

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF ETHNIC MINORITY SOUVENIR BUSINESS OVER TIME AND SPACE

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### ABSTRACT

*The development of ethnic minority souvenir businesses in Thailand was once initiated by external actors and mostly limited to the northern region, but over the last decades, an increasing number of ethnic minorities has gone into business for themselves and migrated southwards to Thailand's urban and beachside tourist areas such as Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Phuket or Koh Samui. This paper focuses on the ethnic minority group of Akha who have moved temporarily or permanently into Thailand's urban tourist areas in order to sell souvenirs as street vendors. This research aims to reconstruct and understand the Akha migratory processes into Thailand's urban tourist areas and to analyse agency perspectives of these micro-entrepreneurs as well as their embeddedness in social, political and economic structures. The author argues that the development of Akha souvenir business over time and space can only be understood by analysing conditional changes and structuring in both Akha homeland and migration destination areas. On the individual or agency level, moreover, the author shows that Akha vendors' motivation to migrate and enter the own-account souvenir work is not only tied to economic but also social and emotional factors. The empirical data collection of this study involved participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews and personal network analysis which were conducted at the various living and working areas of Akha souvenir vendors across Thailand. Existing research on highland groups in Thailand has focused on village case studies while urban perspectives beyond the northern city of Chiang Mai have been neglected. This research thus aims to enrich existing literature by integrating data from empirical research carried out in urban and tourist areas in the capital city Bangkok and the southern beachside destinations.*

**Keywords:** Ethnic minority business, souvenirs, migration and tourism, Akha, Thailand

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study is located at the intersection of tourism and migration, the two most central social and economic phenomena of contemporary society (Hall and Williams 2002). The areas of sale of Akha internal migrants, such as the famous traveller Khaosan road in Bangkok or the notorious Walking Street in Patong on Phuket Island, have become interfaces between ethnic minority entrepreneurs and a wider economy consisting of national and international travellers, expatriates, other business owners and workers, officials, and various members of Thai mainstream society. Due to their active involvement in tourism production and distribution processes along the roads of international urban tourist centres, Akha street vendors have become highly visible. While most urban-based hill tribes as well as other actors of the informal sector remain invisible to visitors and other outsiders (Buadaeng et al. 2002), this particular group stands out visually and has become an integral feature of Thailand's urban and beachside tourist centres. The Akha ethnic minority represents the most popular highland group working in tourist businesses in Thailand's urban and beachside destinations. They feature prominently in the tourist media and advertisements in Thailand (Cohen 1992) and international contexts.

Furthermore, by working as colourful ethnic minority street vendors offering souvenirs,<sup>1</sup> they serve to enhance the "exotic" image of the city or urban neighbourhood. As economic actors in popular travel destinations, they contribute to the production and consumption of urban and tourist places from which both cities and migrants can benefit (Hall and Rath 2007).

There is, however, another side of the coin. Frequently, such processes of migrant or minority integration are linked with xenophobic stereotypes (re)produced by dominant societies as economic advancement does not necessarily enhance social status. In addition, street vending takes place in a context of competition, risk and insecurity in informal sectors and often evokes conflicts with government authorities (Bhowmik 2005; Endres 2013; Etzold 2013).

Finally, this research on ethnic minority street vendors in Thailand's urban tourist areas represents a highly gendered case study. Based on the author's own fieldwork material, it can be stated that the vast majority of Akha souvenir vendors are women leaving their husbands and families behind in the villages.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION**

This paper contributes to the neglected research on the phenomenon of urban-based highland people in Thailand. A lot of village-based research on the hill tribes, including especially that on the Akha people has been carried out (for example, Bernatzik 1947; Feingold 1976; Geusau 1983; Kammerer 1986; Cohen 2001; Tooker 2012; Trupp 2014a), but only a few studies have examined the hill tribes in the urban context (Vatikiotis 1984; Toyota 1998; Ishii 2012).

Moreover, this paper focuses on the dimensions of migration and self-employment whereas movements into the informal self-employed economy are often interpreted as an economic strategy purely aimed at surviving in the marketplace (Fuengfusakul 2008). Neoclassical economics assumes that human action is economically rational, self-interested and therefore only minimally affected by social relations. This way, migrants calculate the differences of expected income between home and destination area, summed up over a specific time frame, and consider the expenses of the migration. Migration—so the argument goes—takes place if net gains are expected from such movements (Todaro 1969). Flows of labour (migrants) or entrepreneurs simply move from low-wage to expected high-wage regions. The "blocked mobility" approach (Waldinger et al. 1990), however, views migration into self-employment and own account-work a result of the various obstacles that migrants or ethnic minorities experience in the labour market. They may be unfamiliar with the language or local culture of the host society, lack education or work experience, and are moreover disadvantaged by lack of mobility due to poverty or discrimination. As Zhou says, "[r]acial exclusion and discrimination erect structural barriers to prevent immigrants from competing with the native born on an equal basis in the mainstream economy" (2004: 1047). Such a situation prevents them from obtaining salaried jobs, and self-employment remains as the only alternative. This explanation views self-employment or entrepreneurship "not as a sign of success but simply as an alternative to unemployment" (Volery 2007: 33). The author aims to demonstrate that the Akha "migration into tourist business" (Trupp 2014b) is not purely connected to economic considerations.

Other approaches to the study of ethnic minority businesses highlight the importance of social relations for their development and success (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Turner and An Nguyen 2005). The practice of bonding and bridging social capital to members of one's own or an external (be it a social, ethnic, economic or political) group is regarded as crucial in order "to get by" and "get ahead" (Putnam 2000: 23).

Kloosterman et al. (1999) propose a more comprehensive concept of (mixed) embeddedness that also acknowledges the economic and politico-institutional environment of the actors in question. Their work follows and further develops the studies of Aldrich et al. (1990) who claimed that in order to explain ethnic entrepreneurial strategies, it is necessary to combine ethnic and socio-cultural factors with politico-economic factors. Rath and Kloosterman elaborate further that "[i]n conjunction with the ethnic bias, most scientific researchers have paid little systematic attention to the underlying structural changes of the economy in general and specific markets in particular" (2000: 667). The author thus looks at structural conditions, agency perspectives and social structures in order to explain the development of Akha souvenir businesses over time and place.

This way, Akha migrants are carving out their own niches in the tourism industry by entering into self-employment and/or commodifying their products and some of their cultural features into souvenirs. When profit-oriented motives and the economic pressure to earn money outweigh aesthetic standards and when it is more important to satisfy the customer (tourist) than the artist, these artefacts can be called souvenirs (Graburn 1976: 6). It is thus a tourist commodity, which "has exchange value in the marketplace and is produced, distributed, and consumed with few emotional attachments" (Swanson and Timothy 2012: 490). Souvenirs represent a wide spectrum of the material culture of tourism including ethnic crafts, mass-manufactured items and traditional travel mementos including books, clothing, jewellery, antiques, food, toys and even goods that were not intentionally produced to be souvenirs but fulfil the functions of a memory holder (Cohen 2000; Graburn 1976; Hitchcock and Teague 2000; Hume 2014; Swanson and Timothy 2012). The production of souvenirs however always involves processes of cultural commodification. This can be evaluated in a positive way as tourism may bring economic benefits, human and cultural capital (e.g., the practice of foreign languages), but also a sense of pride and identity as well as a political resource to manipulate (Cole 2007; Rath 2007; Trupp 2014a). Other scholars agree that commodification incorporates those people into the new economy, but argue that they simultaneously keep them at the margins of society culturally (Azarya 2004).

In the context of souvenir production and distribution, two processes seem to be relevant for the context of this study. The first relates to the source of the (initial) commercialisation, thus to the question whether the commercialisation of the products is based on the own initiative or whether it was/has been driven by external agents such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations or private business people who ordered and

promoted these products (Cohen 1983, 2000). The second relates to the intended consumers or buyers of the products and the question of whether this audience shares the cultural background of the producers or whether they are unfamiliar with it (Graburn 1976; Cohen 2000).

## **METHOD**

The research is guided by grounded theory principles as formulated by Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (2008) and draws on qualitative and quantitative data. The author's primary data are based on a nine-month period of fieldwork in Thailand's urban tourist areas including Chiang Mai, Bangkok and Koh Samui and derive from semi-structured interviews, forms of observation including informal conversations, personal network analysis and photographs. In addition to primary data, the author uses secondary data drawn from technical and non-technical literature including newspaper articles, tourist magazines and brochures as well television programmes reporting on Akha ethnic minorities, official documents and websites depicting trading regulations as well as official tourism and street vending statistics. Such an approach, however, is able to indicate that Akha micro entrepreneurs are not entirely controlled by external structural forces but have shown themselves to be active agents who pursue their own goals and ideas.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF AKHA SOUVENIR BUSINESSES OVER TIME AND SPACE**

### **From Hillside to Roadside**

Ethnic tourism in Thailand started in the 1960s when individual and later on mass tourists visited the highland villages in search of authenticity and adventure (Cohen 2001). At this time, the northern Thai cities Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai and the same-named provinces were the only highland areas in the entire mainland Southeast Asian mountain region that could be relatively easily and—above all—safely reached. Already in 1968, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) opened its first regional office (outside of Bangkok) in order to promote Chiang Mai's tourism potential including historical sites, Lanna culture, lively handicraft productions and the hill tribes. Chiang Mai became the touristically most important city in the highlands of Southeast Asia and the hill tribes became an important

tourist attraction (Cohen 2014). However, highland ethnic minorities have been romanticised, exoticised and marketed by both private and state actors for tourism purposes but at the same time Akha and other highland groups have experienced discrimination and disdain by the same stakeholders. Due to political developments in the East-West conflict, alleged involvement in drug production, and their use of the agricultural method of shifting cultivation, the hill tribes have been labelled troublemakers and forest-destroying drug dealers by the Thai government and in public opinion (Laungaramsri 2003; Vaddhanphuti 2005).

In the context of ethnic minority tourism, the idea was born that hill tribes could commercialise their handicraft products for an outside audience. The commercialisation of hill tribe crafts was sponsored by the Thai authorities as part of their efforts to integrate the highland minorities (especially the Hmong) into the national economy and the state (Cohen 1989). In addition to the Thai state, also other external organisations like humanitarian and religious non-governmental organisations (NGOs) supported the commercialisation process in order to find new sources of income for resettled minority people (Cohen 1983). Moreover, private business people spied business opportunities and started selling authentic tribal art as well as reproductions in Chiang Mai. In the specific case of the Akha, it is reported that the awareness of an external interest in traditional Akha handicrafts was mediated by the wife of a Christian missionary who worked among the Akha for many years (Choopah and Naess 1997: 198). We can summarise that the commercialisation of cultural goods in the region is generally not a spontaneous endogenous process initiated by villagers, but rather an exogenous process introduced by state agencies, NGOs and private actors (Cohen 1983: 76). Even though the hill tribe souvenir business was started in the villages and initiated by external agents, it soon expanded to urban areas and was taken over (at least partly) by the hill tribes themselves.

The evolution of Akha (and other minority) souvenir businesses in Chiang Mai is strongly influenced by various developments on the intersecting local, national and international levels. The development and the future potentials of international and domestic tourism led to the establishment of two institutions that have become crucial in shaping the opportunity structures for the Akha in the field of ethnic minority enterprise, the Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center and the night bazaar.

The Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center was established in 1972 and has featured *Khantok* dinners including dance performances of northern Thai and hill tribe groups. The first residents were brought by the Border Patrol Police on behalf of Thai entrepreneurs who employed them as local tourist

attractions (Vatikiotis 1984: 210). The idea to display ethnic minority groups for an entrance fee to an outside audience may indicate parallels to colonial forms of such exhibitions, also termed "human zoos" (Trupp 2011). Yet, this institution probably became the first urban base for highland ethnic minorities, which also offered employment opportunities.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the low monthly salary of 150 baht for dancing and singing, ethnic minority members aimed at increasing their income by producing and selling handicrafts and souvenirs to tourists (Choopah and Naess 1997: 195). This opportunity was also used by some of the very first Akha migrants. They bought or borrowed old bags, jackets or leggings from the village and distributed them to handicraft and souvenir shops in town or sold them themselves at the night bazaar.

The night bazaar was established in the early 1970s and is to date located in the Chang Khlang area between the historical city centre and the Ping River. Ever since, it has been one of the biggest tourist attractions in Chiang Mai. The market operates from 6 pm until midnight and consists of small vending stalls and shops and expanded over the last decades to some of the neighbouring lanes and squares. It is famous for its handicrafts, souvenirs, toys, clothing as well as (original and fake) CDs and DVDs. From its beginning, the night bazaar has also served highland minority groups as "a dual and indistinguishable function of market and social meeting place" (Vatikiotis 1984: 213) where economic activities as well as social exchange with co-ethnics and relatives take place. The first highland minority group engaged in the souvenir enterprise was the Hmong. Their pioneering role in the 1970s is linked to the proximity of Hmong settlements in Mae Rim and Doi Pui to the city centre of Chiang Mai and to their early involvement in government-sponsored handicraft commercialisation projects. The Akha were the second group that entered the urban highland souvenir business in Chiang Mai (Meyer 1988: 429). According to Toyota, the first Akha woman opened a handicraft stall at Chiang Mai's famous night bazaar in 1975 (1998: 205). The author's research participants also confirmed this development. One of the first Akha involved in the urban souvenir business got the information from another Akha friend who observed that an old Hmong man very successfully sold bracelets at Chiang Mai night bazaar. So they decided to follow this business model together. At the beginning, there were only three mobile Akha and some Hmong vendors. Initially, the Akha sellers were too shy to approach and sell to the tourists. Contrary to the present-day situation, in the very early years of the urban souvenir business, the Akha constituted a rare attraction and tourists approached them, asked questions about the products, and were eager to buy the handicrafts. In the late 1980s, Akha vendors could sell their products

such as self-made bracelets for 200–300 baht per day, which was many times the income of any other wage labourer. In the context of an interview, one of the Akha sellers recalls the early days of Akha souvenir business at Chiang Mai night bazaar:

"At that time no one sold there. There were many Farang at that time but Ator [my Akha friend] and I were too shy and so we could not address them. But the Farang saw us with the stuff in the basket and asked, "What are these things?" And they bought my stuff for 200–300 baht. So Ator said that we should organise more products. Both of us could run good business" (Interview with Akha vendor, Chiang Mai, 26 January 2009).

Based on this success, they decided to buy more raw materials, produce more souvenirs, and bring their friends and relatives. In the first half of the 1980s, Vatikotis reported that the Akha population in Chiang Mai accounted for 76 persons while an estimated number of 15–20 of them were involved as traders in the night bazaar (1984: 212). We can thus date the beginning of the urban Akha souvenir business to the early 1970s, when some Akha started selling handicrafts on a small scale at the Old Chiang Mai Cultural Center and the Chiang Mai night bazaar.

While these developments outlined above clearly shaped the opportunity structures in the migration and sales areas, increasing socio-economic and cultural transformation took place in the village areas. The highland development policies such as the prohibition of forest use and shifting cultivation led to an exclusion of the hill tribes from the forests and to their loss of control of natural resources. Moreover, the introduction of new administrative structures and powers undermined existing political and social structures in the villages (Gillooly 2004; Vaddhanphuti 2005).

"If we have enough money or something to do to survive we will not come to Bangkok. But in our village there is nothing to do. We are not allowed to make plantations in our village. No forest for us anymore (Interview with Akha seller in Bangkok, 26 August 2008)."

International tourism also facilitated better roads and transportation, which form the infrastructural base for more frequent migratory movements to the city. Maybe even more importantly, the ethnic minorities became more entrepreneurial by controlling both the production and the distribution of the souvenirs. Through the direct sale to tourists, minority vendors avoided



dependence on intermediate dealers and were thus able to significantly increase their income. The social relations to their Akha home villages were important in order to obtain hill tribe clothing that was resold in the city or further processed for souvenir production. Moreover, successful Akha sellers shared the knowledge about new business opportunities with co-villagers, Akha friends and relatives. These forms of bounded social capital and the subsequent commercial opportunities were not equally available to the urban lowlanders. This resulted in an economic niche that may be described as unique to highland minority migrants (Vatikiotis 1984: 122). In the 1980s, the market in Chiang Mai changed from mainly selling traditional clothing and jewellery to selling products primarily adapted towards Western tourism demands (Choopah and Ness 1997: 197). The rise of the urban Akha souvenir business in the 1970s and 1980s can be attributed to transformations in the Akha home villages, new evolving commercial opportunities in the city and minority agency (see Table 1). Akha souvenir and handicraft entrepreneurs may run their own shops, rent stalls at one of the markets, occupy some space on the sidewalk, on the staircase of a building, or walk up and down with a basket along the streets as mobile vendors.

Table 1: Conditions for the rise of Akha Urban souvenir businesses (source: author).

Changes in source region	Opportunities in target region	Minority agency
Loss of land and forest	Increase of international tourism	Taking over the processes of souvenir production and distribution
Destruction of social and political village structures	Establishment of commercial institutions	Mobilisation of social networks to co-villagers, relatives, and friends
Improved transportation facilities		Adaption towards tourist demand

In the mid-1990s, Mika Toyota estimated the number of urban-based Akha in Chiang Mai to be around 2,000 (1998: 197) and Fuengfusakul counted approximately 100 mobile sellers at the night bazaar in Chiang Mai in 2000 (2008: 113). The vending style of mobile selling appeared in higher numbers in the context of increasing migration and competition. The number of mobile sellers, however, has not been stable as some only come to sell at the markets during tourist high season and return to their home villages for harvest season; thus, different types of migrants can be identified (Trupp 2014b).

This substantial increase in Akha migrants in general and Akha souvenir sellers in particular outlined above led to increasing competition that strongly affected the spatial expansion of urban and later on, beachside Akha souvenir businesses.

Over the last 15 years, three different "day markets" have been established in Chiang Mai, which also became important sales areas for Akha entrepreneurs. These markets have provided more commercial opportunities for Akha vendors, but also have attracted further business competition. Above all mobile, Akha sellers expanded their sales activities to further popular tourist areas along the eastern part of the historical city, to Loi Kroh road and the neighbouring small red-light zone. It also has to be noted that these economic spaces are important sites of social activity and exchange. There is a high fluctuation of Akha migrants; newcomers frequently arrive from the villages and meet relatives or friends they have not seen for a long time. So, personal stories or news from the villages are shared along with information about business activities elsewhere. These social functions are even more important for migrant destinations further away from the villages such as Bangkok or the beach areas (Trupp 2014c).

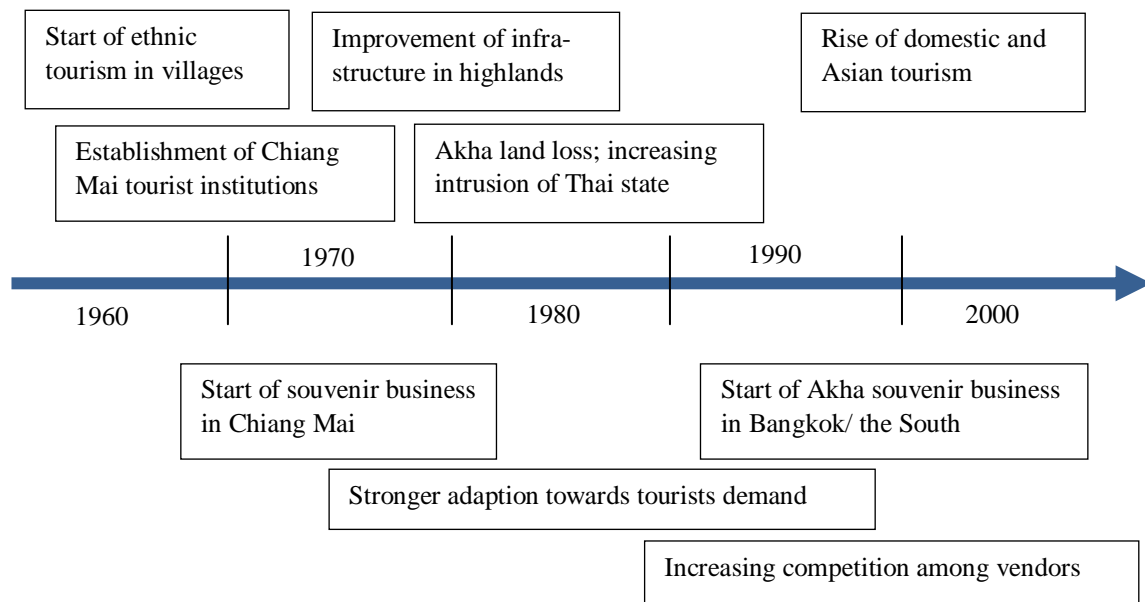


Figure 1: Timeline of the development of urban Akha souvenir businesses (source: author).

## **Moving on to Bangkok**

Increasing competition, bad sales conditions in Chiang Mai, continued limited job opportunities in their home regions as well as the motivation of some adventurous Akha sellers to discover new destinations and business opportunities have led to a spatial expansion of the Akha souvenir business to other urban and touristic areas such as Bangkok, Pattaya, Hua Hin, Koh Samui and Phuket. According to external resources, the first highland minority people selling souvenirs on the streets in Bangkok were Hmong (Giradet 1990). They came to Bangkok during the dry season as seasonal migrants in order to diversify their household incomes by temporarily becoming street vendors. The author assumes that their longer experience with urban souvenir businesses in Chiang Mai, with ethnic tourists in their home villages, and their comparably strong (economic) relations with Thai lowlanders made them move first. They predominantly sold ready-made souvenirs in Bangkok's famous tourist area Silom (Patpong). Based on the interviews with long-time Akha sellers and Thai business owners in Bangkok, the author dates the beginning of Akha urban businesses in the capital to the mid-1990s when the first Akha temporarily moved to Bangkok. Similar to Chiang Mai in the early days, they and their products easily aroused attention. The Akha pioneers in Bangkok were very successful as they could sell their products at a good price in a short time. So they informed friends and relatives from the home village who came to accompany them. These Akha sellers who migrated to Bangkok in the first years did not have much information on where to go and how to run a business in the capital city. However, they had received the information from other Akha friends who had already moved there on a short-term basis that it was economically better to run a business in Bangkok. These pioneers or early migrants had already gathered sales experience in Chiang Mai or their home villages and migrated in small groups. In contrast to Chiang Mai, however, they often experienced problems with municipal police checking their residence permits.

The first Akha sellers in Bangkok stayed overnight at the Sriwivat Hotel around Thanon Samsen, and in 2002 moved to the Thai-Chinese owned hotel Thaiwarie next to Thanon Dinso, which until recently was the main place of residence of some Akha. This accommodation is good for seasonal migrants or short-term visitors/vendors as they offer relatively cheap room prices and do not care how many guests stay in a room. Usually, three to six Akha vendors share a room costing between 150 and 200 baht per night. As the hotel manager does not offer discounts for longer stays and charges 10 baht extra for recharging mobile phones, many Akha

vendors have moved to a living area close to Wan Chart market where they mingle with long- and short-term migrants, predominantly coming from Isaan, Northeastern Thailand. During the author's fieldwork, the Wan Chart area became the preferred living area for most mobile Akha sellers because the rooms and houses, which can be rented on a monthly basis, are cheaper and more spacious. However, the area is also considered to be dangerous at night and Akha sellers sometimes anxiously told stories about residents getting robbed in the small lanes. All three living areas have in common that they are located within walking distance from one of the main sales areas for Akha vendors, the famous Khaosan road and the adjacent area.

The three main sales areas in Bangkok are the Khaosan and Rambuttri area, the Silom road (Patpong), and the lower area of Sukhumvit road. The Khaosan area is lined with street vendors selling food, clothing, souvenirs, accessories and fake ID cards, and is well-known as Bangkok's ultimate backpacker bubble that is spatially expanding, going up-market, and has become a popular night life area for young Thais on the weekend (Howard 2005). The Sukhumvit area sees many expatriates, attracts an increasing number of tourists from the Middle and Near East around Soi 3, and features red-light districts at Nana Plaza and Soi Cowboy. Along Thanon Silom lies Bangkok's financial district, but international tourists mainly visit the Patpong night market that offers fake watches, purses and clothing as well as its famous red-light zone. Only 200 metres further lies Soi Thaniya, which is popular with Japanese tourists. These areas feature a distinctive atmosphere and specific characteristics and thereby attract different types of tourists, which in turn shape the opportunity structures. Akha vendors are aware of these specific structures and have specific reasons to sell at one location or another (Trupp 2014b). In addition to these three main sales areas, Akha vendors are scattered near various tourist attractions (e.g., next to the Grand Palace) and occasionally go to sell at special markets or events (e.g., Chinese New Year in Chinatown). Other popular tourist and market areas such as the famous Chatuchak (weekend) market or Suan Lum night market<sup>3</sup> strictly prohibit any mobile street vendors. However, a few Akha traders have their own shops at Chatuchak. Due to a strong fluctuation in Akha sellers, it is difficult to assess the number of Akha vendors in Bangkok based on the author's own count; the information of Akha interview partners on their number accounts for 70–100 sellers.

### **Moving Beachside**

Since the late 1990s, Akha vendors have also ventured further south towards several beachside destinations. During the author's fieldwork, the tourist

areas of Hua Hin, Pattaya, Phuket and Koh Samui were popular sales and migration destinations for both mobile and immobile (i.e., stall) vendors. They have thus migrated and worked in most of the major international tourist destinations of the country. Many Akha vendors know other famous tourist destinations, such as Krabi, as well, but authorities strictly prohibit them from carrying out mobile sales activities. In Hua Hin, there are about 20 Akha entrepreneurs, most of them mobile vendors, but one couple runs a stand at the night market and a few Akha vendors present and sell their products from the sidewalk. Sales zones include the beach area between the Chinese temple and the Sofitel Hotel, the small red-light zone and the night market where mobile sellers are allowed to sell after 10 PM. Long-term and experienced vendors told the author that more than ten years ago they started to explore different and relatively new sales areas in Thailand. These further migration movements and the spatial expansion of Akha souvenir businesses were mainly motivated by two factors. On the one hand, the competition has been increasing in both Chiang Mai and Bangkok, and on the other, Akha pioneers felt ready for new adventures and trying out something new. In terms of economic sales success, Pattaya, Phuket and Koh Samui have been regarded as the best options, but in terms of larger politico-economic, social and institutional structures, Bangkok and especially Chiang Mai are the preferred locations. For instance, in the early years of Akha souvenir business in Pattaya—when pioneers or newcomers could not yet draw on Akha social networks providing reliable information—the main problem was not to successfully sell products, but to find a place to sleep. Several guesthouse owners in Pattaya (in 2001) would not rent out rooms to Akha sellers even though they offered the same money as tourists or Thai visitors. It seems that economic success did not go hand in hand with social integration or enhancing symbolic capital. Eventually the newly arrived Akha group found a *tuk-tuk* driver who helped them find a place. Another critical issue that may have impeded greater numbers of Akha migrants moving to the islands of Koh Samui and Phuket is the transport issue on the islands. Not all Akha living areas are within walking distance to the sales areas, and transportation between the beach areas (the sales places) is quite expensive. In order to navigate between living and sales areas on Phuket or Koh Samui, a motorbike or a car is of great advantage. For example, Chaweng, Koh Samui's most popular beach area is seven kilometres long.

Their income at the beachside destinations is usually higher than in Chiang Mai or the capital city but so are their living expenses. The Akha vendors' monthly income across the country depends on many factors, but usually varies between 8,000 and 20,000 baht. However, in Chiang Mai

where competition is at its edge, monthly income for mobile or semi-mobile mat vendors can go down to 3,000–5,000 baht (also cf. Fuengfusakul 2008: 119), and in beachside destinations vendors were reported to be able to earn 40,000 baht per month or more.

Interestingly, in addition to seasonal individual vendors, Koh Samui hosts many migrating Akha couples who work together in the souvenir business. Research participants working on the island stated that many couples move to Koh Samui to start a new life and to leave former negative experiences, e.g., in the context of personal relationships, behind.

"The reason why I decided to go to Koh Samui is that I did not want to live in the same area as in the past which reminds me of my past story. I want to forget everything" (Interview with Akha seller, Koh Samui, 8 September 2011).

Even though most Akha migrate into the souvenir business without family members, joint work and migration can enable a life with one's loved ones that may not be possible otherwise.

### **Beyond Economic Interests: Personal Freedom and Becoming One's Own Boss**

Such statements and developments challenge the view of Akha souvenir migration as purely economic. Indeed, the motivation to escape individual or community histories and the opportunity of self-realisation, which are usually related to lifestyle migration (Benson and O'Reilly 2009), can play a role too. The motivations for different sales and living locations cannot be reduced to economic interests alone. Moreover, several Akha vendors have had great economic success in destinations such as Pattaya or Phuket, but returned to Chiang Mai or Bangkok because of more pleasurable working and living conditions and a more pleasant social environment.

Another reason that has influenced the spread of Akha souvenir businesses is the advantage of self-employment. Being one's own boss and thus able to independently decide when to leave work and return to or visit the village is highly valued.

"I can decide to come home whenever I want. Christmas, my children's vacation or when there is a serious case in the village. That is why I love this job, it is a tough job but it makes me feel I am independent" (Interview with Akha seller, Bangkok, 4 September 2008).

Moreover, previous employment experiences lead to a preference for and an increase of self-employment. Most Akha (except younger seasonal sellers in school or university) already have job and migration experiences prior to working in Bangkok or the beachside destinations. These occupations included waitresses, workers at construction sites, in laundry shops, and massage places or wage labour in the agricultural sector. Most of these jobs are characterised by low wages and some, e.g., those in construction, can be quite dangerous and resulted in injuries. Some vendors showed the author the injuries they had sustained from working in rice fields, factories or construction sites. Toyota also observed that ethnic minorities are preferred employees because they accept lower than average wages for unskilled work (1998: 208). A young Akha woman also reported that she was deceptively offered a job working in a restaurant or hotel, which actually turned out to be a brothel where she and other women were locked up. In addition, many Akha sellers reported that they had been treated badly and looked down upon by Thai employers. Overall, previous job experiences were described rather negatively. In light of such experiences, becoming one's own boss is promising. Research participants clearly stated that they preferred to run their own businesses as they could decide when and how to work as well as when to visit their villages, and that their jobs as own-account workers made them feel independent.

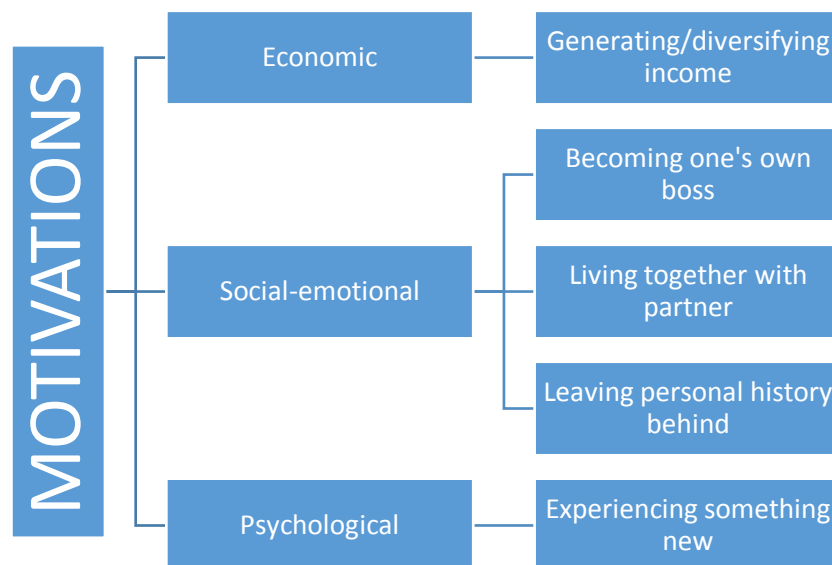


Figure 2: Motivations for migration into tourist business (source: author).

## **SOCIAL RELATIONS**

Many Akha own-account workers are well aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the various sales locations, and there are long-term Akha vendors who have gained experience in Chiang Mai, Bangkok and two or three beachside destinations. At present, experienced sellers are also contacted via mobile phone by Akha vendors seeking advice on starting their own urban souvenir businesses or changing their current living and sales conditions. One of the Akha vendors even mentioned that ever since the massive spread of mobile phones in Thailand's hill areas, Akha migration has increased considerably. Consequently, long-term and experienced sellers have become an even more important source of information.

Social relations still play an important role among Akha migrant sellers, especially in terms of sharing information about transport, living possibilities and changing business opportunities at various locations (Trupp 2014b). At the present time, there is a strong fluctuation both (1) between different sales areas and (2) between home villages and sales areas. Their high level of mobility and flexibility enables Akha vendors to oscillate between several locations—a core factor in the pursuit of the urban souvenir business.

## **LEGAL REGULATIONS**

Laws, regulations and enforcement related to street vending are stricter in the capital city Bangkok and the beachside tourist destinations. Petty trade is aimed at reducing poverty and defined as "a means for economic self-reliance" and has also been positioned in Thailand's Economic and Social Development Plans since the 1980s (Nirathron 2006: 23). On the one hand, state authorities and urban planners tolerate street vending to a certain extent because they acknowledge it as an economic necessity for the urban poor, and on the other, they view street vending as an obstacle to urban development which should be prohibited by law enforcement (informal conversations with officials of the Department of City Planning, Bangkok, December 2013). Officials of that department told the author that they received many phone calls from Bangkok residents complaining about street vendors occupying public space and requesting the areas be cleared. Indeed, relocations and evictions of street vendors are frequently observed in South and Southeast Asia (Walsh and Maneepong 2012: 256) and it has been noted that "the state in Thailand has taken the view that vendors are one [...]"



undesirable element, or 'weeds on the modern landscape'" (Tepwongsirirat 2005: 152). Legal frameworks related to street vending allow certain designated sales areas (and simultaneously determine prohibited zones); they can forbid individuals from cooking and selling products on public roads and public areas; they can outlaw the use of carts for economic purposes in public areas; they can specify certain days and times when vendors have to cease all vending activities and regulate vending identification and registration.

Concerning the Akha vendors, none of the mobile sellers throughout the country obtained official registration and also the majority of semi-mobile vendors remain without it. Permanent vendors running a fixed stall at one of the markets have to register with the specific responsible urban institution. Moreover, Akha mobile and semi-mobile street vendors are tolerated in the various vending areas outlined above, but are currently not allowed to enter other popular tourist areas such as Bangkok's Chatuchak weekend market or the famous beachside resort of Krabi in Southern Thailand. Eventually, most of these laws and regulations remain ambiguous (Kusakabe 2006: 29), especially concerning their enforcement by local authorities. Local practice of law enforcement significantly differs according to time and space and often contradicts official guidelines. In 2013, for instance, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) announced it would go easy on street vendors and avoid imposing fines on sellers in Bangkok (Kongsai 2013), but at the same time Akha vendors recounted that the amount and frequency of fines increased. Without prior notice, controls by local municipal police became harsher. In addition, the lack of clear regulations encourages "local street politics of corruption and bribing." Although none of the Akha mobile sellers obtained an official vending registration, they may have to pay monthly bribes ranging from 100 to 1,000 baht. These unclear policies and arbitrary practice of law enforcement also annoy the Akha vendors: "I don't understand [the regulations]. Now everyone just wants money money" (Akha vendor, Bangkok, 14 December 2013).

## **CONCLUSION**

The development of ethnic minority souvenir businesses was once initiated by external actors and mostly limited to the northern region, but over the last decades an increasing number of Akha has gone into business for themselves and migrated southwards to Thailand's urban and beachside tourist areas.

For most sellers, Chiang Mai has been the starting point for newcomers to move on to further destinations in their urban Akha souvenir businesses. Due to transportation improvements and motorisation processes in the highlands, the distance between Chiang Mai and the northern Akha villages is not really relevant anymore. Already in 1998, Mika Toyota stated: "Chiang Mai is no longer perceived a migrants' destination but rather has become part of their [the Akha's] extended domain of social networks" (1998: 209). Today, Akha vendors' social networks have further expanded and facilitated an extension of Akha souvenir businesses to Bangkok and beachside destinations. However, popular sales areas such as Chiang Mai night bazaar or Khaosan road in Bangkok have remained places where migrants meet personally and exchange experiences about former and current sales conditions throughout the country. Bangkok is not necessarily an intermediate stop before heading further south, as many sellers instead decide to head on to Pattaya, Phuket or Koh Samui directly. Akha vendors have become part of the country's tourist and commercial landscape, but their work is neither formally recognised by state institutions nor supported by NGOs.

Several problems and conditional changes in the highland regions such as loss of land, destruction of traditional village structures, improvement of transport infrastructure, and the creation of economic opportunity structures in the destination areas in light of international tourism development set the stage for the evolvement of Akha souvenir businesses. These developments have fostered migration into urban areas and the spatial expansion of sales activities. On the other side and equally important, Akha have become more entrepreneurial by taking over production and distribution, adapting their products toward tourist demand, and thereby increased their income. They have activated their social relations with co-ethnics using social capital for processes of souvenir and raw material acquisition and for the transfer of information relevant for business start-ups.

Based on empirical data analysis, the author developed three motivational categories which foster migration into tourist business and the spatial expansion of souvenir sellers. These refer to economic, social-emotional and psychological dimensions (see Figure 2). Even though economic pressure seems predominant at first sight, non-economic factors have been shown to be important as well. These include rather negative previous employment experiences leading to the quest for occupational independence, the possibility to live a life together with a partner, the chance to escape individual or communal histories, and eventually the desire of experiencing something new. Migration decisions and economic actions

are not purely economically rational and self-interested. The case of Akha migration into urban and beachside tourist destinations involved more than a purely economic survival strategy aimed at simply surviving in the market as neoclassical migration theory has argued.

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## **NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Souvenirs offered include self-made wristbands, bags and hats as well as mass manufactured products such as wooden frogs, bracelets or plastic souvenirs.

<sup>2</sup> The Diamond Hotel was reported to be the second place where hill tribe shows were presented to tourists (Meyer 1988: 426; Choopah and Naess 1997: 195).

<sup>3</sup> Suan Lum night market operated from 2001 to 2011.

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