10 The Cultural Identity of Techniques: Rigidity and Flexibility among the Akha of Highland Laos

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Introduction

This chapter focuses ethnographically on two distinct sets of techniques that I documented among the Akha, a group of swidden farmers living in highland Laos and neighboring borderlands. It shows that these two sets of techniques have diametrically opposite characteristics in terms of their flexibility and rigidity, and it aims to explain the reason for this difference. The first set that I discuss is the technical repertoire of herbal medicine mastered by the village herbalists. The second set is what the Akha call *ghanrsanrkhovq*, which can be roughly translated as "customs," a range of practices that, along with rituals and social norms, comprise everyday techniques such as cooking, dressmaking, hunting, house building, and farming. Drawing a comparison between the two, I show that while the first is typified by high flexibility in learning, the second is typified by high rigidity. While the flexibility in the learning process leads to high variability of herbal medical techniques—that is, each herbalist treasures their own distinctive arsenal of herbal pharmacopoeia and related techniques—the rigidity in the transmission of customs leads to high stability—that is, one finds high homogeneity of customs-related techniques across Akha communities in space and time. My focus here will be customs-related techniques regarding house construction and design. I argue that the key factor explaining this difference is cultural identity. Not being a marker of cultural identity, Akha herbal medical lore varies freely depending on the personal experimentation of its practitioners and independent of community-wide conventions. By contrast, Akha customs are cultural markers: their rigid transmission over time enables the perpetuation of Akha identity. Exploring the social conditions in highland Laos that make the perpetuation of cultural identity such an important value among the Akha, I argue that a study of human techniques must always be embedded within a study of the broader geopolitical context in which these are practiced and transmitted. The chapter ends with a reflection on the relation between cultural transmission and efficacy of techniques. It notes that, in different ways, the Akha-specific means of transmitting both herbal and customs-related techniques are not necessarily conducive to higher efficacy because the value attached to their mode of transmission overshadows concerns about instrumentality.

Brief Ethnographic Background

Migratory farmers of Tibeto-Burman language origin, the Akha[1] crossed the Mekong to settle villages on the Lao hills sometime in the nineteenth century, after a long southward journey from China. Their migratory trajectory led them into the confines of five nation-states. Beside Laos, they currently live in northern Thailand, in the Yunnan Province in China, in the Shan state of Myanmar, and in the northwestern tip of Vietnam—numbering some 750,000 in total, of which 113,000 live in Laos (Wang 2013, 20). The vast swath of highlands they have occupied has the geopolitical peculiarity of having been, historically, out of the reach of governments. Its remoteness impeded major lowland power centers from exerting full control over the highlanders, effectively allowing the creation of politically autonomous zones and the proliferation of ethnic identities. With a few exceptions, highland societies stand out for being very different, both in terms of culture and modes of subsistence, from the politically dominant lowlanders. To this day, driving from a lowland Lao town toward the highlands means entering a strikingly different cultural universe. People of the plains like the Lao have had a state, permanent agriculture, a writing system, and Buddhism. Highlanders have lived in a condition of statelessness (until recently, at least), shifting cultivation, orality, and animism: they practice a mixture of spirit cults and ancestors worship. As James Scott (2009) argued in his "anarchist history of Southeast Asia," people like the Akha consciously decided to live in such remote places to escape the burdens of the lowland state—bureaucracy, slavery, warfare—and its people, who regarded them as uncivilized.

Parallel to this process of rejection, over the centuries the Akha have consolidated an elaborate complex of customs—rituals, material techniques, social norms, dressing codes, and artifacts—that has served as the basis for their identity in such a context of power inequality (Geusau 2000; Tooker 2012). Throughout their history, they have placed high value on the conservation of this tradition, carefully passing down oral codes and texts from generation to generation. One can witness very similar practices—for example, house building and hunting techniques—in Akha communities far away from one another that have been separated for centuries. Many anthropologists who have studied the Akha consider this as a great example of rigid and stable cultural transmission (Lewis 1969; Kammerer 1986; Tooker 2012). In recent decades, Akha living in Thailand and China have largely abandoned their traditional customs. In Thailand, this was mostly due to the work of foreign missionaries in the 1990s. In China, many customs were eradicated even earlier by the Cultural Revolution. In socialist Laos, however, change has been occurring at a much slower pace because of remoteness and a ban on religious proselytization. Here, customs are still held firmly in place by the power accorded to the ancestors. Where I conducted fieldwork, Akha still see themselves as the contemporary bearers of an important, identity-defining tradition, handed down through the centuries by a long line of forefathers. When external influences introduce benefits or constraints that require change to this tradition, this change (the adoption or rejection of novel practices) tends to happen at a collective level, in a way that preserves a sense of identity.

My fieldwork was conducted in the village of MawPae between December 2014 and April 2016, with three follow-up visits until 2019, for a total of 19 months. My original research focused on the Akha healing tradition, which included herbal pharmacopoeia, animal sacrifice, shamanism, and a variety of other ritual and medical techniques whose

proper understanding meant uncovering many other aspects of Akha society as a whole. In what follows, I first describe herbal medical techniques and, second, Akha customs.

Herbal Medicine and Related Techniques

The following section zeroes in on Akha herbal medical techniques, which, I will point out, are typified by high flexibility in learning. I will show that there is no rigid "traditional" way of teaching herbal medical skills and that, accordingly, these techniques reveal a high degree of idiosyncrasies and individual variation. This, I will argue, is due to the esoteric nature of medicinal plant knowledge. Given the secrecy that surrounds it, medicinal plant knowledge is impervious to the exogenous and stabilizing factors that, by contrast, characterize the learning of techniques related to Akha customs that I will discuss later. Moreover, with a handful of exceptions, the actual biochemical effectiveness of herbal remedies (i.e., the efficacy of the remedies beyond the "placebo effects" produced by their administration) is seemingly low and, counterintuitively, it is not a factor that is conducive to the stability of knowledge.

By the term *yavghaq*, Akha refer to any substance that, through appropriate techniques, is used for the treatment or prevention of disease, whether in humans, other animals, or crops. It has been translated as "medicine" (Lewis 1989, 213), even though the term only refers to medicine as substance, rather than medicine as a body of knowledge. *Yavghaq* comprises herbal medicine and other remedies that Akha gather from their environment, as well as modern pharmaceuticals (the use of which I will not discuss here; see Ongaro 2019, 139ff.). These treatments form what George Foster (1976) has characterized as a naturalistic medical system: they treat what for the Akha are "naturally caused" conditions—that is, ailments and illnesses that are not spiritually caused.

Along with lumber, timber, bamboo, fruits, greens, fibers, and dyes, Akha also rely on the nearby forest for their remedies. Herbs and plants provide relief for the aches and pains that ensue from the hazards of living in what Akha themselves describe as an "uneasy" environment, especially the practical activity done in fields and in the forest itself. I have seen it applied most frequently to treat ailments such as fractures, burns, cuts, stings, bruises, or animal bites, but also for skin rashes (habitually caused by caterpillars), stomach pains, and as last resort, for emergencies like cramps or seizures, often in haphazard combination with ritual. As the primary method to cure a large number of relatively minor ailments, herbal medicine is widely used. Although people might at times describe herbal medicine as "Akha medicine" (*Aqkaq yavghaq*), they do not conceptually set it apart from the pharmacopoeia of other highland groups, nor do they refer to a specifically Akha, community-wide sphere of knowledge. Rather, if they use the term "Akha medicine" in this context, they are simply referring to "herbal medicine" as opposed to the lowland pharmaceutical medicine of the Lao or the Chinese.

This is important because, as I shall describe below, there is not any specifically Akha, community-wide sphere of medical knowledge when it comes to plant medicine, which is revealing about the flexibility involved in the learning of herbal medical techniques. Certainly, general botanical knowledge is very widespread and uniform in the community. By interacting with the forest on a daily basis, Akha become acquainted with the individualities

of plants from a very early age. As they go from village to field and back, or as they venture into the woods to hunt for birds, young children follow their older relatives in what are true educational paths of knowledge: they point at plants, they ask their name, and they are taught back (often favorably, with a sense of pedagogical duty). Children quickly build up a huge knowledge of arboreal species, whose vastness usually surprises anthropologists brought up in urban places. And yet, how to pick these plants and mix them in a way to produce powerful medicine is knowledge belonging to only a very few members of the community.

Herbal medicine among the Akha is a domain of practice that is shrouded in secrecy but whose effectiveness is said to depend precisely on this quality. Although many individuals in the village might possess a smattering of knowledge, only a handful of people "know a lot about medicine," and their expertise is sought after when there are ailments to be cured. Herbalists do not divulge their knowledge except for when they teach it to select apprentices. Dispersal of knowledge is said to decrease the potency of herbal medicine. "The medicines would turn bad," they say. Typically, they keep their medicinal herbs and plants in the attic (a place only homeowners can access) and make sure not to show them to anybody else. Covertness is also involved in the preparation of herbal remedies. Before applying a remedy to the sick person, herbalists prepare it at their own house and only take the final product to the house of the sick. The final product is a mixture of herbs whose individual ingredients are visually unidentifiable by others.

There are some general ways of applying medicine that are adopted by all herbalists. These modalities of treatment vary with the nature of the ailment. For instance, herbal compresses are made for fractures or blows. These are wrapped around the limb and kept for several days, refilling the herbs on a regular basis. Cuts of all kinds are treated with vulnerary leaves pounded to mush and then applied to stop the bleeding and to clean the wound. The herbalist will often spit on both the wound and the herbs, accompanying the treatment with mumbled spells. For skin conditions like spots or rashes, herbs are poulticed and smeared on the site and smeared again when they wash off. Leaves can also be chewed beforehand or soaked in rice whisky and then applied. Sometimes, as a treatment for skin conditions, a special vine is burned at one end and held a few inches from the person; the herbalist will then blow a gentle blast of smoke over the affected area. Herbal decoctions or infusions (which tend to be very bitter) are drunk for cramps or stomach pains. Occasionally, they are also drunk as tonics, to revitalize the body even in absence of any ailment. Although I have never seen it myself, in some cases of severe fatigue, medicines are burned and their aroma inhaled to reinvigorate the sick person. There is a discernible sensorial quality to all these treatments that, through their soothingness, bitterness, pungency, and overall tactile application, may trigger the senses in ways Akha have learned to associate with healing.

Outside these general rules for how herbal remedies are applied, knowledge about ingredients, mixing, and posology is kept secret. Herbalists only disclose it to daughters and sons, provided they have an interest in acquiring the knowledge and under the promise that they won't divulge it to anyone else. For any other aspirant apprentice, there is a price to pay in exchange of knowledge, depending on the degree of kinship with the herbalist and on what they want to learn, for some herbs are more expensive than others. I myself had a short apprenticeship with four herbalists, three elderly women and an elderly man reputed to be among the most knowledgeable in the district. I paid them the necessary amount to have a solid baseline for comparing their methods and herbal pharmacopoeias. (While obtaining

knowledge comes with a charge, the treatment is usually free but might be recompensed later through a chicken offering if healing is successful.)

I took several walks with each of the four tutor herbalists. We walked through teak forest, across groves of fern into thick bamboo areas, and down to swampy marshes, in search of medicines. Every time a medicinal plant was spotted, the elder would tell me its name and what part is used for treatment—root, leaf, wood, or bark—and other traits of the plant, such as whether it is planted by people by seeding or whether "it was planted by the ancestors" (i.e., it grows on its own without human intervention). I would further ask when it flowers and if it is rare or common, and I learned that the rarity of the plant, especially when it is grown in distant lands, ups its value. When disclosing medical knowledge about an important plant, my teachers would explain its features in a ceremonious way, with a grave voice, conveying importance. They would add stories of how long or far one must walk to obtain this or the other plants, or of how one time they had to travel to Myanmar or other distant lands to collect a plant that they knew was only growing there. Similar to the handling of medical knowledge in other ethnic groups in the region (Sprenger 2011), the foreign and the distant connote higher potency.

Each herbalist told me that they were taught about herbal medical techniques by their parents, but that their learning also involved a good deal of experimentation. Repeated failures usually lead to discarding the remedy and trying another one or changing the posology or combination of herbs. I was able to attest that their path to knowledge is highly personal and idiosyncratic. This is also because an important way of sourcing healing plants comes from dreams (though this oneiric ability usually sets in as one has already apprehended a good deal about herbal medicine from one's teacher). All four herbalists I worked with reported that they occasionally receive inspiration about plants from the spirit-owner of people they meet in dreams. Three of them said that they meet their former teachers (their parents, mostly) who are now dead. The fourth herbalist told me that she has established a special relationship with an old couple that visits her in dreams on a regular basis. The spirit-owner of the wise old man and woman appear in her dream, whispering the name of the plant or the method of preparation into her ear. Upon waking up, she rushes into the forest to collect the plant, without talking to anyone on the way. The plant recommended in a dream is not immediately included in the herbalist's inventory, for she will test it after gathering it and keep it only if it works reliably.

It thus comes as no surprise that, when I compared the pharmacopoeia of all four herbalists, great differences emerged among them. The overlap of shared medicinal plants among herbalists is low. Often, the same herb is used for very different ailments, and the same ailment is cured with different herbs. In one instance, the same plant used by one herbalist as a soother was used by another as a stimulant. There was, in sum, great variability. This is not simply a variability in types of plants used but also in the process involved in the production of medicine such that the sequence of acts, place, and tools employed in the making of the concoctions or mixtures varied from individual to individual. The low degree of transmission of medicinal knowledge and practices, both within and between groups, appears to be a general trait of the region. Catherine Pake (1987), working on the neighboring Hmong people, found that herbalists do not share their knowledge of plants with one another (see also Dubost et al. 2019). Jean Marc Dubost (2014) surveyed the medicinal plants used by Lue, Hmong, and Lamet communities living in close contact with each other to find that

only a meager 23 percent were commonly shared, most of which, it turned out, were used for completely different ailments.

These findings should prompt some observations on the question of effectiveness. Discussions about ethnopharmacology often revolve around the possibility that some plants, unbeknownst to biomedicine, might contain potent active ingredients (Anderson 1993; Heinrich and Jäger 2015). With the obvious but important exceptions of opium, betel, and ginger, all widely used among Akha, not much is known about the potential medical properties of the herbs and plants employed by expert herbalists. A lesson learned in ethnopharmacology over the last 50 years is that the failure of bioassays usually turns out to be high—not many traditional herbs and plants are discovered to contain pharmacologically active substances for the ailments they are purported to treat. Arguably, this is likely to be even more the case where there is minimal information-sharing and a lack of a collective endeavor in testing the efficacy of plants, as it happens among the Akha and neighboring groups. We also know, however, that any treatment can produce what is misleadingly called the "placebo effect," and that this is heightened by features specific to the therapeutic act—for instance, the aura of the treatment and the patient-practitioner interaction (see Moerman 2002).[2] Certainly, the secrecy that shrouds Akha herbalism generates an aura of potency around herbal treatment. It is likely that this perceived potency, coupled with the intense physical sensations of their application, might afford potent healing effects, in light of what we know from the science of placebo responses.

To recapitulate, herbal medicine and related techniques among the Akha are characterized by high flexibility in learning and high variability. The secretive nature of this knowledge entails paths of learning that are not subjected to exogenous social factors, which, consequently, prevents such techniques from achieving stability. Moreover, these features do not appear to be conducive to higher selection and effectiveness of medicinal plants. I will now discuss another set of techniques—Akha customs—that have almost the opposite characteristics to herbal lore. I suggest that the reason for this difference lies in the fact that these techniques have been chosen as important identity markers.

Customs-Related Techniques and the Role of Identity

Contrary to medicinal plants, what Akha call "customs" (*ghanrsanrkhovq*) are typified by high rigidity and stability in their transmission. I will show that for the Akha, the techniques embedded in customs are important social markers: they define Akha identity in a multiethnic social context where the manifest belonging to a specific ethnic group carries significant practical and political value. In the following discussion, I expand on this point by arguing that the study of flexibility and rigidity of techniques should always be embedded in a study of the cultural and historical context in which their learning takes place because this context often modulates their practical utility.

Previous anthropologists working on the Akha have variably defined 'customs' as 'religion', 'way of life', 'etiquette', 'ceremonies', noting that it is hard to say where ceremony begins and 'etiquette' ends, since they influence social life all the way down to mundane, everyday practices (Lewis, 1970; Geusau, 1983; Kammerer, 1986). Akha customs constitute a total social fact that encompasses at once the spheres of religion, law, kinship, economy,

and healthcare. They comprise prescriptions and proscriptions that regulate much of ordinary social life (kinship rules, behavioral codes, etc.) as well as the complex non-calendric and calendric rituals that punctuate the Akha yearly agricultural cycle. They also comprise a rich body of oral stories, myths, proverbs, and shamanic texts, comparable in breath and complexity to codexes such as the Vedas or the Old Testament, themselves taking oral forms before having been written down. These customs also regulate a range of practical techniques as varied as house building (e.g., how many rungs to fit on a ladder), hunting (e.g., how to kill game), eating (e.g., how to hold a bamboo teacup in ceremonies), sleeping (e.g., the direction one should sleep), and working in the fields (e.g., how to hold a sickle). I shall now describe the general nature of these customs before focusing on techniques specifically. Indeed, my argument is that the capacity of customs in defining Akha ethnic identity is important to the extent that it permeates even very practical daily techniques whose nature, as a result, cannot be viewed solely from an instrumental lens.

"Akha is as Akha does," as one anthropologist working on the Akha once put it (Kammerer 1990, 281). Akha identity is premised on living in an Akha community, speaking the language, and adhering to Akha customs, which are considered to have been handed down by the ancestors. Importantly, being Akha entails being affiliated to a patrilineage with a long pedigree of ancestors that can be traced to the first man, SmMirOr. Every adult male in a traditional Akha village is supposed to memorize his genealogy up to this apical figure, whose recitation is required at funerals, when the deceased person joins the ranks of the ancestors (see Hanks 1974). These genealogies can go back 60 generations, spanning about 1,500 years. As linguists and anthropologists realized, Akha communities separated for centuries share the initial nodes of these genealogies, a testimony to the striking stability of Akha customs through time. Linguist Pascal Bouchery (1993, 1) remarked:

> The fact that all Akha subgroups are bound by genealogical links is absolutely remarkable, if one considers the geographical distance that separates different groups of population. For instance, Akha of Thailand and Piyo subgroups, though they are for the most part ignorant of their reciprocal existence and have no contact at all, use the same common list of 20 initial ancestors names in their genealogies, with the exception of minor phonological differences. In two communities separated by more than 500km of mountainous country, we have recorded a list of initial thirty-odd nodes at a genealogical distance of 25 generations. It has been frequently argued that among oral societies, genealogical lists of ancestors are too easily manipulated for them to carry any significant historical meaning. The great similarity of Akha initial nodes of ancestors demonstrates on the contrary that a very ancient memory can remain unchanged through centuries despite migration, geographical isolation and linguistic changes.

Genealogies also keep a sense of unity among members scattered across mountain ranges and national boundaries. I often happened to see that when two Akha strangers meet and begin to converse, they reel off each other's genealogy to trace how far back they are related. The conversations that follow tend to be spirited and mutually enjoyed. Out of the recognition of common ancestry arises a sense of shared identity and connection and warmth on the part of the host.

The discussion of customs more generally is a staple of public events. The elderly revel in talking about myths, stories, pieces of customs, and how to exactly perform a ritual or organize a festival. This is especially salient when it comes to the practical organization of rituals or festivals, where the disquisition of their technical aspects of preparation to their minute details takes on a lively tone, often branching off into a discussion about the ancestral

origin of such customs. Everyone respects what the elders have to say. Unlike herbal medicine, knowledge and practice of customs is public and exoteric, and it is supposed to be so: it is a marker of social identity, of what makes a person Akha.

The learning of customs and related techniques is very different from the esoteric learning of plant medicine. In the previous section, I discussed why herbal medicine is a highly idiosyncratic form of knowledge: it involves a high degree of individual experimentation, which means that the path of knowledge ends up being highly personal. The demonstrated variability of herbal pharmacopoeia across Akha herbalists (and across ethnic groups) is a consequence of this form of flexible learning.

Unlike the learning of herbal medicine, the learning of Akha customs is highly standardized. One is not supposed to deviate from the teaching of the ancestors but to follow their words precisely (with some exceptions, Ongaro, forthcoming). This principle falls in line with the overall gerontocratic character of social relations among the Akha, according to which knowledge and status grows with age. This arrangement among the Akha makes for a fairly unidirectional type of learning of customs (Strachan, Curioni, and McEllin, this volume). During communal activities as varied as hunting, house building, pig killing, meat cutting, rice threshing, coffin making, fishing, fish-trap making, ritual sacrificing, and so on, children and young teenagers are not supposed to engage with or ask questions of their elders. It is considered improper and embarrassing to do so. Elders, for their part, disregard the presence of children, who congregate a few meters from the scene and watch attentively without interacting.

To be sure, children and teenagers are not mere spectators. As they attend the scene, they do not just watch but actively engage with each other. There is undertone chatter among themselves. There is ostensive pointing to different aspects of the scene. There is whispering in the ear of a close-by peer. There is the occasional exclamation. There is observation of another peer's observing. There is, in short, what goes under the name of "perspective sharing" (Tomasello 2019). And when it comes to performing a technique for the first time (say, hunting, or the ritual sacrifice of an animal), the young individual is guided by the elders and receives a lot of "peer correction" to ensure the technique is performed correctly. The mastering of techniques thus takes place through a multitude of means and, as such, the *process* of learning can be defined as flexible (Strachan, Curioni, and McEllin, this volume). However, the *content* of what is learned is not: the overall vertical, top-down character of teaching, as far as customs and related techniques are concerned, is prominent, and it implies little possibility for personal experimentation. Customs simply need to be learned and reproduced, as they once were, unless there is a collective, community-wide decision to change them.[3]

The learning of customs in such a rigid way is facilitated by a set of general and simple principles that underlie them. I am referring here to what Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn (1997) termed "cultural schemas," which are defined as a socially shared network of strongly connected cognitive elements that motivate action and interpretation of the world. Overall, these cultural schemas, typified as they are by intuitiveness and simplicity, facilitate the rigid transmission of customs and techniques. When there is flexibility in the learning of a technique, this plays out within the rigidity they impose.

Such schemas among the Akha (and many other people) take the form of binary oppositions, the most important of which is the opposition between "inside" and "outside" (see table 10.1). This principle is most saliently instantiated in the construction of the Akha

village. Every Akha village in highland Laos is made of a close cluster of houses, spread on a slope, encircled by a belt of forest that sets it apart from fields, other villages, and other types of forest, namely the "outside" world. Even with growing deforestation, at least a thin rim of bush is kept around the village. The village, thus structured, guarantees some protection from external forces like wild animals, foreigners, and evil spirits. Its "inside" is perceived as a safeguarding, positive domain, seen as the fount of "blessing" that, if rightly channeled by way of ritual, counters the negative forces impinging from the outside. Much of Akha ritual life reenacts the separation between these two domains, closing off the intimate haven of the village from the threats of the outside world.

The opposition between "inside" and "outside" is reproduced within the village at the level of the household (every house must have a boundary that is ritually reinforced periodically) where it further intersects with the opposition between "men" and "women." Akha houses are windowless, hence quite dark, rectangular chambers, internally arranged in a quadripartite order. Width wise, they are divided by the main floor beam, which marks the separating point between the "living" side, where eating, cooking, and working take place, and a slightly raised "sleeping side." Lengthwise, they are divided by a partitioning wall that evenly separates a "male side" from a "female side," with elders sleeping closer to the partition. The hearth, where women cook rice and other food, is typically located at the far end of the female side. The ancestral altar, the place where Akha perform 12 sacrifices per year, is also located on the female side. In such a strongly patrilineal society, one might expect to find the ancestral section in the male side of the house. Instead, it is located on the female side because the male/female binary is juxtaposed to the outside/inside binary: being the major source of blessing and protection, the ancestral section represents quintessential "insideness." Women, by virtue of cooking rice and their association with fertility, are also associated with the "inside," in opposition to men, whose distinctive activity is hunting, an "outside" occupation. Unsurprisingly, hunting rituals are performed on the male side.

House building is also coordinated by the opposition between "above" and "below." Initially built on the ground by newly married couples, houses are elevated on stilts after a period of time, keeping with a gerontocratic principle central to Akha culture that associates age and importance with "aboveness." Accordingly, ancestors are "above" their descendants (the ancestral altar hangs from the top rafter) as elders are "above" younger people, both in terms of importance and spatial coding. For instance, it is forbidden for a young person to reach for something that lies on a shelf above the head of an elder, let alone drop it. Like the inside/outside dichotomy, the above/below dichotomy is very salient and takes many forms. It guides gender relations, to the effect that man must be above and woman below, a rule that (reportedly) is most prominently realized in sexual intercourse. It is also instantiated at the household level—for example, the attic is off-limits to everyone except the house owners—where it intersects with the other salient distinction of humans versus animals: humans must be above, animals below. In the same way that outside animals cannot enter the village, inside animals cannot climb on top of roofs. Seeing a pig, dog, chicken, or goat climbing the roof is an ominous event that signals a deficiency of blessing for the household. Customs command that the reckless animal be killed and its meat distributed evenly among all villagers, except for the animal's owner.[4]

Let me make a brief example with reference to house building. After gathering the necessary amount of timber from the forest, a family asks the village chief to call a "sacrificial

Table 10.1
Akha cultural schema: a set of major internalized symbolic binary oppositions that underpins the rigidity of the learning and transmission of Akha customs

Outside	:	Inside
Man	:	Woman
Above	:	Below
Hunting	:	Agriculture
Steep	:	Level
Night	:	Day
Wild animals	:	Domesticated animals
Wet season	:	Dry season
Spirits	:	Humans
Physical deficiency	:	Physical integrity

day," which is when one male member per household in the village helps out with building a new house in exchange for a meal (usually the family kills a pig) and for future reciprocal help whenever anyone else in the village builds a house of their own. The construction takes place in one day. The fact that the construction calls up the whole village over a day already implies a degree level of rigidity and stability since it is possible to build it speedily only if everyone involved has a shared idea of the main structure and process of construction. Effective coordination depends on a baseline of commonly shared assumptions. Most importantly, rigidity in building practices is dictated by customs and the cultural schemas outlined above. For instance, before setting up the stilts, it is "custom" to level the ground because the house—the sphere of the "inside"—must be distinct from the sloped area of the "outside"; it is "custom" to divide the house in a quadripartite fashion and to build a wall that separates male and female quadrants; it is also "custom" to hoist the main house post—where a major ancestral spirit is said to reside and to which a chicken is sacrificed before construction—before any other poles, and so on. Outside these rigid customs-related rules, there is some room for flexibility and, accordingly, variability. By way of illustration, here are three different house layouts that I have seen in my village that reveal the extent of design variability (see figure 10.1).

Depending on family wealth and preferences, house design can vary. Some houses can have two hearths, for example, or an extra uncovered porch, but one will never find a house with two front ladders, or without the female/male separation, or where the female quadrant is higher than the male quadrant. Such configurations would not be permitted by customs. *Maq janr khmq*, people would say; it is a sentence that means "it is not allowed," where the particle *khmq* is exclusively used in the Akha language to denote behavior that is permissible or not permissible by Akha customs (if a person were to doggedly refuse to adhere to customs, they will have to be fined and ultimately ostracized from the community).

To be sure, not all rigidity is the result of explicit rules. There is no rule forbidding people to, say, build their house twice the size of the others or paint it pink. The reason people do not do this is mostly due to "shame" (*xavq dawr baw*). Deviating from certain kinds of community-wide conventions is derided and scorned upon; a person would be chided for "having no shame" (*xavq dawr maq baw*). Significantly, the verb "to have" in this expression

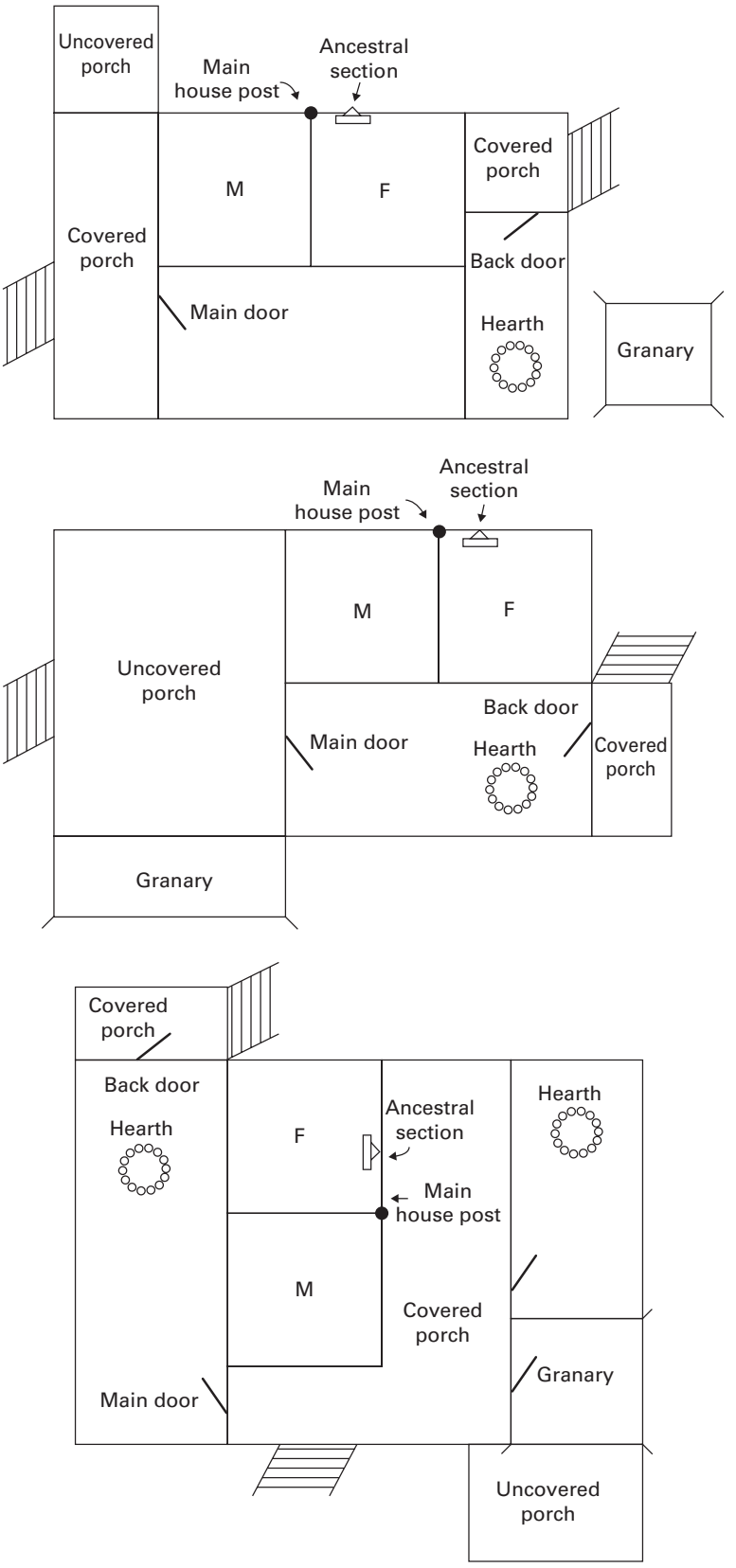

Figure 10.1
Examples of floorplan variation. Room proportions are approximate.

(*baw-e*) is usually employed for the possession of valued culturally central items, such as a house or children. Among the Akha, shame (or embarrassment or shyness) is a positive rather than negative trait: it is by exhibiting it in an appropriate context that a person maintains their reputation. Arguably, the homogenizing effect of shame is a consequence and reflection of the homogenizing and stabilizing effect of customs. Cornelia Kammerer goes as far as saying that "shame is part of customs" (1996a, 83) and that it is central to the Akha egalitarian ethos. All this suggests that there is a considerable social cost associated with flexibility and variability on the select range of techniques that act as social markers.

This brief account should give an idea of the pervasiveness of the above-mentioned cultural schemas, which are internalized by every Akha individual who grows up in the community. Importantly, these schemas run deep enough in the culture to seep into people's bodily *habitus* and even the most banausic techniques. Importantly, the fact that customs imbue techniques sometimes counters effectiveness and instrumental concerns. As I have mentioned, in building a house on stilts, Akha spend a lot of time leveling the ground when they could more easily dig holes for the main posts because the "inside" and "life-affirming spiritual forces" are associated with "levelness"; in the same way, it is important for ritual and other significant social activities to take place on level ground and not on a slope. In planting rice, men must make holes into the ground with a wooden stick while standing, while women, stooped closer to the ground, sow the seeds. The symbolic and the utilitarian merge in hunting, too, where Akha have several rules regulating the appropriate killing of wild animals (e.g., a boar that is killed while munching leaves must not be brought home, as it is seen as blurring the boundaries between the living and the dead). Similarly, in animal sacrifices, which Akha perform on a regular basis, the animal cannot be decapitated while alive: it needs to be bled to death before being chopped apart, in keeping with the parallel between life and physical integrity. Also, Akha do not perform manual work close to the ground when their back faces the sun because they see the shadow as an extension of one's soul—disturbing or piercing it with objects would thus amount to self-affliction. Doing all this is part of being Akha.

Perhaps the most salient signature of the value Akha associate with identity is found in clothing and related techniques of weaving and embroidery. Traditionally, all Akha men wear indigo culottes, an embroidered shirt, and a wide red turban, and they keep their head shaved with a long top-knot dangling from the top; whereas all women wear thigh leggings, miniskirt, bodice, a similarly embroidered indigo shirt, and heavy silver headgear. As Kammerer put it, Akha appear to be "dressed in flags" (1986, 26). The value Akha attach to their cultural identity is important to the point that it shapes the standardization of even very utilitarian techniques, like hunting, house building, or dressmaking.[5]

Of course, despite their remarkable rigidity and stability, we should not think of Akha customs as timeless. There is evidence that these customs have always evolved and diversified historically. Nevertheless, the recent expansion of the Lao state into the highlands and the introduction of new technologies have brought some new challenges to their traditional practice. For example, it was "custom" to fell trees in the forest using an axe. The introduction of the chainsaw, which makes cutting much easier, stimulated debate within Akha communities. Resisted for a few years, its use was eventually adopted after collective deliberation (except for cutting trees at funerals). The same happened to methods of storing rice in field huts during harvest. Traditionally, Akha used a particular type of handwoven con-

tainer that features in many Akha myths and legends. When Chinese sacks that are used to carry sacha inchi became widely available in the area, nobody adopted them straight away to contain their harvested rice. But when a couple of households first started using the sacks in such a way, the Akha community deliberated on their adoption, and before long everyone followed suit. Overall, the arrival of new technologies and policies from the national government has slightly attenuated the salience that customs used to have (see Ongaro 2019 for a fuller account; see Kammerer 1986 and Tooker 2004 for an account of these changes in Thailand). Akha say that customs were stronger before. What is significant, however, is that the decision to abandon a practice or to take up a new one is usually decided collectively, in line with the collective identity-defining character of customs.[6]

Discussion and Conclusions

I have illustrated two sets of techniques among the Akha that exhibit diametrically opposite characteristics. On the one hand, herbal medicine is typified by high flexibility in learning. After acquiring knowledge from an expert herbalist, apprentices are relatively free to experiment with their own techniques and to expand their repertoire in idiosyncratic ways (especially through dreaming), so that the ultimate knowledge and practice one develops usually ends up being substantially different from that of the teacher. Besides, the secrecy that surrounds the practice of herbal medicine preempts sharing or "peer correction." This, in turn, accords with the amply demonstrated variability of herbal medicine know-how among the Akha and in other neighboring ethnic groups.

On the other hand, Akha ancestral customs, which are pervasive to the point of affecting a wide range of practical techniques, are typified by rigidity. Although there is a level of flexibility in the process of learning, the transmission of what is learned is remarkably rigid. The underlying ethos is to faithfully reproduce the ancestors' practices and thereby perpetuate Akha cultural identity. The rigidity in the learning of customs—facilitated by "cultural schemas" and vertical teaching—is consistent with their stability: that is, to the striking degree of homogeneity that one finds across the Akha world in space and in time. Nevertheless, as Sadie Tenpas, Manon Schweinfurth, and Josep Call (this volume) point out, the tension between flexibility and rigidity can play out at different levels and scales. And as I have shown, though rigid in their transmission, customs-related techniques display some flexibility at the community level—for example, through the collective discarding of old customs or the incorporation of novelty. These changes tend to take place after collective deliberation and in the face of socioeconomic changes affecting the Akha area in recent years.

Since the key variable determining this difference is cultural identity—its unrelatedness to herbal techniques allows technical flexibility; its salience to customs implies technical rigidity—it is worth considering once again the Akha geopolitical context, for the ultimate explanation of these patterns (particularly of the rigidity of customs) lies in the multiethnic and unequal scenario that typifies highland Southeast Asia. As Deborah Tooker (2012) argued with reference to the Akha of Thailand in the early 1980s, the shared practice of customs that has been fundamental in forging an Akha sense of collective identity has also been highly empowering in a context of unequal power relations with the lowlands. She argued that the very character of Akha customs—especially the emphasis on the inside/

outside distinction and the attachment to ancestral tradition—played a key role in strengthening this sense of empowerment. The "outside" is the realm of lowlanders and evil spirits and of the dangers that they both represent in similar ways. The correct adherence to ancestral rules allows Akha to tap into the ancestors blessing radiating from the inside and to prevent these threatening outside forces from draining it. It is a system of customs, in short, that maps on the unequal political context in which they find themselves.

The rigidity and stability of customs and associated techniques should be seen as a product of such interethnic relations, for it helps in perpetuating the existence of the Akha as an ethnic group. The same applies to the stable *rejection* of select foreign techniques. Chief among these is writing. As Scott (2009) argued, many upland peoples of Southeast Asia have historically preferred to adhere to their oral tradition and reject writing because of its association with bureaucracy and the state, which they consciously wanted to avoid. As I mentioned earlier, the benefits afforded by recent technologies have sparked debates within Akha communities on how to negotiate ethnic identity, but what is significant is that the decision to incorporate or resist them has typically been a collective one.

This analysis of Akha customs arguably supports Marcel Mauss's anti-diffusionist suggestion in *Techniques, Technologies and Civilisation* (2006) that the most interesting aspect to study about cultural transmission is not so much the borrowing of techniques across societies (borrowing is a normal state of affairs) but the rejection thereof. Mauss surveyed a number of dramatic cases of non-transmission of even very practical technologies across the ethnographic record. He found, for instance, that Athabaskans in Alaska refuse to adopt Inuit kayaks, despite their being self-evidently more suited to the environment than their own boats; Inuits, similarly, refuse to adopt Athabaskan snowshoes. To Mauss, these examples of non-transmission were eloquent about the nature and role of culture (and civilization). The fact that even very instrumental and effective techniques familiar to anyone are not adopted by a certain people allow us to see "culture" as a collective act of conscious refusal (Graeber 2013).[7]

Given that in the cognitive study of techniques, "culture" and "cultural transmission" take on a much broader meanings, I have preferred keeping the term "cultural identity" to the same effect. I have suggested that, in similar ways, the rigidity and stability of a select range of techniques should also be seen as a result of the power of cultural identity in modulating transmission. Techniques that lie outside the domain of identity markers—for example, herbal pharmacopoeia—are clearly unaffected. In fact, in the context of herbal medicine, it is the plants that one obtains from the outside (especially from faraway places) that are most cherished because they are assumed to be the most powerful. This, at least, is the case among the Akha. I should note that the ways in which cultural identity intersects with cultural transmission shows a variety of configurations across the globe. Rita Astuti (this volume), for instance, shows that among the Vezo of Madagascar, ancestral customs and cultural identity do not overlap in the same way they do among the Akha, so some areas of technical know-how that might be identity-defining (sailing techniques) are not permeated by ancestral rigidity. The role of cultural identity in inflecting the tension between flexibility and rigidity can itself be culturally diverse.

Let me end the chapter by highlighting one feature that both the mode of transmission of flexible herbal medical techniques and that of rigid customs-related techniques have in common, albeit for different reasons. This is their apparent restraint on increasing efficacy. In the case of herbal medicine, I showed that the Akha way of sourcing and preparing medi-

cine is linked to secrecy and personal paths to knowledge (e.g., through dreams). This has the effect of precluding the sharing of knowledge and collective experimentation, which is usually key in discovering effective medical treatments. In the second case, techniques do not achieve maximal efficacy because they are infused with a nonutilitarian dimension dictated by customs. Why do people level the ground before building a house while they could more easily dig holes for the main posts? Why must one not decapitate the animal when it is alive even though it slows down food preparation? Because it is "custom" to do so. Customs steer techniques away from their purely instrumental purpose. In both cases, the value attached to the specific mode of transmission of a technique eclipses, to a certain extent, concerns about its practical utility.

Notes

1. I use "Akha" both in singular and plural form, as other anthropologists have done since the 1980s.

2. According to a popular definition (Miller et al. 2013, ix), the placebo effect "is generally understood as consisting of individuals' responses to the psychosocial context of medical treatments, 'inert' interventions, or clinical encounters, as distinct from the inherent or characteristic physiological effects of medical interventions." See Ongaro 2019, 40ff., for a critical discussion.

3. This does not mean that we should view the Akha as a people burdened by doctrine and devoid of critical thought. Quite the contrary. Because customs focus on the correctness of *practice*, they leave ample freedom to speculate about theoretical and metaphysical matters (Tooker 1992). However, given the focus on the specifically technical aspects of Akha knowledge, these matters will not be discussed further here.

4. These two dichotomies also intersect with the dichotomy between "steep" and "level." Levelness is associated with stability and "insideness," and slopes with danger and "outsideness." This matrix of binary opposites is further interwoven with the distinctions between day and night, wet and dry seasons (some activities can only take place at specific time of the day and year), and many less important distinctions.

5. See Zuckerman and Enfield 2022 for an account of a similar effect played by cultural identity on techniques of house construction.

6. This applies to many other aspects of material culture. For instance, while in 2010 every Akha man used to go to the fields wearing a red turban, by 2015, no man would wear the turban anymore. Change occurred rapidly and was a product of conscious adhering to collective ethnic identity. Working among the Akha in Thailand, Kammerer (1996b) noticed a similar sudden pattern of change regarding religion. Akha had been extremely resistant to Christianity for decades. But when conversion happened, it took place rapidly across virtually all Akha villages in northern Thailand.

7. It might be intuitive to think, for instance, that given their vital instrumental value, the adoption of techniques like weaponry should be virtually unaffected by factors other than their effective use. Even in this extreme case, we find ethnographic examples to the contrary, such as that of the Alu warriors of the Solomon Islands, who knowingly deprived themselves of an effective device that could save lives. George Brown writes: "The natives of Bougainville and Bouka [*sic*] Islands do not use shields in fighting and they ridicule those who use them. If Alu and Ruviana canoes are fighting, the Alu natives contend that the advantage is on their side, as only one or two men stand up and use the bow while the others paddle. In the Ruviana canoe, on the contrary, each man uses his shield, and so, having only one hand to paddle the canoe he is in the opinion of the Alu men at great disadvantage" (1910, 161). Pierre Lemonnier's aptly titled book *Technological Choices* (1993) offers us a compendium of similar cases.

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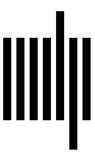

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