Sustaining cultural heritage:
The impact of eBannok on the Akha women of Thailand

by

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ABSTRACT

This field study is informed by the principles of social constructivism and the theoretical perspectives of postcolonial theory and standpoint feminist theory. It represents the impact of the Thailand-based artisan cooperative project, eBannok, on the lived experiences of social and cultural heritage of female artisans. The results support a pedagogy and curriculum that focuses on learning about cultural heritage producers, fair trade outlets and artisan cooperatives, and about female producers culturally situated and relational identities in their various discourses. The use of narrative text and visual images reveals an underlying sub-text of significant cultural phenomena as well as several social and organizational ideological issues that contributed to the author’s findings. Through exhibiting the lived experiences of the artisans, this methodological design appears to be useful in allied disciplines of photography, communication, and cultural studies. This form of analysis, through bridging the lived with the theoretical, also contributes to the broader notion of social or cultural identity.

Keywords: visual narrative ethnography, artisan cooperatives, cultural heritage, female artisans, ethnic minority, Thailand
Dedicated to those affected by the 6.3-magnitude earthquake that rattled the Mae Lao district of Chiang Rai province in Northern Thailand on May 5, 2014. Your strength and persistence in the face of such hardship and devastation is a testament of the indomitable will and beauty of your country.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................... ii
DEDICATION ........................................................................................................ iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................... iv
LIST OF “VISUAL AND POETIC VIGNETTES” .................................................. vii

CHAPTERS:

1. AN INTRODUCTORY VIGNETTE ..................................................................... 1
   Setting the Tone ............................................................................................... 1
   An Explanation of Technique ........................................................................... 2

2. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................. 4
   Purpose and Background of the Study ........................................................... 4
   The Social Constructivist Umbrella .................................................................. 5

3. LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................. 7
   Significance ....................................................................................................... 7
       Sustaining Cultural Heritage in an Age of Globalization ............................... 7
       Fair Trade as a New Type of Social Movement ...........................................
       Cooperatives and Gender Equity ...................................................................
       The Akha in Thailand and the eBannok Project .......................................... 10
           Knowing the Akha ...................................................................................
           The eBannok project ...............................................................................

4. COMING TO METHODOLOGY ..................................................................... 13
   Painted Whistles: A Visual and Narrative Approach to Ethnography ............. 14

5. RESULTS: FRAGMENTS OF BOTH VISUAL AND NARRATIVE VIGNETTES .. 17
   Vignette 1: The Setting .................................................................................. 18
           The Participants Involved .......................................................................... 19
   Vignette 2: The Struggle to Teach Akha ....................................................... 20
   Vignette 3: A Shift in Religious Beliefs .......................................................... 24
LIST OF “VISUAL AND POETIC VIGNETTES”

Photographs:

1. Romantic Dreams ................................................................. 1
2. Painted Whistles ................................................................. 14
3. Amongst the Hills ............................................................... 18
4. We Are Akha ................................................................. 20
5. Learning Letters ............................................................... 24
6. Blurring Borders ............................................................... 27
7. Working and Laughing Together ........................................ 30
8. Akha Bracelet ................................................................. 32
9. Selling Heritage Crafts ......................................................... 35
10. Female Artisan ............................................................... 37
11. eBannok ................................................................. 39
CHAPTER 1
AN INTRODUCTORY VIGNETTE

Setting the Tone

Built with romantic dreams. Maintained through sweat and tears.
The foundational map of an organization, united under the goals:
To empower, and unite.
To create, and improve.
To educate, and enhance.
This is the heart of the community that is The Mirror Foundation.
The spirit and gatekeeper of the eBannok project, P’Ao, is bedecked in her habitual comfortable jeans and sweatshirt. Her daily afternoon coffee warms her hands as its heat radiates upwards, creating a graceful spiral of steam against the damp, rain-soaked air. Its heavenly scent welcomes her as she takes her first grateful sip. She is attentive to our conversation and uncommonly still for these few moments in the day.

“What would happen to the hill tribes if they were not involved with eBannok?”

“If they don’t work here, they can work somewhere else; it doesn’t have to be handicraft. It would still be income, probably labour, but it wouldn’t be enjoyable. Maybe, lose their cultures and traditions sooner.”

“Do you think it is important to continue learning cultural traditions?”

“I think so, because it explains who you are and where you from. You speak Akha, you Akha. Problem is, is 50/50. Some think it is important, some don’t. Some are ashamed they are Akha… hide it.”

We are sitting on her front porch, surrounded by her paintings and dreams for the future of the project and its Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), The Mirror Foundation. “Change is good, means innovation. Cannot stop change. But, in maybe one hundred years, they [Akha] will stop teaching their traditions,” she comments in a sad tone as she picks up a pen and a pad of paper. At first hesitant, she begins drawing before my curious eyes, becoming more sure of herself as the slow, steady movements of the pen create a map of The Mirror Foundation’s layout. “It [The Mirror Foundation] was built with romantic dreams,” P’Ao reminisces between sips of coffee, her eyes gazing inwards at some distant past. Her passion for the project and the hill tribe women blazes in her eyes as she says, “I think their [hill tribe] culture is beautiful. Will feel sad if lost. I want to keep that beauty in the world.”

An Explanation of Technique

This thesis utilizes a combination of photographic and narrative techniques to create rich, colourful, and detailed vignettes that are true to the lives of the participants studied. The poetic phrases accompanying the photographs are my own, based on reflections during the field study. As exemplified
by the above “Introductory Vignette: Setting the Tone”, each thematic vignette will be introduced first by a photograph and accompanying poetic phrases, and followed by the narrative. While these photographic vignettes are presented on their own individual pages, they are not meant to be central to the work. Rather, they are meant to aid in the exploration of the analysis of the themes that they represent (Pink, 2007), serving as a type of quiescent space to conceptualize the ensuing textual narrative. The visual serves as a form of documentary to bridge between the theory, substantive knowledge, and practice of both (Pink, 2004). I specifically chose to format this thesis in a fragmented nature. By creating interplays between the images and text, the lived and theoretical, and the subjective and objective (Goodall, 2004) through a series of thematic vignettes (both visual and narrative), my aim was to connect theory with lived experiences. This is offered in the hope of invoking a deeper level of introspective analysis.

The narrated introductory vignette took place on December 13th, 2013, on the front porch of the residence of P’Ao, a petite and friendly Thai woman in her early 40s who has been involved with The Mirror Foundation and its various projects for approximately 18 years. Her home was built within the commune of The Mirror Foundation, situated outside of the nearby small tourist city of Chiang Rai, in Northern Thailand. It was one of my last days with the foundation, and there was a certain amount of reflection for both P’Ao and I regarding many of the issues discovered and discussed over the past few weeks. On this particular occasion, P’Ao (whose name, along with the other female participants, has been shortened in the interests of privacy, with the addition of the “P”, as the traditional form of respect in Thai culture), and I were discussing why she became involved with the NGO and eBannok. The way she absorbed the conversation despite our language barrier was admirable. Her halting English was filled in with her passion for the hill tribe women and the project. Her drawing of the Foundation’s map is not only a depiction of her own home and place within the organization, but her dream for the women and the hill tribes as well. In a way, the drawing was a metaphor of her own socially constructed reality, a visual governing her social thought and action (Astleithner, 2003; McLennan, 2005).
CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Background of the Study

In recent years, with the influx of money, goods, and people across borders there has been a growing concern regarding globalizations effect on the preservation of cultural heritage (Kurin, 2004; Musitelli, 2002). Concepts such as cultural sustainability, assessing the values of cultural heritage, and consumer responsibility have become topics of discussion among trading organizations and networks around the world. Increasingly becoming a matter of importance, alternatives to the free market have been on the rise (Wilkinson, 2007). The combination of new social movements of fair trade and artisan cooperatives have begun to materialize, satisfying customer needs while “it aims to help the world’s most disadvantaged producers” (Witkowski, 2005, p. 30).

This research study is an exploration of how artisan cooperatives and the cultural heritage items they produce are impacted by the globalized, changing environment that they now inhabit. It is meant to present an increased understanding of the properties through which globalization has a significant impact on artisan cooperatives. The “properties of globalization” will be defined as the challenges that have been created in sustaining cultural heritage for local producers in the context of worldwide markets and distribution. Informed by the principles of social constructivism and the theoretical perspectives of postcolonial theory and standpoint feminist theory, my representation of the studied artisan cooperative aims to create a descriptive and colourful account of the lived experiences of its female artisans. I approach this characterization from an experiential perspective, emphasizing the impact of this one artisan cooperative on the female artisan’s social and cultural heritage through a series of thematic and photographic vignettes. The photographic vignettes will be accompanied by poetic phrases, narrated from mine own reflections during the field study.

My field research on the lived experiences and cultural heritage of female, Akha artisans took place in December of 2013 in the Mae Yao sub-district of Chiang Rai province in Northern Thailand. Here, following extensive previous visits to the region, I spent two weeks of guided socializing, eating,
walking, photographing, and audio-recording with research participants associated with what is known as
the eBannok Handicraft Project, established by its NGO, The Mirror Foundation. Founded over 10 years
ago, the project is self-described as a “fair trade initiative” (eBannok Handicraft Project, 2012) that was
established to provide local hill tribe women with the opportunity to develop education and business
skills; thus allowing them to sustain themselves, their families, and local communities through their
unique ethnic culture. Of the multiple ethnic minority hill tribe groups involved with the project, my
research focused on the Akha, due to accessibility. The eBannok project employs six to eight full time
Akha women on site, whereas other hill tribe groups work from their villages. This is largely due to the
proximity of the Mirror Foundation to numerous Akha villages, both of which fall outside the influence of
Chiang Rai, a mere twenty minute drive away.

The Social Constructivist Umbrella

In a critique of the cultural perspective of representation, Kapoor (2002) has argued that “given
the current intensification of capitalist globalization and spread of multinational corporations” (p. 660),
we have a limited ability to recognize the magnitude of the capitalist role and, as a result, these NGO’s
themselves are unable to fully assess or navigate in the current socio-economic climate. This perspective
is part of postcolonial theory, that has as its central tenet the proposition that by clearing a space for
multiple voices previously silenced by the residual effects of dominant, colonial-forged thinking, a more
inclusive sense of mutual respect and social experience can be learned (McLennan, 2003). Meanwhile,
standpoint feminist theory, which emphasizes the unique social insights of marginalized populations,
provides a vantage point to examine the importance of activism and mobilization regarding women’s
concerns (Kronsell, 2005). Hekman (1997) explains that even though the cultural values of a society
“impose an initial ordering of the multiplicity of possible meanings that confront social actors” (p. 360), a
researcher must look beyond this and be aware that there are multiple feminine standpoints, and thus
multiple truths and realities.

Both theoretical movements, postcolonial and standpoint, include a variety of socially and
materially constructed truths, and a proliferation of histories and fragmented narratives (Hekman, 1997;
Kapoor, 2002; McLennan, 2005). In doing so, these theoretical perspectives can be situated under the umbrella of social constructivism (Astleithner, 2003; Rust, O’Donovan, & Price, 2005), a theoretical perspective that “denies the existence of an objective reality, stating instead that realities are social constructions of individuals in interaction with other individuals” (Astleithner, 2003, p. 131). Just as Astleithner (2003) has argued that realities are constructions based on interactions with individuals, my own reflections and interactions with the participants in this study can be defined as my own constructed reality. These specific realities can be seen as stages for a series of thematic vignettes in the form of thick descriptions of activities and interactions, accompanied by a collection of images and poetic narratives, in the hopes of offering a more inclusive sense of rich social experience.
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

Significance

In order to establish the significance of the study and provide perspective, it is important to explore what cultural heritage is and how globalization impacts it, how fair trade and artisan cooperatives are set up, and how they affect the lives of female producers. Describing the studied cultural group and the artisan cooperative in depth enables us to situate the study within a greater body of knowledge.

Sustaining Cultural Heritage in an Age of Globalization

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2004) states, “cultural goods convey ideas, symbols and lifestyles and are an intrinsic part of the identity of the community that produces them” (p. 97). Due to the long time span of culture, Adeniran and Akinlabi (2011) regard it as heritage, and thus, it is seen as “the history of a society and deserves to be conserved” (p. 74). The cultural significance of heritage arts and crafts by local artisans qualifies them to be sustained, contributing to the cultural identity of a person or place, providing symbolic meaning and value (Lowenthal, 2005; UNDP, 2004; Vecco, 2010). Cultural heritage items “can be used to evoke a sense of continuity of culture, enrichment of people’s lives, as a link with the past and to allow society to make sense of the present” (du Cros, 2001, p. 166). The difficulty lies in identifying the exact content and nature of cultural heritage to be conserved and protected, as it offers both tangible and intangible elements (Blake, 2000; Vecco, 2010). Kurin (2004) describes craft items as tangible objects, but the knowledge and skills used to create them as the intangible.

Cultural heritage, and the arts and craft items that it produces, are aspects of cultural diversity that are impacted due to globalization developments. The UNDP (2004) warns that the economic, social and political aspects of globalization are powerful means of “encouraging” individuals to turn against their cultural heritage and assimilate to a dominant culture, at the same time as they promote conflict and tension due to inequalities. Arizpe (2004) explains that with globalization, there has been a cultural relocation, where some elements of culture are identified with while others are played down or discarded.
The globalization debate is not a new one. Due to globalizations failure to respect boundaries, it threatens local cultures and the attempts being made to preserve or sustain cultural heritage. This is where the debate begins: the effects of globalization can be damaging, threatening the value of cultural expression; yet, globalization can also nurture an infinite amount of cultural knowledge (Blake, 2000; Lowenthal, 2005; UNDP, 2004).

For local artisans in Southeast Asia, the impact of what has been termed “economic globalization” has been destructive (Rajan, 2001), threatening their traditional ways of life as Western consumerist values infiltrate their culture. Rajan (2001), broadly defines economic globalization as “the shrinkage of economic distances (i.e. costs of doing business) between nations” that consists of two trends, “globalization of production and trade, and globalization of finance and capital flows” (p. 1). Economic globalization has generated an inequality in bargaining power that calls into question certain human rights practices. As Rodrik (1997) explains:

There is no substantive difference between American workers being driven from their jobs by their fellow domestic workers who agree to work 12-hour days, earn less than the minimum wage, or be fired if they join a union – all of which are illegal under U.S. law – and their being similarly disadvantaged by foreign workers doing the same. (p. 29)

These are issues that “challenge international agreements on trade and investment on the grounds that they diminish cultural diversity” (UNDP, 2004, p. 27). Based on this, there is a clear need for a different trade system that appeals to our Western ideals of basic human rights and harmonization. “The very fact that a tradition is endangered means that it is not sustainable in its current form or in its current context – hence the need for national or international intervention.” (Kurin, 2004, p. 71). Enter the fair trade movement.

**Fair Trade as a New Type of Social Movement**

The fair trade market emerged as a legal entity in 1983, established among 17 indigenous communities in Mexico, as a means to export produce without paying for any intermediaries in the commodity chain, thereby allowing producers to receive fair prices for their coffee crops (VanderHoff
Boersma, 2009). The initial fair trade product, coffee, became the symbol of the movement, that gradually gained momentum and popularity. Wilkinson (2007) defines fair trade as “a social movement for which new terms of trade represent a strategic tool for the promotion of development and social inclusion” (p. 223). By promoting fair trade organizations with sensitive social justice principles, such as having better trading conditions and standards, consumers are more likely to become actively engaged with supporting the movement.

Emerging as an alternative to the free market, fair trade exists in two primary forms: a product certification label and an “organizational mark”. Product certification labelling is governed by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International (FLO), whose mission is to improve the situations of producers in the developing world (Hutchens, 2010). The Fair Trade Organisation (FTO) Mark, governed by the World Fair Trade Organisation (WFTO), entails an expansive set of principles including: increased opportunities for marginalized producers, commitment to transparency and accountability, long-term trading partnerships, fair wages, no child or forced labour, non-discriminatory practices, and healthy and safe workplaces (Hutchens, 2010). These principles guide FTOs in cultivating a humanistic and activist presence in which artisans are provided increased access to productive resources and education (Fridell, 2004).

Yet, while the institutionalization of fair trade has been alternatively hyped as a new social economic movement that contributes to an ethical restructuring of markets (Gendron, Bisaillon, & Otero Rance, 2009), it is often dismissed as a politically motivated, overstated consumption network with low producer participation in administrative decision making (Lyon, 2006). Fair trade has been examined as a strategic tool in trade to promote development and social inclusion and as a controversial producer-consumer network that replaces trust with a standardized auditing system (Wilkinson, 2007).

With these conflicts, and the increasing restrictions making it difficult to implement all of the principles required to become a registered fair trade organization, a new trend is beginning to form. Many projects are embodying fair trade principles without having the organizational mark. This has caused a new component of fair trade to arise: the organization of alternative trading networks (ATOs)
that “can underwrite Fair Trade claims without formal guarantees” (Wilkinson, 2007, p.222). This is done by putting in place a “direct articulation of producer groups, traders, dedicated shops (largely based on volunteers) and consumers into interdependent trading circuits which very quickly assume the character of social networks” (Wilkinson, 2007, p. 222). These networks, which run based on fair trade principles but have not specifically qualified their products for fair trading on conventional markets, will be referred to throughout the remainder of this thesis as “artisan cooperatives” (Grimes & Milgram, 2000; Mann, 2008; Ruben, Fort, & Zúñiga-Arias, 2009). However, it is important to note, that they still fall under the umbrella term of a “fair trade movement” (Wilkinson, 2007).

Cooperatives and Gender Equity

Women often face disadvantages in global trade (Hutchens, 2010), both in the free trade and fair trade markets. The fair trade market, and the initiatives and cooperatives that stem from it, promote the involvement of women in both production and processing (Ruben, et al., 2009). While the movement is often touted as having the ability to empower women through the promotion of gender equity in the workplace, various case studies provide mixed evidence of this (Hutchens, 2010; Ruben, et al., 2009).

The movement has been shown to improve female artisans self-esteem and status (Hutchens, 2010), yet there is often a problem with the lack of female participation in the organisational and management setting of producer cooperatives (Hutchens, 2010; Lyon, 2008). While empowering women through fair trade programs is a desirable outcome, it may also be culturally disruptive (Witkowski, 2005). Hutchens (2010) sees this as being due to the often patriarchal nature of many of the female producers individual cultures, which affects their roles within the organization itself. For this reason, Lyon (2008) feels that by working “closely with cooperative members to determine locally appropriate strategies for the promotion of gender equity, taking into account cultural and socioeconomic diversity” (p. 260), the movement could indeed promote gender equity amongst producers.

The Akha in Thailand and the eBannok Project

Knowing the Akha. The Akha hill tribe belong to a population group of more than 1.5 million people within the infamous Golden Triangle regions of Northern Thailand, Myanmar, Northern Laos,
Northern Vietnam, and the Yunnan province of China (Tooker, 1996). Theirs is a culture that is currently being challenged as Akha are increasingly incorporated into the Thai nation-state, with increasing numbers of women and children seeking education in order to compete with lowland society for available jobs, leaving very little time for traditional practices (Ishii, 2012; Kammerer, 1990; Tooker, 1996).

As the Akha traditional culture becomes more difficult to maintain, more villages have converted to Christianity or Catholicism with the influx of missionaries in recent decades (Kammerer, 1990). Indeed, the effects of what has come to be called “globalization” have caused the Akha of Northern Thailand to “alter their traditional practices” (Rodrik, 1997, p. 29). Musitelli (2002) argues that the effect of globalization can impact cultural heritage items to assimilate from a unique product to a commercial, standardized item, while Cohen (2000) sees it as a stage in the historical process of change rather than a departure from heritage crafts. Neither argument can be dismissed as inconsequential, as both depict a shift in cultural heritage items. For the hill tribes in Thailand, due to limited access to local craft markets, production of their heritage crafts actually began to peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the facilitation of sponsoring foreign and domestic relief organizations and NGOs began to offer an alternative response to globalization and development (Cohen, 2000; Witkowski, 2005). For the Akha, their heritage crafts have had to adapt to the changing economic and global environment as these social movements began to materialize.

**The eBannok project.** The recent expansion of artisan cooperatives is attributed to the promotion of sensitive social justice issues through the field of development communication (Kim, 2005; Servaes, 2008). Although the eBannok project maintains certain characteristics of institutionalized fair trade such as having the central goals of economic development, bundled with principles of effectiveness, equality, human rights, and ecological and social sustainability (Witkowski, 2005; VanderHoff Boersma, 2009), it is not yet registered as a fair trade organization. Instead, it runs as an artisan cooperative, following fair trade principles. By assuming this role, the project aims to blend traditional cultural values with modern fair trade practices. The result is what one participant describes as being more like a place of “freedom” than a contemporary organization. Being an artisan cooperative that is “promoted as a
system of trade that empowers women and producers” (Hutchens, 2010, p. 449), eBannok provides a safe working environment in order to increase producer’s independent wealth and improve social conditions.

While I recognize and agree with the optimistic aspirations of the project, such declarations are challenged by limited consumer knowledge and producer participation compared to that of the free trade market (Gendron, et al., 2009; Lyon, 2006). Addressing power imbalances that exist by identifying women’s viewpoints and issues of inequality or discrimination may help improve future trade agreements by resolving the inconsistencies within the current system (Hutchens, 2010; Lyon, 2006, 2008). This can lead to a more nuanced understanding of conditions for both producers and consumers (Lyon, 2006).
CHAPTER 4

COMING TO METHODOLOGY

Much of the academic literature has extensive information regarding cultural heritage and sustainability, globalization, and fair trade, yet it is lacking in evocative accounts of the impact that these topics have on lived experiences of female producers. The female artisans stories of experience may exemplify a visual narrative ethnographic account (Crowe, 2003; Goodall, 2004; Pink, 2004; 2007) contributing to the body of artisan cooperatives and producer lived experiences (Grimes & Milgram, 2000; Mann, 2008; Ruben, Fort, & Zúñiga-Arias, 2009) and fair trade outlets (Gendron, et al., 2009; Hutchens, 2010; Wilkinson, 2001; Witkowski, 2005) as it relates to globalization and cultural heritage (Kurin, 2004; Lowenthal, 2005; Musitelli, 2002). Attention to the narratives of the female artisans lived experiences is a reminder not to lose sight of the diversity in marginalized producer populations and highlights the need for attention to issues of equality and education in order to generate increased cultural awareness, understanding and respect within the greater society.

For this reason, I present the combination of both visual and textual data in order to create a descriptive and colourful account of the lived experiences of female producers from one particular hill tribe group: the Akha. The purpose of my research is two-fold: first, to gain an understanding of the eBannok project as it relates to globalization and cultural heritage (Kurin, 2004; Lowenthal, 2005; Musitelli, 2002) and second, to discover how the participating NGO and female artisans lived experiences, specifically in regards to their social and cultural heritage, have been impacted by eBannok.
A hunting ritual, a whistle to blow;
The Akha tradition, now changed for show.
Painted and smoothed, shaped like a bird;
A custom developing, in the hopes to be preserved.
Ethnographers have written extensively about the need to provide vividness that remains true to the patterns of the everyday life of the subject through deep, methodological reflections and descriptive accounts (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001a). Atkinson & Delamont (2010) particularly suggest that an ethnographic approach is able to process events in numerous social arenas “adding to both our conceptual understanding of everyday life and our theoretical understanding of society” (p. 12). In this way, the material reveals itself (Harrington, 2003) through the sensations and fragmented moments experienced throughout the research process. The research presented here was undertaken using photography as an exploratory tool in relation to the context, situatedness, and attached interpretations (Pink, 2007) that invoke the meanings and knowledge of both (Pink, 2004).

My reason for selecting eBannok and the female artisans for this study stems from my past travels throughout the region where I developed a burgeoning interest in cultural heritage and sustainability, marginalized producers, female artisans, and the hill tribe groups of Northern Thailand. As a result of this blended academic and personal approach, I had many identities from which to choose. I selected eBannok for my case study as the project is committed to using trade as a means to relieve poverty and inequality amongst the Akha hill tribe groups, as well as increase self-reliance for marginalized producers (Cleverdon, 2000). Having this as one of its central goals attracted me to the project, as using craft as a way to promote independence is an objective that greatly appeals to me, as an artist. As I began my field research under the umbrella identities of researcher and student, I also developed the rotating identities of paying guest, photographer, lunch partner, friend, fellow coffee connoisseur and so on. This duality of roles allowed for fieldwork that was highly immersive despite the limited time. In addition to a handful of semi-structured interviews, while compiling this textual and visual data, I drew largely upon participant observation and communication (Crowe, 2003) in order to explore and represent the subjective information retrieved.

Conversational and semi-structured ethnographic interviews are described by Atkinson, et al. (2001b) as having the ability to shed light on “the personal experiences, interpersonal dynamics and cultural meanings of participants in their social worlds” (p. 8). As a result of this hands-on engagement,
participants and I were able to better get to know one another, promoting fluid exchanges, and real participant stories. This, in combination with a great deal of observation, journalistic note taking, and the collection of visual evidence through photography, facilitated the representation of the lives of the artisan women in order to “represent the ways people experience certain dimensions of their everyday worlds that create platforms on which people can represent their experiences, views, or culture” (Pink, 2004, p. 10). The reflective nature of utilizing photographs in collaboration with conversational and semi-structured ethnographic interviews, and journalistic field notes encouraged critical interpretations and analyses (Atkinson et al., 2001c). This, in turn, allowed me to analyse the subject of interest through a cross-disciplinary approach of visual narrative ethnography (Crowe, 2003; Goodall, 2004; Pink, 2004, 2007). Creating interplays through a series of fragmented visual and narrative vignettes, my aim was to connect theory with lived experiences.

Being the most popular craft sold at eBannok, the painted whistles (refer to Photograph 2) are symbolic of the Akha cultures continuing development in the face of outside influence. Traditionally used as a hunting tool to call birds, the whistles were once no more than a small, unidentifiable blob of clay. Today, they have been transformed into paper weights and jewellery of multiple varieties, colours and unique shapes. Primarily shaped into the birds they were once used to call to, many are also painted to appeal to Western ideals and beliefs, portraying symbols of our various holidays in the shape of Christmas trees, Easter Bunnies, and more. While the concept of the whistle is a part of tradition, much like the Akha culture, its outward appearance and role in society has been amalgamated into the global society in which it now finds itself.
CHAPTER 5

RESULTS: FRAGMENTS OF BOTH VISUAL AND NARRATIVE VIGNETTES

I subsequently present some of the participant stories of experience to explore lived histories, thought and action, performativity and liminality (McLennan, 2005) as participants attempt to balance their affiliation with their cultural and social heritage and their role with the eBannok Handicraft Project and The Mirror Foundation. These are combined as fragmented narratives, arranged as thematic vignettes. I explore ways in which globalization may have caused religious, cultural and social expectations to contribute to shaping their everyday lived experiences.
Vignette 1: The Setting

Photograph 3: Amongst the Hills

The leaves sway, the grass whispers,

“These are their hills, this is their land”.

Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Lisu,

Akha, Kachin, Daraang, Mlabri;

The titles of the hill tribe clans.

They are shaped by the environment

To which they closely relate.

Changed by the seasons,

Adapting throughout the years,

Identities and cultures,

Who in time,

Are at risk to disappear.
Twenty minutes in a taxi through winding, dusty roads is all it takes before pulling up to a small yet full hill tribe centre outside of Chiang Rai. Only upon close inspection can you make out the shapes of houses and huts jutting out mystically amongst the dense trees that surround the organization. There are approximately 10-14 medium sized buildings consisting of workshops, homes, offices, and volunteer housing surrounding a small pond. On the far right hand side sits the eBannok Handicraft Project. This is the home of The Mirror Foundation. P’Ao, my host and translator, steers me around the commune. I am instantly struck by the serenity of the place. It is set amongst lush, dense rainforest. The buildings, while traditional, are taken care of and cleaned regularly. There is no rush, everyone seems happily at peace here. It seems to be more like a home than an organizational structure. It is easy to note the contrast between the lifestyle difference here and our Westernized world of deadlines and due dates.

The Participants Involved

It is here, set amongst this dense and lush rainforest that I have the opportunity to interview seven participants involved in some way with either the eBannok project or its NGO, The Mirror Foundation. P’Ao, in her early 40s, is my main translator, the gatekeeper of eBannok, and one of the founding members of The Mirror Foundation in Chiang Rai. Thellie, my secondary translator, is in his late 40s, a United Kingdom citizen who has lived in Thailand since 2007 and has worked with The Mirror Foundation for about four years, splitting his time 50/50 between the eBannok and ecoTours projects. P’Pan, a Thai citizen in her early 40s who holds a degree in Political Science Administration, writes the proposals and reports for the foundations various projects. P’Noi, P’Amoey, P’Achue, and P’Busu are all Akha female artisans in their mid to late thirties who work in the sewing or clay workshops of eBannok, each commuting from their villages every day to create the heritage crafts that help to sustain themselves and their families.
Vignette 2: The Struggle to Teach Akha

Define a person, define a tribe.

Meanings surround us, in everything but black and white.

Identities and struggles go hand in hand, side by side.

Teaching one without the other, is a myth we cannot hide.
I am sitting down, talking to P’Busu, a facetious character. Whenever there is laughter, you can be sure that she told the punch line. She is explaining that the Akha people used to be very shy, but now they are brave to speak. In her opinion, many of the younger generations do not care, and as a result, they are less respectful.

“Is the younger generation easy to teach their traditional culture to?”

“No one can teach because nobody know the old culture anymore.”

“Does the younger generation want to learn?”

“No, teenagers don’t want to learn anything.”

“Are you worried about losing the Akha traditional crafts?”

“It’s already being lost. My daughter is 16 and doesn’t want to learn about the craft. Try to teach her how to embroider a dress, when finish, she say, “No.””

Knowing that it is the younger generation who must keep learning the traditions and carrying them forward, I ask Thellie if he feels whether they are eager to learn them. “It all depends on the environment they grow up in. It’s not just the household, but the village as well.” Then he explains something that so many youths struggle with today, “Also, youth being youth, it’s a hard time. They look at Thai TV, Thai culture. The Thai’s are looking at Korean TV, Korean culture. Japanese TV, Japanese culture. Everybody is trying to be something they’re not.” I cannot help but wonder if this is one of the reasons that sustaining culture is so difficult. Perhaps the grass is greener on the other side mentality is why we fight to preserve culture, or, alternatively move away from it. For Thellie, he believes that having the information available in the event that youth do become interested, is the most important step moving forward. P’Pan also explains that changes in culture impact the younger generation most. “When the children use the internet, it changes the way they dress, their fashion. Parents and children can’t talk to each other. Can’t teach them.” She explains to me that instilling pride in the hill tribe youth is an important step to sustaining Akha cultural heritage. Then, they will find pride in their cultural crafts. “If you have the first thing, then another thing will come.”
I sit down with P’Ao and P’Noi. I learn that P’Noi never went to school. Growing up in what is known as Ajha Village from the time she was eight years old, she remembers living in bamboo huts and having no electricity or roads. Ten years ago, the huts changed to concrete, they received electricity, and good roads. When I ask whether this is a good change, P’Ao translates for P’Noi, saying “Before concrete, many tourists come. Now, no tourists come. Because the buildings have changed, and the culture is less traditional looking. Is good to have tourists, but there are less with globalization.” P’Noi smiles as I process this, clearly with a surprised look on my face. I had the assumption that tourism was a large reason that the culture was disappearing, but perhaps it keeps some aspect of it. She adds, laughing, “But, good to have roads too.”

All of the participants are in agreement that the lifestyle changes that the Akha have and are experiencing will continue, possibly leading to a disappearance in the traditional Akha knowledge and ways. P’Achue believes that there are only about 10% of traditional villages existing still in Thailand. For P’Busu, the main reason for the loss of traditional culture is that it has too many strict rules, “If you do something wrong, you don’t have your future. If an old woman passes away, they don’t pass it along.” Thellie describes this as the “Akha Way”, or, Akha zha’, the multitude of rituals that govern everyday life, having hundreds of rules to follow (Kammerer, 1990). If they are not, they may have to give a sacrifice to the spirits. “Maybe they will have to sacrifice a chicken, or in some cases, the whole village has to move.” With so many restrictions guiding Akha life, no wonder many are turning to different beliefs.

Having lived and worked closely beside many of the Akha, P’Ao is seeing a disappearance of their cultural heritage, and feels that “only two or three percent know how to make their cultural handicrafts”. P’Ao, who has for years been trying to learn more about Akha culture in order to try to educate others and preserve it as best she can, explains that it is hard to find out about Akha culture, because many aspects to it are already lost. She is often not sure of the meanings behind some of their crafts. “The people that knew the meaning, died,” she is disconcerted as she says with futility, “Why don’t you learn with your grandmother?” I know she is speaking to no one in particular, but I cannot
imagine how difficult it must be to try to hold onto something that seemingly keeps slipping out of your grasp. She continues, sadly, referring to the Akha people’s own view on the loss of their culture, “Maybe in time, they don’t know, they don’t care. It would be forgotten.”

Another lunch. As I pass by the women, many of them call my name and motion for me to sit down and eat with them. This is the first time I have been invited into the Akha women’s lunch without having P’Ao with me. This is a very visible and noticeable shift because, for the Akha, eating together suggests a community of friendship and kinship. P’Achue explains to me that “Language is what shows who you are. The language makes you Akha.” I do not speak Akha. I do not look Akha. So, I am aware that I am still very much, an outsider. But, as P’Amoey scoops rice into my bowl, I realize that they have accepted me, and my reason for being here. It strikes me that they eat in their own group and it is rare to see anybody else join them for lunch, though I am sure that they would be more than happy to make room for more. On the opposite side of the community, there is a cafeteria. Yet, the women do not eat there. I doubt that the separation is due to any sort of bias. Perhaps it relates more to an ethnic segregation in socializing (Kammerer, 1990). Could this possibly be a reason their cultural heritage is fading? The separatist nature of the Akha could have an orthogenetic effect, leading the “traditional” Akha cultural heritage to change or disappear based on individual adapted beliefs and practices (Cohen, 2000).
Vignette 3: A Shift in Religious Beliefs

Photograph 5: Learning Letters

A shaky hand, a loop and dot.

*The English alphabet, missionary taught.*

*Akha words, at risk to be forgot.*
P’Amoey is a Christian. Since she was little she sees less and less of traditional culture, and has very little memory of it. She explains that most of the Akha tribes in the area are Christian. For her, she knows that the traditional culture revolved around the belief of Shamans, but does not know how to explain much of it outside of that.

“Why do you think much of the Akha culture is disappearing?”

“Largely because they changed to Christian,” Thellie translates for P’Amoey. “The villages don’t have Shamans any more. The ones that do have the traditions and culture, are dying out. Many of the younger generations are Christian so they have no interest in learning about the traditional culture until they get to a later age, and by that time, it is too late.”

“So you feel that it’s mostly because of religious aspects that culture is fading?”

P’Amoey nods her assent as Thellie verbalizes for her, “Yes.”

Thellie, P’Busu, and P’Achue are all in agreement that part of the reason traditional spiritual culture is dying is due to Christian missionaries coming in, offering education and other perks to Akha students. P’Achue explains to me that, in Thailand, if you do not speak Akha, then the Akha culture may be lost. She proudly writes out her name and hello in Akha, using the English alphabet. This is something that is recent in Akha culture, with missionaries teaching the hill tribe people the phonetic sound of the alphabet, so that their words can be written in English. However, many still do not know how to read or write. As the elders die off, and old beliefs are gone, many convert to Christianity or Catholicism. Referring to the Akha women who work with the project, Thellie explains that “most are Christian, so they aren’t particularly interested in the heritage or historical aspects of their culture. It goes against their religious beliefs.”

P’Busu feels that although knowing Akha cultural heritage is important, it is difficult with the change in religion. This is because changing beliefs in Akha culture mean a separating of villages. Once separated into a new village that is based upon a new religious belief, you lose much of the cultural heritage customs, sayings, and crafts that were a part of traditional Akha beliefs. However, part of the
appeal in having a new village, be it Christian or Catholic\(^1\), allows for the creation of more equals; as the new religious villages do not have a leader and instead rely on a priest or pastor to take care of the church. There are two religions that have been introduced to the Akha culture: Protestant Christianity and Catholicism. It has created three types of Akha village. They are referred to by Akha as: traditional, Catholic, and Christian. Traditional Akha believe in spirits and Shamans and place a high level of consideration in many of their life decisions (marriages, house building, harvest, etc.) as it relates to the spirits. Catholic villages are Christians who accept the ultimate authority of the Pope of Rome. They are allowed to participate in traditional celebrations, but because they are not concerned with the spirits, the ceremonies are shortened to a one or two day version, and do not involve sacrifices. Finally, Christian Akha (who would be labelled Protestant Christians in most places in the world) believe in Jesus alone and for this reason, they do not participate in any form of traditional festival, at least not within their own villages.

\(^1\) Distinction between “Christian” and “Catholic” as alternative labels is key – While “Catholicism” is a denomination of Christianity, not all Christians are Catholics. The non-traditional Akha, which all of the participants are, refer to themselves as either Catholic or Christian.
Vignette 4: A Feeling of Discrimination

We come from different walks of life, you and me.
We speak different tongues, laugh at different jokes.
Yet, we are of the same world, this same piece of paint.
We are bound by a blending of boundaries and a blurring of borders.
Religion, tradition, culture and war.
Identity intermingling,
What are we fighting for?
In town, I realize that there are underlying tensions between hill tribe groups and lowland society. When speaking to P’Achue about this, she describes a personal story to me of a time when she felt judged by the Thai people.

“Have you ever felt any discrimination from Thai people when you go into town?”

“Yes. When in Bangkok.”

“What happened?”

“Sat down and picked up a newspaper to read. I heard a few Thai people say, “She cannot read. She just looks at the photo!” And laugh at me.”

This is just one of many cases of discrimination that the hill tribe groups face in Thailand today. P’Noi confirms this, explaining through translation that she sometimes feels mocked when she goes to the market. The Thai people pick up on her dialect and “mock her way of speaking,” P’Ao translates for her.

I am shocked to hear that there are even popular television shows that mock the hill tribe groups. P’Pan believes that the discrimination towards the hill tribe groups is emphasized through both the media and educational system in Thailand. “When talk about hill tribe, they are low society… get the drug, uncivilized, destroy the forest.” She shakes her head, explaining to me, as P’Ao nods her head in assent, that it is the attitude of the greater Thai society that needs to be changed towards hill tribe groups in order to increase knowledge and respect.

Luckily, not all of the hill tribe women have experienced this. When I ask P’Amoey and P’Busu about discrimination, both explain that they have never had an issue with it. Thelli also has not witnessed discrimination between Akha and Thai. “But I know it’s there,” he explains, shaking his head. “Generally it comes mainly from the police.”

This is not entirely surprising considering the history between lowland society, specifically the Thai government, and the hill tribe groups. In the early 1900s, with the threat of communist parties in surrounding countries looming, the Thai government readily offered Thai nationality to hill tribe groups in order to secure their loyalty (Ishii, 2012). Despite this, many hill tribe groups, the Akha included, were reluctant to accept…there simply was no need living on the peripheral. Today, there is little political
motive to distribute Thai nationality, and it is a very slow and difficult process to receive it. With Northern Thailand becoming increasingly commercially developed and absorbed into the main Thai economic cultural system, the hill tribes “are no longer limited to the social sphere of mountain villages; their lives are now part of the global socioeconomic picture” (Ishii, 2012, p. 292). This has created a multitude of stateless minorities, and with it, contrasting perspectives. These perspectives that now intersect with today’s global economy, may be a reason that both Thai and Akha are seemingly having a cultural clash. Even for those Akha who do have citizenship, for many, history has created a divide between Thai and Akha. Discrimination, unfortunately, seems to be a resulting element.
Vignette 5: A Familial Relationship

Photograph 7: Working and Laughing Together

The gentle whir, a deftness of hand.
Colors abound, patterns of thread.
Elements of culture, sustained through craft.
Bought and paid for, an income that lasts.
Working hard, but with an easy laugh.
Women as employers, employees, and coworkers;
Are so much more than that.
This is a family. This is a friendship.
An environment that cares enough to be called a home.
In discussing the role of eBannok with the hill tribe groups, particularly the Akha, Thellie sees it as a project that is about more than just giving women employment and independent income. Being the only project with the Foundation that is “mainly staffed by local villagers and hill tribe women”, Thellie believes it stands out.

“Do you feel that the project values and respects cultural heritage?”

“I think it does. I think as you’ve seen, it’s not as important to the people within the culture. I think what’s important, not just for eBannok, but also for The Mirror generally, is that they allow it to be driven by the people within the culture. If they want help or if they need something important, they can come to us. If there’s ways to help retain culture if the hill tribe wants, then we will try. But, we don’t try to act like knights in shining armour.”

Both Thellie and P’Ao describe eBannok as a project that has been established to teach a variety of applicable skills through various workshops, while the hill tribe women often refer to it as a place that offers an environment of friendship to work in. It is a warm, welcoming, and comfortable setting. By creating such a space, eBannok allows the women an outlet to have any issues they face heard and acted upon. Projects, policies, and programs are often put in place as potential solutions to issues that the hill tribe groups present to the Foundation. Sustaining culture is not necessarily the foremost goal of the project. Instead, it is meant to offer the female artisans an environment that they feel comfortable enough in to explore aspects of their own cultural heritage, should they choose to do so.
Vignette 6: Blending Traditional and Modern Elements

Photograph 8: Akha Bracelet

A history that spans the generations.

A glimpse into the past.

Once upon the wrists of hunter and gatherers,

Now a thing of beauty made only to last.
P’Noi has been working with the eBannok project for about 12 to 13 years, as long as it has been running. She explains the meaning of eBannok to me with the help of P’Ao, as translator.

“What is the definition of eBannok?”

“People who stay countryside.”

“Where did that come from?”

“Is a negative meaning. If somebody call you “bannok”, it mean you are not modern. You far away, traditional.”

P’Ao continues, explaining that initially, the project was called Bannok, with the web address, bannok.com. But because they had an ecommerce website, they decided to combine the two to merge traditional with modern, even in the name. P’Noi feels this is also a reflection of the items the project produces. Since the more traditional items are difficult to sell, it is important to make them more modern. She feels that the heritage crafts need to be changed in order to sell for everyday use, laughing as she says, “High society must wear eBannok brand.” She describes one of the traditional crafts in Akha culture that has been modified, a bracelet. Whereas before the bracelet was made with seeds, now it is made with beads, shells, and nickel. This is largely because some seeds cannot cross borders, so they have had to modify it. The bracelets are her favourite traditional Akha design. However, while they are beautiful with their bright colours and intricate beading, they are still one of the more difficult items to sell within the eBannok project. P’Ao explains that this is because, despite the modern changes the bracelets have undergone, they are still one of the more traditional looking items. This makes them interesting to look at, but not easy to sell.

Thellie explains that traditional clothes and items are hard to sell, as they are not often worn or used. Yes they may look lovely, but not many have a use for it. By adapting to more modern designs but still incorporating traditional elements, eBannok is able to sell more products that in turn pays the women their wages. He refers to the whistles (refer to Photograph 2), “The actual whistle is part of the tradition, but the design has been changed.”
P’Ao eagerly shows me the onsite handicraft shop, which has hundreds of the famous Akha clay whistles hanging on necklaces, and larger ones lining the shelves. The colours are bright and bold. The smaller clay whistles especially fascinate me. Some of them are smaller than a nickel, yet just as detailed as the larger ones. Each make a very distinct whistle sound, much like that of a bird.

As we walk outside the shop, there are about five hill tribe women painting the smaller clay whistles. Their hands dash against the clay, shaping an unidentifiable blob into the very obvious body of an owl, peacock, parrot, or some other type of bird. While some work on shaping the clay, others are painting the already dry figures. The amount of detail is incredible. Beautiful, tiny, little figures of birds emerge out of nowhere.

Inside another room sits a row of sewing machines. Two Akha women sit leisurely sewing patterns into bags to sell. They sit, amiably chatting with each other, smiling as I walk in, and then return to their conversation. Had the sound of the machines not been buzzing in the background, it would have been nearly impossible to know that they were in there working. The atmosphere is enjoyable and relaxed.
Our hard work for sale,
A blend of traditional elements and modern touches,
Hours of hard work,
Mere minutes a transaction.
“Do you think that eBannok can help to sustain cultural heritage?”

“If eBannok is still here and is able to sell the culture, then maybe it can keep the culture alive.”

“And what do you think would be the difficulty in keeping eBannok running?”

“Not sure if the economic system can support it.  Not sure if the customer will want it or not.”

P’Ao is translating for P’Busu.  There is a sombre mood, as we discuss the projects ability to sell heritage crafts.  P’Busu worries about the projects ability to continue on.  Her concern is that because the traditional products are difficult to sell, eBannok may not survive.  Yet, removing the traditional elements completely will cause eBannok to lose its identity of sustaining cultural heritage crafts.  P’Achue mirrors this sentiment, saying, “If you keep using the product it will keep the culture alive.”  The trick is, getting people to use the product.

Internal sales are primarily relied upon through tours, with locals or tourists making the trip to get a glimpse of hill tribe life, stopping at the foundation and the store.  Less popular is the overpriced Night Bazaar, located in Chiang Rai.  Due to high rent costs and paying wages to those who work there, P’Ao explains that it is very difficult to make a profit.  Yet, P’Ao tells me that although local and online sales are not very positive, international sales are.  I am surprised.  She explains that this is largely due to volunteers who take boxes of goods back to their country to sell.  When their buyers express an interest, they turn them towards the website.  In response, the project has set up an online presence for itself on eCommerce platforms such as Ebay and Etsy, where customers can buy direct.  Thellie explains that the beneficial aspect to these websites is that they are automated.  “So, the orders that do come in, are in English.  But it’s got a picture of a bird,” he clarifies, “name of the bird, and the amount.  So it’s fairly straightforward.”  He feels that having these online sales allows the project to remain stable.  “It covers itself and then makes enough to get funnelled into the general pot, which can then help other projects.”

However, with The Mirror Foundation being approximately 50 percent externally funded, the project has a way to go before it can be the possible income-generating program that Thellie hopes for.  It is a daunting number, and although Thellie is unsure of exactly how this figure has changed over the years, he is sure that it has been decreasing steadily as the NGO, and its projects, become better known.
Vignette 8: Gender and Being a Female Artisan in Thailand

Photograph 10: Female Artisan

Painting history, creating identity.
These are the women who continue on.
Scraping by through sculpture,
Earning their way through crafts and colors.
Of the four female artisans I spoke with, all agreed that working with eBannok meant they had an independent income. P’Noi enjoyed it because although it took time away from her family, it was closer to her family than other jobs. P’Amoey, who has worked with the project for three years, starting like many through a sewing workshop, described, with the help of Thellie as translator, that “it helps other people that work here too.” She continues, describing eBannok as a project that respects events in Akha life such as harvest and funerals, “Might be unable to work for up to two weeks, eBannok understands that certain things need to be done.”

When speaking to Thellie, he clarifies that for the women, “the focus is on the family, getting through the day, getting through the week.” He explains that the clay workshop producers are paid on a pace rate, while the sewing workshop producers are on a daily rate, with one having a monthly wage, as she helps with orders and administrative duties. “It’s fairly stable. With one project leader [P’Ao] and me, or P’Moo [works with The Mirror Foundation], helping out, the women in the clay and sewing workshops are all waged.” Thellie explains that first and foremost, the “project is set up to be an independent form of income for the Akha women. If the husband isn’t funding the family, took off, or died, then they have a way of earning their own income.” He glances down at his hands, “second is the attempt to sustain or promote the culture. What has been realized over time with eBannok, is that you can do that to a certain extent.” I glance over at the polka-dot bags with the Akha embroidered handles, understanding his meaning.

P’Busu explains that Akha women typically see man as the head, and they cannot be the speaker. So, for them, having a job that through activities and interactions allows them the freedom to generate a sustainable income is ideal, challenging “dominant and repressive social practices” (Kronsell, 2005, p. 288). Her biggest concern is that it is “difficult because some weeks have less income, changes with how busy it is.” Since many are paid on a pace-rate, the lack of consistent work is a constant source of unease for the female artisans.
CHAPTER 6

MOVING FORWARD

A Vignette in Looking to the Future

Photograph 11: eBannok

A shop to many, a home to some.
A mixture of identities, blended as one.
An outlet to work, a place to laugh.
A future still unsure of its plans.
I admire the dreams of P’Ao despite the challenges she faces. She one day hopes to accomplish a tribal craft education centre in order to ensure that the traditional handicrafts are not lost. She describes having a one or two month workshop where hill tribe people can learn multiples skills, such as sewing, painting, and mechanics. The workshops would be taught by three people who intern for one year, getting a free sewing machine to provide for themselves once they are done. The workshops would be for local schools led by local tribal craftspeople, to teach the younger generation about their tribal culture and identity. “I believe that such a workshop can teach skills for the hill tribes to bring income to family and also to connect them to culture,” P’Ao muses. Her eyes are dreamy, and there is a slight smile playing on her lips. For the Akha, she envisions an embroidery and decorative metal embellishing workshop.

For now, the project will continue to run under the principles of fair trade, as Thellie says, “It is stable, but needs to concentrate on its management structure.” We are discussing whether the project will be registering as a fair trade organization. For the short term future, Thellie doesn’t see this as a possibility. “The worst thing that can happen is that you go diving in and then it doesn’t work out. You just get a bad reputation. The systems in place need to be working well before the next steps are taken. It needs to work on its own.” He is referring to the Akha women being able to work on their own, without the guided leadership of P’Ao or himself. Currently, this is a concern for both him and P’Ao, who would like to see the women be able to take more supervisory roles on as the project progresses.
CHAPTER 7

A REFLEXIVE STATEMENT

Being immersed in a different culture than your own brings to light personal strengths and weaknesses very quickly. It is at this point that I recognize them in order to readily situate the research I did at The Mirror Foundation with their project, eBannok. I am a young, white female, with no grasp of the Thai or Akha languages. While able to effectively communicate with P’Ao, Thellie, and P’Pan (the first two whom acted as translators for me), my lack of Akha language was limiting at times. Prior to beginning the study, I was given the impression that the Akha female artisans spoke conversational English. However, upon arrival, I discovered very quickly that this was not the case and that, in fact, many of them had limited Thai language skills. This in combination with P’Ao and Thellie’s limited Akha language skills was a notable hurdle during conversations and semi-structured interviews. I was immediately labelled as an “outsider”. However, I did not generate the curious glances I had expected due to approximately 20 similar looking volunteers, involved with projects working outdoors or teaching indoors. Quickly my daily presence walking around the Foundation, having lunch with the Akha women, photographing their craft-making, and asking curious questions became ordinary, even expected. The women and those working for the project and the Foundation began to accept me; they became increasingly relaxed and both willing and interested in answering my questions.

From a personal standpoint, I found it a strength to be aware of my limitations. I realized that the narratives and images I produced were representative of what I saw, and the relationships I formed. It allowed me to walk in each day with an open mind for what I was going to experience, because each experience was new for me. By joining the Akha women for lunch every day, I was able to quickly gain acceptance, learning their individual personalities through actions and signals without having to rely on their words. By doing so, my awareness of my surroundings and participants increased, as all of my senses were on high alert. I was not limited simply to words. Instead, I connected with the Akha women through a lot of gestures, drawing, and actions. Personally, I feel that this broke many barriers, as it caused both myself, and the women, to interact in a way that did not allow for a guard to be put up.
CHAPTER 8
DISCUSSION

This examination of intersecting themes surrounding female Akha artisans in Northern Thailand provides a glimpse of the challenges that cultural minority groups may encounter as they negotiate a sense of cultural identity and heritage. The various restrictions found within traditional Akha teachings, changing religious beliefs, and ethnic discrimination are just some of the factors that influence the daily lives of the participants. More specifically, examining their stories reveals ways in which cultural minorities may be pulled in many directions, with some of these influences creating enough conflict to cause a turning away from one's cultural heritage. The stories also highlight the challenges facing artisan cooperatives, like eBannok, in navigating the globalized landscape while seeking to sustain cultural heritage. The potential for conflict when the hill tribe group’s values are shaped by interaction with their immediate and changing environment, in combination with a blurring of traditional and modern roles introduced to their cultural heritage items in their role as female artisans, may impact their experiences and perceptions of their own social and cultural heritage.

As the eBannok project continues and with luck, grows, it needs to determine which aspects of hill tribe traditional culture to incorporate into its own set of modern-day values. Talking to P’Ao, she stated to me that “people still want to see traditional.” The issue is that traditional only goes so far. The Akha people will occasionally dress in their traditional clothes for ceremonies, or for tourist purposes to make a few extra coins. But outside of that, it is fading. The relevance of the traditions is being lost within and outside of the Akha culture. For the Akha, it seems that many of the traditions are time consuming, difficult to teach or translate, uncomfortable (as in the case of the clothing), or unrelatable (often for religious purposes). For outsiders, while it is nice to see the traditional aspects of the Akha culture, it seems to be more of an event for us. Maybe it is that we want to see something unusual, but it is difficult to take that and apply it in our modern lives. This may be a reason that eBannok has had to resort to combining traditional and modern elements in order to increase sales. The tension created between modern versus traditional is further intensified as Akha children move toward adulthood and
make decisions pertaining to their religion, professions, education, and the kind of life they see themselves leading. This is then exacerbated by differences in perspective that are influenced by differences in culture between the greater Thai society that the children are navigating and the landscape that their parents, and grandparents experienced in the past. Then, it is further complicated by struggles that Akha women have faced as they enter the workforce and the struggles they endure to be seen as equals within a changing Akha society as they provide for their families.

In the case of this study, having had a historical general reaction of suspicion and distrust from Thai officials due to what P’Pan explains as “old education” and contrasting perspectives, the Akha and other hill tribe groups struggle to carve out a place in society. Based on what many of the participants explain, one “can characterize the relationship of lowland governments to Akha society as one of extraction” (Tooker, 1996, p. 327). However, with the increasingly commercial development of Northern Thailand, it may have less to do with extraction and more to do with limited political motivation.

Thailand is becoming popular in the global socioeconomic picture, creating contrasting perspectives intersecting with today’s global economy. This could be a common structure that has governed the social thought and action (McLennan, 2005) of hill tribe groups when interacting with lowland Thai society. A cultural divide has been created between Thai and Akha. For this reason, not only does this research address eBannok as it relates to globalization and cultural heritage, and the female artisan lived experiences within eBannok, but it also contributes to the lack of understanding of the experiences of the Akha as a cultural minority group in Thailand. Providing insights into the discriminatory experiences involved in hill tribe life by implementing some form of program to educate a better understanding of the hill tribe groups as they live today, may be beneficial to the greater Thai population as a whole. “Creating an environment in which multiple identities flourish begins with encouraging cultural liberty and equality between groups in cultural, political and socio-economic opportunities” (UNDP, 2004, p. 42). Promoting the multiple identities of the hill tribe groups may be key in moving Thailand forward in the future. Unfortunately, community participation and support is often the greatest challenge (Kurin, 2004).
Then there is the very aspect of Akha society that I had noticed during lunches and that has been reported in other case studies, one of ethnic self-segregation when it comes to socialization amongst the Akha (Kammerer, 1990). This could be in part due to discriminatory reasons, or perhaps it is related to a cultural disposition reflecting the Akha historical method of village-level affiliations and relationships (Tooker, 1996). However, it could also be linked to language barriers, an aspect that is changing as more Akha are incorporated into the public and private educational systems within Thailand. Possibly, it is a reflection of larger intersocietal processes and communications of both hegemonic and resistant relationships that are occurring between different types of political systems (Tooker, 1996) that are currently both in a state of flux in the changing global climate.

The issues presented showcase the challenges that the Akha cultural heritage is currently faced with, and demonstrates the need for national or international intervention (Kurin, 2004). The challenge is that “all individuals or societies must be provided with the enabling conditions to re-present and to negotiate their cultural location with this new *multi-tiered cultural cosmopolis*” (Arizpe, 2004, p. 134). This challenge, in turn, informs the work of like-minded artisan cooperatives, NGOs, and FTOs, as they attempt to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse populations, marginalized producers, and in particular, female artisans. Rather than objectify cultural heritage through conservation in the international discourse seen in today’s evolving globalization, organizations should, instead, protect cultural coherence through programs that recognize and celebrate cultural diversity (Arizpe, 2004).
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSION

Fair trade practices to sustain cultural heritage of marginalized producers in a global context may be familiar to most. Principles of human rights, equality, cultural and social sustainability through ethical trading markets (Gendron, et al., 209; Hutchens, 2010, Witkowski, 2005; VanderHoff Boersma, 2009) are aspects of the institutionalization of fair trade that are commemorative in their familiarity. Other issues of the lived experiences of the producers may be less familiar:

- cultural heritage changes as it relates to religious affiliation,
- discrimination in their immediate social surroundings,
- difficulty in educating their youth,
- equality amongst female producers both within their culture and how that effects them outside of it,
- and, the need to alter traditional craft with more modern elements in order for a project to sustain itself.

Nonetheless, these are issues that are integral to the incorporation of how globalization impacts the “performativity and liminality” (McLennan, 2005, p. 82) of the social and cultural experiences that fair trade institutions offer.

Having the ability to offer a more inclusive sense of rich social and cultural representation, differing fair trade outlets are assembled along symbolic visions, be they visions of narrative and sequential sequence that through convention dictate the course of fragmented heterogeneity and ambivalence (Kapoor, 2002; McLennan, 2003), or physical visions such as the hills that surround buildings that house the sewing machines and clay workshops the producers work upon. However, when discussing the actual role and lived experiences of the producers, knowledge is not seen as a particular symbolic vision, but as a gathering of cultural values of a certain society, that “impose an initial ordering of the multiplicity of possible meanings that confront social actors” (Hekman, 1997, p. 360). Acting as a
social actor, artisan cooperatives often lack the structure that is seen within FTOs that is able to properly navigate these multiple narratives that their marginalized producers bring to the table that may in turn challenge their organizational structure. However, the multiplicity of meanings may also act in a beneficial way for the artisan cooperative, creating stylistic changes to heritage arts and crafts that evolve a culture through the process of globalization (Cohen, 2000; Musitelli, 2002).

The same can be said of the female producers within the artisan cooperative, eBannok, who as members of the project, make practical uses of the affordances at their disposal within the organizational environment, creatively solving the problems that they face in their day to day lives by giving heritage crafts a new lease on life in the commercialization process. In this way, the artisan cooperative in question understands that what once were traditional and cultural tasks in craft making are now being undertaken in unfamiliar ways, in an increasingly modern global setting. By realizing this, and subsequently adapting to this setting, the project has allowed its female artisans to employ more familiar and innovative methods that they have become accustomed to with cultural and social identity shifts in recent years. After all, it is “the resonance and blending between cultures that leads to great masterpieces of human ideas, skills, exchanges and co-operation” (Arizpe, 2004, p. 131). By producing heritage arts that maintain and reflect elements of traditional hill tribe culture, while having the ability to appeal to a more global and external audience, eBannok has begun to establish an authentic hill tribe artisan initiative. The authenticity is not mere repetition of a past cultural heritage, but instead is due to a dynamic and changing shift in hill tribe culture, blending both modern and traditional elements.
REFERENCES


