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LOVELY ANIMALS YOU
SHOULD NOT KEEP AS PETS
LANGUISHING LANGUAGES
HERITAGE SITES & CULTURES OF ASIA
EARTH'S NATURAL GEMS

TREASURES of ASIA



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PHOTO © VICTORIA VORREITER

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High in the mountains of the Golden Triangle where boundaries of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos coincide lives a rich multiplicity of traditional peoples who have maintained their independence and ancestral identity to a high degree. Each group represents an extraordinary world – unique in history, language, features, beliefs, and culture. May such intangible heritage be kept alive as a testament to the diversity of mankind.

BY VICTORIA VORREITER

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76 Koh-i-Noor: A Biography of the World's Most Famous Diamond

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ERRATUM

We had erroneously printed the wrong visuals on page 26 of Issue 135. The section on "country with the highest smartphone penetration rate in 2018" should show the flags of South Korea and Sweden instead.

ON THE COVER

A young Peu Sau Akha girl from Phongsali, Laos

PHOTO © VICTORIA VORREITER

ABOVE

Hill tribe villagers in Thailand riding on elephants



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HILL TRIBES

A Trove of Cultural Treasures in the Golden Triangle

High in the mountains of the Golden Triangle where boundaries of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos coincide lives a rich multiplicity of traditional peoples who have maintained their independence and ancestral identity to a high degree. Each group represents an extraordinary world – unique in history, language, features, beliefs, and culture. May such intangible heritage be kept alive as a testament to the diversity of mankind.

Text and Photographs by Victoria Vorreiter

MAIN
A Hmong Man crosses
the Mae Tha River in
Luang Nam Tha, Laos



ABOVE: A Lahu Shi woman returns home from her garden in Keng Tung, Myanmar

The Golden Triangle, an evocative name for the vast expanse where Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos converge, sweeps through the foothills of the Himalayas. Before our Earth was delineated by national boundaries, this wild tract of rugged, often impenetrable mountains, dense forests, and fertile river valleys was the setting for a cultural and historical crossroads. For thousands of years, some of the world's oldest civilisations settled here, migrating from the highlands of China and Tibet, wandering the network of trade routes that connect India and Mongolia, and travelling along the great rivers of Asia. With such movement and interchange, the Golden Triangle is now home to an astonishing number and variety of peoples, who continue to maintain their ancestral heritage and identity to a high degree. Over 130 different groups and subgroups are scattered throughout the hills, many living in secluded, inaccessible villages. Each of these communities represents a unique world, revealing distinctive physical features, language, customs, cosmology, tenets of faith, dress, arts, stories, and music. Indeed, this area remains one of the most culturally rich places on the planet.

Prominent among this multiplicity are the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, and Karen. These six distinct peoples originally established settlements that prospered in the lower reaches of the Yellow River before 2000 BC. Over the centuries they migrated further into southwest and south central China, moving on different courses from one mountaintop to another in seven-year cycles in search of harvestable terrain, according to slash-and-burn farming techniques.

The Akha, Lahu, and Lisu, who share the same linguistic origins, gradually travelled south along the Nujiang and Lancang Rivers, settling in Yunnan. The Hmong and Mien, who can be traced to a common root language, followed parallel tracks along the Yangtze and Pearl Rivers flowing east to reside in northeast China, before continuing on to Guangxi, Guizhou, Fujian, and Yunnan Provinces. The Karen moved from the Tibetan Plateau through Yunnan, finally descending the Irrawaddy, Sittang, and Salween Rivers, where they settled and thrived.

Yet each of these major groups continued their southerly migrations, eventually fanning throughout the mountains of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Their individual trajectories and experiences created such diversity within a single group that numerous subgroups, now so removed from their common source, evolved. It is then possible for two branches to have lived in such isolation that over time their dialects are incomprehensible to one another and new societal practices emerged. Such cultural transformation and diversity has only added to the remarkable profusion of folk arts, oral traditions, and musical practices found in Southeast Asia.

Traditional Lifestyle

Preferring to live at high altitudes, tribal communities build their villages on the tops or steep slopes of mountains that are marked by deep valleys and a good source of water. They live as subsistence dry-field farmers, cultivating rice and corn, along with numerous smaller crops. Traditionally, all groups supplement their diet by raising livestock and by fishing and hunting, employing crossbow and arrows, slingshots, traps, and, more recently, flintlocks.

Family structures vary among the different groups, depending on the doctrines of

“Whatever the specifics of the family unit and social organisation, all traditional groups of the Golden Triangle observe the principle of collectivism, rather than individualism.”

the first ancestors. The households of the Hmong, Mien, and Akha are composed of multigenerational extended families related by descent and marriage, which are overseen by a senior male. The Karen, Lahu, and Lisu, however, live in nuclear families that value self-sufficiency and work autonomously. Kinship, for the most part, is traced through paternal lines, though the Karen follow the female bloodline and the Lahu are traced bilaterally, with equal emphasis on both paternal and maternal lines.

Societies, too, find order for social, political, economic, and religious interactions through different structures. For some, like the Hmong and Lisu, organisation is based on clan affiliations, allowing connections within a single village and interconnections throughout a network of villages. Other groups depend on the leadership of a headman, spiritual leaders, or a council of male elders, who are responsible for the welfare and ceremonial life of the whole.

Whatever the specifics of the family unit and social organisation, all traditional groups of the Golden Triangle observe the principle of collectivism, rather than individualism. This practice emphasises the interdependence of every human being with family members, fellow villagers, revered ancestors, and unseen deities.

Spiritual Beliefs

To fully appreciate the culture of the highlanders, it is essential to understand their

TOP LEFT
Lahu Shi village, Keng Tung, Myanmar

BOTTOM LEFT
S'gaw Karen mahouts return home in Tak Province, Thailand

RIGHT
A Nuqui Akha woman collects water in Phongsalai Province, Laos



“For these self-sustaining peoples who depend on the environment for their livelihood, paying proper respect to Nature and ancestor spirits becomes crucially important.”

deep-seated worldview, for religious canon so profoundly influences their personal and communal lives. As agrarian peoples highly attuned to the cycles of seasons and the wheel of life, the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, and Karen have each created a complex, all-encompassing belief system rooted in Nature, which sustains every aspect of their existence. Man, the environment, the universe, and the spirit world are inextricably intertwined. Universal laws that govern character, ethical conduct, and social institutions also direct seasonal events, harvest practices, and ritual protocol.

These groups, like all first peoples throughout time and place, have established a belief system based on animism, where everything in the natural world is choreographed, is “animated,” by an infinite number of supernatural beings. Every entity in the universe has a soul. Spirits embody natural elements – the rivers, forests, mountains, wind, and sky. They inhabit the home, animal compound, village, and fields. Spirits even reside in special objects, such as musical instruments, household tools, and shamanic paraphernalia. The spirits of ancestors are dynamic, ever-present, and all-important entities, guiding and guarding every household. Each person has multiple souls that dwell in the body to maintain well-being. All ethnic groups of Southeast Asia have developed an intricate web of deities, ancestors, souls, and spirits who shape their world and with whom they interact on a daily basis.

Yet animism is not a single ideology. It takes as many forms as there are ethnic groups. Though they inhabit the same territory, the Karen, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, and Mien have each developed a unique, integrated philosophy of the universe that reflects their own history, customs, beliefs, and dreams. The Lahu, for instance, are distinct from

other highland groups as they practice a form of theistic animism, honoring a single supreme deity, G’ui Sha, who oversees the human and spirit worlds. The Mien have devised a unique cosmology fusing Nature spirits with a pantheon of celestial beings, by integrating their earliest belief in animism with a 10th-century form of Taoism, a practice they adopted from the Chinese during close contact over millennia.

For these self-sustaining peoples who depend on the environment for their livelihood, paying proper respect to nature and ancestor spirits becomes crucially important. Frequent rituals, ceremonies, and festivals lasting many days are performed throughout the year in order to maintain the good relations that ensure health, plentiful crops, peace, and prosperity. As rice is the primary source of food, the Akha celebrate each of the nine phases of rice harvest with major rites. Only with the help of supernatural forces can the Lahu hunt well, the Lisu raise healthy children, and the Hmong escort their dead to the afterlife.

These sacred ceremonies are composed of a mosaic of intricate, intertwining parts that mix the functional with the fantastical in order to venerate the benevolent spirits that protect and to vanquish the malevolent ones that harm. A hierarchy of shamans, priests, ritual intermediaries, and acolytes, trained in ancestral mysteries by mortal and immortal mentors, oversees the rites that keep the universe in balance. Their means of communication is through melody and rhythm, for music is the language of the gods.

Traditional Arts

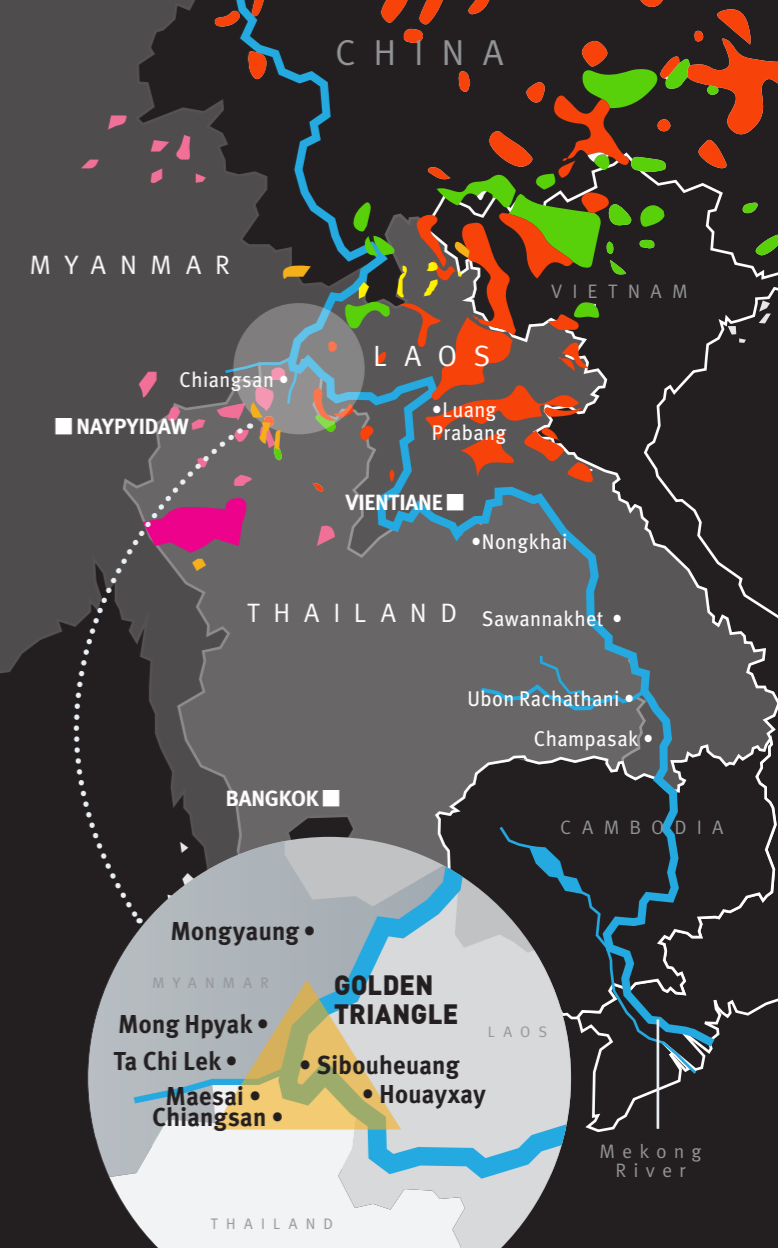
Traditional folk arts – clothing, textiles, jewelry, basketry, tools, totems, houses, and religious structures – are specifically crafted with tried-and-true practices, honed by thousands of years of ancestor knowledge, to protect, support, and enhance the people who use them. Yet these material objects also serve as important vessels for transmitting identity from generation to generation, for they are designed with the unique motifs, styles and techniques that reveal the history, myths, culture, and character of an entire race of people.

Take, for example, the skilled Akha craftsmen who work with rattan and bamboo



OPPOSITE PAGE TOP
Three generations of a Nuqui Akha family in Phongsali, Laos

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM
Sha Sha Lisu celebrate the New Year in Yunnan, China



- 01. A Akha Nuqui courting couple in Phongsali, Laos
- 02. Lahu Shi couple and grandson in Keng Tung, Myanmar
- 03. Lo Shi Lisu children in Chiang Rai, Thailand
- 04. A White Hmong grandmother and child in Lunag Nam Tha, Laos
- 05. Lu Mien bride and groom in Phayao, Thailand
- 06. A Pwo Karen couple in Mae Hong Son, Thailand

TRIBE DISTRIBUTION

Legend:

- Akha Nuqui
- Lahu Shi
- Lo Shi Lisu
- Hmong
- Mien
- Karen Pwo

01	02	03
04	05	06



to create a variety of baskets for specific purposes—small seed baskets tied to the belt for planting, woven sheaths to carry hunting knives, sturdy baskets slung on the back by arm straps, tumpline, or yoke to transport heavy produce or wood, or large baskets with covers to store produce. Each basket requires specific techniques that match their function.

Blacksmiths are called on for their fine abilities in forging iron tools to work the land and shamanic ritual implements to perform healing rites. Of great importance, master smiths also design the ornate silver jewellery worn by every villager for significant events in the cycles of life. Nowhere is this more apparent than during the Lisu New Year festival, when men, women, and children embellish their attire with dazzling displays of shimmering silver – engraved neck rings, chains, grooming tools, pendants of varied shapes and sizes; bracelets, earrings, hair pins, and belts of jangling coins. Silver jewellery not only demonstrates beauty, wealth, seduction, and identity, it also serves a sacred purpose, for it is believed that this precious metal has the magical, restorative power to dispel evil and attract prosperity.

Women throughout the mountains are renowned for their consummate needlework skills, learned from their mothers and grandmothers and developed over countless hours, beginning in youth and lasting as long as the eyes can see and the fingers are nimble. Following in the footsteps of their forebears, they carry out all aspects of fabricating garments to clothe their family and themselves – from planting the seeds; ginning, carding, separating, rolling, spinning, winding, and weaving the threads; to dyeing, cutting, piecing, and sewing the cloth. As the final step, women embroider their attire with vibrant bursts of multicoloured, stylised and geometric patterns, which spring from a vast reservoir of ancestral symbols special to their heritage that reflect the natural world and meaningful lore.

It is notable that Hmong women in certain subgroups further embellish their skirts and baby carriers with a kaleidoscope of intricate indigo patterns using batik, an age-old “resist” technique, whereby designs are created on fabric by applying wax to prevent dye from penetrating the cloth. To every activity in this time- and effort-intensive process, there is a

season. Thus, as one skirt may take up to a year to produce, from seed to finished attire, the labour is mindful and the garment is dearly treasured.

All of the traditional arts crafted by the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, and Karen are unique to their culture. Even within the same group, no two pieces are ever the same. Yet though these material objects can be handed down, the mastery in creating them is more ephemeral. Such knowledge slips into the domain of oral tradition, intangible and fleeting, if it is not practised and preserved.

Oral Tradition

For the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, and Karen, who have no legacy of reading and writing, oral tradition provides the single most direct link connecting the first ancestors with all who follow. For thousands of years, stories, myths, poems, songs, instrumental music, and ceremonies have been passed down in an unbroken chain from mother to daughter, father to son, shaman to apprentice. In this way, oral tradition has served as a living archive that safeguards collective memory – accumulated knowledge of history, life lessons, codes of ethics, spiritual beliefs, methods of sustenance, and cultural practices.

Yet of all these oral channels, music is without doubt the most powerful because of its special qualities, for sound is unique in all the range of perception. With no physical form, music is invisible, intangible, abstract. Melody and rhythm must enter into us to be perceived, seeping into the unconscious where they instantly transform each person in mysterious and individual ways. Tone and pulse also have the extraordinary ability to be felt physically when vibrations beat on the body as sound waves. It is not surprising that music is so intimately connected to emotional life, sacred experience, and healing.

Incantations, chants, songs, vocal calls, and instrumental music form a vast repertory of sounds that has evolved over time to enliven, to “bring to life,” ceremonial events, propelling the participants through the hours and days it takes to satisfactorily appease the spirits. For the peoples of the mountains, music is not merely an accompaniment to such occasions, nor is it recreation or entertainment. Rather,



OPPOSITE PAGE TOP
Hmong boys celebrate the New Year in Phongsali Province, Laos

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM
A lu Mien priest summons Taoist deities in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand

“It is said that if one generation fails to transmit its life lessons to the next, millennia of accumulated knowledge may vanish in a few decades. If we lose these, we also lose a part of the richness of humanity.”

music is a revered medium that leads to attainment. In traditional cultures, where transformation of human consciousness is regarded as holy and worth seeking, music is performed as the very essence of their lives.

Music is never static. The repetitive beats, deep and thudding, sounded by Lahu drummers is instantly able to harmonise the disparate energies of all villagers, young and old, during harvest festival dancing. Hypnotic verses chanted in a never-ending loop for hours or days by an Akha funeral specialist unfold in a continuum of time and space that echoes the eternal circular passages of Nature – sun, moon, and seasons. The pulsing soundscape created by a Hmong shaman, as she shakes clamouring metallic rattles while travelling through the spirit world on a winged horse, puts fear into the evil spirits who have captured a patient’s soul. Music is ever-present and integral in the lives of traditional peoples due to its mighty influence and mystery.

These highly organised, intricately ordered, meticulously observed rites fulfil a sacred role that is engrained in people’s consciousness and essential to their worldview. If they are not conducted properly to satisfy the spirits, imbalance in the human world may follow. Thus an all-night Karen healing ceremony, a three-day Mien wedding, and a Lisu courting ritual of many weeks have great significance beyond the function of a patient’s treatment, a couple’s union, and finding a mate. No performance is taken lightly.

The keepers of the bardic tradition – the master musicians, spiritual intermediaries, village and clan leaders, matriarchs and patriarchs – use their rich trove of songs, legends, and rites to connect people with

something greater than themselves. Music, when supported by ritual and formality, anchors members of a community to their life source. It reunites them with their ancestors and aligns them with their deities. Music fosters a sense of communal harmony by instilling identity and belonging. Songs are the chronicles and oracles of traditional ways of life.

Vanishing Echoes

The ancestral arts and oral traditions that express a people’s worldview are the outcome of sustained collective devotion, creativity, and effort. These practices are robust in the way they have survived for millennia, but are also deeply fragile, for unlike monuments or places in Nature, oral culture remains an intangible legacy.

In animistic societies like the Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong, Mien and Karen that are rooted in songs and the spoken word, no written record of their beliefs exists. Rather, they are imprinted in the memories of those who continue to live them. Regrettably, the traditions that harmonise their inner and outer lives are vanishing as wise elders pass away and young generations forego the ways of their ancestors as they adapt to an ever-changing, connected modern world.

It is said that if one generation fails to transmit its life lessons to the next, millennia of accumulated knowledge may vanish in a few decades. If we lose these, we also lose a part of the richness of humanity. It is imperative for us to preserve age-old traditions before they disappear to keep alive the extraordinary cultural wisdom and diversity of our human race. ♦ AG

Victoria Vorreiter is a researcher, photographer, and musician living in Chiang Mai, Thailand, who has spent over a decade documenting the little-known traditional music, ceremonies and culture of the mountain peoples of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and China. Her work has manifested in a variety of complementary forms as the *Songs of Memory* project – the *Songs of Memory* book and compact disc, *Hmong Songs of Memory* book and film, photo exhibitions, presentations and multimedia exhibitions that include comprehensive collections of musical instruments, textiles, artefacts, photographs and ethnographic films. To learn more, please visit www.TribalMusicAsia.com.



OPPOSITE PAGE

Top Left
A S’gaw Karen woman in her garden in Tak, Thailand

Top Right
A Blue Hmong Woman celebrates the New Year in Chiang Rai, Thailand

Bottom Left
A Blue Hmong woman draped in silver in Chiang Rai, Thailand

Bottom Right
A White Hmong seamstress sews “flower cloth” panels in Chiang Rai, Thailand