

A comparative field-study between two Akha Tourist villages: Tsjaw Pakha Kao and Saen Chareon Kao Akha

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Introduction

In the last 10-15 years an increasing number of ethnic minority mountain villages, including Akha, have tried to open up for tourists, hoping to gain some income from Tourism, including handicraft sales. As for the Akha, this is in sharp contrast with the past, when they were reluctant to show their sophisticated “internal life, ceremonies and knowledge” to the outsider, fearing to be abused. What is left of this is that they tend to make a happy impression to the outside and are afraid to voice open criticism versus the outsider. Of the 20 or so Akha villages, which have seen a major influx of tourists in the last 10-15 years, we have chosen Tsjaw Pakha Kao 10 Km East of Mae Chan and Saen Chareon Kao, 10 Km North West up mountain from Mae Sruai town, South of Chiang Rai. They are two villages which we were able to follow over several years already.

Tsjaw Pakha and Saen Chareon Kao villages:

Basic data: location, composition, leadership, economy, and the impact of tourism:

a. Tsjaw-Pakha Kao Akha village

Location

Mae Chan District, No Wen subdistrict in the Upper Northern Thai Province of Chiang Rai. It is located at a distance of about 10 Km East of the Thai Market Town of Mae Chan, near the Mae Chan river.. From there it can be easily reached by a 5 year old asphalt road, through a wide area of irrigated ricefields, now mostly belonging to Thai peasants. Mountains are behind to the West and one enters the Eastern Mae Chan district, where the large Mae Khong River valley starts. The valley is crossed by many secondary rivers, amongst which the Mae Chan river, all feeding the powerful Mae Khong. There are a few elevations with remnant forest or reforestation with teak and eucalyptus trees under the jurisdiction of the Royal Forestry Department. Tzjaw Pakha is on the edge of some of those elevations, and villagers have conserved a small forest around the village. But otherwise it looks like a small island surrounded by irrigated rice-fields, mostly owned by Thai farmers. When one approaches the village the road curves up, between trees. After that the village comes into sight as it has been built a great deal along the road, over a length of 400 Meters. In between fruit trees households have set up their stalls within reach of the road. Somewhere half-way is an Akha gate and somewhat more hidden is the Akha swing, both indicating that we are in a “traditional” Akha village.

Composition/Leadership: Tsjaw Pakha has Akha 223 inhabitants, half of them younger than 20 years. They are divided over 46 compounds, with bamboo fences and in which extended family households live. At the higher part of the village are a few Thai-style houses with shops and most stalls are also concentrated there. Most houses are traditional Akha houses with low reaching thatched-roofs.

Quite some smaller houses built (not on stilts but) on the soil indicate that there is poverty. In general houses don't make the impression of having been renewed recently. Several children having ID cards, go to a Thai elementary school in nearby No Wen Yao village. Others help their parents. Only a very few had a chance to go to the city for study.

The village's leadership is a combination of the traditional Akha village leadership and modern leadership, linking into the Thai administrative system. The traditional village leader or dzoema, Abaw Mawlo Dzoebaw is a man in his 70's and responsible for internal order, solving of conflicts and the traditional village- ceremonies. Boemaw Adang Yeutsjeh is the village-reciter, who knows the old archaic texts used for healing, official occasions or funerals. Abaw Gh'ang Cheumui still holds the title of Kh'ama or strongman. Abaw Athu Yeutsjeh is the chosen, and Thai appointed headman, for external affairs and links with the Thai administrative system.

An assistant /spokesman or nangeu is Athu Bawtsjeh. A younger and quite successful herbalist is Addo Dzoebaw, who can heal most of the current ailments, as the hospital in the nearby No Weng is quite expensive. This whole group of leaders, of different age is called: Abaw Tsjaw maw, or the Council of elders.

Village-economy

Tsjaw Pakha was founded in 1966, moving down from higher areas near the Burmese border, where they had lived since the 1870's. Besides increasing violence in border areas in the 1960's, a reason to move down was that there was enough irrigable and fertile land in the Maekhong valley and low population density. Until later in the 1970's the village had a time of relative prosperity. Lack of ID cards and landrights were reason, that their paddylands were gradually taken over, often through violent means, by Thai peasants, who moved in from other and poorer areas. 20 families still have a piece of land on some of the higher elevations, but agriculture depends on rain, and soil fertility is low. It does not yield any cash-crop.

The Forestry Department, which in the past had been logging teak-trees there, is now starting to reforest these smaller elevated hills again with eucalyptus and some teak. Only two families still have irrigable, lower, land. Those having land do have rice for

5 months only and no income from cashcrop, like they had in the past. 24 families have no land and work with those having some land for 70 Bht. a day and food. At least in times of planting, harvesting and weeding. Because of lack of land rights, the village is becoming more and more like an island; Also: 16 families don't have house-registration papers and 50 % of the villagers doesn't have ID cards, although their over grandfathers and mothers were already born on Thai soil.

Tourism and handicraft

Tourism and handicraft sale started to come in about 15 years ago to make up for the Loss of land and cashcrop. Some capital input came from two Japanese and one American, marrying three local Akha girls. Guiding started with an Akha man, being able to speak some English. This attracted backpackers and smaller groups, who came

with motorbikes and pick up trucks over a dirt road. Handicraft and embroidery confection remained small scale but brought some income for all.

Visitors also paid for staying overnight and for food. Relations were personal and an Akha english translator or foreigner was often around. Visitors were also happy to buy some of the self-made and simple handicraft. Creativity of the villagers was also great. Everywhere were self-made signs and drawings; most people still had traditional cloth. One old man had made himself an enormous bamboo hat, with gourds and pockets hanging from it. He was sitting on a chair, smoking a water-pipe and of course attracted attention from the visitors, who gave him 10 baht for the show. Other had invented other fancy cloth. Average income per family from tourism amounted to 2-3000 Bht a month, and for families with bigger houses it amounted to 7000 Bht, in peak times.

Mass Tourism in Tsjaw Pakha Village

In 1996 a direct asphalt road was made from Mae Chan to Tsjaw Pakha Kao and after that mass-tourism moved in. In high season this means, that about 30-40 pick ups, van's and busses a day come up on the asphalt road. Trips to the village are part of a package trip, on which they see 5 villages, the border at Mae Sai, the "Golden Triangle" at the Mekhong River. Maybe also Doi Tung. And some have to rush back to Chiang Mai the same day. Each group, between 15 and 30 tourists, stays in the village for about 10 minutes. In that time a guide has to tell something and they also want to have a stroll along the stalls.

Handicraft confection and sale has become a problem for Tsjaw Pakha, as for most Akha villages, however. Cotton growing And processing stopped generally in the 1980's when land problems were growing and became too expensive. Making of the intricate Akha embroidery and applique work is also extremely time consuming and expensive. It was traditionally made for social use in the villages and not for sale to outsiders. By the end of the 1980's the quality of locally made handicraft went down and import from Burma, where prices are much lower and quality better, increased. Tourists also increasingly found handicraft of all kind of quality in night-bazars and handicraft-centers. For increasingly landless villages with a shortage of labour and capital, it became difficult to compete with these growing markets.

Most Akha villages also did not have a chance to update handicraft making through the education of women as professional seamstresses and being able to work with more sophisticated equipment. They thus increasingly turned to the cheaper and often imitation handicraft as available near or just over the border at Mae Sai. As for imitation silver, jewelry, stones, statuettes etc: this was also increasingly made in a Thailand based "imitation-industries". The number of middlemen and companies also increased, leaving only a minimal profit for the poorer and final seller at the stalls.

Tsjaw Pakha thus started to invest in reasonably good Burmese handicraft, the quadrangle saphrane cotton pieces with ornate animals and also marionet puppets, in small format. In the poorer stalls and in between the Burmese handicraft are smaller Yao bags and hats and some low bamboo stools, made by the nearby Yao villagers. Also a few bags and shirts, self embroidered on synthetic cotton of bad quality. Some older women in outworn traditional dress are still embroidering. The younger women

all have dressed up for tourists. But sales have gone down. Nobody can speak English and an absolute lack of information exists.

The guides give the tourists hardly time to look quietly and some women have developed a tendency to push themselves around the tourists with small things of ten baht, just before they are going back to their vans or pick ups.

According to the village-leaders income has gone down. Some of the better families make between 10, 000-20, 000 Baht (370-400 US\$) a year only, but they have to share with others working with them. They have no bankbooks anymore, because its hand to mouth, now.

b. The Akha village of Saen Chareon Kao

Location: Saen Chareon Kao Akha is in the Wawee subdistrict of the Mae Sruai District, Southern Chiang Rai Province. It is located at 10 Km North West of the Thai market town of Mae Sruai, which is 50 Km South of Chiang Rai and 135 Km North of Chiang Mai, on the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai Road. Two Km. North of Mae Sruai one Takes the now asphalted road to Wawee, from where a dirt-road goes up to Saen Chareon, Doi Laan and Doi Chiang villages quite steeply after 3 Km. It goes first through an area where many families have their fields. Later is goes through still a slightly forested area. In dusty and rainy seasons a 4 wheel car or chained pick up is often needed in order to make it to Saen Chareon Kao village, a bigger village at the left side of the road. The village is divided in four mayor parts, or sub-villages, with an Akha dancing place in the middle. An Akha swing is located on the highest elevation, and from where a beautiful view shows most of the surrounding mountains and lowlands. Altitude of the village is around 900 Mr. and it is still is surrounded by a forest, with several sources, although all trees with a diameter of more than 15 cm have been logged out, by lowland companies, over the years. People's fields are mostly at the N. Western and Eastern sides of the village, beyond the forest and at a walking distance of one hour or so. The South Western side of the forest and beyond which previously fields could be found, has been first cleared of forest and later reforested with pine-trees. eucalyptus trees and bamboo. It was part of Worldbank/Government plan, started in 1979 already to reforest most of the Wawee subdistrict after having cleared it from "degraded forest". Logging of this "degraded forest" between 1997 and 1985 delivered around 40, 000 big trees, after roads were made in the whole area. After that roads were neglected, creating some problems of accessibility.

Composition/leadership: Saen Chareon Kao Akha, previously called Maw La Akha has 850 Akha inhabitants, divided over 110 extended family households with their own compounds. About 90 % of the houses are still in the old Akha style, made from bamboo and low-reaching thatch roofs. They are often still built on slopes, especially in the lower sections. Amongst them are several smaller houses, directly built on the soil, indicating poverty. Wooden, Thai style or modern Akha style houses can be found in the upper parts, where also some smaller shops for the villagers are located. In the villages center is also a larger community-house, used for meetings and also for tourists. As for leadership and structure: Saen Chareon Kao

Has been one of the few Akha villages, which quite radically and consciously have tried to maintain the traditional Akha Customary law and culture in leadership, ceremonies, customs and rules of egalitarianism. But it has also tried to adapt these to modern times. Foreign religious enterprises have been systematically kept out, so far. The general attitude of most older villagers is: Accept the new that is useful and don't throw away the old knowledge and practices, initiated by the experience of the ancestors and which still can help. The traditional leadership, or "Council of elders" still functions in village-conflicts, seasonal agricultural decisions and ceremonies of many kinds. It includes the dzoema, or traditional village-leader, Abaw Apaw Dzoebaw, who is assisted by 3 dzoeza (apprentice leaders), all still from traditional hereditary "ruling families". Abaw phima Assaw the traditional reciter of carefully transmitted archaic texts.

They are recited at the occasion of diseases, lengthy funeral and inauguration ceremonies, is still active. In his recitations he still is assisted by two phiza or apprentices. To the council of elders also belong two traditional blacksmiths or rather technicians in bamboo, wood and iron-work, Abaw Langdzjaw and Abaw Abjeu Anyi. Also the Nyipa or shaman, Abaw Peh, still practices his diagnostic trances in the old style. An important member of the "Council of elders" is the Akha Cultural specialist or Boemaw, Abaw Busoe Dzoebaw. : He was appointed village-leader for 20 years, but his term ended 3 years ago. He has been a main animator in the conservation and adaptation of traditional Akha culture and at the same time originator of three Akha NGO's for culture and education.

As for the older women: Three of them have been inaugurated as Jajeh ama or "Rain-field Mothers", giving them the right to do the family ancestral services while wearing the white skirt. The village also has three outstanding herbalist women, directed by Aphi Ku Dzoebaw, who have an impressive knowledge of the healing qualities of plants and trees. Several of the older men and women also have been trained in other medical practices such as bone-setting, blood circulation practices and massage. All families in Saen Chareon Kao still have their ancestor-services at important occasions.

Besides this group of older traditional cultural specialists in Akha Customary Law and traditional knowledge, Saen Chareon also has a "modern" Village-Committee. It is composed of 7 younger leaders, directed by the elected and Thai appointed official Puyaiban, Mr. Apha Jupaw. He is assisted by a Puchuai or assistant, in the person of Mr. Apha Dughmui. This committee is in charge of all modern administrative affairs. Both traditional and modern leadership meet regularly. Heads of all families, including men and women, meet once a month. Over the years good relations between leadership and the local District officers resulted in 80 % of the village population being in possession of ID cards, an exceptional high percentage as compared with most other Akha villages. Land-rights don't exist, however and forest or arable land was and is being "disowned" easily in many cases of reforestation projects.

As for maintenance of all useful elements of traditional culture and opening up for the modern world, especially for study and increasing wage labour in the lowlands, Saen Chareon also had its serious problems. It has caused a "brain drain" in the village, as many of the more clever youngsters moved to Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai. Those youngsters staying behind not always feel happy and the older cultural specialists are afraid that several of their centuries old "lines of knowledge" will not have a follow

up because of an increasing urbanizing and sometimes “lost”, that is uprooted, younger generation.

Village-economy:

Saen Chareon village was founded in 1962, moving down- like Tsjaw Pakha village- from Doi Tung and neighbouring higher border areas with Burma. They had lived there since the 1870's, but had to escape increasing border violence in the 60's, caused by smaller KMT and other armies roaming those areas.

Not finding irrigable land in Mae Sruai's lowland, they moved up to their actual location finding plenty of forest and until well in the 1970's they practiced sustainable swidden agriculture for 20 years. Like in so many Akha villages loss of about half of the arable land to the agro-forestry industry projects since the mid 1980's, and also increase of population density, has made the recycling of land in Saen Chareon village increasingly difficult. Some better off families were still able to concentrate, with wage-labour of poorer families, on cashcrops like tomatoes, cabbage, peanuts, soya beans and ginger, with their often insecure and changing market-values. In spite of investments tomatoes, cabbages and other cashcrops might have to be thrown or given away at the end of the season. Lack of land rights, insecurity of future land-use and lack of funds also made it impossible to switch to stabilized and intensive agriculture. For this reason income had to be increased by outside wage-labour; It is was partly done in the neighbourhood of the village, like participating in re-forestation projects for the Royal Forestry Department; partly for lowland Thai agricultural work. Quite some of the young also moved to Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai for wage-labour in the construction business, small scale imitation handicraft industries, and the service sector. The last include low payed pump stations and restaurants, especially for younger girls. Moving into prostitution was extremely marginal and it stopped when two girls died from HIV/AIDS.

In the 1990's a sense of uneasiness also spread amongst the younger, leading to increased drug-addiction. A young leadership is now dealing with this problem quite radically. Interest in the Traditional Akha Culture also deminished amongst the younger and most started to dress gradually like the lowland Thai, keeping their traditional costumes for festive occasions.

Tourism:

Tourism has come to Saen Chareon village in all kind of forms and shapes, over about years already, but it was limited by a somewhat difficult acces to the village, Especially at the peak time of the rainy period, between July and September. Steep roads are also not easily accessible for vans and bigger busses. This means, thatreal mass tourism cannot reach it. This might be a blessing as it is hard to handle even in a big village.

Saen Chareon's cultural liveliness, its larger size and beautifull ecological setting Has attracted quite a lot of smaller groups. As for economic profit for the village and relations of equality we can divide tourist visits largely in two main groups: passing tourist-groups, including also peoples from the media (filmers, fotographers etc) who are not profitable and sometimes damaging for the village: These include tourist

groups, who just pass and make pictures, without looking for personal contact and not paying any retribution. These groups have increased over the years. There are also examples of government people coming in with film crews commanding all younger men and women to dress up and dance, and then leave without any retribution or contact with the village leadership. An involved onlooker is sometimes amazed how village people go through these kinds of humiliating experiences still friendly laughing and not getting angry.

Free lance writers/photographers and sometimes filmers are amongst the worse of visitors, except when previous arrangements and agreements have been made. Some push themselves in ceremonies, shoot “from the hip”, try to intrude in houses or compounds, when people-especially women-are only partly dressed. It is the less rewarding and most abusive kind of visitors, who-after having sold their booty-make lots of money out of it.

Another damaging form of tourism, in Saen Chareon, has been the drug-tourism, which only brought profit to addicts, and which profit afterwards went up in smoke.

Over 15 years millions of profit have been made by these kinds of scavenger tourism in Saen Chareon, without the village being able to improve from it. People have no power to do anything about this and “authorities”, including police seem reluctant to create bad images versus “farang groups”.

Besides this Saen Chareon had positive and profitable experiences with trekkers and back pack tourism, in case local guides had good relations with the village leadership. In the 1980's already a house was built for such visitors. Partly reacting to this “scavenger” tourism, Saen Chareon has also learned Over the years. how to make money from well organized eco-tourism in various forms. This was also partly due to the fact that the Saen Chareon leadership was at the origin of three Akha NGOs, including also foreign advisors. Since the mid 1980's an increasing number of smaller and motivated eco-tourist groups engaged in development-, culture-, education-oriented tourist ventures, without the NGO's involved wanting to become “tourist-companies”. Saen Chareon being in a district with many Akha, Lisu and Karien villages also made trips to other villages possible.

Ideology of this eco-tourism was in fact that visitors and guests came into the Village as friends, maybe “students” and NOT as tourists. Also that guests/visitors equally needed Development, cultural knowledge and education, when they would be able to meet hosts as equals and friends. This also only could be performed if visitors would be lodged, taken care of and fed by as many local families as possible. Provided that they would not be addicts. In cases of larger enterprises, film or video crews, compensation to the village fund was obligatory. Many of these groups also received previous information on Akha ecology and culture, through videos, in SEAMP-CD-RDI, Chiang Mai, as there was no electricity in the village. In the 90s this kind of eco-tourism developed into “interest-groups”: They were groups concentrating on traditional medical knowledge, ethno-botany, traditional handicraft coloring, massage, land and water management, dancing and music etc. Village cultural specialists were rewarded for their teachings and this also gave the young an Impression of the value of ecological and related traditional knowledge.

How much the individual family and village industry profited from this eco-tourism in financial terms, is not easy to assess. In the late 1980's it made the set-up of a village-rice bank possible. It also contributed to the related NGO's scholarship Funds, from which also many of the surrounding villages profited. Food brought in for "guest-groups" also was shared by quite a large number of related house-holds. The 150-180 Bht. food and board contributions, including massage, 8-10 times a year raised income of many larger households and their poorer helpers. Distributive tendencies are still alive. A dance-group of middle-aged traditional dancers gained some self-reliance and was also asked to dance elsewhere.

Handicraft: Being concentrated on keeping traditional knowledge, which might be economically profitable in the future, several older women started to concentrate on experimentation with traditional coloring for many years already.

Local villagers and students of a women project in the area also obtained some training with the help of an Akha Women NGO. This made small scale sales of new types of traditional handicraft possible, which look very promising when they can be developed. It was never able to develop itself into a new local industry however and cannot be counted amongst the important sources of income for the village, yet.

A Pilot Akha Cultural Center Project: Saen Chareon Kao leadership and advisors are planning a more systematic set up of an Akha Cultural Center in Saen Chareon village. This center will be located in a traditional Akha style house, and will serve several purposes: training of Akha students and village women, in adapted traditional handicraft, traditional medical knowledge and primary health-care, traditional song and dance, massage, besides the principles of Akha Customary law. Illustrative materials and videos will re-inforce this.

The center will also take care of "Guest-programmes" for small eco-tourist Groups, which will be encouraged to participate in village life as much as possible. The center can help them also with traditional medical treatment and massage; eco-trips to neighbouring villages and through forests and fields can also be made on horse. For those who want to contribute to ecological recovery and awareness, a tree planting programme will be set up. A handicraft project will try to expand production of authentic local produce of quality.

The cultural center programme will be set up in such a way that villagers and guests will feel like equals, who can learn from each other. It is hoped that the younger generation in the village will become aware of the value, including the economic, of traditional ecological knowledge and will feel motivation to make their living in the village.