With generous support from the Scott Kloeck-Jenson (SKJ) Predissertation Travel Fellowship I was able to conduct three months of preliminary research in northern Thailand between October and December of 2009. My research focuses on the relatively recent efforts of a (Neo)Traditionalist faction of the Akha indigenous minority group in Thailand to (re)construct a more formal, deterritorialized transborder sense of belonging among Akha residing in the mountainous borderlands of five neighboring nation-states – including Burma, China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam – an area referred to by Willem van Schendel and James Scott as Zomia.

Akha relations with various lowland polities in Zomia have shifted over time. The rise of modern nation-states and border regimes has limited earlier connections maintained by Akha via regional trade, migration and kinship ties. Akha have been assimilated into five distinct nation-states, each with different minority policies. The region's transition from "battlefields to markets" in the post-cold war period (post-1980s), however, has been accompanied by the growth of stronger cross-border ties between groups such as the Akha. Since the early 1990s Thai-Akha have begun to (re)establish connections with other Akha in Zomia by building on what they identify as a common history, genealogy and language. Formerly Akha maintained a transborder sense of belonging rooted in a mythology of a common genealogy traced back fifty-five generations to the first Akha. They are now transforming this mythical sense of transborder kinship into an actual transborder movement and sense of cultural citizenship in a deterritorialized imagined community that may be used in pushing for territorial based rights.

Akha transborder cultural citizenship is being cultivated via a variety of everyday practices promoting the development of cross-border networks, constructions of ethnicity and a sense of solidarity. Akha are organizing cultural festivals and conferences, developing multimedia and literary publications, "modernizing" ancestral rituals, reaffirming genealogical practices and unifying Akha language as part of their movement. In addition, Akha are increasingly using digital technologies such as radios, televisions, cell-phones and the internet to construct a transborder sense of belonging. In their efforts, however, Akha face challenges such as religious factionalism, divergent state policies, competing Akha orthographies and internal socioeconomic divisions.

During my period of research funded by the SKJ Predissertation Travel Fellowship I worked with both urban-based Akha organic intellectuals and leaders and rural-based Akha villagers as well as conducted archival research in northern Thailand in order to begin developing an ethnographically grounded account of the transborder movement of Thai-Akha and identify the various factors contributing to the movement's rise. As a result of my research I have arrived at several preliminary conclusions:

First, in my village-based research I have learned that villagers differ greatly in terms of their roles and/or perceptions of Akha organic intellectuals' and leaders' efforts to (re)construct a more formal, deterritorialized sense of belonging among Akha in the region. The majority of villagers' in my two rural field sites are generally preoccupied with their everyday work-related activities and have played little or no role whatsoever in the transborder project of Akha organic intellectuals and leaders. A majority of the villagers similarly either have no time or are simply not interested in learning the new common Akha writing system that Akha leaders have developed for use among Akha in the Mekong Region. They generally view the Thai, English and Chinese languages as being more useful and encourage their children to learn each of these languages rather than Akha.

In addition, it seems that a majority of the younger generations of Akha in Thailand are neither aware of nor have a sense of belonging in relation to Akha residing in other parts of the Mekong Region – with the partial exception of Akha residing in Burma as many of the older Akha residing in Thailand today at one point in the past lived in various parts of Burma and may or may not still retain ties with their kin in Burma. Older Akha, however, particularly those with knowledge of the vast corpus of oral traditions handed down from the ancestors retain an at least "mythological" sense of belonging with Akha throughout the entire Mekong Region and view Southwest China as being the location of the original Akha homeland.

At the same time, Akha organic intellectuals and leaders view the new common Akha writing system as fundamental towards their efforts of building transborder networks among Akha in the region and (re)constructing a more formal, deterritorialized transborder sense of belonging among Akha in the region. As such I have found that the transborder goals of certain Akha organic intellectuals and leaders do not necessarily overlap with the more local, everyday concerns of the general Akha population. At the same time, however, I have interviewed certain

Akha leaders that are both involved in these transborder efforts to unify written Akha language and build stronger cross border networks as well as assist local Akha communities in northern Thailand in dealing with their everyday concerns related to issues of land tenure, citizenship, education etc. The efforts of these particular leaders may provide a means of bridging the divergent concerns and positions of Akha organic intellectuals and leaders on the one hand and the general Akha population on the other.

One of the key goals of these leaders is to promote a greater sense of dignity and pride in being Akha among Akha both in northern Thailand and the Mekong Region. These leaders emphasize, however, that in their work among Akha communities residing outside of Thailand they are not supporting Akha from neighboring countries to migrate to Thailand but are rather seeking to empower Akha in their home countries; to help them develop a sense of dignity and respect in being Akha; to assist them in improving their lives in their current localities; to help them receive better services from their local governments. As such it is clear that Akha in the Mekong Region are seeking to (re)construct a more formal, deterritorialized transborder sense of belonging as members of distinct nation-states such as Burma, China, Laos or Thailand. As such when Akha organic intellectuals and leaders from the region meet to discuss various issues such as developing a common writing system or reforming traditional Akha culture they do so as representatives of Akha communities in Burma, China, Laos or Thailand. Akha leaders in Thailand, for example, emphasize their loyalty to the Thai nation and their wishes for Thailand to experience economic prosperity. They see their transborder efforts in turn as contributing towards the economic prosperity of Thailand, their "mother country", as the networks they establish with other Akha in the region are resulting or may result in the creation of regional trade networks.

Second, I have learned that the rise of a more formal, deterritorialized transborder sense of belonging among Akha in the Mekong Region seems to really begin with and be further promoted via a series of international conferences that have been held every three years starting in 1993. These conferences, officially referred to as "The International Conference(s) on Hani/Akha Culture", were first held in Yunnan, China in 1993 with support from the local Chinese government. In China, Akha are officially categorized as part of the larger Hani National Minority. In 1996 a second conference was held in northern Thailand. Thereafter the

conference has been organized in different parts of China every three years. The early participation of Akha from northern Thailand at these conferences in turn appears to have been supported by non-governmental and church-based organizations initially led by Western scholars and missionaries respectively working in northern Thailand. It was during the second and third international conferences that Akha participants from throughout the Mekong region began to express interest in developing a common Akha writing system so that they could both write as well as present their papers in Akha rather than English, Chinese or Thai.

Finally, I am just beginning to learn about the roles of various Western Christian missionaries in connecting Akha throughout the Mekong Region through archival research at Payap University. My preliminary research has shown that some of the missionaries working with Akha in northern Thailand during the mid to late-1900s had worked with Akha communities earlier in Burma and/or China. In addition, I have learned that one American Baptist missionary/anthropologist played a fundamental role in connecting Akha in Burma, China and Thailand during the late 1980s/early 1990s.

In conclusion, the three months of preliminary research that I conducted in northern Thailand with the generous support of the SKJ Predissertation Travel Fellowship have allowed for me to develop a strong empirical foundation upon which to further develop my dissertation proposal and obtain external funding.