

Major Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand

One of the main tourist attractions of the north, the hill tribes of Northern Thailand have preserved their way of life with little change over thousands of years. Originating in different parts of South East Asia and resisting persecution by other cultures, they have migrated into Thailand in a quest for freedom and security. Although the hill tribes can be regarded as "primitive", in that they pre-industrial, pre-literate societies, hill tribe communities are not group of simple people living simple lives. Their customs, laws and beliefs are complex and very sophisticated, designed to harmonize relationships between individuals and to conserve their environment. It is only in recent years, with the effects of too rapid population growth and competition for land, that their ancient way of life has proved to be insufficient to cope with the stresses resulting from external forces.



In Northern Thailand there are several hill tribes living within a small geographical area. Each tribe has its own language, customs, religious and social organization. All the tribes are welcoming and hospitable to visitors, providing them with a unique opportunity to see and experience ways of life which have been forgotten in the west.

THE DIFFERENT HILL TRIBE GROUPS

THE KAREN

The Karen, (called Kaling or Yang in Thai) are found throughout the west of the region. Their population is about 300,000 in Thailand, with over four million in Burma. They are concentrated mainly in Mae Hong Son province, and western areas of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Phayao. There are four sub groups. Two are the most secretive. All their villages are between Mae Sariang and Hod. Other groups include the Sgaw (the most numerous) and Dam (black). Originally Animist, over 30% of the Karen in Thailand have been converted to Christianity by western missionaries.

The Karen costume for women is very attractive and distinctive. Unmarried girls wear loose white Vee necked blouses, decorated with jobs tear seeds at the seams. Married women wear blouses and skirts in bold colors, predominantly red or blue, Men wear blue baggy trousers with red or blue shirts, a simplified version of the women's blouses. Black Karen men wear black shirts with a red cummerbund or head scarf.

Karen houses are not usually large, Adult children must leave the home when married - there is no extended family. Houses are on stilts, made of bamboo or teak. Central steps lead to a porch, with a store room or kitchen to one side, a living area and bedroom on the other. Beneath the house is a working area, often with a foot operated rice pounder.

The Karen have strict laws against immorality. They are matrilineal societies, so that two married women cannot live in the same house. In some villages, the punishment for adultery is death. The village chief has great power over his community, and is regarded as the spiritual as well as the administrative leader.



Karen woman

THE HMONG

Called by the Tai Meo (a derogatory term since it means barbarian), the Hmong are found widely in Northern Thailand. There are two sub-groups, White and Blue. Around and to the west of Chiang Mai, most of the villages are Blue Hmong, in the east only White Hmong villages can be found. Their population in Thailand is about 70,000. They originate in western China, possibly Mongolia.

Blue Hmong women wear beautiful pleated skirts with parallel horizontal bands of red, blue and white, intricately embroidered. Jackets are of black satin, with wide orange and yellow embroidered cuffs and lapels. The hair is tied in a large bun. Men wear baggy black pants and jackets embroidered in a similar way to the women's, closing over the chest with a button at the left shoulder. White Hmong women wear black baggy trousers with a long wide blue cummerbund with a central pink area which hangs almost to the ground. Their jackets are simple, with blue cuffs. A brimless blue cap is worn by some groups. Hmong villages are usually at high altitudes, below the crest of a protecting hill. Houses have a dirt floor and a roof which extends almost to the ground. They live in extended families, with two or more bedrooms. There is a large guest platform. The headman has little power, since the Hmong are fiercely independent people who take orders from no one. Before marriage, promiscuity amongst the young is normal. Marriage is followed by a trial period before the bride price is paid. Hmong men are expected to do most of the work within the family. Men do the heaviest work, but in practice this means they do little, and expect to be supported by their wives. The Hmong grow much opium, and addiction rates in some villages are high, mainly among the males.

Hmong clothing is much in demand in Thailand, and the Hmong have proved in the last few years to be good business people. Hmong women will be seen at markets throughout Thailand selling their handicrafts. Although, like the other tribes, generally poor, some families have become quite wealthy. Some build the more expensive and comfortable Thai style houses, but in general the Hmong have retained their traditional way of life.

There have been few converts to Christianity or Buddhism amongst the Hmong. They are strict animists, whose shamans use dramatic methods to contact the spirits. Every house has an altar of a piece of paper covered in cock's feathers affixed with chicken blood.

THE AKHA

The poorest of the hill tribes, well known to tourists for their extraordinary costumes and exotic appearance. The Akha originate from Tibet, and have only recently entered Thailand, the first immigrants arriving in 1911. They are less open to change than other hill tribes, clinging to their old customs stubbornly.

The women's costume consists of broad horizontal striped leggings, a short black skirt with a white beaded sporran, a loose fitting black jacket with heavily embroidered cuffs and lapels. The headgear, which is never removed, is a conical wedge of white beads interspersed with silver coins and topped with plumes of red taffeta. The man's costume of plain black pants and a lightly embroidered loose jacket is much less impressive. The different subgroups of Akha have slightly different costumes and headgear.

The Akha live at high altitudes, in a position offering good views over the surrounding country. Their houses are on low stilts, with a large porch leading into a square living area with a stove, usually at the back. The roof is steeply pitched. They are deeply superstitious, their religion prescribing exactly how each action should be performed. Any deviation from the correct is believed to lead to disaster. All birth abnormalities, even twins, leads to the killing of the new born by the elders of the tribes.

Every Akha village is entered through ceremonial gates, decorated with carving of "human" life, to indicate to the spirit world that beyond here only humans can pass. Outside the gates are wooden sculptures of copulating couples, and the gates may be decorated with a wide variety of "human" artifacts - weapons, tools, and nowadays cars and air-planes. To touch these carvings, or to show any lack of respect, is punishable by fines or sacrifices. The gates are replaced every year, so every village has a series of gates, the older ones in a state of decomposition and disrepair.

Peculiar to the Akha, there is a giant swing in each village. Every year, in August, there is a "swinging festival", in which the headman, followed by the rest of the village, take turns using the swing. The reasons for this practice are unknown.

Many Akha villages still grow opium, generally not of high quality. Opium addiction, especially amongst the older men, is a serious problem.

THE LISU

The Lisu are a fiercely independent people, who are in general adjusting well to the changes taking place in their society. They originate in Eastern Tibet, and the first settlers arrived in Thailand at the beginning of this century. They are only found in the west-particularly between Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son, but also in western Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Phayao provinces.



Lisu mother and child

The women wear brightly colored costumes, consisting of a blue or green parti-colored knee length tunic, split up the sides to the waist, with a wide black belt and blue or green pants. Long hair is tied at the back. Sleeves shoulders and cuffs are heavily embroidered with narrow, horizontal bands of blue, red and yellow. At New Year festival, in mid January, dazzling displays of wealth are worn, including waistcoats and belts of intricately fashioned silver and hats with multi-colored pom-poms and streamers. Men wear green, pink or yellow baggy pants and a blue jacket opening vertically.

The Lisu live at moderate to high altitudes. Their houses are built on the ground, with dirt floors and bamboo walls around a central ridge. They live as extended families, the number of bedrooms depending on the family size. Unmarried girls have a private bedroom after puberty. Every home has an altar at the back of the communal living area with a shelf holding vessels and incense sticks honoring their ancestor.

Although promiscuous, courtship and marriage are highly stylized, involving a high "bride price". There are twelve clans of Lisu, marriage should be between members of different clans. The Lisu believe strongly in the spirit world, and their shamans are used to divine the causes and cures of all problems and sickness.

Many Lisu villages are involved in the opium trade, and are reputed to grow the best opium. Addition rates are declining, and the Lisu are responding well to alternative cash crop production, but the link between wealth and opium is still strong. A Lisu headman has little power over his community, the clan system generally over-riding his authority.

THE LAHU

The Lahu tribes originated in south west China, and have migrated into Thailand from Northern Burma. Most of their settlements are concentrated close to the Burmese border, in Chiang Rai, northern Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son province. The Lahu language has become a "lingua franca", spoken throughout the other hill tribes, since, amongst the Lahu, hiring out labour to other hill tribes has become common.

There are four tribes within the Lahu - Black, Yellow, Red and She-leh. The Black Lahu are the most reserved, but wear the most distinctive costumes women wear a black cloak with diagonal cream stripes. The top of the sleeve is decorated in bold colors of red and yellow, at the whim of the seamstress. Red Lahu women wear black trousers with white edging and vivid sleeves of broad red and blue stripes. Amongst the other Lahu tribes, traditional costume has been supplanted by the Thai shirt and sarong. Lahu men wear a plain black shirt and baggy black trousers.

Lahu villages are at high altitude. The Red Lahu are the only tribe to build a central Animist temple, surrounded by banners and streamers of white and yellow flags. Houses are built on high stilts with walls of bamboo or wooden planks, thatched with grass. A ladder leads to an open central living area, with a store room to one side and living quarters to the other. There is one large bedroom, partitioned off as necessary according to family size. The main room has a central fireplace.

A high proportion (about one third) of Lahu have been converted to Christianity, and many have abandoned their traditional way of life as a result. Animist Lahu believe in one spirit with overall control all the others, and they are rather predatory in search of a marriage partner, but divorce and adultery are common.

THE YAO

The Yao consider themselves rather aristocratic. They originate in southern China, and at one time had considerable power within the Chinese empire, to the extent that at one time a Yao princess was married to an emperor of China. They are the only hill tribe to have a written language, and a written religion based on medieval Chinese Taoism, although in recent years there have been many converts to Christianity and Buddhism.

Their villages are widely scattered throughout the north east, with concentrations around Nan, Phayao and Chiang Rai. They are a very peaceable and friendly people, who pride themselves on cleanliness and honor. The costume of the women is very distinctive, with a long black jacket with lapels of bright scarlet wool. Heavily embroidered loose trousers in intricate designs are worn, and a similarly embroidered black turban. The teeth are commonly capped with gold. The skull caps of babies are very beautiful, richly embroidered with red or pink pom-poms. On special occasions, women and children wear silver neck rings, with silver chains extending down the back decorated with silver ornaments. Men wear a loose jacket which buttons diagonally across the front, with embroidered pockets and edgings.



Yao woman

Yao villages are at high altitude, built usually of wooden planks on a dirt road. There is a guest platform of bamboo in the communal living area, and two or more bedrooms. Girls of marriageable age have a private bedroom in which they can entertain suitors.

Some Yao grow opium, although in general the incidence is declining. The Yao are integrating well into Thai life. Their exquisite embroidery is a very saleable commodity, and their willingness to adopt new crops gives hope for their future within Thailand.

THE LAWA

The history of the Lawa people is long and poorly understood. It is certain that they have inhabited Thailand here 800 years ago. They believe that they migrated from Cambodia, but some archaeologists think their origins lie in Micronesia, perhaps 2,000 years ago.

With such a long history of cohabiting with the Thais (the legendary king Mengrai who unified Northern Thailand was probably half Lawa), there has been large scale integration, so that most Lawa villages are indistinguishable from Thai settlements. However, in an area of about 500 square kilometres between Hot, Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Son, they still live a largely traditional life, although even here the majority have adopted Buddhism and Thai style house. Unmarried Lawa girls wear loose white blouses edged with pink. Around the neck distinctive strings of orange and yellow beads are worn. The tight skirt is in parallel bands of blue, black, yellow and pink. On marriage, these brightly coloured clothes are replaced with a long fawn dress, but the strings of beads are still worn. The hair is tied in a turban, and it is usual for women to smoke tobacco from a wooden pipe. Most Lawa speak Thai, but the Lawa language, related to that of the Wa Tribe of Burma, is still spoken in many villages.

HILL TRIBE LIFE

COSTUMES AND HANDICRAFTS

The most obvious and remarkable characteristics of the hill tribes are their colorful, exquisitely crafted costumes and the beauty of their adornments. Their skills can also be seen in their tools, basketry, weapons and musical instruments.

Each tribe has a unique range of styles and colors particular to it. Great time, pride and imagination are exercised in the production of clothes and jewellery. They are an expression of status, pride and art. Most women still wear traditional costume at all times, but many men and children are adopting western shorts, jeans and T-shirts for everyday wear.

Most articles are produced within each family. Women spin cloth and make their clothes, whilst men make tools and weapons. Specialist blacksmiths and silversmiths have high status within the community, and may attract business from other villages many kilometers away.

Jewelry is commonly made from silver, most melted down from Indian and Burmese silver coins. Brass, copper and aluminum are also used. The jewelry amassed by a family are the outward display of their wealth, worn by the women at the New Year festival.

Clothing and handicrafts were not until the last ten years regarded as marketable products. With encouragement from the Thai government and the Kings Royal Project, co-operatives have been set up to manufacture and market their traditional goods, which are now big business in the markets of Thailand, and can be purchased at countless outlets throughout the world.

RELIGION

The hill tribes are predominantly Animists, although amongst the Karen, Yao and Akha there are Christian and Buddhist minorities. Animists believe that conscious spirits with powers over humans exist throughout their surroundings.

The hill tribes believe in these spirits most profoundly - they are as real as the physical, visible world. There are spirits in such things as rocks, trees and rivers, which have power to bring great good or harm. Ancestor spirits are cared for by the family or village. For this reason, every village will have a shaman, who can communicate with the spirits and ensure the correct actions at all times.

BIRTH AND MARRIAGE

Birth is the most dangerous time for all hill tribes people. Amongst women, complications in childbirth are the commonest cause of death, and infant mortality is very high. The average number of births per couple is six, partly to offset infant mortality. Children are insurance for their parents against sickness and death, so it is vital to have enough to ensure that some survive to adulthood.

Death rates have been falling over the last thirty years, with improvements in health care and education, so that the natural growth rate of hill tribe populations, even excluding immigration, is very rapid. Because of the dangers, pregnancy and childbirth are surrounded by taboo and ritual. The women give birth, usually assisted by a female relative or specialized local midwife. The baby is not considered a human being for several days after its birth - the several souls within the body take this time to enter the new-born. The mother's behavior before and during childbirth is carefully watched. To die giving birth is a "bad death", leading to a high risk of the dead mother's spirit returning to haunt the village.

Courtship varies from tribe to tribe. Most are promiscuous before marriage, except the Karen. Once a girl has become pregnant, it becomes necessary for her to find a husband. There is a high degree of etiquette in the finding of a mate. Lineages must be consulted and good omens looked for before permission can be given. Monogamy is usual, although amongst the Hmong a second wife is acceptable. The marriage ceremony is always a great celebration, very expensive for the bride or groom's family. It is usual for the bride and groom to come from different villages, so the celebration of one marriage frequently spawns others!

SICKNESS AND DEATH

Hill tribe people value health above all other attributes, as do we all, but the hold of the hill tribe person on his health is rather more tenuous than ours. Life expectancy is low, due to poor sanitation, polluted water, lack of, or ignorance of medical facilities, drug addiction and endemic disease. Health is never taken for granted, but must be worked at.

Sickness is regarded as the will of the spirit world, caused by some sin or insult to the gods. Death is a transition between this world and a parallel spirit world, which is opposite to ours. The death ceremony is essential to prevent the soul of the departed returning to take more souls to the underworld, and various options. First, a shaman must be consulted to discover what action has insulted which spirit. The shaman will recommend and carry out the correct sacrifice. These actions will be followed by the use of local herbs - the commonest is opium, very effective as an analgesic and anti-diarrhea drug, but there are many others, whose efficiency has been little researched. Finally, western medicine will be tried, but unfortunately, since this is often a last resort it is frequently too late to effect a cure.

AGRICULTURE AND ECONOMY

The hill tribes have a predominantly subsistence economy. Money is unnecessary, since everything needed is produced within the village. In recent years, this economy had begun to change, firstly with the cash crop opium, now being replaced with money from the sales of clothes, handicrafts and new cash crops such as coffee, lettuce, strawberries and other temperate fruits and vegetables.

The traditional agricultural base of the hill tribes is slash and burn farming. In February or March, an area of jungle is burned. The ashes from the trees provide fertilizer for the crop-rice, corn, chillies or other vegetables. Commonly two crops will be grown together, for example rice with corn. Crop rotation may be used, but after two or three seasons the cleared area must be abandoned for several years to recover its fertility. This system is sustainable with a low population density which allows the jungle enough time to regain nutrients before it is used again, but with the increase in population the pressure is too great, fields are returned to prematurely, soils are being exhausted and the decreasing forest cover is leading to soil erosion and perhaps permanent climatic change.