



## Hierophany in the *Lo Ching Cha*

### THE ROAD TO THE AKHA VILLAGE

*“Sawadee krub!”*

Upon hearing this strange language, I knew that I was no longer in my own country. I have already set foot on the “Land of the Free,” Thailand. I came with all the feelings of excitement, worries, and varied emotions. My passport indicated that I am a Filipino, but I was also carrying another passport, that of a Redemptorist missionary sent to a foreign land. This identity as a Redemptorist missionary was my assurance and gate pass to my everyday encounter in Thailand of the mission of God. It was what I was holding on as I began my journey as a missionary.

Being a missionary in a foreign land was not easy. I was like a child trying to learn everything for the first time; learning how to speak a new language and how to walk in their way of life. Like a child, I needed someone to guide and teach me. The people became my teachers. Learning from them the first few words were difficult; however, their patience and willingness to teach helped me a lot. I considered this childlike attitude crucial to any missionary who wants to learn new things in the mission and for the mission. Remembering the words of Jesus who said,



“Let the children come to me,”<sup>1</sup> I came to Jesus through the people in the mission, in the place where He taught me how to speak, walk, and live a missionary life. I realized that Jesus was challenging me to move forward among the villagers with a “missionary child” attitude.

This missionary child in me was immersed into the “unknown.” But this experience of the unknown gave excitement, joy, and learning to my true mission. I began to believe that it is in the unknown experience that the known God resides, a God who reveals the beauty, joy, and hope in the culture, people, language, and places. In my experience, to explore the unknown is to learn the Thai word “*Maipenrai*,” which means “No worries” or “It’s OK”. “It’s OK” to explore the unknown. God is the God of *Maipenrai* in my life. He sets things before me, and he asks me is to trust in him in the whole mission immersion. “So, why worry?” “*Maipenrai!*”

After a month of being acquainted with the Thai language, I was able to settle in the land where I spent my immersion. I was sent to Chiang Rai, one of the provinces in the North of Thailand. The community where I stayed was situated within the compound of a school. In the same compound is the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady. It shepherds the Thais, foreigners, and indigenous people, especially the Akha. The Church is in a dynamic location because it is within the city proper. The Church celebrates daily masses and other sacraments for the people, may they be foreigners or local citizens.

The Church has fourteen chapels in the different villages of Chiang Rai<sup>2</sup> for the hill tribe called Akha. The mountains and hills serve as their haven, the place of their livelihood and the *Akhazang*, their way of life. My experience with the Akhas in the villages of San Cha Lon, Hou Nam Lin, and Pu Chi Fha is the focus of this paper. I will reflect on the constant manifestation of God within my encounter with their culture and tradition, particularly in the

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 19: 14.

<sup>2</sup>The region of Chiang Rai is the sanctuary for the hill tribes, especially the Akhas.

*Lo Ching Cha*, and hopefully be able to see its implications on the mission in Chiang Rai.

What is the *Lo Ching Cha*? How does it reveal the identity and religiosity of the Akhas? What is its relevance to the Church's mission? How can it be appropriated as a vehicle for evangelization and mission?

Before we take a closer look at the Swing or *Lo Ching Cha* experience during the Swing Festival, let me bring you first to the village where I started, where I encountered and experienced the Akha people.

### *Akhazang*

*Akhazang* is an Akha word that carries a deep meaning. It could mean religion, way of life, customs, etiquette and ceremonies, and traditions handed down by the fathers. "Handed down by the fathers" pertains to the succession of "patrilineal ancestors."<sup>3</sup> The role of men is important in an Akha village. They are the main leaders of the community as well as the spiritual leaders. Through their leadership, the *Akhazang* is preserved for the next generation. Their work consists of teaching the young generations about the *Akhazang*.

During my stay, I had experienced learning the Akha language in the village. Lessons were held in the chapel where the leader taught us the proper pronunciation, their way of counting and writing. It was an amazing experience to learn their language although they don't have their own Akha alphabet. It was the foreign missionaries who taught them to write down their language and to have an alphabet. According to their myth, *Apoemiyeh*<sup>4</sup> gave the writings to the people of the earth. When it was the time for the Akhas to receive the scroll that contains their alphabet, it was written on buffalo skin because there was no paper

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<sup>3</sup>Leo Alting Von Geusau, "Dialectics of Akhazan: The Interiorization of a Perennial Minority Group" in *Highlanders of Thailand*, John Mckinnon and Wanat Baruksasri, eds. (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), 249.

<sup>4</sup>*Apoemiyeh* is the Supreme Deity of the Akha who causes the whole of creation. Moreover, it was also translated as God when they embraced Catholicism.

on which to write it. On their way back to the village, the Akha felt hungry, and thus, they ate the buffalo skin. The buffalo skin is, even now, one of the important staples of the Akhas. That is the legend that explains why even now they do not have an alphabet. There is a belief among them that eating buffalo skin would boost memory. Whether this is true or not, the Akhas generally have a good memory. It is evident in the way they recite their important traditional chants, especially in funerals and other rituals even if they do not have written books that contain these rituals and chants.

However, *Akhazang* would also include the whole of the Akha life at all levels; thus, we can say that it pertains to culture.<sup>5</sup> In short, it includes the when, how, why, and where of the life of the Akha. It covers tradition—clearing the ground for planting, planting rice and vegetables, harvesting, celebrating festivals, such as *Lo Ching Cha*, hunting foods, such as birds, worms, frogs, and other exotic foods, performing the funeral rites, and singing celebration songs. Moreover, it also includes etiquette, their way of behaving in the community and relating with other people. It pertains to how children should behave towards the elders, male and female relations, how they would dress according to occasions, and how they would greet people.

The *Akhazang* speaks of the entirety of the Akhas' life. It is their rule of life where their everyday activities, from the rising of the sun to its setting, are anchored. It is their culture, way of life, rituals, etiquette, and of being Akha. It is what the Akha tribe is all about, their unique way of life. Even with the drastic and great changes that they experience in the larger Thai society, they still continue to live the *Akhazang*. Although it is a fact that some aspects of the *Akhazang* are already diminishing, especially among the youth, the Akha people can be considered generally as being adaptable to changes. It is evident in their way of life: while living the *Akhazang*, they are also able to harmonize it with Thai culture.

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<sup>5</sup>Von Geusau, "Dialectics of Akhazan," 249.

## THE LO CHING CHA EXPERIENCE

### *Experiencing the Lo Ching Cha*

It is the *Lo Ching Cha* that captures the attention of every visitor to an Akha village. Aside from its enormous frame, the visitor will also be curious how the Akha people “play” with it. Out of that curiosity, one might even be tempted to say, “I, too, want to play with it.” That was what happened to me.

Everyone was laughing, everyone wanted to play, and everyone was fascinated. After the Mass, this was the scene that I saw around the *Lo Ching Cha*. “I, too, want to play,” the people exclaimed. The sound of laughter, the music of the drums and cymbals, the chanting of the one swinging echoed around the village. It created music that seemed to resonate in the whole of creation. It seemed as though it could be heard by the universe. Everyone in the Akha village, young and old, gathered together around the *Lo Ching Cha*, wearing their traditional clothes with pride and beauty. Some visitors, *farangs*, from the lowlands, were also standing around the swing. I, myself, was part of that crowd, observing and cheering the one who was swinging.

The *Lo Ching Cha* was the focus of all the people surrounding it and all eyes were fixed upon the one swinging the *Lo Ching Cha*. Everyone was fascinated as the swing moved from one side to the other like a pendulum. The continuous movement of the swing made the onlookers wonder how high the swinger could reach. I, for my part, was more concerned about the safety of the swinger.

This fascinating *Lo Ching Cha* usually stands beside the chapel of each Akha village. It is erected on a site overlooking the scenery of nature and the village. It is usually constructed as high as the roof of the chapel or of a nearby house. It is planted firmly on the ground so that it can stand solid and tall. The height of the *Lo Ching Cha* can be intimidating to a first-time visitor like me.

How do the Akha people construct such a huge swing and “play” with it?

The *Lo Ching Cha* has four poles usually made of branches of big trees of the same size and length. However, because of ecological concerns and limited sources of big trees, they sometimes use bamboos. Nowadays, some Akha villages use metal poles so that they do not have to look for trees in the forest. These metal poles serve permanently as *Lo Ching Cha* poles. The poles are erected and driven deep into the ground with the support of stones. The four poles, moreover, are constructed in a triangular manner with four angles, a geometrical position that depicts two crisscrossing letter A's.<sup>6</sup> The four poles are firmly connected to one another and at the junction point at the top are green leaves. They put any kind of fresh and green leaves at the top of the *Lo Ching Cha*. Added to the top of the poles is a yoke, the part of the swing that enables it to go back and forth. Attached to the yoke is a rope with a loop where a slab can be inserted to serve as a seat or where a person can ride.

The magnificent structure of *Lo Ching Cha* attracts visitors standing from afar. I was standing by myself when one of the villagers approached me and asked me to swing the *Lo Ching Cha*. At first I was reluctant and fearful that I might meet with an accident while swinging; yet, there was an eagerness within me, too: “I, too, want to play with it.” I also wanted to experience the joy that they experience while swinging. So, I found myself walking towards the *Lo Ching Cha*, holding the rope, putting one foot on the loop of the rope, and swinging. I was reaching a high point and was trying to aim high, though I was also afraid. My heart was beating fast. When I gained my balance, I gradually felt calm and confident.

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<sup>6</sup>The geometrical position of the letter A, I think, might stand for Akha.

While swinging, I saw the beauty of the village, the forest and hills, the farms with their sprouting plants, and I felt the cold wind touch my face. I felt the deep sense of the presence of the Divine. I was seeing the beauty of God's creation and was awed by the experience. I felt one with the Psalmist when he gave praise and thanks to God for the bounty of God's creation in Psalm 65:11-13: "You crown the year with your bounty... the pastures of the wilderness overflow; the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain; they shout and sing together for joy."

The *Lo Ching Cha* celebrates God's continuous nourishing of his people and the assurance that He will be with his people always. Indeed, it was an experience of trance and the manifestation of God while I was swinging.

As I inquire from the Akha people, *Lo Ching Cha* is a way to communicate with God, swinging while chanting, praying to *Apoemiyeh*, to God, for blessing, for a promising future, for a good harvest, for rain for the rice and all their plants. So, when the Akha people swing, they are not just playing but they are actually praying. The Swing Festival is not really for fun but for the Akha people to communicate with the Divine, for *Apoemiyeh* to bring in a good harvest. The *Lo Ching Cha* is a means to an encounter: a way to communicate with *Apoemiyeh* and for *Apoemiyeh* to manifest his presence and providence to his people.

That "I, too, want to play," is an invitation from *Apoemiyeh*, and *Apoemiyeh* manifested himself through the *Lo Ching Cha*. Indeed, the *Lo Ching Cha* is a unique religious experience for the Akhas and for me. It is a religious experience that *Apoemiyeh* is continually manifesting himself in the lives of the Akha people.

### *Celebrating the Lo Ching Cha*

Although there is no direct historical evidence as to the origin of the festival, the Akhas will never miss the celebration of the Swing Festival.<sup>7</sup> It is part of their *Akhazang* and religious experience, and they fittingly celebrate it every year. The celebration of *Lo Ching Cha* or Swing Festival usually falls on the month of August. And the *Lo Ching Cha*, or The Swing, is only used during this celebration. After the celebration, the Swing still stands in its space, but the rope is removed. It must not be used until the following Swing Festival.

But how does the celebration of the *Lo Ching Cha* take place?

According to Aye, the 79-year-old Akha elder from the Hou Nam Lin Village, the Swing Festival begins with the offering of a chicken in the rituals of the Swing. The following day, the old swing is torn down, and the poles and the yoke of the new one are made.<sup>8</sup> The male members of the community are first tasked to find new poles. They go to the forest to search for trees or strong bamboos to use as poles. Assembling all the needed materials, the poles, the yoke and the rope, they will then construct the Swing on the same spot where the previous *Lo Ching Cha* had been erected. The space is considered sacred as the Swing is sacred for them. On the third day, they will slaughter a pig or a buffalo to be shared and eaten by the community. It is during this time that they use the *Lo Ching Cha*. Usually the leader of the village or the priests, if he is present, is asked to use the swing first. The people of the community follows. Since the villages are now Catholic, they usually have a Mass for the Swing Festival; each village has its own schedule. So, for the fourteen villages and chapels, the

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<sup>7</sup>Goodman, *Meet the Akhas*, 40.

<sup>8</sup>Assuming that they use trees or bamboos. This process is bypassed if they use metal poles. This is based on the account of one of the elders of the Akha Village, Aye, with whom the writer has a conversation. Quoted from the Mission Immersion Journal of the writer (Chiang Rai, Thailand, September 22, 2015).



priest celebrates fourteen Masses; there are fourteen celebrations of the Swing Festival as well. After the Mass and the celebration, the swing will be unused and untouched until the next *Lo Ching Cha* festival.

Since this is a big celebration for the Akha people, relatives and students living far from their village return home and join the celebration. Indeed, it is a time that all the Akhas are gathered together. This festival is also considered a New Year's celebration. It is a time to celebrate and be connected with their *Akhazang* and revive the religious experience of the manifestation of *Apoemiyeh*, a God who provides a promising harvest and good life for the Akha.

#### HIEROPHANY IN THE LO CHING CHA

Where do we encounter the sacred? Is it during prayer? In the Church? Through an icon or in rituals? For the Akhas, the manifestation of the sacred<sup>9</sup> is enshrined in the *Lo Ching Cha*. This religious experience, the experience with *Apoemiyeh*, is what is called as Hierophany.<sup>10</sup>

The Akhas are a people capable of religious experience in their *Akhazang*, especially in their *Lo Ching Cha*. This is what Mircea Eliade calls *homo religiosus*.<sup>11</sup> But how is it particularly manifested in the experiences of the Akhas? This will be elucidated

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<sup>9</sup>This is referring to God or the Divine but since this is the term that Mircea Eliade used, so the writer maintains the word in the reflection of hierophany vis-à-vis the *Lo Ching Cha*.

<sup>10</sup>The "act of manifestation" of the sacred is hierophany; this connotes that something sacred shows itself to us. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harvest Books, 1957), 11. Moreover, from Greek *hieros*, "sacred," and *phainein*, "to show," this term designate that it refers to any manifestation of the sacred in whatever object throughout history. See Mircea Eliade and Charles Adams, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 313.

<sup>11</sup>The *homo religiosus* or religious person mode of character was developed before the advent of modernity. It is characterized by the desire to with live in the sacred. See Mircea Eliade and Charles Adams, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 444 and Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harvest Books, 1957), 20-65.

by the Hierophany of Mircea Eliade. Eliade's study of the sacred echoes the indigenous life of the Akhas and their encounter with the sacred. The *Lo Ching Cha* as an object of religious experience leads to the manifestation of the sacred in the realm of the temporal world: through sacred space and time, the Akhas encounter the sacred in their *Lo Ching Cha* Festival.

This section will attempt to explain the idea of Mircea Eliade on Hierophany from his book, *The Sacred and the Profane*.<sup>12</sup> But this section will only focus on Eliade's understanding of the religious experience of a religious person which, in this paper, pertains to the Akha people and their experience, specifically of the *Lo Ching Cha*. Expounding Eliade's philosophy fully is not the intention of this paper.

### *The homo religiosus Akha*<sup>13</sup>

In their everyday life, the Akhas are not just bound to banal experiences but to religious experiences as well, especially in their rituals, festivals, or in their *Akhazang*. Their *Akhazang* expresses the religious experience of the *Akha* in this world signifying that the sacred is continually communicating and manifesting in their life, especially through the *Lo Ching Cha*. This religious experience is made possible because of *homo religiosus*.<sup>14</sup> The concept of *homo religiosus* was developed by Mircea Eliade in his continual reflection of Hierophany. I am going to use this characteristic to describe the natural religiosity of the Akha and their attitudes towards the sacred. *Homo religiosus* is characteristic of the mode of human existence prior to the advent of modern, secular consciousness.<sup>15</sup> In other words, it is in their ancient culture, the pre-industrial indigenous culture where the Akha had developed their being *homo religiosus*.

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<sup>12</sup>See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

<sup>13</sup>Appropriating the idea of *homo religiosus* or religious person of Mircea Eliade based on the characteristics and elements, the writer distinguishes the Akha as *homo religiosus*. Thus, the writer coined the term "*homo religiosus Akha*."

<sup>14</sup>Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 18.

<sup>15</sup>Mircea Eliade and Charles Adams, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 444.

The *homo religiosus* characteristic that we can distinguish is that the Akha have a “desire to live in the sacred.”<sup>16</sup> The life of the *homo religiosus* is always oriented to the sacred. They use symbolism that depicts the orientation towards the sacred of which the *Lo Ching Cha* is one very distinct example. Even the interior of Akha houses shows sacred spaces and symbols that they place at their altar. For Christian Akhas, these symbols are placed together with images of the saints. With the desire to live and be present in the sacred, the Akha people created sacred spaces and placed symbols that will lead and connect them to the sacred. The space where the *Lo Ching Cha* is erected is one such sacred space. Through it, the whole Akha community surrounding the *Lo Ching Cha* is in touch with the sacred and are protected. This then becomes their “Center of the World” and their world, a Center, as the source of the sacred. Eliade sees this Center of the World with regards the *homo religiosus*: “This is as much as to say that every religious man places himself at the Center of the World and by the same token at the very source of absolute reality, as close as possible to the opening that ensures him communication with [God].”<sup>17</sup>

This absolute reality is *Apoemiyeh* with whom they endeavor to communicate and encounter through the *Lo Ching Cha*. As *homo religiosus*, the Akha essentially ensures that they have both communication and connection with *Apoemiyeh*. The Akha people, indeed, though living in the world are connected to the sacred because the world where the sacred is and the “Center of the World” are close to their community. Moreover, “openness to the world”<sup>18</sup> is necessary to know the sacred. In being open to the world, the *homo religiosus* Akha knows that part of his life is in the world and to know the world is to know himself/herself.

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<sup>16</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 28.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>18</sup>Openness to the world enables a religious person to know him/herself in knowing the world—and this knowledge is precious to him because it is religious, because it pertains to being. *Ibid.*, 167.

The Akha people give importance to the world as created by *Apoemiyeh*; that is why they have a couple of days of abstinence from all work, a time of quiet acknowledgement of the bounty and wonder of the Creator *Apoemiyeh*. Usually observed during the month of September, this time is called *She Law-eu*.<sup>19</sup> This gesture reveals that to know the world and the sacred is part of their lives. They cannot live outside the sacred sphere, which is in the world. In this way, the *homo religiosus* Akha thirst for closeness to the sacred. Therefore, for *homo religiosus* Akha, their desire is always oriented towards the sacred, to *Apoemiyeh*. They thirst for the absolute reality within the Center of the World.

When the *homo religiosus* express the desire to live in the sacred, it is coupled with the decision to really live in the sacred; in other words, to settle in the “Center of the World.” When they decide to live in this sacred space, their everyday life is patterned after the desire to live in the sacred, that it is of the *homo religiosus* as a community. The *homo religiosus* Akha reflects that the encounter with the sacred and its manifestation is not an act of a single *homo religiosus* Akha but of the community. Thus, we can say that the manifestation of the sacred is in the sphere of the community. It is not a single affair. This can be seen in their celebration of the *Lo Ching Cha* Festival. In short, they are a religious community where the sacred is manifested in the midst of their community life. This community dimension of the *homo religiosus* is present in the village of the Akha and in their *Akhazang*.

In the case of migration of the Akhas, one can ask how they will be able to maintain their sacred space. “How could [they] sing a song to the Lord in a foreign land?”<sup>20</sup> How can they “play” and chant again in the *Lo Ching Cha*? This is the challenge facing any indigenous group who leave their ancestral land. How will they be able to live their way of life in a setting that is different from their former settlement? When the Akha people migrated to Thailand,

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<sup>19</sup>Goodman, *Meet the Akhas*, 43.

<sup>20</sup>Psalms 137: 4.

they faced this issue, along with the issue of marginalization, i.e., being minority among other minorities. But this did not stop them from being *homo religiosus* Akha, and thus, they continued their religious experience of the sacred even in a foreign land.

With the migration of the Akhas, one is tempted to say that their Center of the World, the *Lo Ching Cha*, has been annihilated; this, however, is not the case. With their desire to be in the sacred, the *homo religiosus* Akha searched for their Center in the land that is foreign to them. So when they decided to settle in Thailand, the sacred was recreated. For a *homo religiosus*, “a territory can be ours only by creating it anew, that is, by consecrating it.”<sup>21</sup> A *homo religiosus* cannot live in a new territory without consecrating it to be a sacred space for the Divine. They may face another migration, but the *homo religiosus* Akha will continue to consecrate the world in which they settle to be a sacred space, may it be in the plains, hills, valleys, or mountains.

### *Hierophany in the Lo Ching Cha*

In the religious experience of *homo religiosus* Akha, the desire and the will to live in the sacred made them more sensitive to the sacred because the sacred “manifest[s] itself as a reality [of a] wholly different order from “natural” realities.”<sup>22</sup> This “wholly other” (*ganz andere*) is something that is different from the “natural.”<sup>23</sup> This “wholly other” is the nonrational religious experience of a *homo religiosus*. This is the idea of Rudolf Otto, which influenced the hierophany of Mircea Eliade. The “act of manifestation” of the sacred is *hierophany*; this connotes that something sacred shows itself to us.<sup>24</sup> While an extensive discussion of the Otto’s idea of the Holy or Sacred is not part of the discussion, it will be defined in relation to how it influenced the idea of Eliade.

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<sup>21</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 32.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 9–10. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 25–28.

<sup>24</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11.

According to Otto, the *ganz andere* is encountered in the religious experience as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.<sup>25</sup> This *mysterium* is something that is beyond the conception or understanding of the *homo religiosus*. This is the “wholly other,” the *Apoemiyeh* of the Akha where they encounter a reality, a presence that is distinct from nature, but is in nature. This *mysterium* in hierophany then is the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, [however], in objects that are an integral part of our natural “profane” world.<sup>26</sup>

The Akhas encounter *Apoemiyeh* in an “awful” manner, and that is because of the overpowering majesty of *Apoemiyeh*. But this overpowering majesty gives an energy that enables a *homo religiosus* Akha to approach in a solemn manner and move towards the sacred.

In the history of indigenous beliefs, there are many hierophanies, the manifestation of the sacred in ordinary things, such as stones, trees, rivers, or mountains. In these manifestations in the objects of the material world, a *homo religiosus* is confronted by the sacred. In the Bible, for example, the manifestation of God is through the burning bush Moses was drawn to move towards;<sup>27</sup> the hierophany of God as God communicated with him. For the Akha, the *Lo Ching Cha* is an object where the manifestation of the sacred is enshrined. The sacred is encountered in the *Lo Ching Cha* and it becomes the “door to [God].”<sup>28</sup> The Akha then becomes close to God. Indeed, a *homo religiosus* has this desire to be always in the sacred. The *Lo Ching Cha* constitutes this desire to be connected with the sacred and to gain access to the divine

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<sup>25</sup>Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 12-24.

<sup>26</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11.

<sup>27</sup>Exodus 3:1-3

<sup>28</sup>“Doors to God” according to Eliade is a passage wherein heaven and earth meet. It enables man to enter into the presence of God. See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 27.

presence. The *Lo Ching Cha*, though externally looking like any material thing is transformed as an instrument of hierophany. For Eliade: “By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu.”<sup>29</sup>

The “swing-ness” of the *Lo Ching Cha* remains. However, the point of the worship is not the object but rather the sacred reality that it constitutes. But because of this, the object becomes different from other objects. The *Lo Ching Cha* is more than just a swing; “its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality.”<sup>30</sup> A reality more than just a *Lo Ching Cha* but of the sacred is encountered. For a *homo religiosus* Akha, the world or the cosmos, is capable of manifesting the sacred, and this entirety can be a hierophany.

When the hierophany takes place in the *Lo Ching Cha*, it, then, becomes distinct and separated from other *Lo Ching Cha*; it is singled out from the others. In an Akha village, they have other *Lo Ching Cha* aside from the one they use during the festival. These are the ones which the children play with. They are erected beside the house or within the backyard of the house. Somehow, this becomes the venue for training where they can play and practice swinging. However, the one used during the festival is intended only for that festival; it is unique and different from the other *Lo Ching Cha*. Aside from its size (bigger and grander), it is different because it constitutes the element of the hierophany, the sacred space and sacred time.

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<sup>29</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 12.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

According to Stephen Hawking, “the space and time are now the dynamic quantities that are not only affecting but also are affected by everything that happens in the universe.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, the space and time is not only affecting the arena where things happened but it is also affected by them. This affecting factor of the space and time as constituted in the universe are necessary factors in the *hierophany*. It becomes an avenue where the sacred affects the *homo religiosus Akha*. However, as time affects the encounter of the sacred, so the space and time are also affected by what is happening in the universe, the manifestation of the sacred. They then become sacred, sacred space and sacred time, which is totally different from homogenous space and time.

At this juncture, I will reflect on the sacred space and sacred time that constitute the hierophany. What is the significance of sacred space and time in the manifestation of the sacred in the *Lo Ching Cha*? How do the sacred space and time affect the *homo religiosus Akha*?

### *Sacred Space*

“Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.”<sup>32</sup> The encounter of Moses and Yahweh connotes that the ground Moses was entering was no longer the same ground he was walking on before. It was a space that God manifested Himself in, and thus, it became sacred and must be revered. It becomes totally a spatial “nonhomogeneous”. The ground on which the burning bush stood acquired a different quality from other spaces. The expression of Moses’s gesture of removing his sandals is because of the holiness of the encounter

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<sup>31</sup>Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (London, Great Britain: Bantam Books, 2011), 38.

<sup>32</sup>Exodus 3:5.



with Yahweh, and Yahweh's presence sanctifies the ground.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, for a homo religiosus, "space is not homogeneous,"<sup>34</sup> there is a space that is totally different from other spaces.

The space where the Lo Ching Cha is erected shares the same features of a "nonhomogeneous" space; it is sacred as it becomes the arena where the sacred manifests. With my stay in the village, I have learned from the Akhas that the ground where they erected the Lo Ching Cha is a sacred space. So the Akhas tell foreigners not to do anything to the Lo Ching Cha, not to put anything near or around it as this desecrates the space. For the space where the Lo Ching Cha will be erected in the following year must be the same spot where the former had been. This is to say that when the sacred manifest itself in any hierophany (e.g., the Lo Ching Cha), there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also a revelation of the absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse.<sup>35</sup>

The vast surrounding areas of the village of the Akhas may be astounding to look at, but it acquires a different appeal and reality from the space where the Lo Ching Cha is erected. Even on my part, as a foreigner in their village, I sensed a different appeal of the surrounding areas from where the Lo Ching Cha is erected. It then compelled me to act in a different way, in a way that is religious and respectful of the space. Although there is a festive feeling in the space where one is standing, its sacredness cannot be denied. The sacred space breaks from the vast surroundings that the Akhas are situated; it becomes, then, the locus of their religious experience.

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<sup>33</sup>Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris, eds., *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 83-84.

<sup>34</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 20.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

Furthermore, the sacred space of hierophany “reveals an absolute fixed point, a center.”<sup>36</sup> The sacred space as the fixed point is the “Center of the World” wherein “communication with gods is made possible.”<sup>37</sup> In this “Center of the World,” the *homo religiosus* Akha is in the navel of the earth where there is communication between heaven, earth, and the underworld. This is externally manifested in the area as the *Lo Ching Cha* is strategically located at the center of the village where also they have the village chapel. That’s why around the *Lo Ching Cha*, the houses that are built are assured of the contact with the sacred; they “could only live in a space opening upward, where the break in plane [or homogeneous] was symbolically assured and hence communication with the other world, the transcendental world, was ritually possible.”<sup>38</sup>

In the sacred space of *Lo Ching Cha*, the Akhas can communicate with *Apoemiyeh*. Communicating through swinging and chanting, they asked for rain, safeguards for the crops, and a bountiful harvest. In this sacred space, then, *Apoemiyeh* listens and swings with them. It is a moment of descending and ascending, “[*Apoemiyeh*] descends to the earth and [the hu]man symbolically ascends to heaven.”<sup>39</sup> The “gate of heaven” opens to the Akha, and the Akhas are able to be in communion with *Apoemiyeh*. The movement of the swing is not just horizontal, but the “swinger” tries to move as high as possible to approximate the vertical as he/she tries to move heavenward. That is how an Akha desires to communicate and be connected with *Apoemiyeh*.

The manifestation of the sacred is not chosen by the *homo religiosus* Akha. It is important to note that they do not “choose” the sacred site; they are helped by mysterious signs.<sup>40</sup> Just like in the Old Testament, Jacob saw in his dream a stairway to heaven and the messenger of God going up and down and the Lord said to him: “I, the Lord, am the God of your forefather Abraham and the God of

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 22-26.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>39</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 26.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 28.

Isaac.” When Jacob was awakened, he spoke that “truly, the Lord is in this spot, although I did not know it” for this is nothing else but an abode of God and that is the gate of heaven!” He, therefore, set up the stone and poured oil and called the site *Bethel*,<sup>41</sup> which means “House of God.” God reveals the geographical site where he can manifest to his people. It is through the mystical sign that the sacred site is distinguished. In the case of the Akhas, through their leader or Sala, who is also the Catechist, the sacred space was chosen for them by *Apoemiyeh* starting from the very moment of their settlement.

### *Sacred Time*

Like space, time is neither homogeneous nor continuous. There is an interval of the sacred time, the time of the festival, which is periodically celebrated.<sup>42</sup> The philosophical notion of time will not be dealt with in this paper, rather I will reflect on the sacred time echoed in the *Lo Ching Cha* Festival. From the ordinary temporal duration of time, the *Lo Ching Cha* breaks the homogeneity of time. Say, for example, our birthday breaks the ordinary duration of time, because it becomes significant for us. The anniversary of the couple breaks the ordinariness of time, therefore it enters into significant time. During the celebration of the *Lo Ching Cha* Festival, it enters into a sacred time as the sacred is manifested. However, a distinction has to be made between significant time and sacred time. Not all significant times are sacred, but sacred times, on the other hand, are significant.

The character of a “sacred time is reversible.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, we can recall and repeat the time that was sacred or a *homo religiosus* can make present the event of the hierophany. Moreover, every festival is a “re-actualization of the sacred event” that took place. Christmas, is a re-actualization of the “supreme hierophany,”

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<sup>41</sup>Genesis 28: 10-22

<sup>42</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 68.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

the incarnation of God in Jesus.<sup>44</sup> The Passover for the Jews, re-actualized the event that took place when God delivered them out of slavery and led them to the Promised Land. The *Lo Ching Cha* is a re-actualization of the continuous manifestation of *Apoemiyeh* and their continuous communication as they prayed for rain and a good harvest. *Apoemiyeh*, then, founded the sacred time. “The participants find the same sacred time—the same that had been manifested in the festival of the previous year or in the festival of a century earlier; it is the time that was created and sanctified by [*Apoemiyeh*].”<sup>45</sup> The Akha participate with *Apoemiyeh* in the sacred time and are able to live in the sacred presence. This is made possible through the *Lo Ching Cha* Festival.

As stated in an earlier section, the *Lo Ching Cha* is left alone after the *Lo Ching Cha* Festival, in the place where it was erected. It must not be touched or played with. The *Lo Ching Cha* can be only used during the festival, or something unpleasant will happen to their crops. Only in the sacred time of festivity then can the *Lo Ching Cha* be used. The festival, indeed, is the sacred time wherein they can have complete access to *Apoemiyeh*. Even if they do not put fences around the *Lo Ching Cha*, among the Akhas, it is understood that they cannot use the *Lo Ching Cha*. Therefore, a *farang* or foreigner like me must observe that also. It is their sacred time that I am entering; therefore, I must respect it. I enter into a significant time of other people, and it is in this moment also that I participate in their significant time in making sacred the time I participate in their sacred time.

As sacred time can be reversed, it can be “regenerated by being created anew”<sup>46</sup> annually. For an Akha, time is circular not lineal. As the sacred time can be reversed to its hierophany, the world, on the other hand, can be renewed annually. The *Lo Ching Cha* for the Akha is not just a festival; it is also a New Year Festival.

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>46</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 74.

New Year always speaks of a beginning; among the Akha, this beginning is the start of something new, of hope for a good harvest. Moreover, with each New Year, the time sanctified again and time is reborn. With each New Year it recovers its original sanctity, the sanctity that it possessed when it came from [*Apoemiyeh*].<sup>47</sup> As a circular movement of time, the whole cycle of life in the Akha begins with the *Lo Ching Cha*, and the world they are living is created anew every celebration of the *Lo Ching Cha*. Therefore, the crops and vegetables they plant shares and grow in the sacred time. In this sense, it is blessed, and this is the reason why after the harvest they will offer the first fruits of their labor to *Apoemiyeh*. An act of a *homo religiosus* Akha, it is through the work of God in their time that everything grows and the rains that they are asking for is showered upon them. It is also an assurance that a promising harvest can be anticipated as *Apoemiyeh* works in their space and time of life. The hierophany in *Lo Ching Cha* continues to reflect the religious experience of the Akha people as *Apoemiyeh* walks in their life, in their space and time. Therefore, everything in cosmic space and time is interrelated.<sup>48</sup> The space and time is the determining factor that affects their life, and therefore, everything must have a corresponding space and time. The *Lo Ching Cha*, then, becomes an “image of an opening,”<sup>49</sup> an opening to the manifestation of *Apoemiyeh* in concrete time and space.

#### RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION: CONTINUOUS SWINGING WITH THE AKHAS

What now? Where do we go from here? Where do we go from the reflection of the *Lo Ching Cha* in the lives of the Akha, from their continuous encounter of the sacred in everyday life and from my experience of the *Lo Ching Cha*?

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>48</sup>Von Geusau, “Dialectics of Akhazan,” 253.

<sup>49</sup>Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 26.

For me, this is the challenge of the missionaries and the local church of Chiang Rai: to continuously swing with the Akhas. The *Lo Ching Cha* reminds us missionaries to be here and to be present where the Akhas stand, to enter into their sacred space and time. On the question, “Where do we go from here”? The answer is: To be here. The “here-ness” that I am referring is to be present in the lives of the Akhas, to continually journey with them. Though their villages are far and in the margins, the missionaries assigned to the Akha villages should make an extra effort to reach out to them and to be present in the significant celebrations of their life. There is a danger that only in big celebrations, such as the *Lo Ching Cha*, Christmas and Easter, will the missionaries visit the villages. The missionary must regularly visit and be present with the Akhas, even outside of those celebrations. In my stay in the villages, they were so happy and were affirmed that a missionary lived with them. That feeling of recognition could be seen on their faces. The presence of the missionaries affirms them as a people, as a community and their *Akhazang*.

This “here-ness” presupposes that we enter into the space and time of the life of the people. When we enter into their space and time, we must be mindful that we are entering into a sacred space and time. Specifically, we must be present and reflect on the sacred space and time of the *Lo Ching Cha*. Therefore, reverence and understanding are needed from the missionaries who are entering into the sacred space and time of the Akha people. This reminds us of the encounter of Moses in the manifestation of Yahweh in the burning bush. God said to him: “*Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are stand is holy ground.*” “Removing the sandals” is an act of humility and respect for the awesome manifestation of God. God’s manifestation in the life of the Akhas, indeed, asks us to give reverence and to humble ourselves. Sandals may symbolize social status, but removing our sandals represents an act of humility, an act of being one with them.

In Thai culture and among the Akhas, removing one's shoes or sandals before entering a house is a custom. This even extends to entering a church. As an act of courtesy to the owner of the house and as an act of humility, missionaries then must learn to remove their sandals. To remove ourselves from our comfort zone, to rid ourselves of prejudice, judgment, and schemes or plans when we enter into the life of the Akha means we want to be present in their life, to encounter them and know them. When we enter into their life, we also allow them to enter into our life and be open to where God continues to manifest in us. This event then becomes an encounter, a mutual expression of entering into each other's life and culture. Furthermore, there must be an undemarcated and borderless mission. This means that we go into the periphery where demarcation and border have been created. This is what Pope Francis has been continuously emphasizing since the start of his papacy: "There is a tension between the centre and the periphery... We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-absorbed: when this happens, the Church itself becomes sick. [...] Between a Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is sick with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the first. (Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio to the pre-conclave General Congregation of the Cardinals, March 2013)"<sup>50</sup>

*It is not the Akhas who comes to us but we, as missionaries, as representatives of the Church, should go in search of them. Missionaries, then, must enter into the demarcated and bordered life and geographical setting of the Akhas where there is poverty, discrimination, and lack of societal and spiritual support. As stated earlier, the Akhas experience migration, and because of this migration, they are pushed into the periphery; they are demarcated and "enclosed" within the border.*

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<sup>50</sup>Timothy Scott, "Pope Francis and the Periphery" (Winter 2014), <http://www.crc-canada.org>.

*Missionaries must reflect on this attitude of being ready to take up the undemarcated and borderless mission because it is where God manifests His continuous and bountiful love for His people. According to Gittins: "To go far from home, however, is not yet to be engaged in mission; to move to the margins and over the edge of one's own familiar world in the name of the Gospel and the Realm of God is. Sometimes, in going far away, we go like tortoise, taking our house and home (prejudice and blinkers) with us. But if we can identify our narrowness, our pettiness, our limitations, and our boundaries, and if we can break through them and into the world of other, we are truly on the verge of mission."<sup>51</sup>*

When I was sent to Thailand for my mission immersion, the mission began when I entered into the life of the Akhas and encountered *Apoemiyeh* in their *Akhazang* and in the *Lo Ching Cha*. Entering means to immerse my very self where they are geographically situated, within the periphery. When we venture into the periphery, we are not entering the center; we enter into unhabituated places rather than familiar landmarks.<sup>52</sup> However, when we *enter* into the periphery, we make the periphery the center. Thus, missionaries must not bring the Akhas into the center, rather, we make their periphery as the center. The *Lo Ching Cha* is situated at the Center of the World, therefore, we make this as their center. By creating it as the center, we come to realize that the Gospel can take root in their very life, and the manifestation of God is indeed evident in their *Akhazang*, and especially in the *Lo Ching Cha*.

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<sup>51</sup>Anthony J. Gittins, *Bread for the Journey: The Mission of Transformation and the Transformation of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 10.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.



Therefore, the *Lo Ching Cha* as an Akha identity marker must be given attention and must be reaffirmed among them through the effort of the missionaries. Nowadays, only the older generations know the value of the *Lo Ching Cha*. In my inquiry about the *Lo Ching Cha*, young Akhas have limited knowledge on the significance of the *Lo Ching Cha*. This celebration must be continued and even enhanced in terms of educating the younger generations so that the *Akhas* can continue to grasp the love of God and experience the continuous manifestation of God in their life truly as Akhas. On the part of the missionaries, the *Lo Ching Cha* is a very good entry point for evangelization, that the God whom they experience in the *Lo Ching Cha* is the same God of the Christians, the God of the Universe. In fact, the *Lo Ching Cha* is a rich resource for the Akhas to understand Liturgy and Sacraments. For, indeed, the life of the Akhas is affirmed and in constant communication with God as God manifests God-self in the *Lo Ching Cha*.

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