“Floating Between Two Worlds”
Investigating Discourses of Continuity and Change within Akha Educational Practices in Thailand

Magdalena Vogt

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Supervisor: Bengt-Göran Martinsson
Abstract

As the postmodern view on local perspectives and situated knowledge is becoming increasingly more important, educational issues regarding ethnic minority groups and multicultural aspects of learning are rapidly turning into a major focus throughout the international educational world. Distinct minority cultures and languages are rarely given enough attention within formal school settings. Instead national languages and curriculum are mandatory, leaving minority students confused and at a disadvantage. The Akha people of Northern Thailand find themselves sharing these minority struggles and this paper sets out to explore issues of continuity and change within Akha discourses from an educational perspective.

Eight semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals from the Akha minority group in regards to their views on education. The aim was to analyze how their educational discourses were constructed and what perceptions they carried, primarily in relationship to knowledge and learning.

When analyzing the interview material it became evident that the informants’ discourses about education constructed two completely different worlds. Their descriptions of traditional Akha learning in a community setting was distinctly different from how they depicted the mandatory Thai schooling. Conflicts between continuity and change also emerged in the interview material. At the same time as a strong wish for continuity of traditional Akha culture was clearly visible, the interviewees also expressed the necessity to change and adapt to the outside world. This paper, therefore aims to discuss these conflicting discourses in relation to four different aspects of life where education seems to play an essential role for the informants in promoting and preventing changes and continuity: knowledge and learning, social structures, morals and ethics, and cultural identity. It will also be discussed how these discourses construct and impact reality, as well as how perceptions are constructed and reproduced. Furthermore, this paper will also consider how the different issues and conflicts mentioned above could be addressed by a formal Akha school setting.

Key words: mother-tongue-based bilingual minority education, discourse analysis, curriculum theory, critical theory, Thailand, Akha minority group.
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1 Introduction
Minority education is rapidly coming to the forefront of the international educational arena. Often at the mercy of majority populations, ethnic minority groups received little or no support within formal school settings. National languages are used as the primary language of instruction, leaving minority students in confusion and at a disadvantage. However, more and more, international organizations and governments around the world are pushing for the educational rights of these underprivileged groups (UNESCO, 2005).

The geographical area in focus for this thesis paper is Northern Thailand, and more specifically the province of Chiang Rai. Bordering to both Burma and Laos, this mountainous province is situated in the heart of the renowned Golden Triangle and provides a home for various migratory, indigenous minority group.

The people group, whose educational interests will be examined here, is the Akha. As an ethnic minority group in Thailand, the Akha are distinctly different from the majority Thai population. Living in remote, highland areas, many of the Akha still speak their own language and exercise traditional ways of life that separate them from their fellow lowland citizens. The Akha peoples’ social and cultural heritage, as well as their current practices, is often at odds with the dominant, mainstream Thai society.

Even though they are a distinctly different ethnic people group, it is still mandatory for Akha people to attend Thai schools that are often situated far from their mountain communities. Furthermore, the language of instruction in these schools is Thai, which is foreign to many of the Akha speaking students. As this paper will later point out, curriculum contents are also very different from what they have traditionally learnt and labeled education in their villages. In brief, it appears in this study that Thai schooling is a completely new ‘world’ for many of the minority children who get enrolled. However, a vision of a formal Akha school has been proposed and is currently being planned for and will be investigated later in this paper.

Since the educational arena is a complex field where multiple realities are generally represented, it is essential to listen to the different voices in order to create an adequate understanding for pedagogical practices and institutions. Individual perspectives will therefore be of fundamental importance in this paper. Using qualitative interviews as the main method for data collection, this paper will aim to investigate Akha discourses about education, knowledge and learning. Discourse analysis provides an effective method for understanding diverse interests and points of view. It is hoped that the informants’ rich descriptions and discourses will do justice to perceptions that are essential in understanding their individual realities and interests. Furthermore, the paper will also aim to analyze how the conflicts and issues apparent in these discourses could possibly be addressed in a formal Akha school setting.

First and foremost, the research questions will be introduced and thereafter the methodological aspects will be discussed. In order to provide an understanding for the background, information about the Akha people and ethnic minorities in Thailand in general will then be revealed. Furthermore, the education system in Thailand and previous research about curriculum theory and mother-tongue-based bilingual minority education will also be presented before interview results are brought up and analyzed accordingly. Eventually, findings are concluded and further research suggested.
2 Statement of the Research Questions

It can be argued that education systems, formal or informal, play major roles when it comes to both maintaining and transforming cultures and societies (Freire, 2003). With ‘Education for All’, turning into a universal goal, one might start wondering whose education for all is on the agenda. In Thailand most children go to school, but for the minority students, governmental schools are not very likely to promote their culture, history or language. However, a formal Akha school has recently been proposed and it will be investigated what role this school could play in regards to Akha minority education issues. This paper aims to unfold and analyze Akha discourses regarding education, knowledge and learning. Furthermore, it will also be considered how the conflicts that appear in these discourses correspond to, and can be addressed in, the previously mentioned formal Akha school. The texts that this paper sets out to analyze are eight transcribed, semi-structured qualitative interviews that were conducted with individuals from the Akha community. A proposal text in which policies for a future Akha school is outlined was also considered.

Initially, the focus of this paper was to analyze discourses concerning knowledge and learning. When the interview guide was designed, the primary object for investigation was therefore responses displaying discourses about these two concepts. After interviewing representatives from the Akha community, the intention was to compare the interview material to national Thai education policies. However, after completing the interviews, the object for comparison changed, and the relationship between the interview data and a proposed Akha school was chosen as the topic for analysis instead.

When analyzing the interviews, interesting conflicts between continuity and change repeatedly appeared in the informants’ discourses. However, the conflicts did not only concern knowledge and learning, even though this was naturally one major focus of attention. The respondents appeared to describe more overarching conflicts between educational worlds, in regards to various aspects of life and learning. The first research question thus concerns the conflicts between continuity and change that appears within the interview material and how these conflicting perceptions are carried and constructed in the informants’ discourses about different worlds.

My second research question is how the proposed Akha school can possibly address these above mentioned conflicts and issues within a formal, recognized, educational setting.
3 Methodology

3.1 Discourse Analysis

The critique against objectivism in the post-modern age in which we find ourselves has been callous. The positivist philosophy in social science has basically been defeated and very few contemporary education theorists would argue that knowledge is objective – that the point of view does not matter and that knowledge is a ‘view from nowhere’ – or maybe rather ‘a view from anywhere’. The relativist perspective, that knowledge is a view from ‘everywhere’, has also been questioned. Today, most theoreticians would rather forward the idea that knowledge is culturally and socially constructed and thus contextual and situated, i.e. it is a view from a specific ‘somewhere’ (Barad, 1996, 180).

These “somewheres” will be of essential importance in the following paper, where different perspectives on education, knowledge and learning will be presented and analyzed. The traditional curriculum question “what knowledge is of most worth?” can not be answered in an objective manner. It has to be considered in a more multifaceted way, taking conflicting points of view into account (Pinar, William F. et al 1995, 866). The most important addition to the traditional curriculum question that will be discussed in this paper is ‘for whom?’ For whom is the knowledge valuable? Is the knowledge important and relevant for the people who are supposed to gain from it? “The basic subject matter is no longer objective data to be quantified, but meaningful relations to be interpreted”, as Steinar Kvale writes in his book on *InterViews* (1996, 11). Subsequently, this research report does not claim to be based on quantifiable, objective data. It will rather take a qualitative and interpretative approach focused on local contexts, relationships and perspectives.

Social research of today is “complex diverse and pluralistic” (Sarantakos, 2005, 29). However, one thing that most qualitative researchers have in common is their focus on language as an essential avenue to understanding and analyzing the world. Discourse is a basic part of human life, interaction and how knowledge is constructed. We talk, write, ask and answer questions and through this communication we learn and construct ideas relating to the world and ourselves. In the introduction to his chapter on discourse analysis, Potter (2004, 607) writes that “learning to talk is fundamental to learning a culture, and language provides the categories and terms for understanding self and others”.

Discourse analysis is a relative newcomer within social science but is gradually becoming a more important approach within this research field. It has its roots in structuralism, poststructuralism, conversation analysis and hermeneutics and draws mainly on qualitative research paradigms such as constructivism and interpretivism. Its focus is on the *construction* of written and spoken ‘texts’ and its purpose is to analyze how meanings of various social phenomena are constructed, as people use them to make sense of their lives and how “human experience [is] embedded in the discourse or influenced by it” (Sarantakos, 310). Discourse analysis both deals with ‘found text’, i.e. text that is not explicitly produced for research purposes, such as the proposal for the Akha school that will be analyzed in this paper, but can also be used to analyze field data. This paper will mainly use discourse analysis to examine interview transcripts (Lee, M Raymond and Fielding, Nigel G. 2004, 542, Potter, 612).
It goes without saying that discourse analysis deals with discourses, but what is a discourse? Becoming an increasingly popular word in the last twenty years, discourse has also been appointed various different definitions and is sometimes simply referred to as language in use. However, other times it takes on the meanings of highly theorized linguistic concepts. Sotirios Sarantakos defines discourses as “socially constructed frameworks of meanings that act upon people like rules, norms or conventions”. He then goes on to say that, “discourse analysis is a precise application of content analysis in a qualitative context. It deals with communication, text, language, talk and conversation, but also with the ways of seeing, categorizing and reacting to the social world in everyday practices” (2005, 309). The concept of discourse goes beyond simple words and sentences. Discourse analysis explores the action-oriented and constructive aspect of language and how humans present themselves as individuals and also how they construct versions of their world. It also looks at variations in language and its patterns and tries to analyze them. The discourses that are analyzed in this paper can mainly be viewed as socially constructed frameworks of meaning that function as norms and expressions for what people see as guiding principles. They carry perceptions about what is valuable or unacceptable, such as peoples’ concepts of knowledge and learning and how these are constructed in interviews. Since these discourses are also constructed culturally and socially, they also reflect certain features of the socio-cultural context in which they are constructed (Sarantakos, 2005, 309). According to Norman Fairclough, discourses can be defined as “diverse representations of social life” (2005, 4) Furthermore, he also argues that “processes of social change can be seen as starting from change in discourse” (ibid, 6) The discourses investigated in this paper can therefore also be seen as representations of social life, triggering social change.

Linguistic repertoires is another important concept in discourse analysis that refers to the “clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech: they are the building blocks used to make constructions or versions of cognitive processes, actions, policies and other phenomena” (Sarantakos, 309). It is these linguistic constructions that give the interpreter insight into the meaning of the interview texts that are analyzed. In this paper, it has been important to look especially at how these linguistic repertoires vary and correspond, and finding reasons for why variations or regularities occur.

As mentioned above, discourse and discourse analysis is defined in a number of different manners across the social sciences, linguistics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, communication, literary theory and cultural studies. Research methods and analytic tools also vary according to the various disciplines in which discourse analysis is employed. The orientation that will be used in this paper is a more general social science approach, which is not so concerned with abstract textual structures, but rather focuses on practices, organizations and the three fundamental principles that discourse is action-oriented, situated, and constructed as presented by Jonathan Potter (609).

The action-oriented principle is reflected in the three basic discourse-analytic questions.

- What is this discourse doing?
- How is this discourse constructed to make this happen?
- What resources are available to perform this activity? (Potter, 609)
The idea that discourse is situated means that it is often part of a situation and does not occur in a vacuum. Actions often, but do not always, produce responses in forms of other actions. Potter writes that “talk and text are embedded in sequences of interaction” (609) but they are also part of a bigger setting, such as the general surrounding environment.

Thirdly, discourse is constructed. It is constructed of words, and it constructs versions of the world. Discourse analysis thus deals with aspects of discourse both as constructed and as constructive (Potter, 610).

In order to find these action-oriented, situated and constructed discourses about Akha knowledge and learning, qualitative interviews were conducted.

### 3.2 Inter-Viewing

Since interviewing was the main method of data collection it will be further discussed in this section. The thoughts presented in the following paragraphs draw heavily on Steinar Kvale’s book entitled *InterViews* (1996).

The purpose of the qualitative interview, as stated by Kvale (1996, 1) is to “understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold the meaning of people’s experiences [and] to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanation.” Emphasis is put on the interview as a conversation and as a construction site of knowledge where both the interviewer and the respondent are active in the inter change of knowledge. In fact, “knowledge evolves through dialogue” (Kvale, 1996, 125). The method used in an interview is therefore neither subjective, nor objective; it is rather intersubjective (Kvale, 1996, 66). The interviewer needs to be aware of the fact that he or she contributes to the social construction that occurs during the interview.

Kvale compares the qualitative interviewer to a traveler, rather than a miner - exploring a landscape in a postmodern and constructive manner, rather than digging for ‘given’ knowledge waiting to be uncovered. Similarly, “the goal of an interview researcher is to return from the stages of his or her qualitative inquiry with a tale that does justice to the subject’s stories of their lived world and that conveys new and valid knowledge and insights to the listeners and the readers of the tale” (Kvale, 1996, 80).

In order to obtain qualitative descriptions of the interviewee’s conceptions of knowledge and learning, semi-structured interviews were conducted, which is the most common type of interviews in qualitative research (Sarantakos, 2005, 270). As can be seen in the attached interview-guide (Appendix 10.1) suggested questions were developed in accordance with the themes that were wished to be explored. These two themes, knowledge and learning, were often not clear cut and the suggested questions also involved more general educational inquiries. The structure for the actual interviews turned out very differently in each case. Some respondents gave such rich answers that the following questions were of no use. However, with other respondents more follow-up questions were needed. Sometimes respondents got very engaged and talked about learning when asked about knowledge and vice versa. Flexibility was a needed and used aspect of all interviews.

Even though Kvale writes that there are very few methodological standard rules for how qualitative interviews are to be performed, he provides a number of directions that were incorporated into the interview-guide format. First and foremost, there was a
wish to use open-ended questions that would hopefully produce rich, descriptive and relevant answers. Another aim was to formulate simple questions that would be easy to understand. Even if the intention was to create an environment where the interviewer could engage in conversation as much as possible, sometimes it was necessary to interrupt the respondents in order to verify interpretations or to ask follow-up questions.

Kvale (1996, 128) also suggests that interviews should be framed in a way that provides a context for the interview, starting with a briefing in which the purpose of the interview and questions about e.g. confidentiality are addressed. Similarly, the interview can end with a debriefing where the main points of the interview are summed up, and the interviewee is offered an opportunity to ask further questions or make additional comments. Both briefings and debriefings were conducted and proved to be very useful.

As mentioned above, transcribed qualitative interviews belong to the group of main data collection methods that are commonly used in discourse analysis, since they have many advantages. Interviews can easily be designed in a way that keeps the conversation focused on particular topics of interest and may also allow the interviewer to deliberately provoke the respondent to use certain discourses or linguistic repertoires. Furthermore, they give the interviewer the chance to control the data that he or she is collecting to a greater extent than with ‘found’ data, and also to standardize the questions in a manner that makes it easy to compare different interviews. On the other hand, the interviewer has to be careful not to manipulate the answers to prove theories or preconceived thoughts. A disadvantage though, is that the interview situation in itself since it might be somewhat unnatural, and it does not give the interviewer the opportunity to see the respondent “in action”. An alternative way to study typical Akha knowledge and learning methods would have possibly been to observe situations where learning takes place in the villages, and compare this data to observations from more formal learning situations where Akha students for example learn things in Thai schools. However, since both time and language skills were too limited, interviews was chosen as the preferred data collection method. Even if the process of transcribing interview material is very time consuming, it is also a good opportunity to become very familiar with the material.

It should be mentioned however, that two interviews were conducted through email, and were therefore not transcribed. Privately writing down answers to questions in a structured way, and spontaneously answering interview questions are two rather distinct forms of communication. Hence the informants’ language differs slightly between the oral and the written interviews. However, the basic content in the written interviews is very similar to what the transcribed interviews contained.

One of the major weaknesses with this study is that it had to rely on interviews that were not conducted in the interviewer’s and interviewees’ first languages. It is unfortunate that the research conducted had to rely on English, especially since it is striving to avoid ethnocentrism and explore a minority perspective. English was a third language for all the informants, after Akha and Thai. However, it is part of the limitations that have to be acknowledged and worked through. Although most respondents are comparatively proficient in English, our mutual language limitations caused misunderstandings at times. Even if open-ended questions were used, clarification through examples sometimes had to be used resulting in more confined and closed questions, which was unfortunate. However, for the most part both parties were able to
communicate with each other, and when misunderstandings occurred it was relatively easy to sort them out within the framework of the interview.

Concerning the ethical aspects of research work, one of the main guiding principles, the *beneficence* principle, assures that the benefits for the interview subject’s should outweigh the risks of harming them. However, the interviewees did not seem to fear any personal damage, on the other hand, many of them seemed happy to voice their opinions and thoughts. All of the informants were informed about the purpose of the study and they were asked if they wished to participate. They were also told that they were free to leave the interview at any time and that they could refuse to answer questions they did not wish to answer. Furthermore, every interviewee was asked if they wanted to remain anonymous. However, all of them replied that their names could be used within the research work (Kvale, 1996, 111).

Kvale (1996, 229) refers somewhat mockingly to the generalizability, reliability and validation in terms of the holy scientific trinity, worshipped by the devoted believers in science. However, he does not suggest that they should be rejected, but rather reconceptualized, in forms that are appropriate to modern qualitative research interviews. Even though dismissing objective truth, local community versions of truth need to be taken into consideration. This paper aims to explore a certain context and does not aim to produce general knowledge. In order to avoid subjectivity and assure reliability, questions regarding the consistency of research findings have been taken into account. These include how the categorization of the research findings is done as well as questions about how the interview questions are worded in the interview. When it comes to validity, it is important that the research methods are in line with the purpose of the study, as well as with the subject matter. The quality of the interviews and the transcriptions are other major concerns. Furthermore, the data has to be verified and interpreted in a sound way. “Validity is often defined by asking the question: Are you measuring what you think that you are measuring” (Kerlinger 1979, cited by Kvale 1996, 238). As argued above, interviews are often used to collect data for discourse analysis. Interviews were conducted one-on-one, in quiet settings and recorded with a minidisc-player. All the interviews were then transcribed word by word and the simplified transcription symbols suggested by Silverman were used (2005, 376). The interviews were then coded and analyzed as text and the discs were kept and stored.

Analysis during data collection is the most common practice, and the one that is most consistent with the principles of qualitative research. In this case data are collected, coded, conceptually organized, interrelated, analyzed, evaluated and then used as a spring-board for further sampling, data collection and analysis, until saturation is achieved (Sarantakos, 2005, 344).

It is typical for qualitative research to be conducted with a rather interactive and “fluid” relationship between data analysis and collection and this approach was taken throughout the research time. After conducting the interviews, questions were often slightly reformulated or added to the interview guide, even though the main contents remained the same. This approach also enabled the research focus to shift slightly, after the first seven interviews had been completed and analyzed. Instead of comparing the discourses in these interviews to national education policy documents, which was initially intended, a focus on a proposed Akha school was chosen instead. Therefore, the last interview was
conducted with the coordinator for this school and completely different interview questions were used in order to obtain another set of data.
4 Background Information

4.1 The Mountain Peoples of Northern Thailand

The field work for this master’s thesis took place in Northern Thailand, which is the home for many of Thailand’s nine most common, recognized minority groups known as Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Lua, H’Tin and Khamu. Originally, most of these ethnic groups immigrated from southwest and south-central China and moved southwards. A large number settled in Burma and Laos while many of them continued to Northern Thailand. Migration is still taking place today, but to a more limited extent, since economic conditions in surrounding countries are not as good as in Thailand. The population number of the above mentioned nine groups in Thailand was 914,755 according to the last official population census taken in 2002 (Tribal Research Institute) which makes the tribal group approximately 1.4% of Thailand’s total population (CIA World Factbook, 2006).

Half a century ago, most tribal people were self-sufficient farmers, living rather isolated lives within their respective communities. Still today, a large number of the tribes reside in the elevated jungle areas where they can exercise their distinct, traditional cultures, religions and ways of life – speak their own languages and wear their individual folk-costumes. However, due to a number of reasons, modernization and economic development being two of the major ones, these communities have become increasingly more connected with the bigger cities. Electricity, roads, improved transportation possibilities, TVs, cell-phones and other artifacts and influences from the lowlands have brought about new life patterns and endangered their self-sustainability.

Although the socio-economic situation of the minority people has improved in recent years, they are still a very vulnerable and disadvantaged group within Thai-society. This is largely due to the limited infrastructure, problems surrounding poverty and the fact that many ethnic minority people still lack Thai citizenship and therefore can not access basic social services, such as health care and education (FAO, 2002). According to a rather recent report on the situation in Thailand for mountain people groups, the lack of means to cope with the rapid changes in their society make the highland communities experience major problems in areas such as agriculture, employment and socio-cultural values (FAO, 2002, v). Most minority communities are highly dependent on agriculture for village employment and their income is very low. Loss of cultural identity due to the stress of modernization and migration to urban areas, legal problems, HIV and drug addiction are other examples of issues that the communities struggle with (FAO, 2002, vii). In view of this, governmental as well as non-governmental organizations have emphasized the great need for adequate education in these areas in order to “reinforce their income-generating capacities and socio-economic potential, which will be the foundation sustainable rural development” (FAO, 2002, ix).
According to the Thai National Education Act (1999), it is mandatory for all children in Thailand to go to school. But for large parts of the minority population living in the mountains, the schools are not geographically accessible. In spite of the government’s promises to implement formal schools in the mountains, there are very few well functioning public schools close to the villages. Instead, thousands of ethnic minority children are forced to leave their villages and live in boarding schools far away from their homes and families. Only in Chiang Rai province an approximate number of 300 boarding schools are run by NGOs (personal communication). The attempts to introduce ‘non-formal’ and adult-education in the communities have largely failed too. ‘Alphabetization’ in Thai is sometimes provided, but mostly for children and the teachers often lack adequate training. Furthermore, children who can only speak their ethnic minority language have major problems understanding the Thai teaching in public schools. A pilot-project has recently been issued in order to offer one Pwo-Karen minority community in the province of Chiang Mai formal education in their first language. This mother-tongue-based bilingual minority school is the first of its kind in Thailand and it was a joint effort supported by the Thai Ministry of Education, UNESCO and SIL-international (Person, 2006, 4/18). The school followed the principles for mother-tongue-based bilingual minority education, as outlined by UNESCO, teaching the mother tongue first and then bridging into Thai. The minister of Education, Chaturon Chaisang, declared the project a “miracle” and Thai educators view the school as a model for other bilingual programs that will hopefully follow among the minority groups (Person, 2006, 5). A number of non-formal and informal education projects have also been geared towards the minority communities. However, no other formal education is yet provided to these people groups in their own languages, but there are plans to start a formal elementary school for the Akha people, which is one of the major focal points for this paper. Later on, the general importance of bilingual education for ethnic minority groups will also be further discussed (MOE, 2004, Hani-Akha.org, 2007).

4.2 The Akha

This master’s thesis will focus on the Akha people and their educational situation. However, many of the minority groups suffer from the same educational issues, and the research results might therefore apply to other groups as well. Over several centuries, the Akha have migrated southwards from their original home in Yunnan province in China, where a large majority of the Akha-people called Hani are still living today, but considerable groups of Akha have also settled in Laos, Burma and Vietnam. The estimated population number of Akha and the closely related group of Hani living in these countries range between 1.5 and 2.3 million people. Thailand had an estimated number of 65,826 Akha people in 2002 according to the last official census (Tribal Research Institute), which made them the fourth largest minority group in the country. Very little research about these ethnic groups has been carried out since then, but it is likely to believe that the group of Akha in Thailand has increased since 2002, and that there are now more than 70,000 or up to 100,000 Akha living within the Thai borders (personal communication). In comparison with many other people groups, the Akha arrived relatively late in Thailand and the first known Akha-village was not established until 1903. A major part of the newcomers settled in Chiang-Rai province where
approximately 90% of the Akha in Thailand are still living. This is also one major reason why this research was carried out mainly in Chiang Rai province. (Highashide, 2004, 95; Lewis, 1984, 204; Akha Asia, 2005, Tribal Research Institute, 2002).

The Akha have very distinct traditional clothing-styles. In Thailand there are three basic varieties of Akha people: U-lo Akha, Loimi Akha and Phami Akha. The major differences between these groups can be seen in the women’s headdress.

Different groups have worked among the Akha in Northern Thailand for decades, in early times it was the Christian missionaries, and later on linguists and anthropologists came to study the Akha culture and language. Recently, an increasing number of development workers and NGOs have arrived. Dr. Paul Lewis is an American linguist and anthropologist who have worked with the Akha people since the early 1950s. Using roman characters, he was also the first one to introduce the Akha with a written script. According to Lewis, a dominant theme among the Akha is continuity (1984, 10). This can be seen for example in their emphasis on the importance of ancestors. In similarity with several other Tibeto-Burman groups, the Akha learn how to recite all the names of their male ancestors chronologically, back to the “beginning of human beings”, approximately 60-65 generations. In order to make sure that they are not closely related, young couples will list their ancestors until they reach a common antecedent. If they can not recite more than six patrilineal generations, they will not be allowed to marry (Lewis, 1984, 204).

Geusau (1983, 249), another well-known Akha researcher, also describes the importance of continuity within Akha culture. “Akhazan”, or ‘the Akha way’, is the term that the Akha people use to describe their religion, culture, lifestyle, customs, ceremonies and ways of life. “Traditions as handed down by the fathers” is another way of translating Akhazan, or Akhazang as it is sometimes spelled. Zang is the Akha word for customary law which includes Akha life at all levels, everything from regulations and customs to traditional knowledge, flora and fauna, hunting, cutting down forests, growing rice to more relational and spiritual matters such as marriage ceremonies and how to take care of the dead (Geusau, 1992, 146). However, the line between what is sacred and profane, ritual or non-ritual is hard to draw. Spirits and dead ancestors play an important role in the traditional Akha way of life. At the same time as the dead predecessors are highly respected and considered a great source of life, wisdom and knowledge on how to deal with everyday life, they are also feared and many rituals and offerings are performed in
order to protect their communities and families from the anger and revenge of restless ancestors. Every Akha person is an essential part in an important string of life, “each is a link in a great chain, a part of the Akha continuum, which must be maintained at all costs” (Lewis, 1984, 222).

Geusau (1983) gives an example of a quote from a traditional Akha oral text, *pma-lce*, where he argues that the static characteristics of traditional Akha cosmology are apparent. This quote also clearly shows the themes of continuity and change.

> Although the woman changes genealogy (when marrying), the older woman’s habit of wearing the white skirt does not change. Although the man changes place ten times, his hair-tail does not change. Although a person changes, *Akhazan* does not change. Although a buffalo is moved ten times, his leash does not change. Although the house is moved to ten different places, the ancestor-basket does not change. Although cultivation is moved to ten different sites, the design of the rice mother’s little house is the same. Although a woodcat changes place ten times, the rice steamer does not.

Most Akha researchers have put great emphasis on continuity within Akha culture. However, at the same time as continuity is certainly visible in the above quote, there are also a great amount of changes taking place and it will be argued in this paper that one also has to call major attention to the importance of changes when discussing Akha culture today. The conflict that one can observe between continuity and change in the quote from *pma-lce*, is certainly still very obvious in Akha people’s discourses about their own culture today, as this paper will point out. Today though, the changes play a much stronger role. In spite of the clear opposition portrayed between change and continuity in the above quote, the major emphasis appears to be on the latter - even though changes may occur, stability seems to remain! When looking at today’s Akha communities the picture is different. The forces of continuity do not seem as strong as they used to be. Instead, rapid changes are very evident while the traditional ways of life are clearly breaking down, due to for example the increasing influence of modernization and complex issues of integration and assimilation mentioned above. Whereas the Akha villages used to be autonomous and rather isolated, today they find themselves under the control of the Thai government and heavily influenced by new outside political-economic and modern forces. It appears difficult to preserve the traditional ways of Akha life, and *Akhazan* is disintegrating.

Even though the Akha history has not been documented in written form until very recently, the Akha people have a rich oral cultural heritage of rituals, legends, migration history and proverbs that has been passed on orally through generations. Considering all the hardships that the Akha have encountered, and how they have spread over vast geographical areas, it is fascinating how they have managed to maintain their distinct culture and unity. However, their current political and economic situation for the Akha in Thailand poses serious threats against their cultural integrity and continuity. Their oral tradition is facing a serious crisis and it is feared that the rich oral texts will be lost. No official research has been done, but it is estimated that less than 5% of the Akha are literate in their own language. Very few Akha people are writing down the oral texts (personal communication with Dr Paul Lewis, Interview no 8). Instead, foreign researchers such as Inga-Lill Hansson (Sweden), Paul Lewis (US) and Alting von Geusau (Netherlands), have worked on recordings. Furthermore, many oral texts are ritual and closely associated with religious ceremonies that are no longer carried out by the
Christian communities. The Akha legend has it, though, that they once had a written script given to them by God, written down on buffalo hide. However, when the Akha people got hungry they ate the hide and lost the script, or rather ‘carried it in their stomachs’.

Traditionally, the elders in a community are considered the more knowledgeable and the younger people are supposed to learn from them. This pattern is clearly changing in today’s communities, though. Since the younger generations oftentimes do not live in the villages, but are schooled elsewhere and do not partake in the traditional socialization process, there is little opportunity for the older generations to pass the oral knowledge on to the next generation. Hence, it can be argued that the increased formal Thai education contribute heavily to the loss of the Akha oral linguistic systems, as over the children’s more general socialization process (Hashide, 2004, Hansson, 1997, Interview no 3 and 8, Hilltribe.org 2007, Hani-Akha.org, 2007).

The question is how the Akha can possibly address these complex educational issues. All of the respondents interviewed in this study thought that education could function as a helpful tool in this struggle, but most of them agreed that the education system available today would not be sufficient. On the contrary, Thai education seems to contribute to the breakdown of Akha culture. Minority children often have to leave their families and villages in order to go to Thai schools, where they will not be taught about their own language or culture.

Deborah E. Tooker (2004, 243) is another well recognized anthropologist who has worked extensively with the Akha people and she argues that the Akha identity has changed from a “comprehensive, holistic form of collective identity” to a more “compartmentalized identity”, since she first started her field studies in 1982. One of the four major reasons that she describes as the cause for this change is the “assimilation to the majority Thai identity, most powerfully through formal schooling” (271). However, she admits that she does not have enough data to discuss the effects of Thai schooling on Akha culture to any fuller extent. As far as I am informed, no such studies have been conducted. Hopefully, this paper will provide useful insight about the Akha people from a new educational angle.
4.3 The Education System in Thailand

Traditionally, education in Thailand has primarily been provided in temple and family settings. It was not until 1932, when Thailand became a monarchy, that formal education in a more modern sense was introduced to the Thai people (OEC, 2004, 8). However, it is not the intention of this paper to give a full educational history, only the policymaking of more recent years will be introduced. Since the economic crisis of 1997, the need to improve Thailand’s economy has become an essential issue for the government. This focus has also put demands on the education system to focus increasingly on technology and science with the purpose of produce students with internationally compatible skills. In order to reform the education system in Thailand, the National Education Act was promulgated in 1999, and it has served as the guiding legislation on education since then. Already in the opening sentences of this document it becomes evident that the reasons for the reform are mainly economic. It begins:

The economic, political, cultural and social crisis has caused all concerned to realize the expediency for the reform of Thai education. The urgently needed reform will undoubtedly redeem the country from the downward spiral, so that Thailand will arise in the immediate future as a nation of wealth, stability and dignity, capable of competing with others in this age of globalization. (1999, 1)

International competitiveness in the global community and financial security are clearly pointed out as the major reasons for the education reform. In the introduction to the most recent report on the education system in Thailand, published by the Office of the Education Council and the Ministry of Education, it is also said that the economic crisis and the “era of globalization have prompted an urgent need for Thailand to strengthen its human resource base” through education (OEC, 2004, 4) It is believed that a learning society leads to a strong “knowledge-based economy” (ibid, 18). By using terms like building “human capital” when talking about for example early childhood development, the emphasis on the economic benefits of education is further highlighted (ibid, 133). It is important to keep this strong focus on economic advancement in mind when analyzing the education system in Thailand, since the wish to “progress”, the way it is defined here – as something economically lucrative – is likely to clash with other educational aims to maintain and preserve traditional knowledge that might seem unprofitable and backwards in comparison. This naturally concerns the educational situation for minority groups with distinct indigenous knowledge.

However, alongside the heavy economic demands placed on the education system to help improve the economic situation in Thailand, especially through subject matters like mathematics and science, there is also a stress on preserving local wisdom and indigenous knowledge. In the National Education Act, the importance of “local wisdom” is mentioned several times, although there seems to be more of a focus on Thai wisdom, than on preserving minority knowledge. In chapter 1 where the objectives and principles for the education system are outlined, the importance of “pride in Thai identity […] national culture […] local wisdom, Thai wisdom” etc is introduced (section 7). In chapter 4 the significance of “curricular substance relating to the needs of the community and […] local wisdom” is brought up. Furthermore, it is hoped that “the communities will be capable of providing education and training; searching for knowledge, data and information; and be able to benefit from local wisdom […] in keeping with their requirements and needs” (section 29) and also that human resources will be mobilized “in
the community to participate in educational provision by contributing their experience, knowledge, expertise and local wisdom for educational benefits” (chapter 7, section 57). These more postmodern influences on policy building have opened up the possibility for communities in Thailand to start developing their own local curriculums. This opportunity is now also open for minority people groups. Chinese schools, the Pwo-Karen school and the proposed Akha school that will be discussed further on in the paper are all examples of such minority schools.

Ever since the Cabinet resolution of 6 July 1976, the government’s policy towards the minority groups in Thailand has been to integrate them into Thai society. Some scholars have rather mockingly referred to this development process in terms of “domestication”, rather than “development”. John McKinnon (1983, x), even uses the label of colonialism to describe the relationship between the highlanders and the “socio-economic and political power granted by access to technological superiority, and reinforced by self-serving ideologies”. He further compares the ethnic minority peoples’ situation historically in Thailand to the Jews in Europe, American Indians and Palestinians in Israel. However, more recently the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have started to support local initiatives to preserve traditional knowledge and culture and promote local curricula. Declarations like “Education for All” and other documents advocating the rights of minority people and other disadvantaged groups have had a significant effect on more recent Thai policy making (FAO, 2002, vii; Chiengthong, 2003, 156-163).

The “World Conference on Education for All” where the basic educational needs in the world were discussed and addressed was in fact hosted by the government of Thailand. Among other things, it was recognized that “traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value and validity in their own right” (UNESCO, 1990, 2), and in the framework for action it is states that: “The first step consists in identifying, preferably through an active participatory process involving groups and the community, the traditional learning systems which exist in the society” (ibid, 4). This declaration has had enormous impact on educators and educational policies all over the world. It is clearly visible how these educational philosophies have been echoed in more recent Thai policies, where the importance of integrating local wisdom and community participation in the curriculum is advocated.

Also in accordance with Education for All, the National Education Act in Thailand states that “all individuals shall have equal rights and opportunities to receive basic education provided by the State for the duration of at least 12 years. Such education, provided on a nationwide basis, shall be of quality and free of charge” (1999, chapter 2, Section 10). The first nine years of schooling in Thailand, including primary and lower secondary school, are compulsory. Upper Secondary school, grade 10 through 12, is optional, but should be provided free of charge, according to the National Education Act. Eight core subjects are taught in primary and secondary school. These subjects include Thai language, mathematics, science, social studies, religion and culture, health and physical education, art, career and technology, and foreign languages. Extra-curricular activities might be added if the school wishes. After upper secondary school students can proceed with undergraduate and graduate studies. However, it is generally known that education is very seldom provided free of charge. The public schools charge a
number of fees, even if they are not supposed to (OEC, 2004, 70, personal communication).

Education in Thailand is divided into three categories, formal, non-formal and informal education. Formal education includes basic education (pre-primary, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education) and higher education (at universities or colleges). Non-formal and informal education is mainly geared towards those who cannot participate in formal education. These two categories include for example literacy programs, youth development organizations, early childhood development centers, vocational training, community learning centers with libraries, museums etc, informational education programs provided by mass media, radio, television, newspapers or through the internet (OEC, 2004, 20-30).

Similar to the Akha peoples’ struggle with conflicts between the continuity of their own culture and the changes that the outside world demands, so do the educational policy makers in Thailand seem to face conflicts between inward and outward stresses. Whereas the more pragmatic demand for economic competitiveness stems from the economic crisis in 1997 and the challenges of globalization, the humanistic call for continuity has to do with local needs and preservation of cultural identity, but also with the pressure from international organizations such as UNESCO who advocate the rights of minorities and disadvantaged groups. The reform act from 1999 seems to give education two roles to play at the same time. On the one hand education is supposed to promote technological progress and economic success, but at the same time it should act in the interest of local communities and the need to preserve and protect traditional knowledge and culture. In order to balance these somewhat paradoxical demands, the government uses decentralization to forward the responsibility to create this balance in the local curriculums that each community is supposed to develop. Concepts like “decentralization”, “learning societies” and “life-long learning” appear repeatedly throughout the national education documents that are available in English. However, curriculum decentralization does not only seem to be the trend in Thailand, but is rather an international movement and catchy phrase-word. Except for arguments of cost-effectiveness, grassroots’ participation and the sharing and redistribution of power, one of the major reasons behind the theory is to make the curriculum and the ways in which it is delivered more congruent with local cultures. The question whether these global and national perspectives can possibly coexist with local needs in a balanced local curriculum will be further discussed in relation to the proposed Akha school.
5 Further Review of Literature and Research

5.1 Understanding Curriculum

In concluding the extensive book *Understanding Curriculum*, William F Pinar (et al 1995, 847) writes that curriculum is a “highly symbolic concept”. It is not limited to the texts produced by the Ministry of Education or what the school board proposes. It carries more than an institutional meaning (although it also incorporates this meaning). Curriculum, according to Pinar et al (1995, 847), “is what the older generation chooses to tell the younger generation … it becomes the site where the generations struggle to define themselves and the world. Curriculum is an extraordinarily complicated conversation”. As such, curriculum is hardly something static, instead it is constantly changing, reflecting the “temporality, historicity and provisionality of knowledge” (ibid, 859). Curricula changes when we respond to it in different ways, when we study its contents and reflect on it. Curriculum is a dynamic process in itself. “Curriculum is not only particles moving through space, but it is the space in which the particles move” (ibid, 859). It is this space, this “somewhere”, where the generations struggle to define themselves and the knowledge that they wish to pass on, that this paper will aim to explore. This “lived space” where students’ and teacher’s lived experience is in focus is the only place where curriculum can be constructed according to Pinar (1995, 860). In formulating a more formalized curriculum for the Akha people it is therefore critical to take their “lived space”, their “somewhere” as well as their perspective on knowledge into account. If the formal curriculum fails to express their struggle to define themselves and their world, it will not be a true Akha curriculum. It could possibly be a curriculum for, but not of, the Akha-community. Even though the proposed Akha school has to meet certain Thai-standards, the teachers must also be aware that their prime “pedagogical obligation is not to deliver someone else’s mail … but with his or her students, to compose [their] own correspondence”, in keeping with Pinar’s view on curriculum construction (1995, 860).

The field of curriculum theory is indeed a complicated one. It is “filled with a thousand voices … a vital and energetic field” (ibid, 863). Pinar further defines curriculum theory as “the interdisciplinary study of educational experience” (2004, 2). This however, does not mean that every interdisciplinary study focusing on educational experiences are automatically curriculum theory, nor is every example of curriculum study interdisciplinary. Similar to the research field of pedagogical practices, one has to consider the research field holistically when defining it. Clearly discernable are influences from social science, as well as from the humanities and the arts. According to Pinar, “curriculum theory aspires to understand the overall educational significance of the curriculum, focusing especially upon interdisciplinary themes – such as gender or multiculturalism or the ecological crisis – as well as the relations among the curriculum, the individual society and history” (ibid, 21). Considering that knowledge is hardly regarded as something objective or universal, one can probably not expect educational science to be harmonized. If knowledge can be described as views from different “somewheres”, it is natural that many voices need to coexist within a field concerned with learning and teaching.
However, the arena used to look different. During the 20th century the curriculum field, and social science in general, underwent a fundamental paradigm shift where it moved from a “paradigmatic unity” to “particularism – the various contemporary discourses” (ibid, 849). At the same time the interest also shifted from a primary focus on the development of curriculum, to the understanding of curriculum. Maybe this is a rather natural result when knowledge has ceased to be objective. This does not mean that curriculum theorists do not express a wish to change matters. On the other hand many of them do, but the time when curriculum theorists were simply carrying out the priorities of others without questioning has certainly passed.

The research between the 1940s and the 1970s was carried out in a scientific and positivistic manner. “The researcher was like a social engineer who produced knowledge to be transformed into detailed rules for the schools. The teacher played the role of the technician who was expected to follow the state directions” (Johansson, 2003, 577-78). Today however, researchers have established closer relations with the teachers. Drawing on Foucault’s theory about knowledge and power walking hand in hand, an interesting power shift can also be seen as a result of this change. Individuals (e.g. teachers) are closer to the knowledge production and hence preside over the system, rather than the other way around (Johansson, 2003, 588). Today’s curriculum theorists acknowledge the many complexities that the field presents to a greater extent than their predecessors did and they are more reluctant to prescribe the “right techniques” and specific curriculum contents. “In contrast to the traditional field’s rather exclusive focus on devising schemes for improving the procedures of curriculum development”, much contemporary scholarship labors to understand how curriculum is developed, from the domain of policy, to planning and implementation, to teaching, and to evaluation and supervision” (ibid, 790-91). The contemporary issues of curriculum and teaching are no longer limited to technical “how to” questions but will rather ask “why”. This approach shifts the foci to understanding the dilemmas that was earlier regarded as problems to primarily be solved. Thus, this paper will also aim to understand educational issues possible solutions where these problems are addressed, rather than proposing possible answers.

The traditional idea that curriculum could be designed and evaluated in a politically neutral manner is long rejected, and it is therefore very natural that in order to understand a curriculum one has to take the political context into account. “Schools mirror the surrounding society and many people want to be sure that they continue to do so” (Goodland, John I, 1984, cited by Pinar et al, 1995, 243). Very few people would argue that curriculum is politically unbiased and key concepts such as reproduction, hegemony, resistance and ideology etc. have been commonplace in the political analysis of curriculum since the 1970s. In the 1980s issues of gender, race and class were discussed to a greater extent and further influenced the policy making. Critical pedagogy and literacy are other notions that have been essential in the efforts to understand curriculum politically (Pinar et al, 1995, 313). One critical political theorist that will be examined a little closer in the next section is Paulo Freire.
5.2 Curriculum for – or of – the People?

In the spring of 2007 it will have been ten years since the death of the critical theorist Paulo Freire. His pedagogical ideas, however, have outlived the author and are still very influential throughout the educational world.

Freire’s philosophy has been compared to a “secular liberation theology”, advocating liberation of the oppressed, rather than for the oppressed (Macedo, Donaldo 2003, 25). This “bottom-up” approach is certainly not based on the ethics of the market, but takes its departure in the oppressed communities of illiterates in Northern Brazil where Freire strived to develop literacy learning methods. The “literacy” that Freire promoted was not limited to the technical reading of “words”, but rather an ability to “read the world”: to “decode” ones submersion, create a new understanding of self-hood, as well as critically analyze and define the surrounding social context and transform it if necessary. (Freire, Paulo and Macedo, Donaldo, 1987).

Freire’s pedagogy is a rather complex perspective which has its roots in Marxism and phenomenology, as well as in liberation theology. It regards education as inseparable from other parts of society, such as political, economic and social dimensions. Illiteracy in the sense above, an inability to “read the world”, undermines justice and democracy and the education for liberation that Freire promotes affects the entire society. Its impact is not only limited to the Brazilian democratization process, and in helping illiterate peasants in developing countries how to read and understand their world, Freire’s ideas have also been internationally recognized, as well as criticized. The political establishment in Brazil both jailed and exiled Freire, since he was seen as too big of a threat. Within the academic arena, political conservatives have questioned Freire’s radical wish for drastic social change and his close ties to Marxism while moderates have considered his research and practices too heavily influenced by his strict values and ideology. Generally, political scholarship has been accused for lack of empirical evidence and it has been argued that models are assumed, rather than explained. (Pinar et al, 1995, 826-7/267).

Even though there might not be any need for a Marxist political revolution among the Akha people, Freire’s broader concept of literacy, as well as his emphasis on active grassroots participation is helpful when analyzing minority education and investigating how they can read and construct their own world. This paper will therefore expand more on some of the theories Freire forwards.

In his well-known book Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire criticizes the common “banking pedagogy”, and presents the reader with a different alternative labeled “problem-posing pedagogy”. Within the banking concept of education, where the students’ empty minds are to be “filled” with valuable information, “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider know nothing” (Freire, 2003, 72). The teachers “deposit” information that the students receive and store and “the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world and transformers of that world” (ibid, 73). For oppressive regimes, who want to avoid students developing any type of critical consciousness, the banking model is an excellent way of controlling their population so that current power structures are maintained. According to the banking model, the teacher’s role is simply to “regulate the way that the world ‘enters into’ the students” (ibid, 76). However, “true
humanists … cannot use banking educational methods in the pursuit of liberation, for they would only negate that very pursuit” (ibid, 78). Freire further argues that “those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings … They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in relations with the world” (ibid, 79).

Paulo Freire calls this critical consciousness that the students are hoped to develop “conscientizacao”. The world is not a fixed reality, but instead a “problem to be worked on and solved” and in this process, humans are meant to be active subjects, as opposed to objects that are acted upon or merely “filled up” with knowledge (ibid, 35). In fact, reality does not exist without human perception and one of the central aims with problem-posing education is to help people develop this ability to perceive the world, and the way that they exist in this world with a critical approach. If people lack this critical awareness that enables them to respond to their reality they are likely to be submerged into what Freire labels a “culture of silence”. The education system was one of the major tools used to maintain the social, political and economic domination in the Brazilian society and detain people in this culture of silence. (Shaull, Richard 2003, 30-33). Voice is a key concept in critical pedagogy that is used both to describe the when subjects actively meditate on and construct reality (Pinar et al, 1995, 267).

Even though it is not clearly evident that Thai educators have used the “banking model” mainly in order to maintain a certain power structure and hinder students from developing conscientizacao, a problem-posed education model would be more in line with what Freire would suggest for an empowering Akha-school of the people, rather than for the people. “Whereas banking-education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of a reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (Freire, 2003, 81).

One important aspect of problem-posing education is meaningful dialogue. “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself being taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (ibid, 80). Everyone within this learning environment is responsible for the process and function both as “teacher” and “student”. An important aim is to educate critical thinkers and “only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (ibid, 92). By naming the world, it is also possible to understand and transform it. However, this dialogue requires love, humility and faith in humankind, otherwise it risks turning into another tool of domination. Education without true dialogue runs the risk of “banking”. “It is necessary to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to initiate (or will abandon) dialogue, reflection and communication” (ibid, 66). Freire further argues that “the oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for redemption” and that “attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them like objects which must be saved” (ibid, 54/65). Great emphasize is bestowed on the importance of active participation within the learning environment. Top-down methods will automatically manipulate and confine the learners, turning them into objects - but stirring reflection among the oppressed will lead to action.
Freire’s theories will be further discussed in relationship to the proposed Akha school where it is clear how individuals within the Akha community have turned from objects acted upon to become active subjects engaged in reconstructing their own educational reality.

5.3 Mother-tongue-based Bilingual Minority Education

Since language is one of the major means of human communication, it plays a very important role in education. It goes without saying that it is essential for learners to understand the language of instruction in order to benefit from the teaching. However, this is not always the case. In fact, the Akha people is only one out of several thousand minority language groups in the world who lack access to formal education in their own language. In order to increase literacy rates, reach the goals and objectives of Education for All, improve the general quality of life for minority people and at the same time work to preserve traditional culture, UNESCO (2005) has made it an important priority to support mother-tongue-based bilingual minority education programs for minority people. In most South-East Asian countries, this movement towards an increased use of local languages in schooling is evident. However, it is also important for minority groups to acquire proficiency in the language of wider communication, such as for example knowing Thai which is the national language in Thailand. Knowing languages of wider communication will provide the linguistic minorities with greater opportunities to interact with society, find work, conduct business and continue with further education. In their text First language First, UNESCO argues that education programs should use the learners’ mother tongue when teaching beginning literacy and curriculum content and then introduce the wider language of communication step by step as a second language of instruction (UNESCO, 2005). As of today, this is not the case for any Akha students studying in Thai formal schools.

The conclusion that the learners’ first language should be used first draws on an extensive amount of research. Blachford (1997, 159 cited by UNESCO, 2005, 87) suggests that the reason why so many Chinese minority students perform poorly in school is that their mother tongue is not used. Furthermore, he argues that the lack of skills in their first language hampers their overall intellectual development abilities. Another comparative study from developing countries that is quoted also states that “the child’s first language (i.e. his or her mother tongue) should be used i

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demonstrated that a strong foundation in the first language and a carefully planned process of bridging to the new language is an important factor in minority language learners\' success in education” (UNESCO, 2005, 72). These theories are also confirmed by other sources. “The Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis” outlined by Cummins (1991, cited in Baker 1996, 151) likewise suggests that the competence in one\'s second language is dependent on the proficiency already developed in the first language. “The more developed the first language, the easier it will be to develop the second language” (ibid, 151).

Bridging from the first to the second language should be a gradual process. Oftentimes this progression is illustrated with a bridge with different steps. If certain sections in the bridge are missing, learners are likely to “fall off” the bridge, or drop out of the program and possibly ending or severely hindering the learning process. The first step includes comprehension and building oral fluency in the first language. In the second stage literacy is taught in the first language while the second language is introduced orally. After that the students can bridge into literacy in the second language and can then eventually continue their education using both languages (UNESCO, 2005, 37, 76).

Another important aspect of language acquisition is the culture and also the community where the language has developed and where it belongs. There is no language without a community. And to a certain extent, cultures are also partly formed by their languages. Oral texts, songs, proverbs, folktales and local wisdom are all transmitted through language. The community is therefore an important source when it comes to teaching material and curriculum development and should be engaged in the local education programs as much as possible. Involvement also helps to create ownership. UNESCO also encourages efforts to find and train teachers who are willing to work in their own home villages, which also contributes to local participation (2005, 72).

The estimated literacy rate among the minority people in northern Thailand is 16.39% (UNESCO, 2005, 52). Thailand\’s northern region ranks lowest in the whole country in terms of literacy, which is largely due to the high number of minorities, populating the area (MOE, 2004, 2). Until recently, Thai schools prohibited the use of any other languages of instruction than Thai. The “sink-or-swim” submersion approach heavily contributes to the fact that most minority children lose at least two years in school before they can properly follow what is going on in class (UNESCO, 2005, 102). The students\’ timidity and reluctance to speak and participate in classroom activities was sometimes mistaken for mental issues. “[W]ell-intentioned officials have classified groups of ethnic minority children as ‘slow learners’ and placed them in programs for mentally challenged. The problem does not lie with mental facilities, but with language abilities” (Person, 2006, 20). The same UNESCO case study also revealed that “many children who grow up in non-Thai speaking environments lag behind their Thai compatriots in educational achievement” (ibid, 5). However, more recently the international movement focused on minority peoples’ right to education, and an increased use of their local languages in schools has also affected Thailand. As mentioned in the earlier section on Thailand\’s education system, the use of “local wisdom” and community participation in schools was encouraged in the National Education Act of 1999. Local curriculum activities can make up as much as 30% of curriculum taught in schools. The constitution of 1997 also promotes traditional communities’ rights: “Persons so assembling as to be a traditional community shall have the right to conserve and restore
their customs, local knowledge, arts or good culture of their community and of the nation” (Government Gazette, 1997, section 46). The Chinese communities living in Thailand have clearly taken advantage of this opportunity and have started their own Chinese schools. But even though provisions for multilingual communities are included in the Constitution and the National Education Act, there is still no specific strategy or policy for multilingual education (UNESCO, 2005, 64). As mentioned before, another bilingual pilot project for the pwo-karen minority group in Thailand has been launched in Omkoi district and it has been observed that the students in this school are “much more engaged in their schoolwork than minority students in nearby, national-language only programs. Greater engagement translates to increased learning, better attendance” as well as a more comfortable learning environment (Person, 2006, 20).

Schools are vital institutional support facilities when it comes to preserving and maintaining languages and culture in general, although schooling alone cannot protect languages. Family and community support are also key. Thus, schools and communities need to work together. By its nature, community-based minority language education as described in this section is a bottom-up rather than top-down undertaking. Taking its departure in the learners’ needs, language and culture, its contents are naturally learner-centered. In fact learner-centered education requires that the learners are taught in their first language, a language the students speak, understand and are comfortable using within a formal school setting.
6 Conflicting Discourses Between Continuity and Change

As mentioned in the background descriptions concerning Akha culture, there appears to be a strong emphasis on continuity within traditional Akha way of life (Geusau, 1983, 249). The ancestral worship, the “Akha way”, the memorizing of their genealogy and the transmission of oral texts from one generation to the next are all important customs that reflect the importance of continuity. The Akha see themselves as links in this cultural continuum where they look to their ancestors for wisdom and strength to live their lives and raise up the next generation. Proverbs such as “listen to the customs with both ears and obey. Look at the embroidery patterns with both eyes and imitate”, point to the significance of continuity in Akha culture (Lewis, 1984, 238).

However, external pressures on Akha communities and internal desires to integrate and interact with the outside world have brought about rapid changes during the last few decades. Conflicts between the wish for a continued maintenance of traditional Akha life and the desire to adapt and adjust to the modern world became very apparent in the respondents’ discourses about education. Since my initial interview focus was to investigate a few Akha informants’ discourses about traditional Akha knowledge and learning methods, many of my questions were centered on what the respondents view as important knowledge and how learning usually occurs within Akha contexts. Furthermore, respondents’ educational experiences in formal Thai schools were also brought up. The conflicts between these two arenas appeared to be considerable. Not only are these two “worlds”, as Ahmee (interviewee number 1) and Charan (informant number 6) described the Akha and Thai learning environments (1:2, 6:5), different in a geographical sense, but they are also presented as distinctly diverse systems. Whereas the traditional community is seen as the environment where continuum is taught and learned, the Thai schools generally bring new and foreign influences that do not contribute to the traditional continuity.

I have chosen to analyze four different topics where these conflicts between continuity and change are clearly visible in the respondents’ discourses. Since my initial focus was to explore discourses concerning knowledge and learning, this is the most extensive section where the desire to pass traditional knowledge to coming generations appeared to clash with the strong desire to incorporate new knowledge and education systems which are not compatible with older patterns. Secondly, the respondents’ ideas regarding social structures will be discussed. Modern influences have contributed to the breakdown of various traditional social structures that for example enable the Akha people to pass on traditional knowledge. At the same time as some of these changes are welcomed, others are seen as threats against their communities. Thirdly, the respondents’ views on morals will be investigated. At the same time as there appears to be a strong wish to reinforce high, distinct morals, sometimes they are building these values on new and conflicting foundations. Lastly, the Akha identity will be discussed, where similar conflicts between continuity and change arise. When analyzing the interview material the concept “world” appeared, and since the interviewees seemed to structure their educational discourses around conflicts between these different worlds, this is also how the result will be presented.
In the chapter following these four themes, the paper will aim to investigate how a formal Akha school could address and possibly bridge these ‘World Wars’ and conflicts between continuity and change.

6.1 Presenting the Respondents

When choosing informants, Akha people who could speak English were sought out. On the one hand, it is a rather diverse group of Akha representatives, living in different countries and specialized in many different areas. However, all of the informants are relatively well educated and used to interacting with English speaking foreigners. All of them willingly acknowledge their ethnic background as belonging to the Akha group, since otherwise it would have been much more difficult to find them. Naturally, responses would probably have been rather different if an uneducated group had been interviewed, or if the respondents would have wished to hide their Akha identity. In fact, none of the interviewees wished to be anonymous. However, in keeping in line with the accepted ethical code of conduct for researchers within Sweden, all the informants, except for Dr Paul Lewis, have been given fictitious names (Vetenskapsrådet, 2004, 12). In total, 9 interviews were conducted and transcribed, seven one-on-one and two via email. These Akha individuals can not be seen as a representative selection of Akha people in general, but it is rather likely that they share many views with other educated Akha in Thailand.

Respondent number 1 is a 30 year old woman who will be called Ahmee. She is currently working on her bachelor degree in child development. Ahmee is married and has four children. Apart from studying and raising her children she has been involved with a number of development projects for the Akha, mostly as a volunteer.

Interviewee number 2, here given the fictitious name Ahasa, is 44 years old and has a bachelor degree in agriculture as well as a teacher’s degree. Ahasa is currently employed as the project administrator for a large Akha foundation, working mainly with Akha youth development and he also runs a boarding school. However, Ahasa has also started and is currently involved with many other rural development projects for the Akha. Ahasa was interviewed twice, the first time he was interviewed according to the interview guide that was also used for all the other respondents. The second time, he was interviewed about the proposed Akha school that he wants to start (this is referred to as interview no 9 in the text). Ahasa is the one who has taken the initiative to write the proposal and develop plans for the future school.

Informant number 3 is 36 years old and will be referred to as Aju. He also has a bachelor’s degree in agriculture and is presently doing his master of law. Alongside his studies, he is also working with leadership capacity among minority people in Northern Thailand for an NGO. Before that he worked with community development among the Akha for ten years. He is married and has 2 children.

The fourth respondent, here called Dang, has lived in Germany for almost two years, since he is married to a German woman. He is doing his PhD in agriculture at a German University and is investigating agricultural issues in the Mekong/Golden Triangle region. Just like the last two informants, Dang has worked for many years with the Akha people in Thailand and been employed mostly by various NGOs and he has also...
taught development classes at Chiang Mai University. He has two children. This interview was conducted through email.

The fifth interviewee, Hana, is the youngest one, she is only 27 years old and she is working on her PhD of law at an American university. Contrary to the other respondents, Hana has not worked with community development or for any NGO. She is also not married. Hana was also interviewed via email.

Respondent number 6 is in his late forties, and is about to finish his PhD this year. In this report, he has been given the name Charan. Charan is writing on the topic of leadership within Akha culture and is obtaining his degree through an American university as well. Besides his studies, he runs another significant Akha foundation in Chiang Rai province which includes a theological seminary as well as a boarding school for children. Charan was born on the border between Burma and China, but came to Thailand when he was very young.

The last informant is a 32 year old lawyer, here called Bon, who has worked for several years to improve legal rights for the Akha people. He is the only informant who went to live in a Buddhist temple, instead of a regular boarding school, in order to receive free education.

All the respondents have gone to boarding schools, or temples, and had to leave their families and the Akha villages where they grew up since there were no schools nearby. Their parents had no formal education. However, none of the respondents are currently living in a traditional Akha village, even though many of them work with Akha people in smaller communities.

One more informant was interviewed. This is referred to as interview no 8 in the text. This interview was mainly conducted in order to collect background information, and was never intended to be analyzed together with the other interviews as the informant is not Akha. The respondent was Dr. Paul Lewis, a well-known American anthropologist who has researched and worked with the Akha since the 1950s, and who has also created a written script for the Akha people. Currently he is working with the Hani in Southern China, but he happened to be in the area and agreed to an interview.

6.2 Two Educational Worlds of Knowledge and Learning

In order to discover and analyze the respondents’ discourses about knowledge and learning, the interview questions mainly focused on what the interviewees see as important knowledge and how they describe learning. When analyzing the interview material, two distinctly different learning environments, or ‘worlds’, became visible in the respondents’ discourses. The differences largely had ethnic boundaries. Whereas the knowledge that the respondents describe as traditional Akha knowledge was normally learnt within the village, the “other idea” as Aju describes Thai knowledge (3:5), had to be learnt in a school setting, away from the village. All the respondents were forced to leave their home communities and families to live at boarding schools or hostels (interviewees number 1,2,3,4,5,6) or at a Buddhist temple (respondent number 7) in the cities in order to enroll in Thai education. The two ‘worlds’ are therefore different in both physical and more symbolic ways.

Most of the informants express that they felt displaced when they initially started Thai school. Charan describes the Thai school as “a strange place. Strange, everything strange” (6:3). By repeating the word strange he further emphasizes how alien the new
environment was. Everything was foreign to him. Hana simply says that she was “not familiar with the school setting” (5:1) and Ahmee agrees that the school was a “new world”. Like most of the informants Ahmee had never left the village before and it was hard for her to leave her home and family. She also claims that she lost her purpose. In the village, where the learning is not institutionalized and isolated from everyday chores, she learnt by partaking in daily activities. “I feel like I was very purpose there (in the village), and once I go to the big hostel then I mean nothing there, you know. Just little kid there. Not quite acceptable” (1:4). In the village “I am always feel like I am very purpose. Purpose in my family, you know. I can support my mom, take care of my younger”(1:2). Apart from the fact that Ahmee missed her family, she expresses how her inability to contribute in practical ways made her feel meaningless and displaced.

Consequently, one major difference that can be seen between the school setting and the village setting is the ways in which learning takes place within these contexts. The Akha way is not “like formal class, like sit down” (1:16). Instead, “life and learn, is going together. When you go to work in the field, right. When you working, when you weeding, they also exchange the knowledge” (3:14). Learning is not separated from daily life, where you have to “sit down” in order to learn, like you have to do in a formal school. Furthermore, learning normally takes place within the family where the older people teach the younger. “For example, boys learn to hunt when they follow their father, relatives, friends, etc to the jungle to hunt” (5:8). Ahasa talks about, “learning the thing from mom and dad. Or from learning by doing. See something, the people doing, he also go close to him” (2:12). Learning occurs when you are close, following and participating in activities. Similarly, Charan says that the “father teach the sons, mother teach the daughter, and is informal, very non-formal way of teaching and mentoring. And you know the learner also follow day in and day out in normal life activity, regular daily experience” (6:6). Whereas the educational environment in Thai schools is portrayed as rather foreign with strict teaching and learning hours and ways, learning experiences within the Akha community is generally closely connected to life, work and family and familiar concepts that create the impression of a more intimate and personal environment.

Furthermore, the traditional Akha knowledge that they describe can generally be put to immediate and practical use. Various handicrafts (1:10, 2:6, 5:8), knowledge about herbal medicine (1:10), Akha songs and dances (2:5, 5:8, 6:6), proverbs and folktales (3:5, 6:6) knowledge about Akha culture, tradition and history (2:3, 2:5, 4:2, 5:5, 8:8), games (5:8) are aspects that the interviewees mention as typical Akha knowledge. Moreover, the ability to recite ones ancestors, the genealogy, is repeatedly mentioned as one of the most important things that every Akha person should know, in order to avoid that close relatives marry and give birth to ‘imperfect’ children. The direct usefulness of knowledge is valued very highly. Ahasa explains that “all of the thing that they doing, is for daily life that they need. They have to have, like a broom, like a basket. See that the thing, the daily life that you, you should know this … You have to make your own basket. Like when you use clothes, you just put into the basket that you made” (2:6).

However, although a sense of alienation can be distinguished in the respondents’ discourses about Thai schools, and despite the fact the school system seems to be distinctly different from what they otherwise describe as “life”, there is a strong belief in the importance of Thai education. Charan explains that his grandparents did not want him and his siblings to go to school, but that his father took them downtown to the school
anyway, against the grandfather’s wish. Actually, the decision to take the children to school caused a great split within the family and made the grandparents leave the family and move out from their mutual home. They thought that schooling was completely “irrelevant to the Akha” (6:6) and that it would not contribute to their world in a constructive way. When the interviewee came home to the village for school breaks, he was harassed and ridiculed. In spite of the opposition that the family faced in the village, his parents continued to support his schooling. “You know that something good ahead of you. You don’t know exactly what that is, but…” (6:3). Other respondents describe a similar ambiguous belief in education. Ahmee says: “My mom kinda support me. ‘You go’. You know, because they say that education that will help you, will kinda like, is good for you. Good for your future” (1:3). So even though parents have to send their kids far away, and both parents and children had to endure hardships of various kinds, there is a certainty among the respondents that education is good and necessary, especially for the future.

In fact, the schools that the informants describe are almost seen as some kind of charity. Dang argues that “education is very important and I believe that underprivileged people can be sustainable better off via their education” (4:1). Similarly, Bon says that people with higher degrees need to help “poor Akha people, to have more study, more education”. Using words like poor, underprivileged, and in need of help, indicates that there are supposedly others who are rich and privileged in comparison, and who ought to offer this assistance to their less fortunate fellow human beings. The Akha people themselves are presented as rather helpless. Ahmee labels her elementary school as a “welfare school” where “they give a chance for the hill tribe people” (1:1). Again, the term welfare bears a resemblance to an outside charitable benefactor who offers this chance, an opportunity for someone less fortunate. Ironically, Ahmee says that she did not realize that she was needy and impoverished until she came to school.

I’m know that later on I am very poor and my, my family we in the bad situation as my dad he is a drug addict. But once I live in the village, I mean my neighbor, they are also the same so I don’t realize like “Hey, you are in problem, or you are in need to help”. I don’t really feel that way. So I don’t know is lucky, or…? (laughing). I don’t know that. But when I went to school, I learned that this is thing this… what is thing is… illegal, or thing to do is not healthy for your health, is not good for your family, or thing like that. I mean, once you have learned you realize that “Aaaah, ok this is…aahhh, my family, they in need.” (1:2)

As mentioned earlier, discourses are situated, and constructed. And according to Ahmee, this notion, that her family was poor, in the bad situation, in problem and in need, did not occur in a vacuum, or even in the family situation itself. It was constructed in a formal school context, where she was informed about the ill state of her family members and her people group. However, if discourses are not only constructed but also constructive, they will highly impact the way that she subsequently views and constructs her reality and in this particular context Ahmee chooses to eventually distance herself from the rest of her family. She starts out using the pronouns like my and we, clearly indicating that she is part of the family. But in the last sentence she changes from using “my family”, to point out that “they” are in need.

Actually, it seems as if the informants generally distance themselves from the Akha people as a group. Only on a few occasions in all of the interviews do the interviewees use “we” when describing their people, instead “they” is used almost
without exception when talking about the Akha. Perhaps the fact that all of them are highly educated plays a role, even though they argue that they are proud to be Akha. Being Akha is commonly associated with living traditional village lives, and very few educated Akha return to live in their villages although they work to enhance the quality of life for Akha people. None of interviewees live in Akha villages and that might possibly be one of the reasons why they describe the Akha in third person. Perhaps the education that Akha people have received in Thailand the last few decades has rapidly contributed to the loss of traditional cultural identity among them. They have gradually become members of a new world, and therefore distanced themselves from their former fellow Akha associates. Charan explains that:

…since there is no school nearby the villages, they have to kinda migrate to the city and all that. Now the… the bad side of it is that they will have no relationship with the people in the village, their culture, their language, you know. The kinda division of that happening. How to make them feel proud of who they are is challenge. (6:4)

Besides describing the division that occurs between educated and non-educated Akha people, the above example also depicts how Charan describes the Akha in third person. Hana present the same issues in the following way:

The integration by way of providing education to the tribal children is one of the most important efforts the Thai government has made in bringing all of the tribal populations into the presence of the Thai government. The effort proved to be highly successful such that the majority of the tribal children are now effectively integrated into the Thai mainstream. Ironically, however, because of the success, many of the tribal children including the Akha children are becoming more and more ignorant of their own culture and traditions (5:9).

Again, the Akha people are referred to in third person. Furthermore, the quote clearly identifies the conflict between Thai education and the continuation of Akha culture. The integration “success” causes the breakdown of traditional Akha way of life, according to the quote and it displays the effect of cultural assimilation techniques. Furthermore, Hana also says that “the ignorance, I believe, began in my generation when many of the Akha children were sent away from the Akha community to attend public school in the city. I spend 95% of my days in the city away from home since my childhood” (5:6). However, not only do the Akha have to leave their villages in order to get educated. Since the education normally prepares students for a career in the city, it is almost impossible to find employment relevant in the village after completing higher degrees. Ahasa illustrates these issues:

If they come back, what they gonna do? In the village, how they gonna live? They don’t have any land… even they have land, they are farmer, they can not do farmer. For example, if she graduate from accounting, from the collage, if she go back home. No bank in the village! Where is she gonna work? She can not go work. She has to go work in town! In the town that they have a bank, or any store, any shop. But even the hill tribe people they have a shop but they pretty small, they can not pay her. So, how she can come back? No, no way! (2:11)

This convincing passage, full of rhetorical questions and a repeated usage of negations, clearly shows the impossibility for educated people to find appropriate work in the communities. Hence, educated Akha people seldom return to live in the villages.
One aspect that most informants single out as the most important piece of Akha knowledge is the language. Hana argues that “[e]very Akha people should at least know how to speak, read and write basic Akha language” (5:5). Similarly, Charan declares that “most critical for me is speaking, reading and writing Akha. Is the heart of it” (6:8). Furthermore, Bon claims that the language “show who you are” (7:8) and he also thinks that the Akha language is the one aspect of Akha culture that will still exist in twenty years, mainly because of the script and the fact that they have the New Testament translated to Akha (7:7). Ahasa says that “if we lose the language. Then it mean, we lose everything” (2:3). Aju emphasizes that he and his wife teach their children Akha before they teach them Thai, “the language, on the heart, should be maintain”, he argues (3:7). Charan also supports the importance of teaching the native language before other languages. “I think most of Akha, be easier to learn Akha, than Thai, you know, cause mother tongue come more natural”, he suggests (6:8). Using the word *heart* on two occasions, and claiming that the language shows *who you are* highlights how important the language is for their cultural identity and further existence as a people group. The maintenance of Akha language and cultural preservation are clearly intertwined.

In spite of this esteem for their native tongue, most of the respondents talk about how they are losing their language. Again, Thai schooling is depicted as one of the major reasons causing the deterioration. Ahasa talks about how he lost his Akha language proficiency when he went to school:

I was, came down from the village you know, from seven years old and I have chance to go back home only twice a year. This mean, one year only have 12 month. 10 month I stay in town, for study. Oh, I lost my own language and culture and everything, so when I go back home I, the school break, sometime, many word I can not speak my own language. And I am also feel sad. Sometime I am try to speak Thai with my mom and dad, and so, mom and dad also not speak Thai. So that the thing, that I am see. We lose a lot of culture, we, we be like Thai 100 percent. Because the environment is Thai. (2:2)

This quote shows how the education environment plays an important role. If the environment is Thai, it is difficult to maintain a different minority identity. He is afraid to turn completely Thai – 100%. But it is not until he returns to his native environment again that he realizes his loss. Most of the respondents have similar experiences, and Bon further emphasizes how school children are unable to communicate in Akha with their parents after their Thai schooling:

Respondent: I mean Akha people, now they can not speak Akha very well. When we have a conversation with them, they speak Akha three words, Thai three words in the sentence. So why… when the children go to school in the town, in the school break, they go back to the village. Sometime, they can not… how do you say? Comm..

Interviewer: Communicate?

Respondent: Yeah, communicate with their parents. Because the children speak Thai, and Akha, in one sentence. That’s problem for now I think (7:5).

However, Bon also agrees with Thai teachers who punish students who speak Akha in class. Whereas most interviewees clearly object to the discrimination that Akha people experience in school, Bon chooses to legitimize the Thai teachers’ behavior:
For me, I understand… I understand the teacher. That ok, you come to study for Thai school. In the class you have to speak only Thai language, because they want to learn and to train about to speak Thai. Because if the teacher allow the student to speak Akha language all the time, also in the class. I understand why the teacher do that because I think they want student to use Thai language very well. I think that. In the class I agree that, but after school, I don’t agree that (7:5).

The idea that the Akha language should not be used in the school environment, and only after class, can be seen as somewhat surprising and contradictory, considering that Bon also emphasizes the importance of maintaining the language. As quoted before, he claims that the language shows “who you are” (7:8). But in this context, the importance of speaking Thai outweighs the significance of the Akha language. Bon chooses to side with the Thai majority perspective. This will be further illustrated under the cultural identity heading, showing how many Akha people completely shy away from their cultural heritage in Thai school settings.

If the lack of proficiency in the native tongue might be one of the issues that Akha people face after going through Thai education, their lack of sufficient Thai language skills is usually one of the major problems when they start school. As mentioned in the previous chapter regarding the importance of bilingual minority education, the inability to speak the language of instruction is a common dilemma that often causes children from minority groups to lag behind in school. Ahmee says that she only knew a few simple greetings in Thai before she started school and that “my first year to six grade, I was terrible in the class” (1:3). This inability to speak the common language further instills the sense of being a foreigner in a new world. Similarly, Ahasa describes how “that time is quite difficult for me because I not speak any Thai, not know about Thai anything. So I speak only Akha” (2:1). But after the first few years it got better. “The first years is harder, yeah. And after that, get used to. A little bit understand what they saying, even the teacher saying”, Ahasa continues (2:2). Aju argues that hill tribe children are at a disadvantage in comparison with the Thai children: “the hill tribe student have to hard, hard study, to (...) over Thai people. We don’t study only the knowledge from the curriculum. But we also have to learn how to speak Thai, right” (3:4). Hana says that she “could not speak Thai at all” (5:4) and the same goes for Charan. Even though the importance of knowing the Akha language is something that all the respondents can agree on, the need to learn Thai is certainly important as well.

The fact that so many of the respondents emphasized the importance of reading and writing Akha is also interesting, since literacy has only been part of Akha culture since it was introduced by missionaries in the middle of the 20th century. Not one of the interviewees explicitly mentions the oral culture other than in roundabout ways, for example when talking about memorizing the genealogy, even though the oral tradition historically plays a much large role in Akha culture than any written texts do. When I asked Dr Paul Lewis who developed and introduced the script to the Akha people if he thought that the written language can be considered part of their culture, he said that it could not, except for in Christian communities where people now use it to read their Bibles and hymn books. Very few Akha people use the written language to write down their own history, fiction or poetry (8:5). The fact that none of the informants mention oral culture explicitly, and that there is such a strong focus on the script, indicates that the oral tradition has already been lost to a certain extent.
The oral transmission of texts is also closely connected to their belief system. Not only do the oral texts contain religious stories, the actual act of memorizing seems to have religious connotations. According to Aju, it takes some spiritual assistance to memorize. He says that “they need help from spirit. The magic word is very long. On the night time, they can sing, all night, they can remember because the spirit help them. It is the same as God help them. So they can remember by automatic” (3:15). In fact, Bon argues that traditional knowledge and learning in general has strong connection to their spiritual beliefs. “Akha traditional, is Akha animist. Because the sacrifice, learning, is going together” (3:14). However, the Christian influence in many Akha communities has contributed heavily to the loss of traditional knowledge, according to Aju. He uses the knowledge about herbal medicine to illustrate what he thinks:

Respondent: Magic medicine, you know…this one also is involved with evil… Christian, they say that, evil.

Interviewer: Evil.

Respondent: Mmm. Evil. So right now nobody want to study, and no body want to learn about the medicine. Actually, when the Akha people heal the ill people, right? They have many things, some they use only magic, but some they use magic and herb. So the third, they use only the herb. But right now, nobody interesting to learn about this. This one also Akha wisdom.

Interviewer: Why do you think… why do you think that people are not interested in learning?

Respondent: Because mostly of the Akha in Thailand, like a 90%, they are Christian. So is (…) with Christian faith, right. They use, so, so now when we get sick, we need doctor. We go to see the doctor, we pay lots of money ((laughing)). Because we don’t use herb. Ok, we accept that some look like an animist way, but herb, I think we should, we should…learn about herb.

Interviewer: Is there some Akha knowledge that you think should not be passed on?

Respondent: Ahm. Yes. Because in… how can we do? If we want to be Christian? Right? If you do something wrong, the leader, or the committee of the church will expel you. Out, right… out from the member.

Interviewer: What are… what are those things?

Respondent: Because you do, you do wrong. You use the power from Satan. They say that. Magic, is use Satan power, right? And so they don’t select which one is Satan power and which one is a pure knowledge. Ahm

However, others prefer the switch that has occurred, and welcome western beliefs. Ahasa provides another example to show that the modern scientific approach in his mind is superior to the old belief system.

Something that they have to understand, I mean, the Akha people. See sometime they believe, for example. If they go out to the field, they drink the water. And they get back and they got diarrhea or stomach pain they always thinking: Oh, bad spirit. Happen. So because of that they have to go see the witch doctor. Witch doctor say: Oh, you have to kill one chicken. Or maybe one pig. Sacrifice, and go apologize to that water, to that stream. See, this thing. This thing, they believe something wrong. Actually they don’t think that, during that time, maybe beginning of rainy season, water have a lot of bacteria because of the leave and you know everything is spoil and come to the river and they drink
straight. Because of that is cause bacteria or diarrhea. See, they never thinking like this. So this kind of thing should be explained. But most of the villages now understand because of they have, some kind of education, many NGO or government they go up and explain about health program, so now they more understand. (laughing) So this thing, we should not preserve. But by that time we have to explain. Not only preserve, but have to be explain. And also another thing, not only this… (2:4-5)

Even though the use of herbal medicine and the sacrifice of chickens to appease spirits are not quite comparable as curing methods, these examples still show the conflicts between the traditional belief systems, modern science and Christian beliefs. Ahasa chooses an example that might appear rather primitive and meaningless, such as killing chickens or pigs, to show that the scientific approach is advantageous, however, the herbal medicine might seem rather profitable in comparison to an expensive visit at the doctor’s in Aju’s example. Both examples illustrate how old Akha knowledge with distinct spiritual connections is slowly being replaced by other ideas, from sources outside the Akha community.

As has been shown in this section, various conflicts arise between the two arenas of Thai schooling in combination with western influences and the traditional passing on of Akha community knowledge. The demands from outside of the community are not always compatible with the wish for continuity within Akha culture. Aju expresses the conflict as follows:

I think, because if we don’t learn our story, or who, who we are. Right? And who our ancestor… how do they grow up… and how do they… teach our people. If they don’t learn, they will forget all. If they just study only Thai. Right? Some day, they don’t proud to be Akha people. If they study only Thai curriculum (…) And, it is need to learn both. Even Thai and Akha. I am not agree that to study only Akha. Because in Thai, the social it should be… harmonic. Harmonic. Because if we learn only our story, we can not touch other idea, right? We can not adjust our body with the situation. Or we can not catch up other, other thought. We need some way to (…) you. And they will take advantage of you always, if you don’t have idea. (3:5)

This is one of the few occasions where the Akha people are referred to in first person. Indeed, Aju identifies with the problem. On the one hand, he wants his people to know who they are and to be proud. At the same time, they will be taken advantage of if they can not “touch other idea”, or “catch up”, as if they were behind and very vulnerable. How can harmony be created? Charan labels the same phenomenon “floating between two worlds”. Again, another image of vulnerability. Not swimming with direction, but floating, being at the will of others. Here Charan is describing young Akha people that have not “reached any area of expertise”, but have only gone through basic Thai schooling, which is the case for the majority of the younger Akha generations. Hence “they are not able to maintain and live like their fathers. Farming, etc, like they used to be. So they are floating. Kinda floating between two worlds. They can not be Thai, they can not be Akha. And so, there are a lot of confusion” (6:5).

The loss of traditional skills, knowledge and ways of learning and the wish for continuity can clearly be seen in the respondents’ discourses. Yet, at the same time, there is also a strong emphasis on the importance on knowledge that will enable the Akha people to interact with the outside world. However, these two educational ambitions, or worlds, do not yet exist in harmony. Conflicts between the continuity that has been maintained by generations and the demands arising from national and international interests are evident.
6.3 Social Structures Within the Different Worlds

The traditional ways of learning and teaching that were discussed in the previous section are closely related to long-established social structures within Akha communities. As mentioned, fathers used to teach the sons and daughters learnt from their mothers. Communities and families used to work collectively and help one another. However, today this is slowly changing. According to a report from the FAO, the “traditional way of life does not always fit in with the present socio/economic and political conditions of the rest of the country, and a sense of individualism is growing among youngsters. Communication between the Thai-speaking younger generations and the ‘illiterate’ older generations is thus sometimes hindered” (2002, 4). These issues will be further analyzed from an educational perspective in the following paragraphs.

Part of the emphasis on continuity within Akha culture can be seen through the respect they pay older people. The older people are, the more respected they are. Several of the interviewees mention respect for older people as the most important moral value in Akha culture. “The old they have a lot of experience. They… because that mean they can manage the life, since they were very young, until old. That is very valuable” (3:9). One of the first questions that Akha people usually ask is how old you are and depending on whether you are older or younger than them, they will treat you differently. The titles that are used for older or younger people are for example different, and older people will always be served first when Akha people have meals together (2:7, 7:11). Older people are seen as wiser and should be respected and listened to accordingly. However, the following quote shows how this practice has slowly begun to change since they started sending their children to Thai schools:

And the order in their old system, and that’s value, that’s respect… But when the community open up, you know. The modernization, the globalization is coming, they have to open. And you can say that education is a good thing, but other things also come in. You know the materialistic is coming in, drugs become a problem, prostitution, AIDS, so they lost that strength of the community. They kinda almost dissolving that, and kinda reverse the role. You know it’s good that kids have the education, but you know they are not trained or taught how to maintain in the way that their fathers used to be. And so that’s a reversed role, the children become the leader, and the older generation become follower. And that’s a lot of confusion and a lot of stress (6:5)

Charan partly blames the Thai education system for the “reversed roles”. Before, “in their old system” or world, the older people taught and led the younger generation, but today’s younger generation is more educated in a modern sense. The communities have to “open” and new things enter into their world. This makes the older people more dependent on their children for representing the villages on a national governmental level, and for helping them to get by in Thai society. The “strength of the community”, the former collective unity is “dissolving”, according to the respondent. Instead, “the modernization, the globalization is coming”. He uses big words for powerful forces, and the Akha people seem helplessly obliged to comply according to the respondent, “they have to open”. He lists a number of bad things that have entered the community, “drugs”, “prostitution” and “AIDS”, to further demonstrate the devastation. Aju articulates a similar view: “right now, the problem is, older people, they have to adjust to the new traditional. Because the development is open and come to our village. Very, very fast, right? And the young
people also go to school outside of community. They bring new culture come” (3:10). Again, a strong outside force is described as conquering the community. Bad things are coming in, since the children leave the communities to go to school. Aju continues to give an example that several of the respondents mention. Previously, the headman of the village used to be an older, well respected male, but since the government requires the village leader to be able to communicate with the government, they now need to be fluent in Thai.

They need the (…) headman. Abawtaw committee. And all the words, have to contact with officer, in district. So they need the knowledge, new knowledge, how to record, how to write, calculate. So it’s confused with the old people, older people, they can not write, right? They can not write. But they know that how should manage their life. But the new generation, they can not see the value of older. Because they say that “ah, they don’t know about how to write” (3:10)

Whereas this “new knowledge” introduces foreign technical concepts like “recording”, “writing”, and “calculating”, using “words”, the old knowledge is described as how to manage ones life. Again, two rather different outlooks on knowledge are presented, and since neither of the parties values the other perspective, a widening gap between the two generations occurs. The continuity that was earlier carried on from the older people to the younger is challenged and divided.

Another aspect that Charan mentioned briefly in the quote above is the loss of community strength, and how the villages are becoming increasingly more materialistic. Akha culture is traditionally collective, and working together as a community is an important part of village life. Ahasa expands on this topic in the following way when he was asked about if the communities are changing:

When I was young, many people of the villagers they helping each other. They don’t know how to use the money in the village yet. So if you need something, like if you need pumpkin, [mm] you know I am also give the pumpkin to you if you help. But I don’t have paper, [mm] paper. You know, you help, we exchange that. And also, we also exchange the labor. Today I go and help you [right]. You not ask for money. And I am not ask for money. And tomorrow, or next day, or next two week, you come and help me. You see like that. And if when building the house, the whole village go and helping for building until finished [right] Planting rice, harvesting rice… everything they do together. Without no money, we do not have any money, to use. But now, you see totally changed. [right] Like black and white. If you go ask to help something, they gonna ask you to, how much you gonna give me, the money. See, all kind of that. So this thing is changing. And plus, because of, the education also part of that is changing. Because the children is not stay in the village. They go out from the village, and to town. And the town situation and the village situation environment – different! So they learn from town and coming back, so they use their own experience from town. And use in the village. See, that is also change. (2:3-4)

Again, Thai education is seen as the crucial factor causing the children to leave the village only to bring back materialistic influences to the formerly collective community. When inquiring about differences between the town and the village, Ahasa answers that, “in town, they more focus on themselves. They not… they not, aaahh. care one another. See, like I say, you have to help yourself. Everything they use money “(2:4). The town is seen as self-centered and individualistic, in comparison to the traditional collective Akha culture. The difference between the two systems is “like black and white”, radically opposite. Once more, it is the younger people who are teaching the older ones. The roles
are reversed, and the younger generations are dictating the way of life, whereas the traditional community appears to have become a victim to outside forces.

The movement to and from the cities therefore plays a big role in the changed social community structures. Bon articulates his concerns: “when we visit in the village, we can see only the old people or the young children stay there. The how do you say, the labor? Or the working people? (…) They come to the town to make the money, yeah” (7:12). However, not only does this de-populate the village when the workers are away, but it can also create problems when they return:

Ok, wife stay in the village, husband come to work in the city. Yeah, when husband and wife, they stay… [separate?] Yeah separate, they have a problem. Yeah. Ok. Husband have… [an extra lady?] Yes. And they have a sex. Sometime. And they didn’t know about how to safe. When you have a sex. Ok some, some people got a HIV, and they went back to the village, and with his wife [and she gets HIV?] Aha, yeah. (7:12-13)

Even though this problem is not caused by the fact that children go to school, it is part of the setting that this paper aims to investigate and it is not an uncommon issue. On the contrary, the interviewee wishes that the people that go to town were better prepared to deal with the reality there. He says: “I think almost all people who come to work in the town, they can not speak Thai very well. And one thing is the, how do you say? The life style [yes]. And the using life in the city, in the town. And the problem happen when they can not” (7:12).

Another feature of social life that has changed more recently and that will also be discussed more in the coming section on morals and ethics concerns the views on gender roles. “In the old day, they kinda particular, you know. Like, this is women work, and this is men work. For now, for myself, I wouldn’t teach that way”, Ahmee says, and she continues to give an example: “Akha men not really washing clothes for women, especially skirt or underwear or something like that. Then, then my husband say “no”. we have to be, support one another. You know, not really divide” (1:12). According to Ahmee, this change is also attributed to the fact that people are more educated, “the new generation, that, they went to school and have education, they change a lot about this”, (1:12). Traditionally though, women were not considered equal to men, not even “when they are strong and outspoken” or when they are old enough to wear the white skirt (approximately forty-five years old), according to Alting von Geusau (1983, 270). The old proverb that “just as the roof is above the floor, so is the man higher than the woman” is a clear evidence of the old attitude (ibid, 271). In opposition to many of the other changes that have taken place, the new gender roles are regarded as something very positive, indicate both male and female respondents.

Just like the different discourses concerning knowledge and learning displayed conflicting ambitions, so do the concepts regarding social structures contain contrary elements. Again, there is a sense of loss, and nostalgia where the wish for continuity is expressed. The respect for the older generation, and the desire to keep learning from them is evident, while individualistic and materialistic influences are seen as threats towards traditional collective ways. Even if the Thai schools and the migration to and from the lowland cities are blamed for some of the negative effects on the village, other shifts are welcomed, such as the new gender roles. Furthermore, there is also a desire to prepare Akha people for a changing society and educate the Akha about issues such as HIV/AIDS
and other possible dangers. In order to equip the people to interact with society, the respondents argue that education is needed. This goes both for the people that leave to go work in town, but also for the village leaders and others in the communities who need to represent their villages and interact with the Thai government. Conflicts between continuity and change within the two worlds arise once more in the respondents’ discourses about social structures.

6.4 Morals and Ethics: Different Worlds – Different Views

Strong moral values are considered an integral part of both Akha culture and education in general, according to the respondents. When asked what characteristics they see as important in a teacher, only Hana answers “knowledgeable” (5:9) and she also mentions the significance of preparation. Otherwise almost all the other features that the interviewees describe can be seen as moral qualities. Ahmee emphasizes the soul, spirit, and the heart, probably not the most prominent key words that are used in a letter of recommendation about teachers in the western world: “They have to have a soul! A soul of wanna teach, a soul of patience to train somebody, you know. Or a soul of, of spirit, to encourage the people too, I think. I think they have to have a heart” (1:17). Aju articulates a similar view. “Good teacher, should be like the second parent, you know. Not care only the lesson, what they teach. (…) should be kindly people. How to share the things with other friend” (3:15). Teaching actual subjects seems to be of less importance, whereas it appears more essential to be a good role model, “like a second parent”, to be kind and teach empathy. Bon mentions “the commitment” as the most important characteristic (7:14). Charan who is currently doing his dissertation on leadership within Akha culture gives a number of characteristics that refer more to leadership in general, but again, the moral aspects are predominant.

However, the Thai schools and teachers that they describe do not seem to fulfill their expectations.

But every subject have to be moral. For example, every teacher himself, or herself, have to be moral himself. To teaching. And should be understand you know, each subject. I am teaching you because of, don’t want, on self-focus, yourself. We also have to love one another. Also help one another. I am think like that. Love your neighbor, like love yourself. Something like that, you know… But in education now, they don’t teaching like this. If you doing great, you will be the winner. So because of that everybody try to cheating. To be a greater. (2:14-15)

The competitive environment is seen as demoralizing, as in order to be the “winner”, people need to “cheat”. According to Ahasa the focus needs to be shifted from the individual self, to the group and the others, “the neighbor”. This quote also reflects the conflicts between the individualism prevalent in society and the traditional collective Akha culture that was discussed in the previous section. Ahasa wishes that the education system would address these issues, instead of undermining them. “They more self-focused, too much. They not love, they never have enough of the thing that they want, they need. They have more and more and more…”, Ahasa exclaims (2:14). By repeating the words “more and more and more” he points out a greedy behavioral pattern that never brings satisfaction, but appears to be a life style that is accepted and embraced by the
younger generation. “Nowadays, the Akha people also more greedy. Greedy more than older generation”, Aju concurs (3:8).

However, there are other changes in the morals and ethics that they do approve of, such as in regards to the gender roles mentioned in the previous chapter. Even though several men express their wish to work for equality between the genders, the women give more animated descriptions. Hana thinks that it is time to abandon the old beliefs.

There are many of the Akha traditions that are beautiful, unique and valuable and thus need to be preserved. On the other hand, however, there are also many things need to be changed. In the Akha culture, women are less favorable than men and are treated unfairly sometimes. For example, women do not have the right of inheritance; women are not allowed to be involved in the community dispute settlement (men get to decide); women are supposed to be cooking and serving guests (from start to finish) during various cultural events while men are socializing and entertaining guests; the Akha widows are not allowed to come back and live with their parents for any reason. (5:7)

A number of procedures within Akha culture are listed as examples of that seem unfair, and therefore ought to be changed. Ahmee, the other woman, talks about the imbalanced and therefore unfair relationship between the genders.

Maybe in this age, they can be change a little bit. Sometime, it didn’t seem like, very fair. Quite fair, something. Like, this is example, you know, there is gonna be so many things still. In the old day… is ok, like man can beat the womens. Like anything, like hit, or something. But not allow women to beat the husband. Or do thing like that. And, I think that’s weak. I don’t mean that WOMEN CAN HIT THE MAN (laughing). But NOT allow… someone that, you know like will abuse other people (1:14)

Morals of equality and justice prevail over the traditional norms. Ahmee forwards that instead of having both partners hitting each other, the abuse should end completely. Furthermore, she voices the opinion that there are other rituals within Akha culture that should not be maintained.

“In the old day we believe is not. Not in this age, ok? Now we pretty much of… follow like country… constitutions, and aahh, and I mean, typical law. In the old day, Akha kill twins. And if any kid born with unperfext, like six finger, or maybe mouth, eyes, or something miss. They not able to live” (1:9)

The killing of twins and children with physical defects is also part of the traditional belief system. These ‘human rejects’ (tsaw caw) are seen as a threat to their lineage and to the continuity of a healthy clan (Lewis, 1984, 232). However, modern schooling and Christianity, has mainly put an end to this practice in most communities, just like it has decreased the usage of animal sacrifice and herbal medicine, as was discussed previously. Hana points out that some of the traditional Akha ways are now also prohibited by Thai law and that the Akha have to accept and follow these new regulations.

For example, the practice of twin killing is a crime and can no longer be maintained. Also many ceremonies related to the religious belief such as the cutting of the big tree to make a coffin for funeral is against the environmental law and have to be replaced. (5:6)

Several other traditions connected to the old belief system are also declining, even though they are not law-breaking.
Many, many knowledge. Like… wedding song. They have a song, when the Akha people have a wedding, right? They have a song that somebody will sing, and somebody will sing back. And we sing to you, you sing to me… something like that. That also, nobody interesting to learn. Because all the story in the song, is involved, regarding with the old idea. (3:8)

These conflicts between “the old idea”, the old belief system, and the new principals that are brought by for example schools, development workers and missionaries do create some confusion, and Aju asks himself who “should I follow? Traditional… or the knowledge, or should I walk on the universe, knowledge?” (3:8). Global, universal ideas do not always harmonize with the old belief system.

The above paragraphs discussing morals and ethics are rather closely connected to the subject matters that were discussed under the previous section on social structures. The respect for older people, the conflicts between collective and individualistic community structures and gender roles are examples of topics that fit under both headings. Once again, similar conflicts between changes and continuity emerge. The importance of high morals is emphasized, for example when the respondents talk about teachers and schooling. However, these morals do not always build on the traditional foundations. On the contrary, some traditional norms are gladly abandoned, such as inequality between genders and the killings of “human rejects”. Here, the Akha chose to assimilate and adjust to the outside world. On the one hand, the informants also present a loss of Akha morals and ethics, such as the respect for older people and the traditional collectivism. Individualism, greed and disrespect are slowly replacing the old ways according to the interviewees, who are partly blaming the schooling system. The conflicts between “old” and “new” morals and ethics cause confusion. “Who should I follow?” and how will that affect the continuity of Akha culture?

6.5 Cultural Identity Within the Two Worlds

The loss of knowledge, morals, traditional Akha ways and the breakdown of social structures that have been presented this far, all contribute to a somewhat confused Akha identity. No man is an island and no world is a vacuum. The different realms in which the respondents find themselves certainly affect how they view themselves. Others’ discourses are accepted and reproduced. The question about whom to follow at the end of last chapter further illustrates this uncertainty. It seems as if the respondents’ discourses about their fellow Akha people create the impression of a rather vulnerable group. Not only do they describe their people as poor and needy, they also appear to be the victims of very strong outside forces which they can do very little about. Aju labels their state as “blowing down the stream”, as if they were caught in a strong downward current, apparently helpless and without control. The expression bears resemblance to the earlier metaphor of “floating between two worlds”, that Charan used.

Ah, like we just was blowing down the stream, yeah? Blowing by the stream. If the wind come this way, we go this direction. Or they say that, “go to grow the rubber tree, is good”. Oh, Akha people grow, grow. And when they get the product… “Oh the tea is better”. They cut down all the rubber tree, and go to grow the tea again. They don’t know which thing is best for Akha, they don’t know, they can not analyze this information (3:11).

This quote shows the same lack of direction and inward strength that the question of whom to follow does. The inability to analyze, come to conclusions and make sovereign
decisions make the Akha people vulnerable according to Aju. Ahasa argues that it is the pressures from outside that are too strong: “modern thing is come very strong. And more convenient. (...) And globalization. You know, everywhere television. You know, like that, because of that, that thing too strong for the young generation” (2:3). The outside forces are not just strong; they are too strong for the young generation. TV is everywhere. No escape seems possible.

But what is the reason for this weakness and vulnerability? Charan explains it like this: “You know it used to be the Akha community, used to be self-sufficient, self-supporting, isolated and self-existing in a sense. But... So they used to be proud of who they are. And the order in their old system” (6:5). Here, the fact that Akha people are no longer self-sufficient is seen as the reason for their lost dignity and pride in who they are. They have been stripped of their pride and are dependent on others. Since there are plenty of issues with land rights and citizenship with the minority groups, they very seldom own the land that they are cultivating. Aju asks, “so, how can they feel confident in the life? They can not be owner, anything” (3:12). Lack of ownership and self-sufficiency thus lead to dependence on others and a loss of pride and confidence. As a minority, they are also treated as second class citizens, only adding to this sense of helplessness.

Many of the respondents also talk about how they started to feel inferior in school. Charan describes that he experienced “emptiness, loneliness, inferiority” (6:4). Similarly, Hana expresses that “I felt a sense of inferiority to local Thai children. Apart from the ethnic background, we had less time to study than local Thai children because we had more responsibilities in term of daily chores” (5:4). As mentioned in the introductory background section about the Akha people, it is not uncommon that the minorities are treated in discriminatory ways, in schools as well as in society in general. Oftentimes Akha people change their names and take Thai names in order to disguise their minority heritage. Even if they wish to keep their name, the teacher might give them a Thai name anyway, taking away from their cultural identity. Ahasa gives an account of the how the Thai people treat Akha children in school:

They look down... and sometime they treat different, for hill tribe, because they see from your name. See, because of this reason that I am not change my last name, I still keeping Akha. I want to see if they treat me different. They treat me different, I can go and ask them “why?”. Because I am also Thai. And some of the school, they also say, teacher say “Oh! Akha language, difficult to say. Call your name... So I am change to Thai name”. Some is like that. Even the student don’t want to change but teacher already tell them to change. (...) Maybe they not thinking deeply - how the hill tribe people feel (2:11)

This informant is unusually confident in his minority identity and chose to keep his Akha name so that he would be able to confront the Thai people when they treat him differently. However, not everyone has this strength. Bon admits that “[s]ome people they don’t want to be Akha people. They are shy to show, to let other people know, that’s the case” (7:15). Since most of the respondents work actively to improve the situation for Akha people in Thailand, all of them have kept their Akha names and they take pride in their cultural identity. However, some of them have also taken Thai names for official purposes. “We have to accept, the name, two or three names, right now. Because in the Akha social, we talking, we use Akha name, among Akha people. But when we contact with big social, Thai people, we use common name. In ID card name” (3:6). This respondent yielded to the big social pressures and uses his Akha name only in the little
social, with his minority group. Different worlds, different names and requirements. Since most of them are working for development organizations who support minority people, their Akha heritage is seen as a benefit, rather than a disadvantage. However, if they were to apply for different jobs, they might be treated differently. “Oh, I am Akha, I am proud of Akha!” After they say like that, they can not find a job”, Ahasa says.

There is generally a negative attitude towards Akha people in Thai society. Ahmee’s daughter was crying when she came home from school and said: “Mom, they teasing me, I don’t want to be an Akha”. I say ‘Why? ‘Because they make fun of me, they say Akha eat dog, Akha dirty, Akha chew beetle nut and have black teeth. And Akha is begging in night bazaar” (1:6). The description of dirty people eating dogs, with black teeth due to the constant chewing of beetle nut to reduce hunger, and who are forced to beg for money produces a rather raw picture of a primitive and undeveloped culture. Ahmee continues saying:

So I feel sad for her, and I try to understand… And I accept, because is true. The thing that they were teasing, or. Thing that she would tell me is true. But I want her to see another side. I say that “A lot of Akha are successful” The example, you know somebody who near, they like society. I say “Your aunt (…) She win a Thai government scholarship, she gonna be a doctor soon, and the only one in the country, and Akha win it. Don’t you proud of it? (1:6)

So the informant accepts what the school children say about Akha people, because it is true. Akha people do eat dogs, and chew beetle nuts. She admits that they are dirty and they do beg in the night bazaar but she also tries to balance the image. Though, the example Ahmee chooses is not taken from traditional Akha life, legitimizing why their traditional culture is valuable. On the other hand, the girl is told to be proud of her aunt because she has done well in Thai society, in the other world. Hana puts it this way: “Many of the Akha people had difficult time trying to relate themselves to the Thai society due to negative attitude attached to the image of uncivilized Akha community” (5:8). These discourses about unsophisticated Akha people further reinforces the idea that Akha people are inferior to the seemingly cultivated and elevated Thai people. Bon argues that, “everyone look Akha people, is the bad sight (…) they look Akha people, not only Akha people, but hill tribe people to like that, the second people in Thailand” (7:14).

The sense of inferiority that these discourses and attitudes towards Akha people create, pressure some people to give up their Akha identity completely and aim to become Thai instead. In fact “many young Akha just don’t want to be Akha” (4:2). On the contrary, “Akha pretty much want to be like other” (1:8). And in order to achieve this goal, “they learn from other” (2:6) and “they open their community to the rest of the world and learn how to live like others” (5:6). The word other is used frequently to describe phenomena which are different from the Akha culture. Most of the time they refer to different aspects of Thai society, but sometimes other refers to global and international aspects of life. The interviewees who take pride in their Akha identity value the importance of the fact “that we can separate with the other people, the other group”, or the other world (3:7). However, it takes a lot of confidence in ones own cultural identity to be willing to separate with other.

When asked what the most important things to teach Akha children is, Ahmee and Charan both mention confidence in their cultural identity to be their top priority. “I think
for them to develop their sense of pride and dignity of who they are” (6:10), Charon says. Ahmee’s answer is similar:

Respondent: To, to, to… understand where they are from and who they are. So, they wouldn’t be confused or try to be like other. And, so they can have the good personality… or. Not personality… how do you call?

Interviewer: Identity?

Respondent: Identity! About who they are, how they look like. How about the way that they look themselves and how other people look themselves. And then that thing is, prevent them a lot, and… for in the future so they can be proud. Like, who they are, the way they is. And they also… one thing that, kinda build up good attitude for them. To have a… to have a will or to have a respons (ibility). To love the home town, To look… once they get good opportunity, right? And then doing well, they can, in the future, they wanna share good opportunity to other people too. [right] And then like… home town is important, and then be proud what they are… like who they are. Proud with their food, their custom, they people, the history and something like that. I know they are not all good thing, but. There area lot thing that, you know that are… worth to proud, they carry for many hundred, many thousand, thousand years. You know. Not just… wanna be like other people. (1:5-6)

It seems like confidence in their cultural identity is seen as the crucial factor in maintaining their ethnicity and way of life. The pressures and discriminatory discourses and behaviors of other often generate a sense of inferiority and a wish to integrate with mainstream society and shy away from their Akha identity. At the same time as they wish to separate themselves from the other, there is also a desire to succeed in society and to “learn from other”. However, it appears that by educating themselves, such as all the informants have done to high levels, they also seem to have distanced themselves from the traditional Akha cultural identity, which can be seen for example in the use of third person when talking about their own people. In conclusion, conflicting discourses between various reasons for confidence and important elements of cultural identity occur also in this section. Others’ discourses about Akha identity are oftentimes discriminatory, and to a certain extent the Akha take on and carry these perceptions that depict their people group as vulnerable and helpless. But there are also discourses evident that express a wish for pride and dignity, where the Akha identity can be a self definition, rather than images produced by others.
7 How the Proposed Akha School Might Address the Conflicting Discourses Between Continuity and Change

This section will aim to answer the second research question, concerning how the proposed Akha school could possibly address the four conflicting areas of continuity and change, and the pressures and appeals from different worlds that were introduced in the previous chapter. The four themes will be tackled one by one, following the same order that was used when presenting them. After that an overall analysis will be carried out, where theories and information from earlier sections will be further discussed.

Data about the intended Akha school was collected primarily through two interviews with the future supervisor, Ahasa, who has taken the initiative to plan and hopes to see the fruition of the school. However, the other respondents were also asked about their thoughts on a potential formal Akha school and some of their views will also be included. Furthermore, I will also quote the written proposal that has been outlined for the school (AYDC, 2007).

Firstly, however, the school will be described in brief. In fact, two schools are actually being planned for, but both of them will run under the same umbrella and employ a very similar curriculum. One of them will be situated in Hwei San, a small Akha village outside of Chiang Rai, consisting of approximately 90 households. The other wished-for school site is Tam Luang, another small Akha village close to the Burmese border where an estimated number of 40-50 households reside. Neither of these communities currently have any formal education possibilities in their villages. Primary education from grade 1 through 6 will be offered by the proposed schools, and alongside the required Thai curriculum, extra-curricular Akha contents will be taught. The Akha curriculum will make up about 30% of the approximately 1000 in-class lesson hours per year. Subjects will include Akha language studies, Akha tradition and culture, Akha history and Akha knowledge. There is a strong emphasis on a learner- and community centered approach in the proposal. Local knowledge holders, mostly older people from the villages, will be invited to help teach the Akha related curriculum in the school. It is also hoped that it will be possible to find and train a sufficient number of teachers from the respective villages, who will be trained to teach both Thai and Akha curriculum and also how to develop relevant teaching materials (Interview no 9, AYDC 2007). When asked where he got the idea for the school, Ahasa refers to his own childhood.

I grew up in the hostel. I separate from my mom and my dad since I was seven years old. So I have to come down to town, study in town, study Thai. I have chance to go home only two time a year, so that mean I lose my relationship with my mom and my dad, and also my language, the culture… I want to communicate. But I forgot. But I don’t totally forgot, but quite hard to communicate with my mom and my dad. But that part feel very sad. Very bad. (...) So because of that I want to do the school. I think will be big help. So the student able to stay in the village. So it means they don’t have to separate from mom and dad, at least. Primary school, very need help to support from mom and dad. The parent. And also the culture, the language. After primary school I think is ok. I think will stick everything, the language, the culture, I think it will be difficult to lost, the language, the culture. And also protect the knowledge of the old people. So is not carry on to the new generation. So for new generation separate from the village, every new thing that they learn from town. After that they go back, they can not adjust, a lot of thing from that they can not use in daily life in the village. It is kind of difficult (9:1).
The issues and conflicts that the informant describes are very similar to those discussed in the previous chapters. The traumatic hostel experience, the separation from family and community, the loss of language and culture as well as the wish to protect cultural heritage and prevent the conflicts between the “new thing that they learn from town” which they “can not use in daily life in the village”, were also mentioned by other respondents and quoted before. It was thus Ahasa’s dissatisfaction with his own experiences in Thai schools, in combination with the problems that he could observe among other Akha children, which prompted him to propose a formal Akha elementary school in order to deal with the issues and the conflicting demands of continuity and change. The goals for the school as outlined in the proposal are thus focused on protection and preservation, but also on preparation for life and further studies outside the community.

The overall objectives for the proposed Akha school are:

- to prepare children for Thai society and future Thai schooling, through teaching Thai curriculum in a proficient way and in accordance with national requirements;
- to preserve Akha culture and language and help the children to build a strong Akha identity, through teaching extra-curricular Akha subject matters such as Akha knowledge, language, culture, tradition and history;
- and to strengthen the Akha communities in which the schools are situated. (AYDC, 2007, 4)

The question is how these goals of preserving the inside community and preparing for the outside society can address issues of continuity and change. When talking about knowledge and learning, and about their educational experiences in Thai schools, several informants expressed a sense of alienation and inferiority in the Thai school setting. Thai schools were described as a “different world”. According to Hoskin and Sigel (1991, 4) “immigration represents a meeting of two worlds: the world of the immigrant and the world of the host society. In this meeting, both worlds are at risk. Unless somehow transformed the immigrant may subtly alter the host society; naturally enough, therefore, the host society attempts to transform the immigrant”. Even though most of the respondents were born and raised within the Thai borders, they literally became immigrants in the new school world, and many of the new aspects of Thai society introduced there were indeed foreign to them. Integration policies did not allow them to use their native language and forced them to assimilate, meanwhile discriminatory behavior against them further instilled a sense of inferiority. This has caused many Akha people to shy away from their Akha roots, seeking to be accepted by the majority. When asked whether the preparation for Thai society or the preservation of Akha culture is a more important objective for the school, Ahasa answers that they are equally important. “We can not say is more important like that. But when they came down from the village. Look like Thai is more important…than hill tribe. So that mean they forgot all kind of tradition and hill tribe language. So they become Thai 100%” (9:4). The sense that “Thai is more important…than hill tribe” created a situation where the native world was lost and the Akha became “Thai 100%”. However, if this superiority of Thai knowledge is removed, and Akha knowledge is presented as equally important, will this solve the conflict so that the two worlds can coexist peacefully?

In a report from the Canadian Journal of Native Education where local knowledge in curriculum development is investigated, the author suggests that “often attempts to
contrast Indigenous Knowledge with scientific knowledge create a sense within Indigenous students that their way of knowing is inadequate and inferior” (Ignas, 2004, 54). Scientific knowledge is often presented as “paradigmatic of knowledge itself” and in order to avoid this sense of inferiority, Ignas forwards the argument that common themes where indigenous and scientific knowledge can meet and be studied simultaneously need to be focused in the curriculum. It will however take a lot of time, effort and creativity from the teachers in order to develop thematic teaching material. If the two curriculums, the Thai and the Akha, are taught in very separate ways and if they are not interconnected, the gap between the different subject matters is likely to remain. Since the Akha curriculum is not allowed to make up more than 30% of the time, this might also make it more difficult to communicate to the students that the subject matters are in fact equally important.

Another critique against the governmental Thai schools that the respondents voiced was that they often perceived curriculum content as irrelevant to their “life” and that “life and learn” need to go together (3:14). In the village however, learning was much more in line with “life”. The proposal clearly emphasizes the desire to offer schooling that is appropriate and practically relevant to the students’ lives and needs.

The school aims to be learner-centered, taking its departure in the learners’ needs and providing relevant schooling which draws on the students’ life experiences. Furthermore, it also intends to be community-centered, inviting and involving the community as a whole to support and participate in the curriculum as well as in decision making and in the development process of the school (AYDC, 2007, 4).

Not only does the school aim to be learner-centered, taking the students’ experiences and environment into account, it also intends to be community-centered. “Traditional learning styles will also be incorporated, especially for teaching the Akha curriculum. Villagers and old local knowledge holders from the community will be invited to participate and teach” (Proposal, 4). The well-known village settings, the opportunity to have family members close by and to meet community members in the school is likely to make the students much more comfortable and the gap between school and “life” is likely to diminish. Furthermore, by introducing the local knowledge holders as people who are competent and whose knowledge is valued, education does not have to be seen as something that only belongs to the city and “others”.

Another of the informants’ major concerns had to do with language. Both their inability to speak Thai when starting school, and the loss of proficiency in their mother tongue after a few years of Thai schooling, were described as concerns. By using both Akha and Thai language in the proposed schools, these issues are partly addressed. It states in the proposal that the: “Akha language will be used when teaching the Akha curriculum, but also in order to initially bridge into and introduce Thai language as a second language of instruction for the Thai curriculum subjects” (AYDC, 2007, 7). However, since Thai is one of the required subjects in the Thai curriculum, already from first grade, it might be difficult to have time to build a strong foundation in the Akha language before introducing literacy in Thai. As presented in the earlier section on bilingual education, it is normally easier to learn how to read and write in ones first language first. These literacy skills and strategies will then be more easily transferred when learning another language. Furthermore, a good foundation in ones first language
generally helps students to perform better in academic work also where they use they second language. A more detailed plan for how and when the different languages are introduced needs to be developed in order to teach both languages effectively. Also, since Akha has only existed in written form for the last decade, it is debatable what role the written language should play in the curriculum, if it aims to “preserve Akha culture”, which is largely an oral culture. Maybe there ought to be more of a special focus on verbal transmittance of knowledge, which would be more in line with their past, as well as the theme of continuity. However, if Akha literacy is introduced early it will help in the second language acquisition process and thus be an important tool in the preparation process for Thai society and further Thai schooling. By using Akha as one language of instruction, the students are also less likely to feel less foreign, as the borders between the two worlds are not closed. They do not have to leave their old world in order to enter into the new one.

In terms of social structures, the respondents argued that Thai schooling was partly to blame for the “reversed roles” where older people could no longer teach the younger ones. Instead, younger people are starting to appear as village headmen and leaders due to Thai language skills that the older generation lacks. Instead of the traditional way where the old lead the young, communities where the young are leading the older are now more common. By inviting the older community members to teach in the school, the old learning patterns as well as the respect for the older generation and their skills and experiences, could be restored to a certain extent. Furthermore, if the school can manage to involve community members to participate and take joint ownership for the school, this is also something that can strengthen the community as a whole and reinforce the traditional collective culture where responsibilities were shared. The proposal also emphasizes this participatory holistic goal.

As mentioned before, the issues associated with social structures, morals and ethics are closely related. Individualistic tendencies have contributed to the partial breakdown of traditional collective culture and values. The competitive environment in Thai schools was seen as one demoralizing factor where students were “cheating” in order to be “winners”. It does not seem like the proposed school addresses this issue in any clear way. Even if the community focus partly challenges an individualistic mindset, the learner-centered approach is more individualistic in nature. By teaching the traditional belief system, festivals and ceremonies, the children should be able to get acquainted with their heritage, but other religious beliefs will also be introduced as possible foundations for value systems. When asked how things should be learnt in a school for Akha children, Hana answers that ”something about the Akha can only be preserved by way of documenting since it is no longer practical or, in some cases, legal. The children may learn about this thing only as part of the Akha history” (5:9). Here, she is probably referring back to practices that she has earlier described as illegal or otherwise illegitimate, such as killing of twins, or unfair gender roles. The continuity of these practices could be carried on through teaching about them in Akha history classes, but they should not be seen as directions for how to live life, according to the respondent. Hana further argues that the Akha school should introduce new values:

The Akha school can be a place where the older generations in the community can learn new things and open their mind to the new knowledge and the outside world. For example, many of the Akha men are likely to abuse their wives because of the old belief that their wives are their property (...) The
children can learn how to treat women with dignity from anywhere since they are more likely to be in contact with the outside world. But for the old generation, they are less likely to learn and accept this new value and be transformed unless serious efforts are made. The Akha school can contribute to the community by bringing the new value into the Akha community (5:7).

One of the most crucial prerequisites for the maintenance and continuity of Akha culture is that the Akha people can be confident and strong in their cultural identity. The respondents mention a number of reasons for the stumped identity that the Akha seem to be struggling with today. A lack of ownership and the impossibility to be self-sufficient has led to lost confidence and dependency on outside support factors. Furthermore, discrimination has underlined their sense of inferiority. Integration policies and other strong influences on the communities are other additional examples of possible explanations for the weakened Akha identity. Rapid modernization often forces ethnic minorities to “adopt the dominant cultural pattern, but most often at only the lowest ranks of the social hierarchy”, which can clearly be seen in Thailand where minority people often work for very low wages and with jobs that no one else would want (Chiengthong, 2003, 166). Minorities sometimes chose to “opt to maintain and reconstruct an ethnic identity to bargain for rightful access to resources” instead, which is a more honorable way to address the issues, and which is what can be seen in the plans for this formal Akha elementary school (ibid, 166). One of the overall objectives of the proposal is “help the children to build a strong Akha identity, through teaching extra-curricular Akha subject matters such as Akha knowledge, language, culture, tradition and history” (Proposal, 4). Is this possible? Of course, only a limited number of children would be able to enroll in the school, and the major part of Akha people in Thailand would not be affected by these two primary schools, but in the selected villages the schools are likely to make a difference. An increased amount of quantitative facts about Akha culture and tradition might not do the trick alone. However, the secure and comfortable learning environment in the village, will hopefully enable the children to confirm and mirror their cultural identities in relationships with other community members. Discrimination against the Akha, and pressure from the Thai majority group to assimilate and integrate will not exist in an all Akha school. By protecting the children in the village setting the first 6 years of their schooling, it is also possible that they will be less perceptible to harmful Thai influences in general, at least, that is the hope. As quoted above, Ahasa says that “[a]fter primary school I think is ok. I think will stick everything, the language, the culture, I think it will be difficult to lost, the language, the culture” (9:1). His idea is that the culture will “stick” like glue, and that the children will be less inclined to lose their culture and language. Furthermore, by slowly increasing the human resource base in the village it might increase the quality of life and make the village more self-sustainable, which would probably make the villagers more proud of their community in a long-term perspective.

When asked what they think the overall goal for a school with Akha children should be, other respondents also mention a strong cultural identity as the most important objective. Charan says that “I think for them to develop their sense of pride and dignity of who they are” (6:11). Aju, who often uses metaphors, replies that “we pave the ground. Right? We pave the good ground. And then when they grow up, the, the Akha root will, they will root in the heart, you know” (3:16). By paving a good ground, the students will have something solid to stand on, and rooted in their hearts, they will be able to find
nourishment and stability to keep growing. Even if they grow tall and have to endure stormy weather, they will not lose ground. They will be steadily grounded in their Akha heritage. With a strong root system, changes and outside forces do not pose the same risk. Continuity is still likely to be maintained, if they keep building on the same foundation. They can bend in the wind, but maybe, they won’t break. Even if they do break, as long as they are not uprooted, they can continue to grow.

One of the most important ways in which the proposed Akha schools addresses the issues and conflicts described in the previous chapter is how it shows the Akha people as active agents who are taking charge of the situation. Whereas before, their discourses rather carried the perception that they were objects acted upon, “vulnerable”, “poor”, “underprivileged” victims, “blowing down the stream” etc, these efforts to create a different reality for themselves rather demonstrate how they can be active subjects taking control of their own lives and educational futures. Instead of letting “others” dictate how they interpret and construct their realities, they will construct their own which is visible in discourses about the proposed school. The Akha literacy will hopefully incorporate a way to “read the world” and not just the words, in keeping with Freire’s extended literacy concept. To be informed by others is not equal to being educated. Instead Freire argues that true literacy helps one to “decode” states of submersion, reconstruct ones understanding of self-hood and also enable active subjects to critically analyze and identify the surrounding social context and, if necessary, transform it! Hana expresses her hope that “developing a formal course for school teaching will enhance the chance of in-class, dept discussion, intrigue the thought, motivate further development, etc” (5:5). If educated in this sense, learned Akha people should not have to distance themselves from their people group and refer to them in third person. Learner-centered Akha education could promote a new self-definition that can also include aspects that formal Thai education, taught from a majority perspective, would not encourage.

According to Freire, education of, rather than for, the people, advocates the emergence of consciousness which will lead to a critical intervention in reality. The Akha school could be seen as one such intervention, where the Akha people have emerged from the “culture of silence” and found their “voice” which could then lead to action. However, many Akha people are still trapped in this silence where they either assimilate and refuse to acknowledge their Akha identity, or just chose to avoid interaction with the outside world. In order to break out from this submersion, Freire argues that “the oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for redemption” (2003, 54), which is what the school can function as, an example for redemption, keeping their voice and interacting with the outside world. The first bilingual minority school in Omkoi does not have these benefits, however, since the initiative did not come from the community, but from UNESCO, SIL and the Thai government.

As active agents in their own development process, questions such as whom “to follow” (3:8) could rather be rephrased, “where do I want to go?”. They should not have to be “floating between two worlds” (6:5). Both worlds will still exist, but the students should be appropriately equipped to swim and decide in what direction, no longer simply “blowing down the stream” (3:11). The “harmony” between these worlds that Aju is looking for will require a capability to deliberately select the right tones. “Harmony” is created when a number of tones are arranged together in a certain way, but if no one controls the strings, disharmony between different worlds, or tones, is likely to occur. If
the Akha take charge of their situation, outside forces are less likely to control the changes that will take place. Changes can not be avoided, but they can be directed in a way that still enables continuity and a constructive progress. Hana sums up her thoughts stating that:

…changes are natural and are necessary. We cannot prevent changes since they are necessary and reasonably follow the changing society. For that reason, instead of preventing changes, we should find ways to preserve what we think is necessary. To preserve does not mean to bring the Akha community back to the stage where it first originated or reinstall the practices which are no longer suitable for the modern society (5:6-7).

Cultures that are alive naturally change, but in order to maintain continuity these changes need to originate, at least partly, from needs and desires within the community itself: “we should find ways to preserve what we think is necessary”. If the changes are seen predominantly as outside powers forcing changes on the community, serious conflicts between continuity and change will occur. This is what seems to have happened to the Akha people, where the education they received during the last decades can be labeled “for” the people, rather than “of” the people. Continuity can be maintained only if the changes that occur build to some extent on the old foundations. Otherwise, continuity is broken.

A quote from an old Akha text shows this harmonic relationship between continuity and change: “rice doesn’t die, there are grains (kept to be planted next year)… animals don’t die, their offspring are left behind” (Hansson, 1997, 148). These images, taken from nature, show how change is a prerequisite for continuity. The grain planted in the field is transformed into a plant which makes it possible for more rice to grow. However, without change, without new offspring and rice, there would be no continuity possible, only preservation. But the changes need to spring from inside their world. Outside forces, such as rain and sunshine for the grain, and food for the animals, might trigger the growth, but the new has to originate from the old. Thus, when the initiative to educate comes from inside the Akha society, continuity is made possible, through change. However, if education is forced on the Akha people from outside, foreign changes are likely to create conflicts with the inside aim for continuity.
8 Conclusion

As this paper has aimed to point out, continuity is an important and integral aspect of Akha culture. The strive for continuity of traditional Akha culture was also clearly evident in the informants’ discourses concerning education. However, due to a number of external stresses from the outside world, the long-established Akha world and their traditional ways of life have faced a number of new challenges during the last decades. In order to meet the somewhat paradoxical needs for continuity and change, conflicting demands on the school system also emerged in the informants’ discourses about education. The respondents discussed these conflicts in relation to four different aspects of life where education can play an essential role in either promoting or preventing changes and continuity: knowledge and learning, social structures, morals and ethics, and cultural identity. Whereas the outside world forwards discourses wishing to reproduce Thai values and change an “inferior” Akha society, the Akha discourses clearly show a strong desire to continue their ways of life. However, many of the respondents also carry discourses that contradict the Akha wish for continuity, and rather identify with the Thai perspective. These conflicts between different worlds, visible in their discourses, create confusion and a state where they seem vulnerable, floating paralyzed between two conflicting systems. As mentioned before, discourses are constructive and it was the current hopelessness of handling the conflicting demands evident in these discourses that triggered social change. In the proposal, discourses rather show how the Akha people dictate their own future, rather than being dictated. Ahasa’s says that frustration with his own experiences in Thai schools, and the problems that he could observe in Thai society in general, caused him to propose a formal Akha elementary school in order to deal with the issues and seek a possible solution.

The proposed formal Akha school was then introduced and it was considered how this school might possibly address the conflicts between continuity and change, apparent in the interviewees’ discourses. In a number of ways, it might be anticipated that the school could actually harmonize between the two “worlds” of conflicting requirements and address the issues that were mentioned by the respondents. By offering learner-centered schooling in a familiar environment where the Akha people are not discriminated against, the school is likely to appear less foreign and intimidating and increase the learners’ confidence. Extra curricular Akha subjects are also supposed to provide the students with a better understanding for their own culture and contribute to a stronger cultural identity, whereas the Thai curriculum will prepare them for life and further studies in Thai society as well as in the world as a whole. It is further hoped that gaps might be bridged between the different generations, if the older generation is invited to teach. In the long run, it is also expected that the community will benefit from an improved human resource base and make the community stronger and more sustainable. The bilingual approach is predicted to simultaneously help preserve the Akha language, and at the same time improve the Akha childrens’ Thai proficiency. In fact, in accordance with the research presented earlier, developing literacy skills in their mother tongue first is likely to bring greater academic success in other subjects as well. Hence, by aiming both for preservation of Akha culture and for preparing children for Thai society, the school hopes to equip students both to cope with changes, but also to uphold the continuity of their own culture.
However, one of the most important ways in which this school addresses the conflicts in focus, is by making the Akha people active agents in their own education. Instead of letting “others” define their needs and determine how they interpret and construct their realities, the proposed Akha school clearly shows how the Akha have chosen to start constructing their own. Instead of “floating between two worlds”, they have begun to read these worlds and decide how they wish to interact with them, instead of drifting in between conflicting demands without an inner navigation system. It is this ability to counterbalance different demands that can allow for continuity. Changes can not be avoided, but in this way they can be controlled to a greater extent. Deeply rooted in their origins, the Akha people can stretch out, change and grow in a way that still builds on a mutual foundation that allows for continuity.

It seems like the process of emerging into larger communities makes local identities increasingly more important. As Thailand enters into the global village, and tries to deal with international pressure, there is also a simultaneous wish to return to national roots and cultural identity, which was also observable in the national Thai education documents with their focus on local wisdom. When the Akha community faces the threats and challenges of Thai society, it likewise propels them to go back to their origins in order to find themselves in order to deal with the changes properly. However, even if theories like these might seem too big and too general to verify objectively in a rather limited paper like this that is rather occupied with local perspectives and personal views, the results certainly imply that there are such tendencies. The research clearly shows the evident conflicts between continuity and change, and how the respondents construct discourses about the different worlds in which they live. It also shows the relationship between discourses and social change.

There are several other areas in which further research would be valuable. A more extensive investigation into the effects of Thai schooling on the Akha communities and identities in Thailand would be both useful and interesting. A study concerning how current Akha students can integrate into Thai society would also be of great wealth. Furthermore, it would also be helpful to analyze how students from the proposed Akha school will actually succeed, both academically but also how the school impacts their discourses and lives in various other ways. Since these appealing topics are beyond the possible scope of this paper to cover I will leave them to fellow researchers to explore.
9 References


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10 Appendices

10.1 Interview Guide no 1

Briefing
My purpose with this master’s thesis is to study what knowledge and learning methods that are important for the Akha people in Northern Thailand today. This interview is an important way for me to collect information about these questions, and parts of it might be published in my Master’s thesis, if you allow me to. Do you? Your name and any other personal information about you that can show who you are will be changed in these texts, so that you will be anonymous, if you prefer to have it that way. I also wish to inform you that you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time without reason, and also that you are free not to answer questions you do not feel comfortable answering. Do you have any other questions before the interview starts? (The amount of information about me will of course depend on whether I am already acquainted with the interviewee. If not, I will have to present myself and where I am from more in depth, possibly also explain what a Masters thesis is etc)

Interview questions

Introductory questions
Can you tell me little bit about yourself? Your age? The place where you grew up? Your educational background or anything else that you wish to tell me.

Do you remember when you started elementary school yourself – what was it like?
- What was it like to be an Akha student in a Thai school?
- What were your main struggles or issues, if you had any?

Knowledge
What kind of subjects do you think that Akha students should be taught?
- Why do you think that these subjects are important?
- Are some of these subjects more important than others?

Are there certain things that you think that every Akha person should know? If so, what are these things?

Is there any traditional knowledge is special for the Akha people?
- Is that knowledge being passed on now? How?
- Is there any typical Akha-knowledge that you think is at risk to be lost?

Do you think that the Akha community members would want to have a focus on their cultural heritage in the schools? Can you describe examples of parts of the cultural heritage that would be important to teach?
What traditional values do you think are most important to the community members?  
- Religious? Moral? (Do these differ from Thai values, if so - how?)  
- Are these values different from the values in Thai society, how?  
- Should these values and/or religious beliefs be taught in school?

Is the Akha community in Thailand changing today, do you think? How?  
- Are there changes that you would like to see in the community? If so, how do you think that a school could support these changes?  
- Are there changes in the Akha society that you would like a school to prevent? How could that be done?

Are there other problems in the community that you think need to be addressed in an Akha school?  
- Can you describe these?  
- How could a school teach about this?

Is there certain knowledge that would be more important for woman that for men and the other way around?

Would you describe Akha people as creative?

What language do you normally use when you think?  
- in what situations do you use different languages?

What language do you think should be used as the language of instruction when teaching Akha students?

Learning  
How does learning normally occur among the Akha people in the villages? When?  
(feel free to refer back to different types of knowledge mentioned before, and describe how this knowledge is obtained)

Can you mention some typical Akha knowledge that you have?  
- Can you describe how you learnt this?

How did people Akha people use to learn things traditionally?

What kind of typical Akha learning methods do you think could be used in a school?

Can you describe the basic education that the Akha receive today?  
- what do you think about this?

Can you describe why you think that a Thai school is a good - or why it is not such good place of learning, for an Akha-student?  
Would you want an Akha-school to be different from a Thai-school? If so, in what way?
Do you think that it would be important to start a formal Akha elementary school?
- If not, why? Are there other and better alternatives according to you?
- If so, can you describe how you would like it to be or where it should be located?

Do you think that an Akha school could help its students to relate in a more effective way to Thai society in general? If so, how?

Can you describe what a good teacher is like?

Can you describe what a good student is like?

What do you think should be the overall goals for a school with Akha students?

**Debriefing**

Trying to sum up the main points that have been brought up during the interview, and allowing the interviewee to respond to this summary. Eventually asking if the interviewee has any more questions, if there is anything else that he or she wishes to add or ask before the interview is over.