

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

## <Book Review>

Rosalie Stolz

**Micah F. Morton. *Enchanted Modernities: Ancestral Vitalizations in the Upper Mekong*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2025.**

*Southeast Asian Studies*, 1-5 (in press).

## How to Cite:

Stolz, Rosalie. Review of *Enchanted Modernities: Ancestral Vitalizations in the Upper Mekong* by Micah F. Morton. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2026, 1-5 (in press). DOI: 10.20495/seas.br26011.

## View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2026/03/earlyview-br-rosalie-stolz/>

**Subscriptions:** <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

**For permissions, please send an e-mail to:**  
english-editorial[at]cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Micah F. Morton. *Enchanted Modernities: Ancestral Vitalizations in the Upper Mekong*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2025.

Reviewed by Rosalie Stolz\*

In his monograph based on forty months of ethnographic fieldwork from 2004, spanning several mainland Southeast Asian countries and Southwest China, Micah Morton introduces us to the neo-traditionalist Akha movement. This movement aims at revising and reinforcing Akha traditions in the “Upper Mekong” among members of the Akha ethnic group from Myanmar, Thailand, Southwest China, and Laos.

Morton’s long ethnographic fieldwork in various settings, his personal involvement (see below), and his close rapport with leading—predominantly male—figures of the neo-traditionalist movement allow him to draw a rich picture of this movement. It is mainly from this perspective that light is shone on two main other stances on being Akha in *Enchanted Modernities*: the traditionalist stance on practicing localized ways of being Akha and the stance of Christian Akha. Pondering whether this book is about “enchanted modernities,” as the title suggests, I have come to understand it as being about what it means to be Akha in the contemporary world. Morton uses the metaphor of the village gate in order to highlight different takes on being and belonging among Akha of these different factions: while Chapter 1 starts off by highlighting the core aims and ideas of the neo-traditionalist movement, Chapter 2, “Within the Village Gates,” familiarizes the reader with localized, traditionalist Akha practices; Chapter 3, “Without a Gate,” centers on those who are oftentimes not allowed to reside within the village gates—that is, Christian converts; and finally, Chapter 4, “Beyond the Village Gates,” returns to the neo-traditionalist movement, which is wider in scope than the traditionalist perspective and aims at reaching and reuniting beyond specific village gates.

While the first chapter may lead the reader to expect a straightforward narrative presenting neo-traditionalism as a cure to the Christian assimilation threat, Morton’s analysis increasingly complicates this. He shows, for instance, that the neo-traditionalist project is inspired by

---

\* Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4509-076X>

Christian approaches to attracting adherents: he highlights the role that literacy has played in the project of proselytization and shows the efforts put in by Christian Akha stakeholders at establishing a separation between religion and culture to preserve an Akha cultural identity while simultaneously following the Christian faith. This tendency to separate religion and culture has been documented also for other upland groups such as the Lisu in Myanmar (Diao 2021). Yet, literacy is also key to the neo-traditionalist project, Morton shows. Neo-traditionalists have successfully reinterpreted the mythical story of Akha post-literacy, their losing of their script: whereas the moral of this tale was to emphasize their prowess in memorizing the content of the written script and maintaining a complex oral tradition, neo-traditionalists have shifted the emphasis to the element of loss coupled with a call to revive tradition and appropriate written script in the service of reuniting Akha and reestablishing their Akha *ghanr* (customs and traditional ways). Neo-traditionalist association publications and documentation are aimed at preserving Akha traditions, including most notably a manual for ritual conduct nicknamed the “Akha bible” (p. 144). Some of the rules of conduct included therein (translated in Chapter 4) indeed resemble the Bible’s Ten Commandments. Those of Morton’s interlocutors who were critically observing neo-traditionalists’ attempts at “deeply lightening” Akha *ghanr* (p. 159) were reminded of Christian practices when considering the “monochronic, prayer-like rituals” (p. 159) advocated for in this manual.

Popular culture and material artifacts also play a role in the process of “deeply lightening” Akha traditions: neo-traditionalist events include pop music bands to attract younger and middle-aged Akha, among whom this movement is particularly successful (p. 15). Also, a stylized genealogical chart has come to be an influential material mediator of belonging and is embraced in conspicuous household altars in affluent Akha neo-traditionalist households (p. 171, Fig. 34). This “Master Ancestral Genealogy Picture” (p. 34, Fig. 3) is a depiction of the Akha cosmos with a “phallic shape” “Ancestral tower” that has the “patrilineal lines descending from the seven offspring of the last Great Ancestor, Dzoeq Tanq Panq” at the base and rises via the line of apical ancestors up to the mythical ancestor of Aqpoeq Miqyaer and the homeland of Jadae Mirkhanq represented by a red sun (p. 166).

Conferences, publicly staged rituals, DVDs, and manuals are part of this bustling activity and networking of Akha activists and intellectuals, sponsored by wealthy Akha households who managed the transition from rice cultivation to cash crop production with some success. The neo-traditionalist attempt at “deeply lightening” Akha traditions is reflected also in innovations in ritual commands that allow for a reduction in rituals (instead of 12, a minimum of only one ancestral ritual needs to be conducted) but also encourage the inclusion of novel, conspicuous elements such as modern, market-based food gifts that speak to middle- and upper-class status sensibilities (p. 170).

With respect to conversion to Christianity among upland minorities, it has been frequently

shown that the connection to larger, transnational networks presents an attractive alternative to national hierarchies where marginalized groups tend to find themselves at the bottom. Now, interestingly, Morton shows that it is also one of the central aims of the neo-traditional project to “promote the transregional scaling-up of Akhaness from more parochial forms of cultural praxis to more universal (yet still particular) forms of religio-cultural belief” (p. 14). In ritual practice, neo-traditionalist organized rituals focus on the upper part of the long Akha genealogies, which is the part shared by all Akha irrespective of the specific maximal patrilineages they belong to. Thus, while old traditionalist ritual practices address the closest and better-known genealogical ancestors (up to seven generations up), the trans-regional rituals conducted by the neo-traditionalist Myanmar Association for Carrying Akha Ghanr are oriented toward the apical ancestors shared by all Akha, leaving out the localized ancestors of attending households (p. 154).

The author can only be admired for his sustained research efforts covering very different sites and operating in equally different language contexts to study this transnational movement. Methodological nationalism can lead us only so far when aiming at understanding a revival movement that is inherently transnational. Yet, ethnic groups in upland mainland Southeast Asia have more in common than usually depicted. Many readers may relate to, for instance, the appearance and role of village gates or “woven bamboo stars” that are common across the area. It is striking that among the notable others mentioned as being among the external influences on the cultural identity of Akha, rarely are other upland groups mentioned. Lowland states, majority populations, and Westerners are mentioned, seldom in favorable terms, and contrasted with the Akha as though the Akha world was not always already integrated in wider multiethnic and multilingual worlds crisscrossing the upland-lowland divide.

Yet, at the same time, it transpires from the book that the national frame remains vital: national policies and histories are important backdrops for Akha self-positioning and -fashioning, whether it is Chinese governmental pushes against what are regarded as wasteful superstitions or the early Christian conversions in Myanmar. Keeping in mind the complex and shifting political entanglements in governmental politics with minority groups and Christianization (as shown, for instance, in Ngô 2016), one wonders how much import the experience and political circumstances of influential Akha have on the specific rhetoric they use. Here, we could have learned more about the economic and political networks of those influential figures mentioned in the book as being part of an elite or emerging middle class that is characteristically well-educated, well-off, and relatively mobile—“everyday elites,” as Seb Rumsby (2023, 15) has suggested for the case of Hmong in Vietnam. Are discourses surrounding true Akhaness shared also among less mobile, less privileged Akha villagers, for instance in northwestern Laos, where the politico-historical situation differs from the Thai, Myanmar, and Southwest China contexts (Ongaro 2019, 84–85)?

Another question arising from the book relates to the topic of exclusion: as this story of

the rise of the neo-traditionalist movement is presented as the “story of an Indigenous community’s work to decolonize and reclaim its collective Ancestral identity” (blurb), this provokes the reader to ask, what is the flip side of neo-traditionalist rhetorics? When are affirmations of ethnic identity positive examples of decolonial subjectivities, and when do they send a shiver down the spine? It is obvious in several moments in the book that there is an uneasiness among a few of Morton’s interlocutors across the different Akha factions over the issue of potential exclusion: Can they be excluded from being Akha with all its consequences—for instance, meeting their ancestors in the afterlife and being properly cared for after death?

Interestingly, Morton explicitly discusses his own personal involvement as an insider-outsider married to his Akha colleague Miqsawr Pyawqganr/Haiying Li (he quotes her publications and comments in an exemplary manner), who is active in the neo-traditionalist movement. It is in his dissertation that he is most outspoken on his personal stance: “I thus inadvertently positioned myself from the very beginning as an ally if not advocate or authenticator of sorts for this particular faction’s stance in the increasingly contentious authenticity debates being waged in the Akha World” (Morton 2015, 78–79). There, he also ponders whether his initial “search for an authentic, non-Christian Other” was the reason for his reluctance to see Christian Akha as authentic Akha and for his being receptive to similar claims on authentic Akhaness put forward by his neo-traditionalist interlocutors (Morton 2015, 90). This critical self-reflection is a refreshing addition and, in a very positive sense, complicates the ethnographic picture.

This book’s focus on key actors, discourses, and the efforts of a current neo-traditionalist movement targeting the promotion and renewal of Akha traditions adds an important perspective to the existing body of work focusing on likewise influential actors and brokers involved in Christianization movements in other upland areas of mainland Southeast Asia (Scheer 2011; Ngô 2016; Diao 2021; Rumsby 2021; 2023). Drawing on a rich body of research on Akha speakers (Kammerer 1986; Geusau 2000; Tooker 2012; Ongaro 2019), Morton’s *Enchanted Modernities* provides us with new takes on what it means to be Akha in the contemporary world. If anyone had any doubts about it, upland traditions are still very much alive and well.

## References

- Diao Ying. 2021. Traditional Culture as a Vehicle for Christian Future-Making: Ethnic Minority Elites Pioneering Self-representations in Northern Myanmar. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 29(3): 669–685. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.13102>.
- Geusau, Leo G.M. Alting von. 2000. Akha Internal History: Marginalization and the Ethnic Alliance System. In *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, edited by Andrew Turton, pp. 122–158. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Kammerer, Cornelia. 1986. Gateway to the Akha World: Kinship, Ritual, and Community among Highlanders of Thailand. PhD dissertation, University of Chicago.

- Morton, Micah F. 2015. *From Blood to Fruit: Crypto-nationalism and Reformations of the Ancestral Burden in the Akha World of Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China*. PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Ngô, Tam T.T. 2016. *The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Ongaro, Giulio. 2019. The “Placebo Effect” in Highland Laos: Insights from Akha Medicine and Shamanism into the Problem of Ritual Efficacy. PhD dissertation, London School of Economics.
- Rumsby, Seb. 2023. *Development in Spirit: Religious Transformation and Everyday Politics in Vietnam’s Highlands*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Rumsby, Seb. 2021. Hmong Christian Elites as Political and Development Brokers: Competition, Cooperation and Mimesis in Vietnam’s Highlands. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 29(3): 701–717. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.13090>.
- Scheer, Catherine. 2011. When the Spirits Are Angry, God Gains in Popularity: Exploring the Emergence of Bunong Protestantism in the Highlands of Cambodia. *Aséanie* 28: 45–72. <https://doi.org/10.3406/asean.2011.2213>.
- Tooker, Deborah. 2012. *Space and the Production of Cultural Difference among the Akha Prior to Globalization: Channeling the Flow of Life*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.