

Hilltribe Healers of North Thailand

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The hilltribes of Thailand migrated from southern China, Laos and Burma. From the mix of these diverse hilltribe peoples emerged a communal culture. This uniqueness was, and continues to be, expressed in their cuisine, crafts, folk and traditional hilltribe healer practices.

There are over 3000 hilltribe villages in the North. Common to all hilltribes is a belief in a spirit cause of illness which must be rectified before traditional healing. The hilltribes combine medicinal, ceremonial and ritual treatments; practices which have been conscientiously preserved over many centuries.

Lahu Hilltribes

Lahu believe in worldly spirits called "Ne" and an inner soul which they call "Aw Ha". For health and survival, they appeal to two deities; a supreme one they call "G'ui Sha", who created the heavens, and his wife, "Ai Ma" (great mother), who created the earth. Their roots go back to the mountains of southwest China.

As their hilltribe ancestors have for generations, they cultivate the surrounding jungle to sustain the growth of wild herbs for their traditional healing remedies. Lahu men are enthusiastic hunters and it is not uncommon to see them carrying crossbows and handmade guns. There are no clans among Lahu, thus no surnames.

Lisu Hilltribes

Carrying their beliefs from their ancestral homeland in Tibet, this hilltribe now lives in Thailand, Myanmar and the mountain region of southern China.

Traditionally, there are 4 categories of spirits which the Lisu hilltribe call "ne": ancestral spirits, forest spirits, owner spirits, and bad death spirits. The latter are believed to be very dangerous; hungry souls of dead people who have not yet passed over into the spirit world.

In the Lisu view the most powerful spirit is "Wu Sa" or the Creator. He looks after the living and determines each person's lifespan. They appeal to "Ida Ma" (the Great One) for healing. Above every hilltribe village there is a shrine for worshipping "Apa mu" (their guardian spirit) who is powerful and greatly feared. Communal worship at this alter helps bind the village together.

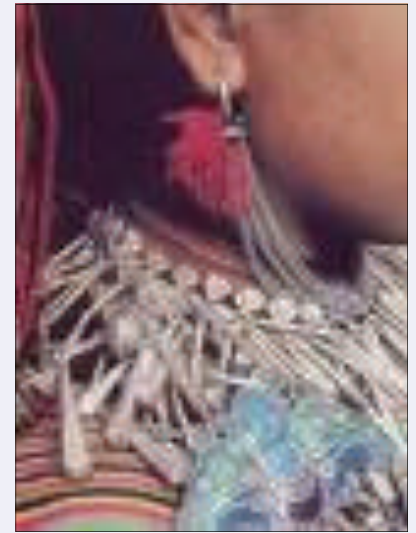


Lahu man in traditional dress.

No house in the village may be built in front of another one. This would obstruct the unseen "spirit path" that goes through the door to this alter.

Within each Lisu hilltribe home is an ancestral alter where resident ancestral spirits are fed offerings daily and invoked, during special ceremonies, to bless the household with good health and bountiful crops.

Lisu believe in exorcism and possession. There are two "beings" who can take possession of a person: weretigers, which they call "phi pheu" and vampires, called "phu seu". According to Lisu hilltribe belief, many of the illnesses they experience are caused by black magic called "tai". Specifically, it is an object that is "magically" implanted in the body of the afflicted person by another person. This object must then be sucked out by the shaman before a cure can happen.



Jewelry detail, Lisu woman



Karen Hilltribes

While their faith has a strong element of Buddhism, like other animists the Karen hilltribes believe that spirits reside in all matter; in streams, mountains, animals, etc. They strive for harmony in their lives by appealing to these spirits.

The most powerful ancestral spirit, Bga, is a daily focus of offerings and entreaties. They believe that each person has 6 "life force" souls housed in the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, mind and body. Divination with chicken bones, feathers, eggs or counting grains of rice are used to determine the spirit cause of illness. Only then can a cure be implemented.

Many are protecting their cultural traditions, however, they are concerned with the increasing disappearance of the jungle and the wild plants that are used in traditional medicine. The hilltribe village Mor Ya (herbalist) must now travel for days to find some plant materials, for remedies, that used to be close at hand.

Hmong Hilltribes

It is speculated that these hilltribes entered China via the high steppes of Tibet, Siberia and Mongolia some three thousand years ago.

The Hmong hilltribe inhabit a world full of spirits including household spirits for protection against physical calamities and ancestral spirits to safeguard against outside evil spirits.

Traditionally, they perform numerous and varied ritual ceremonies as a part of traditional medicine. One example is the baby naming ceremony where a silver neck ring is fixed around the baby's neck to keep the soul in.

The Hmong midwives are famous amongst the hilltribes for their dexterity in turning the baby around while still in the womb, for easier birthing.

The hilltribe Shaman is called to determine cause of illness. After he returns from a trance state, he uses divining rods to determine appropriate treatment. If he decides that a revengeful spirit has been offended, then the soul (which has been stolen) must be enticed back with a "bridging ceremony", involving the whole village.



Traditional Hmong weaving

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