An Investigation into the Inevitable Nature of Culture Change within Tribal Societies in Northern Thailand: Case Study of the Akha Community in Mehmon Village

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Abstract
This paper seeks to understand "culture", its definition, associated theories and most importantly, the notion of change. By using the Akha community in Mehmon village (Northern Thailand) as a case study, the author hopes to seek out areas where culture change has occurred, the effects of such change and most importantly, the reasons for change to occur specifically in tribal societies and in general societies as well.

Keywords: Northern Thailand Hill tribes; Akha (italics); Culture change; Globalization; Tribal societies

Introduction
General background
Defining "culture" and its constituents have long been a tireless effort by anthropologists around the world. The difficulty researchers face lies in the inability to come to a consensus on an accurate definition. Previously, researchers Alfred Kroger and Clyde Kluckhohn [1] had catalogued over 100 different definitions of the word, but Kroger later refined it to mean something that is "learned, shared, patterned and meaningful" [2]. Modern literature slanted towards cultural studies reflects a growing tendency for researchers to utilize specific case studies, for example a particular ethnic group, because studying culture as an isolated entity is meaningless. Parallels can be drawn between this method of study, and the separate disciplines of area studies and anthropology. Firstly, area studies, as discussed by Hall and Tarrow [3], involve "building on a relatively deep and context-rich knowledge of a specific society or region to develop propositions of more general applicability". Similarly, Balan [4] argues that anthropology starts with an analysis of specific particularities, which will eventually lead to a more general understanding of culture. Simply put, the use of case studies improves researchers' overall understanding of culture because it enables them to contextualize their research, and thus, observe possible trends which may not be restricted solely to the specific case studied. In this case, this paper will deal specifically with tribal societies in Northern Thailand.

Formerly known as Siam, Thailand is a country located at the center of the Indochina peninsula in Southeast Asia. The northern part of the state encompasses nine provinces, and is widely known for its mountain ranges and the scenic river valleys. Aside from the physical landscape of this magnificent region, the mountainous areas of Northern Thailand has also become home to a group of locals known as the "Hill Tribes". Over time, this specific terminology has been applied to the various tribal people who have emigrated from Yunnan, Tibet or elsewhere in China. They are a group of ethnic minorities who make up an estimated 800,000 individuals. At least ten hill tribes can be identified, but the Thai Government has specifically recognized only six of them as the main groups, namely the Akha, Lahu, Karen, Hmong, Mien and Lisu people [5,6]. Their distinct traditions, language and religious practice stand as a testament to their existence and rich culture, which they can proudly call their own. However amidst several physical challenges...
significant and rampant are such changes?

3. Why does culture change occur specifically within the Akha community in Mehmon as well as in general societies?

Thesis statement

Aligned to Kroeber’s theory of culture being analogous to a coral reef, in terms of how “humans have no real control” over change [8], this paper seeks to prove the idea that when a group of individuals, together with their culture, is restricted to the boundaries of a community, they will naturally shape their own identity due to their innate characteristics which allow for the occurrence of change, leading to signs of deviance from their original culture.

Methodology

This paper will take a three-pronged qualitative approach, in which each phase will be congruent to the respective research question crafted, as reflected in the conceptual framework (Figure 1). The overarching aim of the research is to account for the presence of culture change in general communities and societies. Hence, in order to do so, Mehmon village, located within Northern Thailand, has been chosen as a case study. The first phase of the research aims at identifying the types of culture changing processes which have taken place. It will involve an analysis of both the general Akha culture and that of the chosen community residing in Mehmon, leading to a comparison between the two. Culture change would have proven to occur if cultural elements of the case study show signs of deviance from the original Akha culture. Details of this paper draw from both secondary data of research publications and primary data from personal observations, interviews and photographs pertaining to the village. After identifying the types of culture changing processes which have taken place within the community, the second phase will focus on further discussions as to how these processes have impacted both the culture of the community, as well as the villagers’ lives. Other areas of exploration include how significant and frequent these changes occur within the chosen society. Finally, this will lead to the third phase, which will be a deeper interpretation of culture change and an understanding as to why such change occurs in societies. From the case study, the author hopes to be able to draw from it several trends and observations which can be applied in more generality as well as to prove the overarching hypothesis that even though external processes such as globalization are ongoing, it is a society’s innate characteristics that lead to the occurrence of change.

Delimitations of research

Culture, being a large and no-doubt complex entity, is impossible to be studied as a whole. Therefore, this research will only focus on culture change, specifically targeted at the tribal societies of Northern Thailand with the Akha community residing in Mehmon village as the case study.

Limitations of research

In a paper surrounding anthropological research, Balan [4] introduces the ethnographic method as a main feature, which many anthropologists apply when conducting their research. Hoey [9] echoes his sentiments, suggesting that the best way of conducting research related to culture, is through “long-term engagement in the field setting or place where the ethnography takes place”. This is known as participant observation – in other words, “in order to develop an understanding of what it is like to live in a setting [or learn about a certain culture], the researcher must become a participant in the life of the setting and an observer”. This highlights a clear limitation of this study. As the author would not be able to observe the chosen village over a prolonged period of time, it might lead to possible loopholes within the research.

Research Findings

Northern Thailand and the hill tribes

Introduction to the hill tribes of Northern Thailand: Northern Thailand’s unique geography creates two distinct ecological zones leading to separate socio-economic systems. The first is the lowland
sedentary area while the other comprises the hill tribes who inhabit the highlands. Srissontorn [10] notes that while the term "hill tribes" is still in use, it is not entirely accurate because a large majority of these individuals have migrated downwards and many of them do not belong to a particular tribal organization. The term also explicitly differentiates them from the lowland Thai and according to McKinnon [11] invokes "a set of stigmatizing discourses of exotic nomadic tribes people". Srissontorn [10] notes that there are six major tribes namely the Akha, Lahu, Karen, Hmong, Mien and Lisu; these tribes are distinct from each other [10,12] and from the lowlanders [13-16]. According to available statistics, there are in total 3572 hill tribe villages in 20 provinces of Thailand, comprising 133,070 households and around 800,000 people. The largest group is the Karen, followed by the Hmong and the Lahu [10,17,18].

These highlanders prefer living in smaller villages [18] of about 20 to 50 houses each, at an altitude of about 600 to 1200 metres above sea level [19]. Majority of them migrated from Tibet, Burma, Laos and China [20], only entering Northern Thailand several centuries ago [5,17]. They are mostly engaged in agriculture as their primary economic activity and household-based handicraft production as secondary sources of income [10]. Delang [19] elaborates that the farmers are divided into secondary and primary forest swiddeners. Secondary swiddening involves the rotation of fields rather than relocation while primary swiddeners practice a more destructive form of swiddening, after which they relocate. One of the commonly found crops planted back then was opium but since 1959, it became illegal, thus farmers switched to other alternatives [10].

Research on these tribes has often surfaced a myriad of problems they face, and they have seemingly become a burden to Thailand’s economic and environmental development [7,16]. Jackson [20] points out that the most fundamental issue is poverty. The villages they live in often have "no sanitation, no electricity, no medical care and no schools". Cultural isolation has also led to a lack of national identity, mainly because the Ministry of Interior is hesitant in granting the highlanders citizenship due to their close affiliation with crime [10,21]. This has led their status to fluctuate between "naturalized", "alien", "illegal" [10] and more commonly, between Thai citizens and "the others" [22]. Finally, lowlanders have also proven to be a problem as they compete with the hill tribes for "land, water and soil resources", forcing them to live on less land with limited options (Crooker, 2007) for survival.

The ongoing threat of culture change: Burdened with the wide range of tangible problems, these hill tribes are at times oblivious to the fact that their culture is slowly eroding too. These tribes have different social habits and extreme cultural differences but it is these differences - their "languages, clothing, ornaments and religion" [5], which make them who they are. Verchot [23] explains that such erosion of culture is not restricted to the hill tribes alone, but indigenous cultures worldwide struggle with these "shifting boundaries that connect and separate them from the dominant culture". Higashide [24] adds that Southeast Asian minorities face the constant threat of culture loss due to "insufficient recognition that each is a unique minority".

The most fundamental and universal reason for cultural devolution to occur is due to migration, which have been woven into the highlanders’ culture [23], either within the hill areas, or outwards. Younger generations are now moving to urban areas and integrating into the Thai society, thus they disregard their traditions, with the opinion that it is no longer worth preserving [10]. Also, Hickey and Wright [13] add that continually-increasing contact amongst the various tribes has also led to numerous forms of change. While such interaction may be within one’s control, processes like modernization are still inevitable. Srissontorn [10] explains that "just as modern society is changing", the highlanders face growing "social and economic problems". The closer proximity to urban lifestyles and "improved roads, infrastructure and technology" are having a "huge impact on their way of life". The acceptance of Thai language into the villages, "exposure to modern knowledge and other religions like Buddhism and Christianity" have caused communities holding "traditional values and beliefs" to break apart and lose their identity [18]. Soon, it will be close to impossible to see young women with their "elaborate silver-covered headpieces dressed in short skirts harvesting hill rice with sickles, or mothers sitting on porches, wearing heavily pleated, batik designed skirts made from help fibers and woven by hand, sewing elaborate tapestries" [17].

The Akha tribe

According to Anderson [17], the Akha people are "cooperative, friendly and gracious". Heh and Tehan [25] notes that their population is difficult to estimate accurately as there is "no adequate, comprehensive census data available"; nonetheless, 25,000 were estimated in 1962 [26]; 28,000 in 1989 [27]; 33,000 in 1993 [17] and most recently, around 70,000 [25] currently spread across 200 villages in Thailand. The Akha refer to themselves using that name, though the lowlanders call them Gaw, Kha Gaw or E-Gaw [17,28] and they can be subdivided into three main sub-groups: the Akha Loinoi, Akha Ulo and Akha Pami [28]. Majority of them reside in the provinces of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Tak, Kamphaeng Pet, Pampang and Phrae [17,28,29] though Young [26] previously felt that Chiang Mai is doubtful since they are comparatively newcomers to Thailand. They also live in surrounding countries such as Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and China [25].

The Akha emigrated from the eastern part of Sip Sawng Pan Na, where most of them still live. They started migrating into Burma, Laos and Vietnam first and settled there [28] in the middle of the nineteenth century, only entering Thailand in the beginning of the twentieth century [17] with the first Akha village appearing in Thailand in 1903 [27]. The tribe lives by "The Akha Way", which is a "complex set of rules that combines religious and secular authority, and are deeply ingrained in every Akha" [27]. It was once considered "a religion, an oral history, a genealogy, a set of morals and a body of law" [29] but culture change has led to communities, such as the one in Mehmon village, deviating from it over time.

Mehmon village: the Akha community and their culture

Introduction to Mehmon village: Mehmon is one of the twelve tribal villages located within Bua Sai subdistrict (Figure 2), which is part of Mae Lao district in Chiang Rai province. The inception of the village dates back to about 30 years ago in 1974, with only 15 households then. Over time, due to tribal immigration and external influences, its population has grown to about 1000 people in 160 households as of today. However, along with the entrance of such players come cultural influences as well, slowly but surely tweaking and changing the culture of the Akha community there. An interesting aspect about Mehmon is that it is home to two distinct tribes living alongside each another – the Akha and Lisu. Using the church (Figure 3) as a marking point, the Akha households are located further down the slope while the Lisu live higher up. It has been noted that these tribes live rather independently and it is rare to see them participating in each other’s activities. While such coexistence is rather uncommon, it proves to be yet another avenue for cultural assimilation, which ultimately poses a threat towards the Akha culture as well.
Cultural parallels between the general Akha culture and the Akha community in Mehmon:

Cultural symbols: The first and most basic similarity would be the diet of the Akhas. They are known to grow and eat “hill rice, sweet corn, beans, pepper, sesame and a large variety of other vegetables” as well as breed “poultry, pigs and water buffalo” for sacrificial purposes [28]. Mehmon has done away with sacrificial practices, thus the meat, along with their own harvest, such as vegetables and rice, becomes a major part of their diet; in other words, they are self-sufficient. The health-conscious nature of the villagers is also reflected in both common Akha practice and Mehmon’s culture (Figure 4). Another obvious parallel would be that of the houses. As seen in Figure 5, the houses in Mehmon are also made of woods and built on posts, with no windows. However, Davies and Wu [27] and Perve [28] account that the roofs are generally thatched and walls made of bamboo which is not the case in Mehmon – in order to ensure a stronger protection from the elements, roofs are now made of tin or tiles instead. Additionally, Perve [28] and Tribas [30] mention that the house is commonly divided into two sections: “the men’s and the women’s and children’s”, which is apparent in Mehmon houses; in fact, there is a general consensus that men and women should maintain a clear division, even in church. Finally, Figure 6 depicts a horn-like ornament, denoting fifth-generational status. Similarities between the Akha tribe and the Akha community in Mehmon pertaining to norms are rather minor and insignificant. Young [26] notes that the women normally do most of the work both in the fields and at home, the men are mostly found at work hard alongside the women. This is practiced in Mehmon as well, where only the elders and toddlers stay behind in the village during daytime (Figure 7). In terms of societal order, Akha villages are known to be patrilineal and each village has its own headman, who is “more or less the political leader” [13,17,28]. The position of headman is still present in a large majority of villages, including Mehmon.

Cultural values and beliefs: Religion plays a major part in shaping the values and beliefs of the Akha community. The introduction of Christianity has severely altered these beliefs, thus there is seemingly little to no resemblance to the original Akha culture in this particular aspect. Only when such values are decontextualized from religion can minor parallels be drawn. For example, Anderson’s [17] research reveals that the Akhas have great respect for their elders – such a practice is observed in Mehmon as well (Figure 8). Also, Graceffo [29] praises the Akhas for having an easily-contented nature, which is generally applicable for all hill tribes. Finally, the Akhas in Mehmon are extremely welcoming to outsiders; this coincides with Kammerer’s [31] view of the Akhas being accepting and tolerant individuals.

Cultural deviance between the general Akha culture and the Akha community in Mehmon and types of culture change identified:

Cultural symbols: Traces of adaptation are reflected within the language spoken amongst the Akha people in Mehmon. They speak Akha Daw as well as Lisu due to inter-tribal interactions; likewise, the Lisu can speak Akha as well. The original Akha language is from the Sino-Tibetan family, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group and T or Lolo branch [17,25,28]. Young [26] and Anderson [17] note that while the Lisu and Akha languages are similar, they are “not mutually intelligible”. Music and dance are also aspects of the Akha culture as Young [26] notes, they have a “quaint dance in which the
men stamp around in a circle and the women form a line to shuffle back and forth”. Such performances used to be the norm but nowadays, stimulus diffusion has led the people to use that as a “selling point” for visitors or tourists instead. Their main pride was being able to dress up in their traditional outfits during such occasions. Young [26] though Anderson [17] and Tribasia [30] point out that they used to keep their traditional outfits on, even at night. Figures 8 and 9 showcase the dress worn, which matches Anderson’s [17] description of headpieces made of “feathers…, buttons, coins, silver and aluminum” and a “dark blue” dress with “beautiful stitchery on the sleeves and back”. Although their traditional dresses are still existent, the Akha in Mehmon no longer subscribe to the practice of keeping them on throughout the day as their culture dictates, detailing subtle signs of devolution.

Cultural norms: As mentioned in 3.3.2.2, children are known to help out in both the village and the field. However, ever since the Thai government established a school from nursery to grade nine, with Thai teachers being deployed to stay in the village temporarily, schooling has become part of the children’s lives. An increasingly worrying but common trend is also that of middle-aged Akha individuals leaving the village and their families for the city to find work. Upon returning, transculturation would most definitely have occurred, and the individual may transmit and apply adapted, modernized methods to the village which had previously been picked up from urban life. Stimulus diffusion has led to a major change in the agricultural aspect of Mehmon. Akhas, or hill tribes in general, were known to practice “slash and burn farming” [28] and were once the major growers of opium [17,26,31]. However, such a “nomadic life” have caused them to get into trouble with authorities regarding environmental degradation [32], forcing them to switch to other alternatives. Other than governmental accusations, Mehmon faces the additional entrance of economic players, who completely changed the agricultural landscape within the village. This has led to a substitution of crops being grown, and ultimately their source of income. Currently, coffee is the main produce, which obviously is uncommon in a place like Mehmon. The village contributes towards the farming and manufacturing of the coffee beans, which are subsequently transported out of the village (Figures 10 and 11).

While a headman is still existent within the village, there has been an abolishment of the position of a priest. Especially in non-Christian villages, priests are responsible for the sacred sites in and around the village and ensure The Akha Way is abided by [17,30]. Christianity has primarily been the reason for the removal of such a role; it can be noted that the church pastor in Mehmon (Figure 12) is effectively a substitute of a priest as he is in charge of the church and overall, religious matters within the village. Apart from the general way of life of the people, the village overall has gone through tremendous change as well. Interestingly, Young [26] explains that the Akhas were and still is “one of the least contacted hill tribes and are among the most backward and primitive people to be found in Thailand today”, and this proves to be somewhat true in Mehmon, however slight but significant influxes of modernization have crept into the village. Normal Akha villages have landmarks such as spirit gates [28] and the people believe in the marginalization of families with “reject” children for example [28], but the abandonment of their animistic beliefs has also led to cultural loss in these aspects. Mehmon fits the description of normal Akha villages, such as being built on slopes and having less than 40 households [30], but what is starkly different are the clear signs of modernization. Stimulus diffusion as well as adaptations and incorporations of urbanized methods are now present in Mehmon. The village now has facilities such as radios and music players, televisions etc.
in most houses, telephone cables (Figure 13) and most significantly, four-wheel drives (Figure 14) which serve as a form of transportation especially during the rainy seasons.

Cultural values and beliefs: Akhas generally subscribe to the belief of the presence of an Almighty who created mankind [13,17,28]. They believe that through this common ancestor, they are all related [31]; thus, great emphasis is placed on ancestor worship [13,17,28]. They also think that all things are "animated by a spirit or god", as such there is no distinction between a material world and an immaterial one [32,33]. This means that, to them, spirits "dwell in all things" [26]. These spirits, according to Anderson [17], can be categorized into great spirits, owner spirits, afflicting spirits, and demonical spirits, each with their own distinct purpose. In order to " placate these many spirits", the Akhas have to make frequent offerings for a variety of occasions year round, such as religious festivals celebrated within the villages [17]. As previously mentioned, the assimilation of Christianity into Mehmon's culture has substituted these generally traditional and backward values and beliefs, leading to severe signs of devolution in terms of their original practices and mindsets. Rituals surrounding marriage and childbirth as well as death in Mehmon show clear signs of deviance from what Akha culture dictates. Youths are free to choose their own partners and wedding ceremonies normally last for two days [28]; thereafter women are expected to give birth. The births of "rejects" were once regarded with horror and these unfortunate newborns are suffocated at birth and buried far away from the village [28]. Such stringent laws are no longer followed in Mehmon where raising twins or deformed children are acceptable and acts such as killings have long been abandoned. While death remains a serious matter, beliefs such as ensuring the dead have a smooth transition into the underworld [28] have been deserted; in fact, the adoption of Christianity (Figure 15) has simplified funeral processions.

Discussion and Analysis

Effects of culture change

It is apparent that culture change has had a significant impact in shaping the culture of the Akha community in Mehmon. These changes are increasingly pervasive and rampant, largely due to extrinsic influences which play a major part in shaping Mehmon's culture. The most common form of culture change involves the adaptation and/or incorporation of new ideas from elsewhere, which ultimately leads to the evolution of practices within the village and possible removal of outdated techniques [34]. Along with this is the process of stimulus diffusion which sees the presence of new innovations, but these ideas stem mainly from external influences still. Apart from changing the various aspects of Mehmon's culture, such change has also allowed villagers to take a more modernized approach towards life. While it is impossible to tell what the future holds for the village, one thing is certain; that is, culture change remains inevitable and it is up to the community to either remain resistant to it, or be open-minded but at the same time, ensure they preserve their identity.

Reasons for culture change: extrinsic factors

According to FAO [18], hill tribal communities and their cultures are on the verge of "breaking apart and losing their identity" just as village isolation is rapidly breaking down [13]. Academics have noted that Northern Thailand has become "engulfed in the wave of modernization" leading to an accumulation of external factors, such as economic developments, conversion to other religions, unnecessary governmental intervention [18] and intercultural contact [13]. These
factors, which aptly coincide with those associated with culture change in Mehmon, will be analyzed further.

**Economic developments:** For an isolated village like **Mehmon**, traces of modern economic developments would supposedly be uncommon; however the fact that there still are further proves the relentless nature of change. Fieldwork revealed that a Canadian organization had set up a coffee company nearby and the person in charge of the coffee trade had built a house within the village (Figure 16). Since then, the village abandoned opium and adopted coffee as its source of agriculture and income. While the villagers are involved in the farming, production and manufacturing of the coffee beans, they rarely consume it themselves. Hickey and Wright [13] posit that similar cash cropping is increasing in other tribal villages and highlanders are becoming “increasingly participant in market economy”. Another key source of income has been through tourism. Thousands of Europeans and American tourists head for the hills each year, in search of a cultural experience [20]. This increasing trend has caused highlanders to cater to these tourists as well. The **Hmong** were the first to become involved in tourism, and was followed by the **Lisu**, **Akha** and **Lahu** thereafter [14]. Tourism has also taken different forms, which range from the sale of handicrafts such as handbags [6] to trekking, ecotourism and presently, community-based tourism [14] (Figure 17). However, Leepreecha’s study [14] questions the authenticity of culture as tourism develops; it revealed that “the more tourism develops, the less authenticity of ethnic culture exists”, instead, “stage authenticity” is being performed for the tourists. In many cases, these highlanders simply become “tourist objects” for visitation.

**Conversion to other religions:** Christianity first crept into **Mehmon** some 23 years ago where a neighbouring village and Christian missionaries came to preach the gospel. Before which, the villagers were animists. Fieldwork suggests that the man who settled in the village as their priest was the first Christian and under his influence, many have turned to Christianity. Buddhism has also been another alternative for villagers and as of this year, the practice of animism has been completely eradicated. From a macro perspective, conversion to Christianity by western missionaries is increasingly common [5,24]; aid is sometimes received by the highlanders in exchange for them giving up their beliefs [24]. Young’s research [26] suggests that during that time, there had not been any converts. But, over the last 20 years alone, over half of the **Akha** population has been converted [33]. Leepreecha [14] notes that these missionaries started visiting the highland communities to spread their religious propaganda after the Second World War and much hostility had been generated at first. Hickey and Wright [13] found these missionaries to be “creating divisions amongst the population” and ultimately destroying their culture [13,29]. However, acceptance grew as these missionaries also provided valuable services for the hill people such as education and healthcare [13,35]. Along with the adoption of Christianity, practices such as festivals have also changed [20]. Hickey and Wright [13] also points out that some highlanders have converted to **Thai** Theravada Buddhism, though this phenomenon has been rather recent (Figure 18).

**Government intervention:** Signs of state intervention in **Mehmon** are not as obvious, nor significant. The only clear sign of state presence is the schooling system established for youths. However, this factor is extremely problematic and detrimental in other villages. Since the 1950s, the Thai state has been “officially managing and interfering” with the lives of the highland communities [22]. Generally, the ethnic differences between the highlanders and lowlanders have been magnified by the government when identification papers were not
The ability to move from region to region has long been "woven into their culture" higher than previously estimated [5]. In fact, Verchot [23] believes the process of integration has intensified over time [22], to the extent where migration rates are much higher than previously estimated [5]. In fact, Verchot [23] believes the ability to move from region to region has long been "woven into their culture".

The relocation of these highlanders has generated the most discourse. The main contributing factor for intercultural contact is migration [13]. The presence of lowlander influence is also existent. The overarching aim of the Thai government is to integrate these hill tribes with the lowland population, even at the cost of their identity [7,16]. Even though an official statement issued by the Ministry of Interior suggests that such integration allows the highlanders "full rights to practice their own...cultures", it is simply ironic as the process of integration would already involve "cultural assimilation", which is demonstrated by the intrusive nature of the state on highland communities. For example, the promotion of propaganda, mass media and the schooling system [12,21] obtrusively contradict the original method hill people are used to inheriting knowledge [12]. Another area would be the banning of opium production, forcing the highlanders to switch to alternative produce [6]. Overall, while Thailand may have bright prospects for "successful national integration", it is important to note that such measures are met with reluctance and viewed with much contempt by the tribes themselves [31] (Figure 19).

Increased migration and intercultural contact: This factor is perhaps the most common and multi-faceted, and therefore most has generated the most discourse. Mehmon itself has two distinct tribes living in close proximity from each other; the presence of lowlander influence is also existent. The main contributing factor for intercultural contact is migration [13]. The relocation of these highlanders has intensified over time [22], to the extent where migration rates are much higher than previously estimated [5]. In fact, Verchot [23] believes the ability to move from region to region has long been "woven into their culture".

Nawarat [22] presents the case study of Mae Win tambon administrative organization (TAO), which is composed of 19 villages. The villagers comprise people of different cultures who live rather separately from one another. However, "interaction and exchange of culture" is said to be the norm as the people do integrate and participate collectively in religious ceremonies, and in common facilities like hospitals or TAO offices. Apart from intertribal contact, a more worrying trend would be the increased interaction with the lowlanders. Although these two separate groups live apart from each other, Leepreecha [14] opines that they have lived harmoniously and are interdependent too - the younger generations of hill tribes seek job opportunities amongst the lowlanders [10] just as how there has been an influx of lowlanders seeking land in the mountains too [17]. While there is willingness on both parties to integrate and accept each others' presence, such integration has ultimately changed and eroded the hill tribes' culture.

Reasons for culture change: the intrinsic factor

Despite processes like globalization being prevalent, leading to the myriad of external factors discussed in 4.2, it is important to note that culture change still stems primarily as an innate choice as discussed. For example, the younger Akhas in Mehmon choose to leave the village and assimilate into an urban environment for better opportunities. Likewise, villagers themselves choose to adapt technological advancements for the betterment of the village; conversely, traditional beliefs such as the killing of "rejects" have been chosen to be abolished as villagers see the backwardness and immorality in doing so. This clearly ties in with the thesis statement, and would be further elaborated in the concluding chapter.

This notion of the innate will to change is similarly reflected within the wide range of research done by anthropologists. Ritzer and Goodman [36] and Crooker [6] had previously conducted fieldwork on the developments of tribal villages and found that many of these villages have adapted modern methods and facilities such as transportation, improved roads and communication networks for the sake of being virtually closer to civilization. Hickey and Wright [13] adds that these highlanders are also becoming increasingly involved in the market economy which has led to the acceptance of new ideas and techniques, leading to major modifications to their culture. Migration has also been considered as something instinctive and intrinsically-driven [13]. Evidently, highlanders are starting to realize that "their traditional ways of life do not always fit in with the present socio-economic and political conditions of the rest of the country", thus they feel it is necessary to "harmonize modern knowledge and local wisdom" [18]. These hill tribes' cultures are "not lost but transformed" into something that "answers their current needs" [23].

Conclusion

This paper has effectively sieved out the occurrences of culture change within Mehmon village and drawn parallels between the case study and general tribal societies. But more importantly, it has presented a wide range of external factors which have played a pivotal role in the process of change. However, the original thesis still stands, that is, while external processes are apparent, it is eventually up to a community to either remain as status quo or innovate and adapt to change with open-mindedness and acceptance. This trend is clearly applicable to other societies as well, regardless of modernity or environment. This elaborate discourse on the erosion of culture has also concluded that preservation and recognition is crucial. While hill tribes should be given the right to "maintain and develop their cultures"...
based on their own aspirations” in today’s “increasingly globalized world” [10], “substantial recognition of the legitimacy” of their traditions [22] is required. FAO [18] expounds that, in order for that to happen, “awareness building and the empowerment of communities and local institutions” as well as “genuine participation of the highland communities” must be the first steps taken.

Future developments

Several research directions can be taken from here. One of which is the continuous study of other tribal societies and their cultural evolutions, as this particular area is extremely broad; another will be the roles played and approaches taken by key stakeholders in preserving the cultures of societies, especially tribal communities.

References