tradition' is a concept often loaded with emotions: both negative and rejecting, and positive and preserving. Traditions in general are often seen and openly represented as ancient and unchanging and thus threatened by processes of modernisation. 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). The concepts of tradition, modernity and development have been and still are actively used as political rhetoric in building a nation state, and symbolically important literacy and education are promoted as a part of modernisation. On the other hand, in addition to attempts to modernise local modes of livelihood and culture to bring communities under state control, certain selected local practices have been officially appreciated and adopted as part of the 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).

Some of the most important symbols of Akeu ethnic identity are 'traditions' consisting of a wide range of customs and knowledge. They remain important for identity construction even in contexts where the meanings of traditions have changed. The elders of an Akeu village in Thailand whom I interviewed were all born in China, and they told me that Akeu culture in China has changed since they left the country because the government deliberately directs the 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 quite recently been adopted. Other Akeu traditions have also been shaped by the circumstances in which they live; for example some animist ritual practices have been adopted from Thai Buddhism. The way of life of so-called traditional societies is always a product of specific historical processes: being 'traditional' does not mean being unchanging (Stavenhagen 1990: 17). However, traditionality constructed as an opposite to modernity has these implications, because modernity itself is synonymous with development or improvement, that is, change. In the recent situation of rapid social transformation, change is linked to disconnection with the past, and thus continuity is highly valued among those Akeu elders who declare current 21st century practices to be 'authentic' traditions.

Preserving traditions becomes necessary only when they are not preserved without deliberate intent. Retrospective preservation of traditions often includes selecting and inventing them (Michio 2007: 197), and selection of practices as 'traditions' is not automatic. In Thailand, government officials value the 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), promoting selective traditionalism is politically advantageous, because traditions themselves are compatible with a modern nation state, while ethnic identities connected to comprehensive minority cultures which permeate through all levels of social life are not. A selective process of preserving Akeu traditions is on its way as well, one that emphasises festivals, rituals and certain parts of material culture which are eagerly presented to foreign visitors, for example, while at the same time other aspects of modernisation such as electricity, televisions, motorcycles, and other industrially produced goods seem to be welcomed with little hesitation. Aspects of traditional culture are also used to communicate ethnic differences. A clear example is the Akeu New Year festival in the Kengtung area in Myanmar. The Akeu New Year celebration is village-centred, lasts for several days and involves ancestral sacrifices in households during the daytime and singing, dancing, and drinking at night. Lately the Akeu villages in Kengtung area have started to organise additional, inter-village New Year festivals, as a reaction to being invited to similar festivals arranged by the local Akha villages. This new form of the New Year festival uses an old tradition to communicate ethnic boundaries between the Akeu and the Akha, but at the same time the meaning of the festival has changed as it now gathers people from several villages. Inter-village festivals are capable of strengthening the participants' common identity as Akeu, whereas the traditional way of celebrating emphasised village and family communities.

Traditionalism is also linked to modernity through culture preservation methods. As the oral knowledge and ritual practices are not widely learned, they must be transmitted in an alternative way. Quite paradoxically, literacy, a new and absolutely untraditional invention for the Akeu—together with digital recording—has become the desired means of transmitting oral culture. Written Akeu was developed in the early 2000s for the purpose of Bible translation and writing has already gained a huge significance for many Akeu. Even though literacy could be associated with Christianity, it has even been adopted by animist elders in Thailand as a suitable means to transmit traditions to the younger generation. Some elderly informants in Myanmar who themselves regarded costume as the most important ethnic symbol, in fact stressed that they do not want to attach too much significance to it because young Akeu are not so interested in it. Instead they talked about literacy in the Akeu language as the 'new symbol' of Akeu culture, which shows a remarkable change in their self-understanding. Formerly, their lack of literacy was a part of the meaning of Akeu identity, but it is now accepted in both countries as a legitimate method of preserving their culture, even by older people who might be completely illiterate themselves.

Transcribing oral culture and ritual practices does not actually 'preserve' them, however, because the written format changes their meaning. Writing is, however, 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 the question. Even though the initiatives to record oral culture in written form are generated by the urge to resist change they also express change: fighting the 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 this appearing traditionalism should not be seen only as a means to modernise in a politically appropriate way, but also as a genuine worry over a disappearing way of life.

Destigmatising 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). Stigmatised 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). As already mentioned, Akeu ethnicity has been connected with strong negative connotations of poverty, non-literacy and lack of education, and a low ranking in ethnic hierarchies even compared to some other minority groups. Expressions of traditionality, such as wearing full traditional costume, are easily connected with backwardness and therefore can give rise to negative attitudes. Traditionality itself, regardless of ethnicity, is opposed to modern and urban, and the young generation of the Akeu in particular seem to distance themselves from it.

Apart from selective traditionalism, there are other processes of constructing meanings going on. Ethnic groups can modify the symbolic resources they use to communicate their identities, and new symbols can be deliberately created to provide new representations of the group (Cornell & Hartmann 1998: 228–229). Selecting literature as a new symbol of Akeu ethnic identity communicates the aspiration to change the meaning of that identity altogether. With writing, the Akeu can now perceive their language to be on the same level as other written languages, majority languages included. Emphasising literacy—and also teaching the Akeu to read and write in their own language—can be seen as a means to destigmatise their identity, to present it as educated and capable and hence 'better' than the old identity. The Akeu language still barely has any literature, however, apart from literacy training material directed at children, and portions of the New Testament, which those Christians who are literate are able to read in other languages in any case. Active promoters and teachers of literacy are mostly Christians, and for them teaching non-Christian Akeu to read may have value as a means of missionary work, but the general educational value of Akeu literacy is necessarily low due to the lack of anything to read. On the other hand, literacy is also spread among Christians, whom the Christian teachers will not see as in need of conversion. Thus I see spreading literacy first and foremost as a part of an ethnic identity project in which new meanings are constructed. Among Christians who generally have used Akha Bibles, the ability to read in Akeu is, in addition

to simply understanding the text better, a crucial part of distancing oneself from the Akha category. In fact the whole Bible translation project was initiated by the Akeu Christians themselves.

One of my informants from Myanmar proudly told me that the Akeu children, now that they can go to school, are doing better than the Shan children. 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 one of 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 Akeu identity as it is made something to be proud of and thus more meaningful in everyday life. Identity is negotiated and changed according to its instrumental advantages, which include not just material but also personal and emotional advantages. Emotions, including a sense of meaning and self-worth, are an important factor in ethnic identification (Jenkins 1997: 46). To illustrate this: some Akeu groups have been referring to themselves Akeu-Akha, accepting outside categorisation as an Akha subgroup, probably because they have seen their own group as too small and powerless on 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 slightly more established status, Akha identity provides some social advantage. According to one informant, however, after some of these Akeu-Akha were introduced to 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 identity the relevance it needs to be maintained as a meaningful one.

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 and Western appreciation of the written word, which can be seen in 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 animist informants valued it as well. Apart from Christian values, literacy also reflects the interests of centralised states. According to Scott, staying non-literate or perhaps even abandoning literacy has been a deliberate choice by highland groups who have in general avoided integration to states, because literacy is essentially a part of state structure, enabling bureaucracy, religious orthodoxy, and official history (Scott 2009: 9, 24, 228). 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 and integration to the state, both of which make literacy relevant. Thus literacy brings fundamentally new values to the Akeu world view. Education within the majority culture has already brought the younger Akeu from oral to literate culture, and literacy in their own language furthers the drift of Akeu culture towards those of the West, other local Christian groups, and local Buddhist majorities. Those Akeu who now present non-literacy in negative terms are fairly well integrated to their host nation states, but previously it may have been a positive feature and a source of

pride. This has changed with state integration, which brought with it not just the value of being literate but also the stigma of being non-literate, which the highland groups could ignore as long as they lived relatively far from the reach of states. Thus empowerment through literacy is empowerment from a weakness that used to be either irrelevant or deliberately chosen, by a means that has previously been perceived as unnecessary or even unattractive. According to Scott (ibid.: 229), literacy can bring not just empowerment but disempowerment as well, because it makes stateless people more easily governable. However, the possibility of avoiding states has become practically impossible (ibid.: 9), and it is now more advantageous to adopt practices compatible with the state society. For this reason appreciation of literacy and education will not only affect Akeu understanding of their own identity in a positive way, but also further their integration to the nation state and the globalising world.

Conclusions

The Akeu, like other Southeast Asian highland groups, are dealing with a situation of rapid social change which is affecting their ethnic identity. As their identity has previously been connected to cultural practices which are now becoming difficult to follow, the cultural content and meanings of their identity must be changed to fit the present situation. At the same time the Akeu must also cope with outsiders' classification of them as a subgroup of the Akha, and communicate the separateness of their identities. Akeu identity is constructed and communicated through a process of selective preservation and modification of traditions, and adoption of new cultural features. As a discontinuity with culture and language increases, the essentiality of these two elements to identity is being questioned, and a more primordial view of Akeu identity is emerging alongside the previous notion of behavioural identity.

New cultural forms, most prominently mother-tongue literacy, both reflect and further the change in Akeu culture and identity. Integration to the state has brought the Akeu within the reach of the values of centralised states and the stigmas connected to traditional, oral cultures, which makes literacy worth pursuing, even if non-literacy used to be a part of their identity. Literacy is also seen as a means to preserve a disappearing oral culture. However, writing down oral traditions changes them from lived, remembered and spoken into an established written form, from everyday life to cultural heritage, which will now live alongside new 'modern' forms of culture, whether consciously ethnic practices or those adopted from urban majorities. The newly formed cultural heritage and 'modern' symbols of ethnicity take the place of previous cultural markers of ethnicity.

The new ways of understanding and presenting Akeu identity are fitted to the circumstances wherein they are constructed. The 'traditional' way of life is still more or less followed in more remote areas of Myanmar and Laos, where there is still enough land for a swidden economy and where the influence of the majority cultures is weaker. The opinions of what it means to 'live like an Akeu' in these mountain villages are probably very different from the views of those Akeu whom I interviewed, who live closer to the majorities and under constant influence from urban culture. Yet the new Akeu identity is not a homogenised one; it contains different opinions of what it means to be an

Akeu, different attitudes to culture, traditions and modernisation, and different degrees of proximity to the Akha. Whether there are conflicts between these different ways of understanding Akeu-ness, between the old and the new Akeu identities, requires further study, as do the ways in which Akeu identity construction continues; ethnic identity is never stable but, rather, a constant process.

NOTES

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[1] The article is based on an MA thesis written in for the University of Oulu. Field data, consisting of 10 half-structured interviews and observation material recorded in a field journal, was gathered in Chiang Rai province in northern Thailand and Kengtung area in Shan State, Myanmar, during November and December 2012.

[2] China and India are not included in Southeast Asia, but the highland areas on their borders are culturally a part of the same continuum as the Southeast Asian highlands. James Scott refers to this region as 'Zomia', which, according to him, is a more practical term when researching highland groups precisely because it crosses state borders just as the highland groups do (Scott 2009: 31).

[3] Most of my informants live in mono-ethnic villages and have perhaps not witnessed assimilation from Akeu to other identities, or do not personally know of any reasons why some Akeu children do not learn their parents' language; this may affects their ideas of stability of their own identity.

[4] Pronounced Gokhue or Kokue, depending on transcription; l at the end of a syllable marks a high tone. I use the name Akeu because it is the name mostly used in printed sources.

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