

# Thailand

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## Profile of Thailand

Thai people have always firmly defended their independence over centuries, and have great pride in their monarchy, and their king in particular.

The Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand border Thailand to the south, Myanmar and Laos to the north, and Cambodia to the west.

In terms of ethnic minorities, Thailand's north-eastern borders have witnessed a continuous flow of ethnic minorities, mostly Karen Padaung fleeing the Burmese regime's oppression and years of fighting. Most of these Padaung are kept in refugee 'villages', some of them such as Mae Song, transformed in tourist attractions.

Thailand has been criticised for being so slow in granting Thai nationality to many refugees, while earning derived income from the tourism trade on their back. However, some efforts have been launched in the naturalisation process, and in late 2005, a group of Karen Padaung was finally granted Thai nationality.

In view of the intensifying fights between the Burmese junta and Karen fighters, and the ensuing flow of refugees into Thailand, then Thai caretaker PM, Thaksin Shinawatra, along with his summoned cabinet, visited Burma on August 3, 2006 to officially encourage the release of Aung Sang Suu Kyi, the opposition leader, from the house arrest under which she had been placed for most of the past eleven years.

However, this hastily arranged visit was hastily criticised by the national Thai press as a personal PR stunt for the PM, and no concrete diplomatic measure was taken by the Junta as a result.

Thailand has been further troubled by internal turmoil with religious tensions in the South and corrupted politics at its core.

# Ethnic Groups in Thailand

## The Akha

### Introduction

The Thai name for the group is *Kaw* or *I Kaw* (*I* is a depreciative Thai word, and *Kaw* means slave in Lao language). Not a very pleasant name after all!

Most of the Akha based in Thailand speak *Jeu G'oe* (a dialect).

Although the Akha are originally from Yunnan, Akha people in Thailand came from Burma (now called Myanmar) in the last century.

Their immigration into Thailand increased after the Second World War, and dramatically accelerated between the Sixties and Nineties.

Nowadays, more than 30,000 Akha people live in Thailand, mostly in the Chiang Rai Province.

### The Origins of the Akha and their Language

The Akha language is part of the Yi (Lolo) branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. This group has no written language and only the Christian community is literate.

The Akha are originally from Yunnan, a southern province of China rich in ethnic diversity.



The Akha as a whole are divided into several sub-groups such as the Ulo, Pamee, Loimi, who slightly differ from each other in customs, dialects and attires.

However, their common denomination is their observance of the Akha Way.

## The Akha Way

Akhas are concerned with the legacy of their ancestors and carrying on their great tradition: The Akha Way.

The Akha compensate for their lack of written history with storytelling. Legends, proverbs and rituals are passed down from one generation to the next. Every Akha's sense of lineage and belonging is cemented by their capacity to recall their full genealogy in the male line back to 'the beginning'.

According to the Akha, *Apoe Miyeh* -an almighty being, brought *M Ma* -the Earth- and *M G'ah* -the Sky- to life. Nine powerful 'spirits' came from *M G'ah*: *G'ah Ne*, *Ne Zaw*, *Zaw Zeu*, *Zeu To*, *To Ma*, *Ma Yaw*, *Yaw Neh*, *Neh Beh*, and *Beh Sem*.

The first human being was the son of *Beh Sm*: *Sm Mi O*, the ancestor of all Akha people.

The Akha can recite the names of *Sm Mi O*'s descendants -their direct ancestors- through all generations to *Dzoe Tah Pah*, the great father of all Akhas.

This will to keep their ancestry alive is also shown in the way Akha attribute the first part of their child name to their ancestor, i.e. *Beh Sm*'s child is called *Sm Mi O*.

Akha always call on their full genealogy during special ceremonies such as burial, marriage [to prevent interbreeding], etc. and rely on the power of their ancestors to protect them against evil spirits.

They hope their descendants will take care of them with ancestral offerings like they do with theirs.

Offerings are placed on the *apoe pawlaw*, an ancestral altar located in every house on the women 'side. They are mainly performed at New Year, when planting; the village swing ceremony and harvest or timings of crisis.

## The Akha Village

### The Village

The Akha rely on their elders, and particularly their religious leader, *dzoema*, to decide on the emplacement of their villages. Most villages are built on villages' slopes.

Practical factors such as the proximity of drinking water source and cultivable lands are only part of the selection process.



Ceremonies such as that of the 'raw egg' will be performed to ensure that the *Lord of the Places*, i.e. the spirits of the place, accepts the newcomers.

*Dzoema* will drop an egg at ear-level onto a hole on the ground. If the egg breaks, then the settlers are welcome and the first house to be built will be the *Dzoema*'s. The villagers' houses will be built around it.

A silent hierarchy regiments houses emplacement: the houses further down the slopes and on the outer rings of the village belong to "rejects", families with twins or deformed newborns.

A typical village will more or less count 40 houses.

### **The Village Houses**

Akha houses are traditionally made of wood (foundations), bamboo (house structure, walls and floor) and imperata grass (roofing).

Because of the village location on hill slopes, roofing must be changed every four to five years to preserve its protective quality.

Houses are usually built on posts or with the upper side resting on the ground and the downhill side on posts and have no windows. The uphill side of the house is where the family works and lives, whereas the downhill side, sheltered from the outside, is an area of rest and sleep.

The pigs and other domesticated animals can take shelter under the elevated house flooring.



Akha houses are divided in two sections: the men's, and the women's and children's. Each section has its own fireplace: the one in the men's section is for tea and meat, whereas the one in the women' section is reserved for rice and vegetable cooking. There is often a third fireplace in the women's section where pig's meat is cooked.

The ancestral altar is also hung on the women 'side and is a central element of Akha houses.

On offerings' days, food and drink will be placed in front of the altar to invite the ancestors and then be shared by the household members, who must abstain from any activities or intercourse during that period.

### **The Village Leaders**

The top figure in an Akha village is the *dzoema* or village priest.

The elders choose a man of purity, i.e. someone who has not behaved contrarily to the Akha way and is not related to any "rejects".

The *dzoema* is responsible for the village sacred sites and ensuring that villagers follow the Akha Way. He takes decisions in accordance with the ancestors and village elders, which all villagers must comply with.

The blacksmith, *ba ji* , is second in importance in the village. His role is mainly ceremonial (he is the forger of the sacred knife) as villagers no longer depend on him for tools as they used to.



Spirit specialists are also prominent figures: the *pi ma* (always male) who plays the role of a spirit priest and the *nya pa* or shaman (male or female), who acts as a healer. Villagers consult them in times of crisis to communicate with the spirits and turn them in their favour.

Although the village authority lies with the *dzoema*, the Akha village also rely on a secular headman called *bu she* for matters related to external affairs and outsiders in general. For instance, if during a trek, you come across an Akha village, you should always ask for the *bu she* for permission to stay.

Finally, the term 'elders' refer to the head of every household in the village. The Akha's respect for their elders is deep rooted.

The *dzoema* himself will consult the elders before taking decisions or when performing ceremonies.

### **The Village Gates, the Swing and Courting Ground**

To enter an Akha village, the outsider walks through its *law kah*, or village gates.

The entrance gates' purpose is to protect the villagers from the spirits (*neh*) and the outside world.

Akha's belief in spirits is grounded in the myth according to which, following a growing enmity between humans and spirits, they separated and as humans went to live in villages, spirits settled in the jungle. The gates are thus erected at both ends of an Akha village to protect the villagers from wild animals, diseases, mythical beasts and all other

evils.

Each year, *dzoema*, the village priest leads a ceremony during which the young men cut out posts from wood and plant the new gates topped by a crossbar beyond the previous gates. The gates are adorned with charms, symbols of wealth, and bamboo taboo signs.

A male and female wooden figures with prominent genitalia are always placed by the main gate, the male being on the upper side (Akha believe that no man should live under a woman).

As *law kah* are sacred, no one should touch or profane them in any way. Any villager or outsider defying this interdiction must pay a fine, often a sacrificial pig, decided by the village elders.

Each year, in August or early September, the Akha celebrate the Swing Festival.

Men destroy the previous year's swing and erect the new one from tying four wooden posts together and suspend a vine through which a plank of wood, acting as a seat, is inserted. Everyone swings, but the women are first, all dressed in ceremonial clothes.

The Swing Festival is the time when young girls come out in their self-made adult attire, and a way for prospective couples to meet. After four days of partying, eating and drinking (no work is allowed during the Festival), the Swing will be left untouched, just as the Gates, until the next year when a new Swing will be erected.

The *dehaw*, translated as courting or dancing ground, is an open place surrounded by benches where young people meet in the evening to talk, flirt, and generally enjoy themselves.

Akha are not against sex before marriage, and on the contrary believe that it is part of the maturation and experimentation of youth. However, if a young woman becomes pregnant, the village leaders will expect her to marry.

### **The Akha Dress**

The Akha have a very distinctive outfit, and unlike other ethnic groups, most women keep wearing their traditional outfits, or at least their headdress, in their daily lives. Indeed, the most distinctive feature of an Akha woman's attire is her headdress. Although the dress

style is determined by the clan's affiliations, each Akha woman's headdress is unique and the result of many hours' work.

Akha learn to spin from the age of six and become highly skilled at weaving threads.

The basic attire of an Akha woman consists of a headdress, a single-strap wrap to cover the top of the body, a long-sleeve waist-length jacket, and a knee-length skirt pleated at the back and worn low on the hips. An embedded sash whose ends hang in front of the skirt adorns their waists, and 'leggings' open at the calf cover their calves.

The jacket, 'leggings' and sash are embroidered and adorned with colourful beads, seeds, shells and silver coins (actually Indian rupees).

Girls wear a skirt, jacket and cap instead of a headdress. As they mature into women, they will progressively take on the adult attire.



A woman's attire also reflects her social status: if a woman's headdress shows no silver coins on the front, she is a widower; if the woman carries small gourds on her headdress or at the waist, she is not yet married.

An Akha man's outfit is not as striking as a woman's but nonetheless specific to their clans.

The traditional Akha man attire includes loose trousers, a jacket and a flat turban.

Here again, a boy is differentiated from a man by his hat wear: a boy will not wear a turban but a cap.



## **The Hmong**

### **Introduction**

The Thai name for the group is Maeo or Mong (Miao, Meo).

Most of the Hmong who settled in Thailand belong to two sub-groups: the Hmong Njua (literally "Green Hmong" but widely translated as Blue Hmong) and the Hmong Deaw ("White Hmong").

Although their respective dialects are very different, Blue and White Hmong seem to understand each other.

Although the Hmong have originally settled in China for thousands of years, they immigrated to Thailand via Laos by the end of the nineteenth century.

Their immigration into Thailand was driven by their refusal to submit to the Chinese nationalist movement and preserve their independence and culture.

Nowadays, more than 80,000 Hmongs live in Thailand, mostly in Tak, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Nan provinces. They can also be found in the central provinces of Thailand.

### **The Hmong Origins and Language**

The Hmong language is part of the Miao-Yao branch of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Lots of its vocabulary is borrowed from Yunnanese, Laotian or Thai.

The Hmong are thought to have originated from Tibet, Siberia and Mongolia but their origins can only be traced to China where they settled for thousands of years.

In order to preserve their independence, the Hmong actively fought the Han Chinese's attempt at crushing their language and culture throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

However, increasing pressure from the Chinese authorities and the lure of opium cultivating to the south drove the first major wave of Hmong into Laos in the nineteenth century.

## **The Hmong Village**

### **Structure and Settlement**

The Hmong are grouped by clans. Each clan is characterized by a patrilineal name, its traditions and taboos.

Hmong prefer to have several clans living in a large village to ensure a wider choice of marriage partners for their sons, add security and extra pair of hands for helping one another.

The clan of the founding families of the village tends to dominate the rest of the village.

Although they highly respect the Mien, with whom they share Yunnanese history, Hmong tend to live separately from other ethnic groups; the spirit of independence prevails in their culture.

The Hmong originally opted for establishing their villages at high altitudes.

Since the drive of NGOs and authorities to discourage minorities from poppy cultivation, many clans settled in lower grounds and opted for rice production and cash crops such as soy beans and coffee instead.

The most respected elder of the clan is responsible for finding a prospective village site. The abundance of cultivable land and the availability of a proper burial ground are of most concern in their choice of settlement.

A Hmong village usually consists of clusters of houses (six to eight houses per cluster) built around the most influential figure of the village.





No gates or fence surround a typical Hmong village. Instead, *choj* , ceremonial 'bridges', built for recalling wandering souls, are often seen on a path outside the village.

Hmongs will move their village if for instance, the surrounding lands are exhausted, a conflict erupted with outsiders, a shaman predicted evil in the present location or if there are not enough eligible females for their sons to marry nearby.

The move follows a particular pattern. First, a group of four or five families settles in the new location in temporary shelters, mark out the fields and plant crops for them and the families stayed behind. These advance settlers are in turn granted first choice for their lands and brides for their sons, and will also benefit from the other villagers help with food while waiting for the first harvest.

After harvesting, the rest of the village joins the advance settlers to their new village ground.

The clan of the founding families of the village tends to dominate the rest of the village.

Each clan has it own customs and taboos.

### **The Village Houses and Households**

Hmongs always ensure that ancestors accept their house location. To this extent, the family seek advice from their ancestors by way of a paper money offering. If no bad sign follows the offering, it means that the site is accepted and the family can gather construction material for the house.

All houses face downhill.

The typical house has an earth floor and is made up of a large room, the kitchen and living area, at the centre of which lies the fireplace.

The sleeping areas, one for the children and one for the parents, are demarcated from the main room with bamboo mats. Food, seeds and tools are kept in the attic above the kitchen area.



The Blue Hmong and White Hmong houses differ slightly: Blue Hmong have only one front door whereas the White Hmong also have a side door and only use the front door for ceremonies. The spirit altar is on the wall directly opposite the front door.

Once the house is built, the household head invite the ancestors and house spirits by the sacrifice of a rooster and hen. The family thereby asks for the spirits protection and good fortune. A wooden sword is also hung over the entrance to chase evil spirits.

The household is made of an extended family living under the authority of a patriarch. Traditionally, married men continue to live in their fathers' home and only move out after their fathers' death or to avoid a rift among members of the household.

Hmong respect for age is deeply rooted, and practised at all levels of the clan. The father-son relationship is central (See following section) .

## **Ceremonies Around Births, Marriages and Burials**

### **Births**

When babies are born, their placenta is buried under the family house.

Hmong believe that each baby belongs to the spirits who sent it for the first three days of

its life, and if it dies within this time, no burial is held.

Only after the three days' period, the baby is named and placed under the protection of the house spirits.

### **Marriages**

A Hmong man must marry outside his own clan and with a woman of the same generation. However, Hmongs allow marriage between cross cousins in order to perpetuate the blood connection with the clan.



Most Hmong marry around 17.

Hmong men value a beautiful, hard-working, fertile and intelligent bride, whereas a bride first looks at her future husband's wealth, strength and family background.

The prime courting time for the Hmong is the New Year Festival, when youth dressed in their finest clothes assemble to play 'catch'. Boys line up facing girls and each girl throws the cloth ball she made to the boy she fancies. Then, prospective partners gradually pair off.

The boy's father and the girl's must agree on the choice of their future spouse. Once agreed, the young man can take his future bride to live with him in the house.

The boy's family has to pay a bride price and also the wedding festivities. The boy and the girl's father will decide upon a wedding date.

The bride price has to be paid on the wedding day, which may take place a few days after the bride has moved in, or whenever the groom's family can afford it: it may take up to a few years before the wedding is finalized.

If the boy's father cannot afford the bride price, the bride and groom will stay with the girl's father to work for him, thus reducing the price to be paid.

Marriage can bring sadness for a young girl who is marrying away from her village, as while she "gains" a husband, she must leave the clan to which she was attached all her life.

Hmong accept polygamist marriages, but the man's first wife must agree for him to take a new wife/new wives.

## **Burials**

As they grow older, Hmong elderly prepare for their journey into the after world by preparing their funerary clothes.

The importance of the father-son relationship takes precedence in the funeral ceremony. Indeed, a father's happiness in the afterlife depends on the lavishness of the funerals paid by his sons and witnessed by all surviving members of the family.

If a deceased is in debts or poverty in the after world, his soul might come back to haunt the village.

Before the burial procession starts, a ceremony takes place to ask the souls of the living not to follow the dead one.

The burial is a complex ceremony: two men are in charge of the rites and allocate tasks. One of these men blows the *qeej*, the Hmong mouth organ, while the other beats the death drum.

Other men have to feed the dead person's body, and three shots are fired into the air each time feeding is performed.

Finally, and of most importance, someone is in charge of settling all the dead man's accounts to ensure the dead's happiness and prosperity in the afterlife.

The corpse is carried out of the house. Sacrificial oxen are killed as an offering for the ancestors and the dead soul. The burial procession finishes at the burial site, often on a mountain.

## **Hmong Attire**

Hmong women are highly skilled at needlework.

White Hmong and Blue Hmong women's clothes differ but these are the common clothing to both sub-groups: Women's attire consists of a knee-length pleated skirt (for daily use, White Hmong usually wear loose black trousers instead of the skirt), an apron and a long-sleeved waist-length jacket open and embroidered at the front and on the backcloth flap

attached at the level of the collar.

They traditionally wear their hair in a bun.



They also wear a headdress for special occasions such as New Year made of black and white chequered cloth folded up to form a peak at the front.

Hmong men wear loose ankle-length trousers, sashes to adorn the waist and long-sleeve jackets elaborately embroidered at the bottom and along the buttoned opening at the front.

All Blue Hmong men, and also the White Hmong men of the Chiang Mai region in Thailand, wear a black cap adorned with a red pompom.

Please note that beyond these common characteristics, Hmong clothing varies a lot between regions.

## **The Lu Mien**

### **Introduction**

The Thai called them Yao, and some believe the name to be a deformation of 'Lu Mien'.

In Thailand, this minority forms a uniform group with a common dialect, similar clothing and traditions.

Mien people first migrated to Thailand from Laos in the middle of the nineteenth century, and there are now around 40,000 of them in the Northern Thai Provinces.

## The Lu Mien Origins and Language

The Lu Mien language is called Yao, a part of the Miao-Yao branch of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. In Yao, Mien means 'people'.

The Mien are thought to have originated from Southern China, where we can find reference of them as *man*, 'barbarians'.

Although the greatest number of Lu Mien is still to be found in China, they are now present in the whole Sub-Mekong region (apart from Cambodia).



Their migration pattern is often studied in parallel to another group, the *She* , whose majority still lives in the south-eastern coastal part of China.

### Written Legacy

The Lu Mien are unique among ethnic groups for their written legacy.

Men use Chinese characters to keep track of their traditions and important family matters; and fathers -or teachers- passed down their knowledge of reading and writing Chinese to their sons.

The Mien also use Chinese characters to transcribe Yao.

Studying this language is therefore of prime concern for the Lu Mien.

*Thong so* , the 'book of days', is very important to the Mien, as future spouses consult it to ensure that by examining the months and years of their births, their marriage will be successful.

*Thong so* also gives a precise account of the location of the child-to-be born soul for each month of the year (see Birth section).

Other literature such as *ca fin tan*, the 'Ancestors Book', serves the purpose of preserving the ceremonial knowledge of the clan's ancestors.

One of the rarer documents, which can possibly be found in a Mien house, is *cia sen pawng*, or "Mien passport".

This passport contains a copy of an edict, which according to one version of the legend was issued by the emperor Pien Hung to reward the Mien and allowed them to migrate and cultivate on any mountainous regions.

*Cia sen pawng* also mentions the twelve Mien clans in Chinese characters, which according to one version of the legend were borne out of the union of the dragon dog, *Phan Hu*, and one of Pien Hung's daughter, or according to another are the survivors of a sea voyage.

## The lu Mien Village

### The Village House and Households

A lu Mien settlement cannot be located below that of another ethnic group, and each house's front door must be in direct line with the spirit shrine situated above the village.

Apart from these mere indications, the village location and structure do not follow a particular ritual, and unlike other ethnic groups', no ceremony is performed around building it. However, lu Mien consider the house as sacred and they are very careful not to offend the spirits when building it.

Each village house is built directly on the ground with materials from the nearby jungle (wood or bamboo for the walls, thatched grass or leaves for the roof).



Clear spatial division of men and women characterizes a lu Mien house.

There are two doors: the men's door opens on the guest area, whereas the women's door, at the other end of the house, directs to the kitchen.

This division reflects the privileged status that men enjoy in the household. Women are expected to serve their men and for instance food is served to men before women and children.

A third door called *top keng* or 'great door' has a ceremonial use only. Facing it is the ancestral altar, *mien pai*, built after the house to ensure the protection of the household ancestors and house spirits.

The area behind the altar is divided in bedrooms.

The number of bedrooms depends on the composition of the household: girls of marriage age have their own bedroom on the women's side to enable access to young suitable men.

A typical house also contains two stoves (one for the family, the other for pig's food) and a rice pounder, which Mien believe are inhabited by spirits.

As a consequence, Mien do not put their feet in the stove to put up a fire or turn their back on it to warm up. These beliefs should be kept in mind if you are a guest in a Mien house.

Each house shelters an extended family of up to 60 people: the husband and wife, unmarried children, and married son(s) and his (their) family (ies) live under one roof.

Individual families retain the income earned from selling crops, but the money derived from the animals goes back to the household head by tradition.

If tensions arise between nuclear family, then the household head will firmly invite one of his sons to start his own household by moving out.

## **Adoption**

Another characteristic specific to the Mien is the fact that they adopt children from other tribes and/or within their own ethnic group.



When adopting from the Lahu, Akha, Shan (Myanmar), Khamu, Lao or Thai, the Mien will pay-in-kind or with money. Sometimes, the child is given as a clearance of debt.

As a rule, Mien will never leave their children for adoption to non-Mien.

### **The Village Authority and Clanship**

Each village consists of up to two clans under the authority of a headman.

He is in charge of the village celebrations and conducts the elder meetings.

Villagers also rely on him for their protection.

Clanship is transmitted from father to son. Women keep their clan membership even when married.

### **Ceremonies Around Births and Marriages**

#### **Births**

Mien believe that until a child is born, its soul does not reside in the foetus but in different parts of the house, depending on the month of the year.

For instance, in the first and seven months, the soul lives in the house door, etc.

As a consequence, Mien observe many rituals for fear of a miscarriage. For instance, they will not enter the bedroom of a pregnant woman for fear of scaring the soul away.

If a girl gives birth outside of wedlock (see Marriage section), she will not do so in her bedroom but in a specially built shelter close to the house.

The baby birth is signalled on an auspicious day in the 'spirit register' so to inform the

spirits of the new arrival.

The mother stays close to the fire after giving birth and will only be given hot food. She will not perform heavy work or enter another house for the following 30 days. Until the baby and her are ritually cleansed, she will only be allowed to go out through an opening made in our bedroom wall.

The naming of children follows a Chinese system. On top of a childhood name and a 'short name', boys over the age of twelve also receive a ceremonial name.

The father chooses this name after consulting the ancestors.

The ceremonial name will only be used after the man's death, when the dead's children pray for him or perform offerings.

## **Marriages**

Mien accept sexual relationships outside marriage (hence the existence of girls' bedrooms) and it is not rare for a child to be born outside wedlock. Such a child belongs to the family of the bride and will increase the bride price to be paid for the wedding to take place.

Young Mien are free to marry the person of their choice but they must respect two conditions: marry outside their clan and consult the 'book of days' to ensure they have compatible birth dates.

Once the marriage is consented, a date is set for both the girl's and boy's families to discuss all wedding arrangements- from the number of guests, the material for the bride to make up the wedding outfits, to the bride price- all of which to be paid by the groom's family.

When both families agree, a written copy of the arrangements is signed and kept by both fathers.

A ceremony is then held to inform the ancestors of the girl's family that she is to marry (outside her clan) and the couple is free to move in together, usually with the boy's family.

When she moves out, the girl must pay her respect at the ancestral altar of her new home, thus placing herself under the spirits and ancestors of her husband's family and distancing

herself from her family's ancestors.

If the future groom subsequently breaks the engagement, his family voids all payment. In the event the girl breaks the engagement, her family will pay double the amount they received in payment.

There are two types of weddings:

- *Tom ching ca*, or Major Wedding.

It is an elaborate celebration during which the bride wears an impressive headpiece made up of wooden braces covered of red and embroidered clothes.

The girl will wear it from the beginning of the festivities, when the bridal party walks to the groom's village, until the end, i.e. for a total of three days.

The bridal price is paid during a meal held in presence of both parties -but not the bride who stays at another place- at the groom's house the day before the wedding.

The next morning, the priest presides over a ceremony to inform the ancestors that a new person is coming to live in the house. He purifies the house entrance before the bride arrives with a musical procession.

The orchestra leads the bride into the house through the Great Door. She kneels in allegiance before the ancestral altar before going to the bridal chamber where she will spent most of the day.

Guests are then entertained in turn until the *kowtow* ceremony, which starts in the evening.

During this ceremony, the couple pay obeisance to the ancestors, and all the guests.

The Liquor or Wine Ceremony, at which an elder preaches the couple on the duties of married life, closes the festivities.

- *Ching ca tong*, or Minor Wedding

If the families cannot afford a Major Wedding, a Minor Wedding is held in the bride's home and lasts for only one day.

The bride and groom wear bridal attire but the bride does not have the special headdress and the rituals of obeisance are not performed.

## **Religion and the Merit-Making Ceremonies**

The Mien's religion is a unique mix of beliefs in ancestors and spirits on the one hand, and Taoism inherited from their Chinese origins on the other.

This dual influence is also reflected in the practice of ceremonies: the Mien rely on their priests to carry rituals, and on shamans to perform curing ceremonies.

The Mien have also erected a Taoist pantheon, i.e. a heavenly hierarchy governed by great gods, whose paintings are always present at ceremonies called the merit-making ceremonies.

There are two types of 'individual' merit-making ceremonies.

The first one, *kwa tang*, lasts for two days and is performed to initiate a boy aged under 20 to the Taoist pantheon and ensures his entry into the Celestial Kingdom when he dies. The boy is afterwards fully accepted in all Mien rituals as an adult.

The second one, *tou sai*, lasts for seven days.

The initiated must restrain from eating certain foods and sexual intercourse, and several priests of high rank lead the rituals.

The participants receive a honourable name at a feast closing this rite of initiation.

There are also ceremonies to which the whole village can take part.

One ceremony is performed in honour of the guardian spirits of the village and lasts for a day. All villagers must provide offerings.

For the three days following this ritual, the village is sealed symbolically.

## **Attire**

The lu Mien women wear three-quarter-length pants richly embroidered. A long black overcoat with red trimming in wool is worn on top and tied in the front at the waist to reveal the beautiful designs of their trousers. Their voluminous wrapped-over headdress is also embroidered at the front.



When coming across Lu Mien women, one can only feel the imperious air which their clothing convey.

The Lu Mien men clothing is more toned down and consists in short pants and a navy-blue or black-cotton miao-style jacket tied up on the side.

## **The Karen**

### **Introduction**

The Thai from the central areas call them Kariang, and the Northern Thai, Yang.

There are two major sub-groups of Karen in Thailand: the Sgaw and the Pwo, and numerous smaller sub-groups such as the Kayah and Pa O.

Karen people first migrated to Thailand from Burma in the eighteenth century.

They initially settled in Yuan (Northern Thai) territory, and lived side by side with the Lawa, whom they quickly outnumbered.

Nowadays, over a quarter of a million Karen live in fifteen different provinces of Northern and Western Thailand.



## The Karen Origins and Languages

### Origins

The Karen are thought to have originated from Tibet, and maybe even further afield: the Gobi desert.

They settled in Burma for several centuries before crossing into Thailand by the Salween River in the eighteenth century to escape the Burmo-Thai conflicts along the border.

The most 'known' Karen are the Karen Padaung, whose majority still live in Myanmar.

A steady flow of Padaung refugees has settled in Thailand to flee the harsh Burmese authorities with whom they are in conflict (see Myanmar).

### Languages

Karen is the English generic term to describe a number of groups who speak similar languages. In reality, there are many Karen languages and dialects.

The Karen languages are considered as the Karenic group of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages because of their differences with other Tibeto-Burman languages and the inability of linguists to classify them with any other family of languages.

Although collectively called Karen, each sub-group has a name for itself, using the word "people" in its respective language.

For instance, the Sgaw called themselves *pga-ka-ngaw Sg'aw* (i.e. the Sgaw people) whereas the Pow called themselves *Phlong*.

Karen dialects are not supposed to be mutually intelligible and borrow words from Burmese, Mon, Shan or Thai depending on the place of settlement of each group.

Christian missionaries developed a Karen script in the beginning of nineteenth century. As a consequence, most literate Karen are Christians.

## **The 'Hill' and 'Valley' Karen**

The Karen live at lower elevations than other ethnic groups –usually at 600 to 1000 metres high. Some have even settled in towns.

Hence the difference in lifestyle: the 'Hill' Karen prefer an isolated life, farming their lands according to their own methods and dressing traditionally whereas the 'Valley' Karen tend to imitate the Thai, or Burmese.

The 'Hill' Karen are poorer and less educated than their lowland counterparts, and as a consequence, the 'Valley' Karen tend to have a greater influence on the Karen culture nowadays.

## **The Karen Village**

### **Village Structure**

Karen are skilled farmers and when settled in the hills, their villages depend heavily on the availability of arable land. When one village gets larger and some of its inhabitants have to walk huge distances to their fields, these villagers set up an outpost closer to their lands.

Several outposts can thus be started depending on the initial village growth and its farming needs.



These satellite settlements often keep close relations with the initial village, and each of them will receive its spirit for protection.

This system of cluttered villages has provided more stability to Karen settlements. As a consequence, Karens seldom move villages and can grow permanent crops.

On the negative side, there is more and more pressure on the Karen people as their population grows and arable land becomes scarce.

### **Households**

Houses' construction follows a rule of matrilineage: houses of people related through female links are built adjacent to one another and no house of another matrilineage shall be built in between for fear of insulting household spirits.

Karen also have a taboo about triangular-shaped pattern that might appear between sets of three houses, and pay great care to avoid it or they believe something *chai*, i.e. evil, might happen.

Houses are built on stilts and domesticated animals are kept below it. The walls are often made of bamboo, and the roof of leaves or thatched grass.

The roof comes down to cover most of the walls. It also covers part of the porch area at the front of the house, where the family receives guests.

A granary is built to one side of the house.

Inside the house, there is a stove but no altar. There are no bedrooms although a bamboo screen separates girls of marriageable age. However, this separation is not to encourage

girls to meet their potential suitors: sexual intercourses outside wedlocks are forbidden.

A household is usually equivalent to a nuclear family (husband and wife and their unmarried children) unlike many other ethnic groups.



Indeed, the Karen believe that the house is the domain of the wife and mother's spirit. For them a situation where two unrelated women live under the same roof will engender a spiritual conflict and cause chaos.

For the same reason, newly married couples may only stay at the bride parents while constructing their new home; widowed men rarely remarry and Karen are very careful of who is staying in their house by fear of offending the household spirits.

Finally, each Karen household is economically independent and self-reliant.

### **Village Leader**

The village priest is the most important figure of a Karen village.

He has a hereditary role, which is passed on to his closest patrilineal relative when he dies.

He is responsible for preserving unity among the villagers and ensuring harmony between the spirits and the villagers. To this effect, the priest sets the dates for the annual ceremonies and presides over them.

The "Lord of Land and Water" ritual when the whole village comes together is the most

meaningful for the Karen.

The priest must also ensure that all villagers respect Karen rules and taboos: he is in charge of fining, or even expulsing the people who have infringed on them. He will subsequently restore balance by offering a sacrificial cow or pig to the spirits.

The priest, based on the elders' advice, also regiments the distribution of fields to the village households and settles conflicts between villagers.

In comparison, the village headman has little power. He acts mainly as an intermediary between the external authorities and the village. Conflictual interests often make his position difficult.

### **Karen: the Weavers**

Karen women are highly skilled weavers: they combine embroidery with beads and seeds to create unique garments, though simple in shape.

The top part of the typical Karen outfit is common to men, women and children but varies in length and colour.

Married women dress distinctively from single ones and young girls who wear long (and mainly) white shifts. Married women also wear a blouse, of similar shape to the girl's shift, but down to the hip only, and a sarong –often red- adorned with horizontal colourful stripes.

Girls weave their wedding outfit and ditch the white for colourful thread. They often wear their hair long and tie it in a bun on top of their head.

The typical Karen headdress consists of either a cloth or a headband, wore loose at one end to act as a veil.

Women adorn themselves with silver jewellery (earrings, bracelets, chokers) and beads.

Each Karen subgroup adopts different colours and patterns; for instance, the Pwo tend to adopt more intricate patterns and brighter colours than the Sgaw in clothing.

Karen Padaung women are the most recognisable faces among all ethnic minorities, and

are often nicknamed the 'Giraffe Women' for the neck rings and high headdress they adorn themselves with, giving the impression of having a very long neck line (see Myanmar).



Karen men wear a shirt shaped like women's but with vertical stripes, and loose trousers. They often wear turbans.

Young boys tend to wear only a knee-length shirt. Single men wear their hair long and pull them to one side of their head, on top of one ear, holding it with clips.

Men also wear headbands, beads and bracelets as part of their outfit.

Tattoos are a strong part of the Karen man identity: they show his strength and differentiate him from the boy. In the past, no woman would look at a man without this body adornment. This is not the case today and most Karen men no longer tattoo their body head to toe, but display just a few tattoos.

## The Lahu

### Introduction

The Thai call them *Mussur*, a deformation of the Shan (from Myanmar) word 'hunter'. There are two major sub-groups of Lahu in Thailand:

- the Lahu Shehle (who call themselves the Laho Na, i.e. Black Lahu)
- the Lahu Nyi (i.e. Red Lahu)

Lahu people first migrated to Thailand from Southern China and Burma in the nineteenth century. They initially settled in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai regions, but can now be found as far as Kamphaeng Phet province.

The Lahu Nyi were the first Lahu to settle in Thailand followed by the Laho Na.

Lahu groups speak different dialects, however, Lahu Na is the lingua franca among them.

Nowadays, nearly 50,000 Lahu live in Thailand, most of them in the Northern provinces.

### **The Lahu Origins and Language**

The Lahu language is part of the Yi (Lolo) branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. Lahu is a generic term for a variety of dialects, not always mutually intelligible. The standard dialect among all Lahu groups, and with other ethnic groups such as the Akha, is Lahu Na.

The Lahu are thought to originate from south-western China. Following conflicts with Chinese authorities from the eighteenth century, they emigrated south to then Burma, Thailand, and later on to Laos and Vietnam.

The second half of the twentieth century has also been the theatre of a massive migration of Lahu from Burma into Thailand.

The Lahu as a whole are divided into several sub-groups such as the Lahu Na (i.e. Black Lahu, which are not to be confounded with the *Laho Na*, referring to the Lahu Shehle), Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu) who themselves are divided between Lahu Shi Ba Lan and Lahu Ba Keo, and Lahu Hpu (White Lahu), etc who differ from each other in customs, dialects and attire.



Christian missionaries developed a Lahu script in the twentieth century. As a consequence, most Lahu Na, also called *Mussur Khrit* by the Thai (Christian Lahu), are literate.

## **The Lahu Community and Household**

### **Community Spirit**

Lahu villages are often small in size, i.e. 30 houses on average for the Lahu Na and 17 houses on average for the Lahu Nyi.

The spirit of cooperation and desire for harmony is not limited to the family but extended to the whole village. This might explain the restriction in village growth.

Lahu villages are hence more like voluntary communities than a group of households. As a result, villagers might change settlement if the authority (headman, elders, religious leader), land or fellow villagers dissatisfy them.



For the same reason, there is no place for conflict in a village: if a villager does not abide by the rule, he must leave for another village or if he has followers, start his own settlement.

New Year is a key time during which Lahu assess whether they should stay in the village.

Lahu do not have clans, and therefore no surname. Also, contrarily to most other ethnic groups, the paternal and maternal sides of the family are equally considered.

Kinship only becomes important when a prospective couple wants to marry or when choosing a new headman.

For a marriage to be approved, they should not have a common ancestor in the last three generations. Apart from this requirement, young people are free to marry the person of their choice.

## **Households**

A household usually consists of a husband and wife, their unmarried children and sometimes a married daughter and her family, living under the same roof.

The Lahu also differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups by the unique relationship between husband and wife. They both actively share daily chores; and the husband will not only help out in the fields but also at home.

A sweet Lahu story explains that, centuries ago, Lahu came under threat from the local

men in central China where they ruled a fortified city.

The Chinese had tricked their wives into trading their husbands' weapons while they were out in the fields and soon launched an attack and conquered the city.

The Lahu men fled and later attempted to have their families back. However, as the Chinese treated them so well, their wives were tempted to stay. Lahu men thus promised their wives to take care of them, and they then all fled south.

### **A Glimpse at Lahu Villages**

Each Lahu group has its living patterns and a distinctive village structure. However, there are common factors across them all.

Lahu, except Lahu Shehle, live at high altitudes.

Every Lahu village has a ritual centre: Lahu Shehle villages have a fenced dancing ground where they pray to the spirits and celebrate.







Lahu Nyi, strongly influenced by messianic beliefs, have a temple, and Lahu Na and Lahu Shi, mostly converted to Christianity, a church.

All Lahu believe in a Godly figure, *Gui-sha*, whom they worship.

Most Lahu groups build their houses on wooden posts and the door is never facing down slope. The interior plans vary according to each group and the size of the household.

The Lahu Nyi have a set of steps leading to a porch at the front of the house. The door leads to a living room with the fireplace taking centre place in the house.

A beam indicates the separation between the living room, the area closest to the entrance door where guests are welcome, and the rest of the house.

A bedroom is sheltered from the rest of the room and a spirit altar is also placed, both as far as possible from the entrance door.

The Lahu Shehleh also have steps leading to a covered porch but the house is clearly separated in two rooms. The fire place is in the living room while the 'sacred closet', whom only the head of the household may touch, in the bedroom.

Both groups finish the building process with a beeswax candles' ceremony to chase the spirits away; and a feast whom they share with the village to ensure prosperity for their household: the merrier, the better.

## **The Lahu Attires**

Traditional clothing varies according to each sub-group.



## **Lahu Shehleh**

The Lahu Shehleh outfit is mainly black trimmed with white.

Women wear a tunic adorned with white and colourful stitched handles, cropped trousers and puttees. Their headdress consists of a towel.

They adorn their bodies with lots of white beads close to the neck and silver bracelets, and also carry patterned shoulder bags.

During festivals, they also wear silver chokers.

Men wear black jackets, knee-length trousers held by means of a sash and leggings.

Both men and women wear silver jewels.

## **Lahu Na**

Lahu Na used their own indigo dye for their clothes.

Women wear a long ankle-length tunic split to the waist on top, and a sarong for the bottom part of their outfit. The tunic traditionally closes on the right side, and the line from the neck to the clasp, at the level of the under arm, is adorned with silver buttons.

They also like to adorn themselves with silver jewellery.

Lahu Na men wear suits of black cloth with a jacket opened on the side or at the front, long trousers; completed by a colourful sash.

This group distinguishes itself by its brightly patch-worked shoulder bags made of black cloth and decorated with colourful wool and pompoms.

## **Lahu Shi**

Lahu Shi, mostly converted to Christianity, also adopted the outfit of the Shan or Thai en masse and westernised their attire dramatically.

However, in Laos or Vietnam, most of them still preserve their traditional clothing style.

They wear black short jacket trimmed with colourful appliqués, and a sarong trimmed with colours (red, yellow and white mainly) at the bottom.

## **Lahu Nyi**

Lahu Nyi women's outfit is made of black, blue or green-based material against red appliqués.

The top is a short trimmed blouse closed at the front by a big silver buckle (most of the time round in shape).

The bottom consists of a long sarong made out of three horizontal panels, with the top panel being red, the central panel is plain and the bottom part is often beautifully stitched.

Lahu Nyi women also like to wear silver jewellery, particularly at festival times.

Lahu Nyi men wear a loose black jacket on top, pants (young prefer blue or green colour, whereas the elder go for black) and white or black leggings with blue trim. Their shoulder bags are predominantly red in colour, and sometimes adorned with silver buttons or beads.

## **The Lisu**

### **Introduction**

The Thai call them *Lisaw*.

They also call them 'Flowery Lisu', because of their colourful outfit, or 'Chinese Lisu', because of their close ties and intermarriages with Yunnanese- whom the Thai also call Haw.

The Lisu first migrated to Thailand from then Burma, probably in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. They initially settled in Chiang Mai Province.

To this day almost half of the Lisu population in Thailand still lives in that province, and another quarter in the Chiang Rai area.

The Lisu in Thailand speak only one dialect, heavily inspired from Yunnanese and not always intelligible to Lisu elsewhere.

Lisu are not numerous –approximately 25,000 – in Thailand.



## **The Lisu Origins and Language**

The Lisu language is part of the Yi (Lolo) branch of the Tibeto-Burman family.

The Lisu are thought to have originated from Tibet. They followed the course of the Salween River in their southbound migration pattern. Following conflicts with the Han Chinese, they first migrated to then Burma.

The Lahu can now be found in Southern China (over half million), Myanmar (over a quarter million) and even in North-east India. However, there are oddly enough no Lisu as such in Laos and Vietnam.

## **The Lisu Attire**

Lisu clothing reflects the competitive mentality of this ethnic group, its desire to be above all other groups and the efforts of Lisu individuals to outdo each other.



## Women Clothing

The Lisu outfit is brightly colourful, and a display of stitching and sewing skills.



The Lisu –women in particular- in Myanmar display different clothing styles from the Lisu in Thailand.

Women dress in a double-breasted knee-length tunic, black Chinese-style pants and red puttees trimmed with colour, traditionally blue.

The tunic in itself is made of black cloth, onto which patches of colours are stitched: blue and green colours are predominantly used for the body, and red for the sleeves. A wide sash, several metres long, is tightened around the waist on top of the tunic.

For special ceremonies, such as New Year, the Lisu attire outdoes all the other tribes': a pair of colourful tassels with pompoms at their ends is tightened to the back of the sash. A black velvet vest adorned with silver buttons is worn on top of the tunic, and a cloth choker covered in silver buttons and dangles is also adjusted around the neck.

Lisu women adorn their head with flattened turbans made of black cloth on top of which strings of beads and colourful shoulder-length yarns are attached.

The final touch comes in form of accessories: silver earrings adorned with colourful wool tassels, silver bracelets and rings. A feast for the eyes!!

## Men Clothing

Men wear a black waist-length jacket opening on the side, large blue or green pants and black puttees trimmed with green or blue colour.

For festivals, men also add tassels onto their jacket in the front, and wear a black velvet jacket adorned with silver buttons around the neckline and front. They also wear a headdress traditionally made out of silk, but nowadays more likely a towel, arranged in a cylinder shape.

They often sport a single piercing on their left ears and a silver bracelet around their wrists.

Young men also carry a 'courting bag', a shoulder bag heavily adorned with tassels, beads and dangles of silvers, which they wear during the New Year festivities or on special occasions.

## The Lisu Village

### Village Structure

Lisu settle in the environment best adjusted to their crops, i.e. at lower elevations for rice cultivation and at higher ones for those still growing opium crops.

Lisu consider water availability when founding a village. However, as Lisu fear the mystical influence of water, they often rely on a system of bamboo viaduct to bring water into the village.

They also consider the abundance of *lu khwa*, a type of weed widely used in ceremonies.

Finally, they want to be isolated enough from outsiders, except other Lisu settlements, while having access to markets for their purchases.

When all these conditions are met, an advance party will perform a cleansing ceremony to rid the chosen area of evil spirits before setting up.

A village is usually made up of several clans; girls always marry outside their own clans.

Lisu villages tend to grow quickly in size but often dissatisfaction with the headman, tensions between clans or villagers, economical or political problems with outsiders, will force them to split up in separate entities, or move the village altogether.

## Lisu Clans

Relationships between Lisu are regimented by a patrilineal clan system.

Lisu count different clans:

- the Bya (Honey)
- the Suh (Wood)
- the Ngwa (Fish)
- the Wu (Bear)
- the Gwa (Buckwheat)
- the Dzuh (Hemp).

The competitive Lisu mentality also transpires between clans, and each clan relies on its older male figure to arbitrate conflicts.

The Lisu believe that a son should obey his father as he is dependent on him for a lot of obligations: the father pays the bride price when his son marries and he also decides for a married son's family still living under his roof.

The son must also pay respect to his father's spirit when he dies. The younger son must also obey his older brother, etc. This highly hierarchical system can breed a lot of resentment and acerbates the spirit of competition even within each clan.

## Village Guardian Spirit Shrine

There is no Lisu village without a 'village guarding spirit shrine' above it.

Often located under a tree and fenced off, the shrine's purpose is to protect villagers and their visitors against evil spirits, calamities and bad influences, and punish those who do not respect Lisu customs and disobey the village authorities.

Women may not approach the shrine. Men come in its emplacement only during special ceremonies.

The shrine has a unifying effect on the village, and its clans.

Some offerings or purification ceremonies are performed under the authority of the village priest.

A family will also make offerings at the shrine when it moves in or away in exchange for protection.

Finally, Lisu make offerings in the event of birth, not only for their children but also their pigs' litter.

## Houses and the Lisu Household

The houses are built under the shrine, with no house built directly in front of another so that they are all in view of this 'guardian shrine'.

They are either built on wooden posts or directly on the ground.

The typical Lisu house only counts one door facing down slope.



Inside, facing the door, on the uphill side of the house, lays the ancestral altar. It separates the bedroom and kitchen in front from the guest area; each side being completed by a sacred fireplace.

No guest should sleep in the main bedroom and with his/her head pointing at the fire.

An older person, who has already parented, should start the first fire.

The house' size grows in proportion to the household and follows a strict separation rule between males and females, family and guests.

The household is made of an extended family living under the authority of a patriarch.

No married daughter can enter the house of her parents without her husband.

Children from the age of ten to puberty cannot sleep with their parents in the main bedroom, but on the guest platforms, with boys on one side and girls on the other.

At puberty, each girl is allocated her bedroom.

A married son living with his family at his parents' house will also have a separate

bedroom.

## **Village Leaders**

### **The Headman**

The elders choose the headman to act as the secular head of the village. When appointing him, the elders perform a sacrificial ritual, organize a feast and pray for his protection and that of the village.

The headman acts as a judge in all political matters. He often relies on the elders for their arbitrary support.

This system has its drawbacks. As Lisu always defend their own clan, it leads to the bigger clan of the village to win arguments. Lisu, being so competitive, are poor losers.

The headman's role is to unify villagers beyond clans' factions and avoid breaking off the village.

### **The Village Priest**

The elders appoint the village priest. He represents the highest authority in the village. He is responsible for conducting ceremonies calling on the village guardian spirit.

He is also in charge of ensuring that the guardian spirit shrine is well kept and customs respected.

Finally, he decides on the religious days and festivals' dates (i.e. the New Year Festival) in the Lisu calendar.

As the priest embodies the guardian spirit, no villager should disobey or threaten him.

### **The Shaman**

The Shaman is the intermediary between the human world and the spirits.

Only a male showing sign of being called by the spirits can become a shaman.

Physical weakness, aversion to food prohibited to shamans (garlic, onions, etc) and a desire to play with fire are all tell-tale signs of such a calling.

The new Shaman is initiated in a ceremony held in the jungle outside the village and presided by experienced Shamans who let an ancestral spirit “ride him”.

Villagers call upon the Shaman in the event of a serious illness with no apparent cause or a calamity. The Shaman will go in a trance to let the spirits “ride him”: the ancestral spirit or bad death spirit will communicate to the affected family through him before returning to the spirits’ world and leaving him in a comatose state.

Ritual sacrifices of pigs and chickens are often performed at the spirit demand.

Lisu often attribute illnesses to recently deceased relatives or dissatisfied ancestors and resort to curing ceremonies performed by elders, or in more serious cases, to the Shaman.

Each clan has its own curing rituals.

### **Weretigers and Vampires**

Lisu do not only believe in the village guardian and spirits of four other kinds (ancestral spirits, forest spirits, owner spirits and bad death spirits), they also believe in weretigers and vampires.

If a person is possessed by a weretiger, Lisu believe his family can also be affected by it, and as a result the whole family will be ostracised.

A boy will always make sure that none of the relatives of the girl he wants to marry is possessed, or he might be disowned by his own parents and expelled from his village.

A person possessed by a vampire takes animal form, bites and sucks blood from animals and humans, alive or newly dead.

One of the reasons Lisu rejected hospitals for a long time was their fear of vampires. They believed that because hospitals are full of sick and dying people, it was full of vampires.

Nowadays, Lisu recognize that some illnesses have natural causes and are trustworthier of herbalists and hospitals.