

# SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE OF THE CHICKEN IN THE AKHA WORLDVIEW<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Myth, beliefs and ritual about the chicken reflect the Akha's world view regarding the chicken will facilitate a better understanding of the link between the chicken and man. And these can be seen as an important connection to domestication.*

*From folklore fieldwork in Chiangrai it was found that Akha divide chicken into 3 kinds: red jungle fowl, decoy chicken and domestic chicken. Red jungle fowl is the chicken of the world of spirits. Its only use is for consumption, not for offering. The decoy chicken has higher status than the domestic chicken. It is considered to be in between the human world and the spirit world. The domestic chicken is the chicken of the human world. It is used for*

*consumption and offerings in various rites. Its important role is as mediator between the Akha and the spirits of their ancestors. Since the domestic chicken used in the rituals must have characteristics corresponding to Akha's beliefs, they therefore have to preserve their original pedigree. This, the myths told by the shaman often shows the importance of the chicken in Akha culture.*

## Introduction

In Chiang Rai, apart from Khon Muang, which is the biggest group that has a long history relevant to the region, there are many ethnic groups, such as Tai Lue, Tai Yai, Tai Yaa, the Mon – Khmer group such as Lawa or Lua, and the ethnic groups which are altogether called “ the hill tribes”, like Lahu (Musser), Lisu, Yao, Hmong (Maew), Akha (E-Ko), who might have lived in the highlands along the Thai – Burma frontier for a long time, including new groups that have migrated within the last 30 years. Among these groups, the Akha most utilize the chicken in various traditional rituals, especially for ancestor worship. However, they use only domestic chicken in these rites.

This article aims at presenting the Akha's view of red jungle fowl (a specific term for a kind of wild chicken in Southeast Asia purported to be the origin of all varieties of chicken in the world), the decoy chicken and the domestic chicken collected from field research, especially oral traditions such as myth, folktales, and ritual, to show the Akha view of the chicken. We also wanted to learn about the significance of the role of red jungle fowl and decoy chicken in their society. The research followed the line of argument that

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of *Human- Chicken Multi-Relationships Research Project* (2004-2006)– (H.R.H. Prince Akishino's Research under the Royal Patronage of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn) This project uses interdisciplinary approach on Biology and Ecology, Geography, Economics and Humanities.

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one should put a high priority on Akha's view on the 3 types of chickens, leading to a better understanding of the link between the chicken and man in their society.

### **Research Objectives**

The research objectives are to study Akha custom, ritual, and myths relevant to the chicken, to analyze the Akha view on red jungle fowl, domestic chicken and decoy chicken, and to ascertain the meanings of red jungle fowl, domestic chicken and decoy chicken in a cultural dimension.

### **Research Methodology**

This research concentrates on the Akha groups in Chiang Rai, especially the Lomi and the Pia groups at Baan Huay Kra and Baan Na Toh in Mae Fah Luang District, and the U-Lo group at Baan Huay Kheelek, Mae Suai District, from July 2004 to March 2005.



The reason these two groups were selected is that the Akha groups at Baan Huay Kra and Baan Na Toh had lived near the Thai-Burma frontier and entered Thailand through Baan Pang Hnun and Baan Mae

Kham. These groups of Akha have been living in Thailand for not more than 50 years. There are around 100 households of both Akha and Lahunee (red Musser) in Huay Gut village. In most of the villagers are Akha, though around 33 households are Lahu nee. The villagers still retain original Akha lifestyles because modern lifestyles are not accessible due to the difficulty of transportation. To go to the village, automobiles with high-powered engines or four-wheel drive are needed. The chicken in the village are of original types. The village is located near the forest; therefore, there are still wild chickens in the area. Besides, the villagers have just stopped hunting wild chickens recently, when the government instituted a law that forces people to hand in weapons to the government. Both villages are under the protection of the border police. There is a primary school staffed by border police, of which the number of students is 214. The school was recently built, in 2003, by the Airports Authority of Thailand in order



to honor Her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn. Thus, there are offices for H.R.H., classroom buildings, and other facilities for researchers to stay and to work. Besides, there are teachers from border police in the area, which are

familiar with researchers and can speak the Akha language. These teachers act as interpreters during data collection.

The U-Lo Akha group at Baan Huay Khee Lek, Doi Wawee, Mae Suai district is an old group that moved to Thailand in 1957 and settled at Samakkee Kao village before moving to their present village. Some members of this group are well educated, like Mr. Wudthikrai Mohpah, who earned a Bachelor's degree and returned to the village as a teacher. Most information about the Akha in this research report is from this group, with the cooperation of Mr. Wudthikrai in checking the accuracy of the data. The weak point is that this Akha group has received so much influence from modern civilization because of its proximity to a town.

However, every Akha group has the same annual, main customs and rituals; therefore, the chosen sampling can represent the whole Akha tribe.

### **Tools Used for Gathering Data**

Two types of tools were used: first, literature review of both Thai and foreign textbooks and research reports that are relevant to the topics of Akha and other ethnic groups in Chiang-Rai, and second, fieldwork of periodical interviews of village leaders and teachers since August 2004, and participation in rites such as the Swing Festival and the Akha New Year Festival in order to observe and record with camera and video recorder.

### **Background Data on the Akha**

The *Akha*, or the *Hani* consists of many sub groups, around 2.5 million members, spread out among high mountains in Yunnan district in southwest China, in the

north of Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand, and in the east of Burma. The Chinese government calls this tribe "Hani". They live mainly in Hwong Ho autonomous region, which is located along the Hwong Ho River in the north of the China-Vietnam frontier, and Simao town in the center of South Yunnan, of which two-thirds of the population are Hani. Furthermore, there are three other areas where the Hani are found: The autonomous region of Tai in Sib Song Panna district in Northern Laos and in the northeast part of Burma, the autonomous region of Puer in the southwest of Kunming, and the autonomous region of Lahu/Wah in Lanchang town along the northeastern Burmese border. In summary, there are around 600,000 - 700,000 in China.

Especially in the autonomous region of Hwong Ho - Yuanyang, the Hani are well known for their skill in highland irrigation. Thus, here, is the world's most extensive stepped farmland, of 3000 steps. The Chinese government is promoting the Hani stepped farmland as a world heritage site and has proclaimed this area to be a "cultural museum" of human-culture-nature. (see also Panadda Bunyasaranai, 1999: 192-193)

In Burma, the number of Akha is around 150,000, distributed over the Keng Tung district in the mountainous area of the Shan State in the north. They are called "Koh" by the Tai Yai and the Burmese.

In the north of Laos, most Akha are living in the high mountainous area of Pong Sali and Luang Nam Tha districts, adjacent to Sibsong Panna district and Burma. There are estimated to be 92,000-100,000 Akha in this area. In Northern Vietnam, there are 2,000-3,000 Akha around the Mae Nam Dum area near the Lao border. They

are called “Koh” or “Kha-Koh” by the Lao and Black Tai in Vietnam.

In Thailand, there are around 63,000 Akha (Benjawan Wongkum, editor: 2003: 7) most of whom reside in Chiangrai and the rest scattered among the northern provinces, including Chiangmai, Lampang, Tak, Petchaboon, Prae and Nan. The Akha are called “I-Ko”, “Ko”, or “Kha-Ko” in Thai. Chit Poomisak has established that the Akha use to refer to themselves as “Ko” but later as “Akha” following the Tai Lue and Chinese terms. The term “Akha” means “being between two things or being neutral” (Chit Poomisak, 1997: 307-308) At present, the official designation, according to the Central Registration Office of The Ministry of Interior is “Akha”.

Akha myth tells us that there used to be an independent kingdom called “Muang Yadae” which then was invaded by other ethnic groups, and so they evacuated to the south of Yunnan district, though some myths say that it was Tai and others referred to a Mon-Khmer group.

In the reign of King Rama V, Mr. Herbert Warrington Smith (an English geologist who had a position in the Department of Metal and Geology) traveled to various regions of Siam to explore geological areas. When he reached a province of Laos north of the Mae Khong river, around Muang Ngaaw valley, Luang Prabang (1892), he recorded that he had found different tribes, such as Lue, Yao, Lisu, Kha-Tin, Maew, Musser, I-Ko, Kui, and other ethnic groups that had wandered from the northeast to the south and the east. The tribes that were much similar to each other were Musser, I-Ko and Kui. Moving to Muang Ngoi in the north of Nam-U, he found many I-Ko or Kha-Ko. (Smith, Herbert Warrington. 2001: 184-189)

From the field survey it was learned that the Akha migrated to Thailand about 100 years ago. There were 8 Akha groups, namely U-Lo, Lomi, Pia, Akhoe, A-jaw, Na-kha, U-Pi and Pha-mi, which can be categorized by the different styles of embroidery on their clothing. However, they use a similar language and follow the same traditions. The Akha language, only on oral language is classified as Tibetan-Burmese.

After WWII, the Akha first moved from China to Keng Tung in Burma and then to the Thai – Burma frontier. During the revolution in China, the Akha moved south with the “Komintang” army to the area along the Burma border called “Loh-Tum”, directly opposite Baan Pha Mee. Then the Burmese government tried to push the Komintang army out of the border area. Around 1957, the Akha entered Thailand through Phaya Prai village, Hua Mae Kum (Mae Chan district which now has become Mae Fah Luang district). The first point where the Akha moved through was the area around Doi Tung, under the leadership of Saen Unruan (Hulong Jupoh). The oldest Akha group had settled at Baan Samakkee Kao, and then spread to Baan Saen Charoen, Baan Huay Kee Lek, and elsewhere. The younger brother of Saen Unruan, whose name was Saen Phroma (Hu song), moved to Doi Pha Mee in Mae Sai district and Doi Sa Ngo in Chiang Saen district. Saen Iai (Tu Sae), the nephew of Saen Unruan, settled at Saenjai village, Mae Fah Luang district.

The second route the Akha took was from Sib Song Panna, China along the border with Burma and the Khong river with Thailand through Mae Sai district, and then moved to Chiang Mai, Prae and Nan. The group taking this route was a new

group. The Akha group of Lo-Mi and Pia at Baan Huay Kra, and Baan Na Toh, Mae Fah Luang district came through Baan Phaya Prai led by Lui Mayerh. The U-Lo group (called "Bulo" by Mr. Wuttikrai) at Baan Huay Keelek Doi Wawee, Mae Suai district separated from the Baan Samakkee Kao group.

### **The Akha Belief in Supernatural Beings**

Akha beliefs can be divided into 2 categories:

*Gods and Guardian Spirits:* Apoemiyeh – Creator god who built everything on earth and in heaven, Um Yae – god of rain, Akyue god of light who controls the sun and the stars, and Um Sa god of wind. These gods help humans; therefore, there are many rituals each year to show gratitude to them. The ritual is led by Yau Ma, the leader of the sacred men, who is responsible for communicating with all of the gods.

*Belief in Unseen Forces,* called "Neh". There are 2 kinds of Neh: good spirits and evil ones. The Phima or the shaman is the one who able to make contact with these spirits:

#### *Good Spirits:*

Ancestor spirits (Apoe Pawlaw) Every household must build an altar for ancestor spirits in the woman's room to protect their offspring. The ancestor spirits should be worshipped at least 9 times a year.

Chief of spirits (Apoe Ahpi) is the head of all spirits in heaven monitoring the well being of villagers who ask for help. The Ya U Pee rite for the great spirit is held in April.

Village Spirit or the ancestor spirits of everyone. These spirits reside everywhere in the village, especially at Lok Khaw (the entrance of the village) to protect the villagers from evil.

Farm / Rice field Spirit or Cha Na Ah Ma protects the farmer and the crops in the field. The Akha worship the spirit both at the beginning of cultivation and after the harvest.

#### *Evil Spirits:*

These spirits cause illness and catastrophe, and are always hot-tempered and like to harm man. Man has to worship and propitiate to these spirits. They include, for instance, Forest Spirit, Wind Spirit, and Rainbow Spirit, which reside outside the village. The Akha believe that they are safe only in the village; thus, they build the village entrance gate at the front and the back to prevent these evil spirits from entering. There are also other tools to keep evil spirits away, such as the sharp fences and weapons at Loh Khaw.

Near every Akha village, there are a large group of trees which are considered to be a preserved area for the forest of the village, regarded as the water source and the place for the forest spirit. The forest spirit is believed to stay in the hollow of the biggest tree in the forest. No tree in this area can be cut. There must be rites to worship the forest spirit at Meesong (shrine for the spirit).

## **Fowl Categorization of the Akha**

Among all hilltribes, the Akha are the group that mostly raise chickens and have rites utilizing chickens. They strongly hold to customs and rites passed down from their ancestors.

There are many stories about the connection between chicken and man in their myths. For instance, the stories of the chicken who called out for the lost sun, the chicken who brought rice grain back to man, the chicken who taught man how to reproduce offspring, or the story of Monyi, who looked for new land by chicken divination. According to the meanings and roles of the chicken in Akha values, the chicken can be divided into 3 types: red jungle fowl, decoy and domestic chicken.

*Red jungle fowl* or “yanee,” which means “chicken that stay in the woods”. Male wild fowl are called “yanee ya puu” and female ones are called “yanee ya maa”. The Akha believe that red jungle fowl belong to gods or spirits because they stay outside the village.

### *Form of red jungle fowl*

Red jungle fowl are smaller than domestic chicken. They can fly up high and down to lower ground. Male fowl have red feathers with white feathers at the tail. The feathers are delicate. Female ones are black (The “Tai Lue” say that the colour is “Mahn” colour, the “Lahu” say it is brown) with small ears, small legs with scales. Red jungle fowl combs are red and extensible. The combs erect when they start to coo. Around October, they start to coo and their combs start to stand erect. From August to October, they coo the whole day long, especially during the full moon. Their mating season is from February to March.

They lay around 2-3 eggs in April. The eggs hatch within 18 days.

### *Attitude toward red jungle fowl*

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| The Akha    | - sweet voice, fast flying, hard to catch<br>- thicker and sweeter than chicken<br>- belong to spirits and not for offering<br>- untamable, even when raise in the household, they will fly back to the forest when they reach full growth   |
| The Luhuna  | - short voice, strong, but die if they touch the excrement of (Black Musser) domestic chicken because they always stay in trees<br>- tasty flesh<br>- from experience by eye-witness: if they mate with domestic hens, the offspring become domestic like its mother, and so cannot fly up, only down  |
| The Tai Lue | - sweet voice, more clever and stronger than domestic chicken<br>- firm flesh because they eat fruit<br>- self-esteem, ie, can't be domesticated. After mating with domestic hens, the offspring follow its father into the forest. A red jungle fowl was captured and raised as a domestic chicken. The offspring were red jungle fowl like their father and flew back to the forest when they reached maturity |

The characteristics of red jungle fowl are voice (the coo), colour, vividness, and

especially delicious flesh, which causes them to be hunted. There have been many attempts to capture them to raise as domestic chicken but they instinctively always try to escape. Red jungle fowl are now protected species. The government urged people to hand in their weapons so that they have had to stop hunting them, in accordance with government policy.

In the hymn offered by the sacred leader 'pima', it is said, at the beginning of this world, Moh Yue, the ancestor, had 7-8 offspring. Each offspring was assigned to create things. One named Ueyaeh created wings and gave them to the great bird to rule heaven. Then he created a red cock called Puechoh which was given to the Akha. When the researcher asked why Ueyae did not give red jungle fowl, the teller said that they belonged to the spirits and were born in the forest, while domestic chicken were created to live with man. It is clear that the Akha divide the human world from the world of spirits. This is also reflected in their worship of ancestor spirits. The Akha will offer Palawpatu (a food tray for the spirit) to ancestor spirits. After offering the food tray, they have to turn away and cannot look back. They believe that man and spirits cannot eat from the same food tray.

There is a myth about the sun and the moon disappearing and man having to send animals to search for them. A red jungle fowl was first assigned the task. The fowl cooed, but the sun did not rise. Then Akha's Puechoh was asked to do the same. Puechoh flapped his wings once, which was heard up to the entire seven classes of heaven. He moved his leg once, sending vibrations reaching the underworld. Puechoh turned his face to the east and cooed. As Puechoh started his coo, other domestic chickens in the world

cooed and the sun rose slowly bringing light back to this world. Thus, the world became as it once had been. *This myth shows the relationship between red jungle fowl and domestic chicken. Puechoh would have to be the ancestor of domestic chicken that came from red jungle fowl.*

*Decoy chicken*, called "kai tang" by northern people or "yaneetama" in Akha, is a special domestic chicken used as bait to lure red jungle fowl into thinking it a red jungle fowl too. The red jungle fowl will fly to this decoy, thus being easily trapped. Decoy are the same size as red jungle fowl but their combs are smaller.

*Significant Characteristics of decoy*: loud coo similar to red jungle fowl, wide base of wings and tail, curvy tail, the upper beak a little bit narrow, and wide chest. A chicken with these characteristics is believed to be a good chicken. An Akha who owns such a chicken is considered to be lucky.

*Good decoy* can be selected by plucking a soft feather from its wing and inserting into its tear gland where there is a canal connected to the throat. When pulled out, if there is blood, it is predicted that the owner of the decoy will be able to hunt big animal as well as red jungle fowl. The Akha raise the decoy until it naturally dies. When it dies, the owner will neither eat nor bury it. The owner will hold a rite to send off the spirit of the decoy, like they do for "kai jao lao" or "kai mae lao" or "the head of the roost", which is a hen that can lay many eggs and can lay eggs till the age of 9-10 years, which is the end of its fertility.

*The ritual to send off the spirit of dead decoy to heaven:* In the ritual, the owner puts some money, paddy rice, ashes, and the corpse of the decoy in the crotch of a big tree outside the village and prays for that dead decoy to reincarnate as his decoy again.

Everything mentioned shows that decoy are similar to red jungle fowl for their status between the human world and the world of spirits. When decoy are raised as domestic chicken, they have higher status and also have some characteristics of fowl from the spirit world. Therefore, the Akha treat this kind of fowl in a special manner as shown by the rite for sending off its spirit to heaven, which is held outside of the village. This manner reflects the Akha idea about sense of place. The area inside the village is for man and the outside is for spirits.

*Domestic chicken* or “kai baan” or “kai liang”, called “yaji”, in Akha are meaningful and related to the general Akha way of life more than ordinary pets. Chicken and eggs are used in almost every rite, whether divination, rite of passage or annual rites and ceremonies.

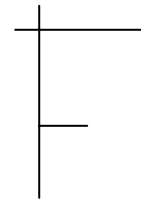
## **Roles of the Chicken in Customs and Rites**

The Akha use domestic chicken in divination when:

*Establishing a new community.* The Akha establish a new community when key persons in the community have conflict, or in case of epidemic, infertile land, crimes, etc. In short, whenever the community cannot retain its stability for any reason, “Djoema” or the principal village authority will determine the location of a new community by an egg throwing rite.

Djoema will hold an egg in his right hand, and raise it not higher than his ears, then throw the egg into a hole. If the egg does not break, it has to be thrown again, but not more than 3 times. It means that the spirit who owns that area does not allow the move. Then they have to move to an adjacent area to repeat the rite again, but not on the same day.

*Building a new house.* They have to throw the egg back over the shoulder, not higher than the ears, and the egg must not touch the ears. For the ceremony for establishing a new community, the egg must be thrown not more than 3 times. The egg’s yolk will spread in 3 main directions, showing the route from the beginning of the village to the end.



*Embarking on a journey.* To check if there will be a hazard or good luck, the Akha kill a chicken to examine legs, liver, and chest meat (Informants such as Mr. Wuttikrai, who is a native Akha, said that the Akha check legs and head of the chicken before the journey. The chicken head is checked to divine illness, while the legs are checked for travel, and before hunting). Furthermore, the Akha read their fortune by inserting a wood stick into both of the chicken’s thigh bones. The right leg side is for themselves and the left one is for others. The fortune teller inserts a stick in the hole of each leg and observes the angle. If the angle of the right leg is higher than the left leg, there will be good fortunate.



A chicken bone is also used to tell the fortune before hunting. The bone must be from a male chicken. Other organs of the chicken are also used for fortune telling.

*The Rites of Passage* are the rites held during the transitional period in one's life, from cradle to grave. The Akha divide rites into 2 categories: (1) rites for the living which are called in Akha "daeyong"; and (2) rites for death which are called "siyong". The rites of the 12 months are held in each month regularly and became custom. Most rites in which the chicken is involved are mainly those offering food to ancestor spirits.

The followings are Akha's rites of passage:

*Birth rites.* There are beliefs that:

- prohibit pregnant woman and new mothers from eating white chicken because it will cause blindness and bone weakness.
- prohibit new mother whose baby is less than 1 month old from eating meat of a chicken heavier than 1 kg.



When a baby is born, the mother touches its mouth with a boiled egg to train the baby to drink milk from her breast. This egg is called "*Shuepoh pae ya u*": "ya-u" means "eggs",

"Shuepoh" means "breasts", "pae" means "to leak." This egg is considered to be the first egg in the baby's life. On the day when the baby is born, the father kills a cock, called "ya sae", (a white chicken is prohibited). To kill ya sae, its throat has to be carefully cut. If the cut is too long they believe that, the baby will have a long neck. This cock is cooked for birth attendants and relatives who come to assist in the birth. On the second day, the father kills a hen, called "yashaw sae." "Shaw" means "to be pure". Then he offers a feast to all relatives as a way of announcing the birth of the new baby.

*Death and Funeral.* The Akha mostly use chicken in ritual concerning death. As many as 20 chicken may be killed in one single ceremony. There must be one white chicken for the funeral.

When an elder dies, people bring one egg, some tobacco or some dried tea leaves folded in a leaf called "Patae" to the family of the dead.

There is also a tradition called "*Prapaeni Chon Khai*" (Eggs clashing ceremony) which might be one of life parts (Children's Day) or might be one of the rites of the twelve months because it is held in the middle of April every year. Current data cannot distinguish these two ceremonies. However, regarding the rites of the twelve months, the data from the research of Kraisit Sittichodok are quite complete, so we use it as a reference basis.

It can be concluded that there are 21 rites that use eggs and chickens in the entire 12 months as shown in the following table:

### Chicken in Rites and Twelve Month Ceremonies

Rites	Period	Level of the Rites		Objectives
		Household	Community	
1. <i>New Year Top Festival</i> (kill one hen for ancestral offering on the first day)	The end of December (4 days)	☐	☐	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To celebrate the end of cultivation season and the beginning of resting season.</li> <li>2. To celebrate the increasing age and to revise everything that had occurred in one year round the village, such as the in and out migration of village members, norms or customs violation, family separation, etc... Also, it is time to reconcile in cases of discord or loans. In case of loans, the amount should be returned, at least partially.</li> <li>3. To visit the elderly to ask for blessing and forgiveness. Every family tries to invite as many guests as possible.</li> <li>4. To let young men and women socialize on New Year day.</li> <li>5. To open the barn and take the stored grain out to eat.</li> </ol>
2. <i>Grain Collecting Ceremony</i>	The end of February to the end of March	☐	×	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To preserve the rites of original rice grain collecting (farm rice)</li> <li>2. To store grain collected from the last harvest in the barn. (This rite allows the Akha to have adequate food, especially, protein because this period is the dry season when the land becomes less fertile.)</li> </ol>
3. <i>New Year Eggs Clashing Ceremony</i> . (kill one hen for ancestral offering on the second day. Boil eggs and glutinous rice)	In mid - April (five days)	☐	☐	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To welcome a new season and new life. When the season changes from summer to the rainy season, it is considered to be the beginning of the New Year; it is the time to start planting.</li> <li>2. To welcome ancestor spirits.</li> </ol>

Rites	Period	Level of the Rites		Objectives
		Household	Community	
for children on the fifth day.)				3. Children's Day of the Akha. The Akha boil eggs, colour them and give them to children to mark the beginning of education.
4. <i>The Ritual of the Building of New Village Gate</i> (Djoema kills chickens at his house after the ritual and, then feast.)	April to May	×	□	1. To demarcate the world of spirits from the human world. 2. To show the age of the village. The Akha build new gates at the upper and lower ends of the village.
5. <i>The Ritual of the Offering to the Lords of Land and Water</i> (1 pair of sacrificial chickens: male and female)	April, first day after the ritual of the Building New village Gate.	×	□	1. To beg the spirit of that area and the dead former leaders to protect and provide for the village. 2. For rich, plentiful crops.
6. <i>Ceremony of First Rice Planting</i> (One sacrificial hen is used on the first day, one pair of chickens, male and female, is used on the second day to tell the fortune.)	mid - May (2 days)	□	□	1. To warn that the season for rice planting has come. The villagers should prepare the seed. 2. To apologize to the lord of water or Naga who gives water for agriculture. The Akha believe that Naga is the father of the Rice Goddess. Therefore, they kill chicken for offering at the principal village well. 3. To foretell coming crop production from chicken bones.
7. <i>Ceremony of Farm Rice Treat and the Field Shrine Offering</i> (one sacrificial male chicken is used on the first day, another uses one hen.)	July	□	×	1. To boost the morale of farmers. 2. To ask forgiveness of creatures in the farming area that are accidentally killed, such as rats, birds, or snakes.

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Rites	Period	Level of the Rites		Objectives
		Household	Community	
8. <i>Swing Festival</i> (A sacrificial hen is used on the first day.)	From the end of August to the beginning of September (4 days)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To celebrate agricultural products.</li> <li>2. To promote women's roles because it is the ceremony in which women ask men to build a hugh swing. During this period, it usually rains very heavily, so the villagers temporarily stop working in the field.</li> <li>3. To bring harmony between the world of humans and the spirit world.</li> </ol>
9. <i>Ceremony to honour the formers cultural leaders or "Jaew ma"</i> (one hen)	September (2 days)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	To worship the former "Jaew ma" and deceased ancestors.
10. <i>The Chicken Feather Plucking Ceremony</i> (one cock at the ancestral shrine)	August - September (1 day)	<input type="checkbox"/>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To pay homage to ancestor spirits.</li> <li>2. To gather among relatives and check the number of members in the clan. This day is considered "Akha Family Day" because every member, except women who have married to men of other family (ies), has to return home.</li> </ol>
11. <i>The ceremony to expel evil spirits away from the community</i> (1 hen)	October (2 days)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To mark the seasonal change from rainy season to winter.</li> <li>2. To expel evil spirits from the village.</li> <li>3. "Jaew ma" holds an appreciation feast for being chosen.</li> </ol>
12. <i>The ceremony to determine an auspicious time for the community to hold the "eating new rice" rite.</i> (1 cock)	October - December	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To determine an auspicious time for the community to harvest their rice.</li> <li>2. To preserve the type of rice that is believed to be the original type that ancestors used to plant.</li> </ol>

## Observations on use of chickens in Akha Rites

The gender of the chicken used in each rite is explicitly fixed. Some rites also require the colour of the feathers to be red or black only. White chicken is not to be used except for a burial day. The chicken used in rites is required not to be handicapped but physically perfect and pure. The selection will be made one day before the rite.

Before being killed, the chicken has to be cleaned and purified by water from a sacred well or freshly drawn water. In purifying the chicken, Akha pour water three times each over legs, body and neck. Some Akha said that the parts that need to be cleaned are legs, wings, and head. In auspicious ceremonies, the chicken is cleaned from legs up to the upper parts of the body, while in unauspicious ones the reverse is done.



In killing, the chicken is hit nine times, i.e. 3 times on the head and 3 times each at wing joints and legs respectively. To completely kill the chicken, it might be strangled except when blood is needed in some rites, e.g., to put a blood stain on the cage. In that case, the chicken is hit on the head to bleed. In divination, the

chicken has to be cut at the throat. Its head must not be hit because the Pima needs to investigate the natural shape of the chicken head.



The sacrificed chicken has to be broiled pluck its feathers, except nails and beaks, which can be easily extracted. Boiled water is not use for this since it would signifies hell's boiler and the boiling water would hurt their god.



To cut open the chicken, the ribs have to be taken out with entrails from the breast. If the entrails stick to the breast, a new chicken must be chosen.

Only ginger, salt, and glutinous rice are used for cooking. Other seasonings are believed to make the food impure and the gods would not like that. Moreover, when chopping the chicken, the flesh must not fall to the ground because it would be improper to use it for offering.

Chicken is an important element in an offering tray. The three main parts are legs, liver, and breast. For an offering five pieces, wings and other flesh parts are added. The Akha kill the chicken on the first day of the ritual.



For Akha, the domestic chicken is closely related to their ancestors. The clearest evidence is, for instance, “*Ya Ji Jijii Ahphew*” or The Chicken Feather Plucking Ceremony held in October. This is not only held as Family Day for Akha, but also the day for making offering to ancestor spirits. The rite starts with the purification of the chicken by water. The sacred water is kept on the ancestral altar. The cooks have to pour water upon legs, body, and neck 3 times each. The feathers are pulled out 3 times at the partition that separate men and women. Then at the men’s doorway another 3 times, followed by another 3 times at the female section. This is repeated 3 times. Then the chicken is killed by hitting it on the head. The left leg and right wing are cut off afterwards (Some families cut every part off). They believe that the leg is the ancestor’s cane who comes down from heaven and the wing is the fan to relief the ancestor’s weariness on coming down to earth. The chicken is cleaned, cut open and broiled to make the offering.

The addition, the researcher also found another relation between domestic chicken

and their ancestors in Akha myth. The creator who created man along with the chicken told man to use chicken in offerings. The chicken was told to wake man up in the morning. The chicken was told to both wake up and go to sleep before man. Man and other creatures follow the chicken in procreation.

## **Conclusion**

The chicken in the Akha World View is divided into 3 kinds:

*Red Jungle Fowl: the fowl of the world of spirits.*

This kind of chicken does not play a direct role in the Akha way of life except only for consumption. But it is linked with the domestic chicken through myth. Especially *the myth of Puechoh*, who called for the sun. Puechoh was a domestic chicken but his colour was red, like the colour of red jungle fowl.

*Decoy Chicken: the chicken in between the human world and the world of spirits.*

Decoy is a kind of domestic chicken of which the size, the colour, and the coo is similar to red jungle fowl; hence, it is considered to be in between domestic chicken (human world) and red jungle fowl (world of spirits), so it has higher status than domestic chicken.

*Domestic Chicken: chicken of the human world closely related to man.*

It is used as a mediator between man and the spirits of ancestors because they are used in various ancestral rites.

The study of the Akha view of the chicken reveals a deviating line on imagination and territory. The natural world is the world of cohabitation, with gods, spirits, man, and animals living together but with distinct

demarcation. Besides, there are many attitudes against anything that is “wrong doing and unnatural” in Akha culture. This might be the reason for the name “Akha”, which means “to be in between” or “to be neutral.”

Though this research included 2 Akha villages, the researcher found that the data collected from rituals and myths are the same. The few differences that occurred are from differences pronunciation or accent of the villagers because they were from different groups. The Akha in Thailand are not isolated. They always settle with the Musser. Therefore, the researcher could compare rituals concerning the chicken and attitudes towards them with nearby tribes.

This research has not given us the direct answer to the question of: How did red jungle fowl become domestic chicken? *However, the myths about the chicken, or any topic linking domestic chicken to red jungle fowl could be a clue for further study on this topic.*

For the tribes which do not have a written language, myths are important because they are sacred, narrated stories that have been passed down through generations from ancestors. Most myths are formulated, rhythmical chants in the rite, especially at funerals, which is the rite to send the soul of the dead to the ancestor's world. Myths explain the origin of the earth, man, and other things. There are truths behind metaphorical language or mythology which is the basis of natural sciences. Therefore, we can draw informed conclusions from myths.

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- Interview with Ahjarn Wuttikrai Mohpa and the Akha Villagers of Baan Huay Keelek Mae Suai District, Chiang Rai (October - December, 2004)

## **Appendix**

### **Myths of the Akha from Fieldwork**

The Akha tell their myths in rituals, especially in funeral ceremony, by Tumoh or Pima. The sacred tales are narrated by oral tradition. They started with the creation of gods, nature, and the first couple; then mixed with later folktale.

#### **Chicken Born Before Eggs.**

Told by: Mr. A-tu A-kher  
Na-nger of Baan Na Toh

When the world was created, there were two gods (god and goddess). The goddess or “Miyeh” lived beneath the earth causing plants to grow (possibly, Mother Earth) and was in charge of taking care of all edible things. Another god “Um Yhong”, staying in the sky, is responsible for health, death, and living making rain. The Akha believe that the sky and earth can talk to each other, and there is a stove at the horizon. When cold air meets with heat, it makes rain.

God (the Light) blew wind from his mouth and there occurred a cock and a hen on a branch of a tree. God taught them to coo and mate by having the cock drink water that was mixed with medical mist so that the cock could mate with the hen; then there came eggs. Later, the god created man like a chicken and gave the first couple one glass each. The woman drank first so that she could bear a baby. On Apoe Pawlaw Day or the Worship Day for Ancestors, the woman wanted another glass. These two glasses were a mixture of darkness and light. The woman drank both glasses and a blood lump formed.

Miyeh ordered man to use the chicken in ceremonies and ordered the chicken to coo in the morning.

First, only chicken, no other creatures including man, knew how to procreate. God told them to follow the chicken. After that, every creature knew how to procreate. While watching the chicken, every one laughed; therefore, the chicken felt so embarrassed that they have to hide their faces when they sleep. Moreover, god ordered chicken to wake up and go to sleep before man, and ordered man to follow them.

#### **Two Brothers or Follow the Sun**

Told by: Mr. Wuttikrai Mohpa

Once there were two brothers. The elder one was “Maw Yhue” and the younger one was “Mon Yi”. Maw Yhue always used bad language but he had a magic wand. When he went out to beg for money, he would return with a lot of money. Mon Yi was good-looking but never got any money. One day, the elder brother got sick, and so the younger one then asked for the wand to go out to beg. Maw Yhue did not allow it because it had been given to him by an angel. While Maw Yhue was sleeping, his brother stole his wand and went out to beg. Finally, Mon Yi got so many things but he was too afraid to return the wand to his brother so he left the wand at Lok Kong (the Gate of the village). When Maw Yhue recovered, he did not see the wand. He asked his younger brother about the wand but he did not get an answer. At last, he found it at Lok Kong but it had become a big tree which afterward grew and covered the sun and the moon. This tree was named “Sidza” (like a banya tree).

The Sidza had grown till it covered the light of the sun and the moon. Bayi (the blacksmith, who was one of important leaders of the Akha village) could not work, so he asked someone to find out how big the



tree was. A deer had tried first but he died before completing a round. Then a gibbon tried to climb up to the top of the tree but his life was shorter than the height of the tree. The Akha and the Abue (the mid Lander) had to help each other. While the Akha were cutting the tree, the Abue sent them food. The Akha had been inside the stump for 7 days cutting the tree until only a small stump remained, but the tree did not fall.

A Pootan bird whose body was green and beak was red, called in Akha “Tong Joh Loh”, came and told the Akha to push the tree to the left side. The folks got annoyed and threw a piece of wood at the Pootan bird. That’s why today this bird has a red beak and forehead. Anyway, the folks followed the instruction of the bird and were able to fell the tree down.

This gigantic tree had 66 roots. When the tree fell, the Akha told the Abue to run to the south, and so 66,000 Abues died and only 6 lived. The Akha ran to the north and so there were 6 dead and 66,000 alive.

Without the Sidza, the sun was very hot during that day. It was so hot that the rock was going to burst. At night, the moon rose and the tree withered. Then man found someone to shoot at the sun and the moon. The Akha cut this gigantic tree into 3 parts. The first part became a man, the second one became a bow, and the last one was arrows. The man shot all 12 suns and 12 moons so that every sun and moon fell into the water. Darkness came. Therefore, someone had to call back the sun and the moon, but they found nothing but a chicken. The chicken was given this mission. Thus, the chicken has to see the sun first and coo to tell everyone.

This myth story is chanted in the funeral of someone who is drowned. In the ceremony, there must be a chicken to call back the *khwan* of the drawn according to the myth.

### **The Chicken called for the Sun**

Told by: Mr. Wuttikrai Mohpa

Once a red jungle fowl and a domestic chicken competed with each other to call out the sun. Both cooed a lot but the sun did not rise. Finally, they came to Puechoh, the first chicken of the Akha. Puechoh had power. One flap of his wing could be heard in all 7 levels of heaven because the upper part of his leg (Pa oh leo pa) had 3 amulets inside and 3 inside his throat to make his coo sound good. When Puechoh cooed, the sun rose, bringing light back to the world again.

This myth is chanted by Tumoh or Pima in Latu rites (pray to chase away bad luck). The Akha believe that when the gigantic tree grew big and covered the sun, they could not hold any rites. The chicken called the sun back, so the chicken is more important than any other animal. The chicken sees the sun before other creatures. The chicken starts its coo at three o’clock in the morning because it can hear the sun opening U-Shukoh (the house door that is made of bamboo).

### **Umyae built Chicken Wings.**

Told by: Mr. Wuttikrai Mohpa

Mon Yi, the ancestor of the Akha, had 8-9 offspring. He ordered each offspring to create nature. One named Umyae said that he would build wings in four years. Having finished, he created a pair of domestic chicken. They were red. The cock was named Puechoh. These chickens were created for humans. He did not create red jungle fowl because red jungle fowl belonged to the spirits. Umyae gave Puechoh the wings. Puechow then became “Om-oh” (the mythical Garuda-like bird) and left from man for heaven.

From this myth, the Akha believe that domestic chicken are from red jungle fowl.

### **The Betraying Son-in-law**

Told by: Mr. Wuttikrai Mohpa

There is a story about the Akha when they were staying in Yadae, the motherland of the Akha (which is believed to be around Sib Song Panna). There was a gigantic tree called “Sizda” that block people from meeting each other. An Akha girl had a lover who was from another tribe. This man had tried to send his message by putting it inside a bamboo section and floating it down the stream. At last, they got married. The son-in-law or “Ahbue” betrayed the Akha by sending his message to attack the Akha. They challenged the Akha to 3 things. First, they competed by shooting arrows to a cliff.

The Abue son-in-law was keen. He put banana sap on the arrow so that it could stick to the cliff. Finally, they competed by sending fire to the town through a canal (the irrigation ditches) without allowing the fire to go out. The Akha use burning Kia Wood (Pine tree) but the fire went out when it touch the water. The Abue used dried buffalo dung as the base for burning Kia wood and they won the competition because the fire did not go out. So they could take the farmland on the plain from the Akha. Thus, the Akha had no farm land on the plain and had to move upland.

In this tale the Abue may be the Mon-Khmer or the Tai group, who were the people from the Plain that invaded the land of the native Akha.

