

# *The Akha Journal of the Golden Triangle*

Vol. 1. No. 2

Akha Baw Dzah Urh Ah Boh

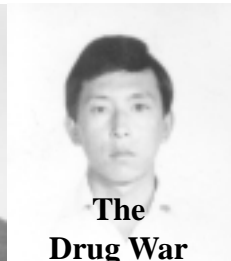
Oct. 2003



*Best of the Akha*



**US-Thailand's "License To Kill"  
 2274 Extra-Judicial Killings In 90 Days**



**The  
 Drug War**

## ***Ripping Off All The Akha Children!***

***US Missionary Residential Schools Are STILL Doing IT!***

**Canada, Australia, New Zealand, American Indians, Hawaii  
 Is Taking Children Away From Their Families The Same As  
"Family Values"?**

**Chinese Baptist Mission Residential  
 School at Ban Chong**



**Akha University Press  
 The Akha - More than Just A Tour And Trekking Destination  
 Laos - Myanmar - China - Vietnam - Thailand**

## **The Akha Heritage Foundation**

The Akha Heritage Foundation was conceived of the idea that the heritage of the Akha Hill Tribe people is worth preserving in a time of encroachment and fragmentation at the hands of the outside world. Social and economic change in the region is rapid.

Fragmentation of culture is not an abstract thing, it is an event which radically effects the lives of people, forcing them into poverty, destroying the very things which support their communities. It is about leaving people without land to farm, shaming their traditions and leaving their children to poverty.

The Foundation was set up on the concept that decline is not something that people welcome, that it is something that eats at the soul, a child born of injustice in a world become too busy to notice.

Many people will not find it pleasant to think of the world as a place of the have and the have nots, but it is also a world where the Akha see what they have being taken away by forces they can not control.

The Akha Heritage Foundation seeks to offset this process by working from within the community of the Akha people to try and offer respite. The job is without end it would appear, but that does not discourage us from helping safeguard as much as we possibly can from those elements powerful enough to take the good away without second thought, preying on whatever weakness can be found in the villages and lives.

The Akha Heritage Foundation focuses on saving life which starts with infants, providing medical assistance, clean water systems, improved nutrition, assistance with agriculture, forestry, advocacy in human rights and promotes the recording of Akha oral literature as a means of reinforcing the culture as it comes under great pressure from the outside. This includes working with the Akha traditional knowledge system which has an enormous understanding of the environment in which they live. Culture is important, because woven together by the people it is part of their immune system. Akha cultural traditions are especially important in the many villages which have repeatedly been relocated.

When outside forces damage the culture of the Akha they damage both their health and their economic capacity for survival. The culture is often intentionally damaged to increase dependency on an alien power structure be it governments or missionaries from Taiwan or the United States.

We attempt to help the Akha to have choices as to what they want to do with their future. We can not pick it for them. We oppose those who would.

The Akha have a rich tradition to their benefit and it is hoped that by drawing on this heritage they can find the resources for survival in this time of transition.

In the early years of our work our goal was to bring as much assistance to the Akha people as possible and come to understand their needs. Over a decade later we continue to deliver services.

In Thailand there are more than 300 Akha villages alone, so the task is enormous. The need for resources to counteract the erosion of the villages is essential. But we think that with the help of many interested people we can provide solutions to most of these situations.

**Huge budgets for buildings,  
none for communities!**



### ***The Cover***

Missionary residential schools continue to plague the indigenous. In America, Canada, Hawaii, New Zealand and Australia, the history of these schools and the abuse of the children is very clear. Indigenous children removed from their villages by missionaries lost their sense of identity, cultural roots, language and family connection. Now it is the Akha missing generation.

The missions prefer to “do now - say you are sorry later”. Residential schools for removing Akha children from their traditional villages can be seen everywhere. Each missionary insists that they don’t remove the children but the evidence is quite to the contrary.

# Akha Journal of The Golden Triangle

## The Purpose of This Magazine

The hill tribes have been living in Thailand for more than a hundred years, and there is little reason to believe that hill tribes of one kind or another have not always been living in the mountains of Myanmar and Laos as the Thai people have long been living in the flat lands of Thailand. The current borders of Thailand have been disputed for many years. So the issue of whether or not the Akha and other hill tribes “belong” here continues to rage.

The pattern of nationalism was set up by the colonial powers for their convenience and this pattern excludes any but the larger groups from political or moral representation on the world stage. The Akha and many others fall into this situation, tossed about and subjugated at will by the larger communities. Oppression of their peoples is rife under the pretext of current laws they did not invent or invite.

In stark contrast to how the Akha are treated in Thailand regarding human rights, land rights and ID cards is the fact that the Akha and the hill tribe in general have long provided an excellent income for others as tourist destinations in much of northern Thailand. While generating enormous sums of tourist dollars, being of great interest to Europeans, the hill tribes themselves have gotten little of this revenue that has been exploited from their intellectual property. Always the answer is, “If you don’t like it you can get out!”

The hill tribes are the most convenient kicking and punching targets for all the perceived ills of the country from drugs to environmental damage. Blamed for trafficking in drugs while the big boys go untouched, blamed for cutting down the forest while the loggers and owners of the big lumber companies’ sit home in front of the TV.

Many of the investigations of the hill tribe are superficial and often derogatory. Racism is noted. Contradictory stereotypes that were started years ago are set deep in the public psyche as “the hill tribe are wonderful to visit but horrible people.”

Researchers come, books get published, and the poor treatment of the hill tribe continues long after the academics go home counting either their academic kudos or their money or both.

Try moving around the country or province with no ID card. If you end up in jail you will get what they give you. If you are a woman you will be even less fortunate. Although prostitution as such is illegal in Thailand the brothels that still mysteriously exist are full of hill tribe women, with little legal protection. The point seems to be that if you want to exploit hill tribe, it just doesn’t matter.

In the last years a growing expatriate community in the Chiangmai area has seen public prostitution increase, while oppression in the mountains has forced many Akha women to consider this option. Boys as well opt for occupations entertaining western men. Villagers who have lost all their fields due to forestry scams end up on the streets working many levels of economics to try and survive. While the old women sell items on the street, the younger women sell their bodies, the younger yet sell flowers and or both. While many of the women are more than willing to marry, western men with an abundance of money, would often rather rent them for the night than take permanent responsibility for them as wives. With time the girls become increasingly hard, long lost is the innocence of the traditional Akha village, exploited by the best educated and the wealthiest.

The Thai Forestry department has no love for the hill tribe peoples. Despite repeated calls by academics and civil society to change their view forestry continues to blast the hill tribe for “slash and burn” agriculture when in fact the hill tribe more often than not practice rotational cropping, often referred to by the more careful name of “swidden” agriculture. Unless forced to move, the hill tribe do not need to pioneer new areas of forest. Thai Forestry plants pine tree mono crop plantations that remove thousands of rai of rice lands from the hands of the hill tribe.

These are not the only groups exploiting and extracting all the resources they can from the hill tribe areas. Western missions have long been in the game of profiteering off these people, with the resulting accumulation of an enormous amount of wealth in the Chiangrai and Chiangmai area at their mission compounds. For more than 40 years the protestants have claimed to be helping these people, and the Catholic church is nearing a hundred or more years of contact with the hill tribes in this region. The missions increase in wealth, come from western countries that enjoy full human rights and good nutri-

tion, but the conditions in the villages, particularly in the area of human rights has improved little. Missionaries living in comparative luxury and wealth will state how unfit the Akha are to raise their own children and suggest that they are better off at the mission boarding schools. How unfortunate the hill tribes do not yet know the history of the missionaries and indigenous people and what has come of those people now. The American Indians, Aborigines and a score of others continue to be exploited and lose their land and resources to the same western people who are sending missionaries to the Akha. This includes the US, Australia, England, Germany, Sweden.

Come to Thailand, forget it all and do it all over again to another tribal people. But ultimately it is the math of the huge dollars that mission personnel live on while the tribal peoples continue to suffer in the villages with so little support for health or human rights. The missions are a business and they are here to exploit the hill tribe in order to keep their own souls out of hell. They make more money off extracting hill tribe girls from the villages than the pimps would, thus we label them as "SUPER PIMPS". There is no concern to the culture nor the overall needs of the villages. The money they spend in the name of the hill tribes would have put the hill tribes on sound economic footing decades ago. "What would Jesus do?" is just so much talk. Or as the Akha say, "The missionaries build a wonderful rice terrace on the back of the Akha that never goes dry, least not for them."

Current and ongoing research is revealing that there may be as many as 5,000 Akha men and women in the jails and prisons of Thailand. A very carefully guarded secret, the numbers that are coming out give the Akha one of the highest minority incarceration rates in the world for an indigenous group, with up to 7% or more of their entire population for Thailand in prison. Men and women are arrested on the slightest pretext, even for things that they could be released for with a fine or warning. Instead they are separated from their families for years under harsh prison sentences. The excuse for arrest can be as flimsy as the officer allows or even involve the planting of drugs on the suspect. The Akha have no recourse, no defense. (Amnesty International has yet to investigate figures for hill tribe incarceration.) Men who are arrested are often severely beaten by the group of arresting officers in violation of their rights. Since many of the arrests are for small matters as an excuse, the abuse is by design, by a police force that has little to no oversight or accountability. Thailand is known to have one of the most corrupt police forces in the world.

Harassment and arrest has led many families in border area villages to abandon their homes and move to anywhere that will reduce the chance that their men will be arrested in frequent sweeps of the villages. Once the father is arrested the wife and children have little hope of surviving and the families break up. With this obvious fact well known to the Thai government, arrests are used as a means of breaking up the Akha community. Thousands of arrested men represent an incredible number of children left to fend for themselves. As missions grab off as many of the children for their greedy yet "holy" designs, they never raise their voices about the unjust actions of the government that put these men in prison in the first place.

The Akha continue to find new ways to fight for their rights regarding ID cards and exploitation of their images. This year MK Restaurants of Thailand was forced to pull images of the Akha they used in poor taste. Currently Land Rover USA is being challenged for also using Akha images showing the Akha bowing down to a local dignitary as if they were a deity. All for the purpose of promoting a new motor vehicle.

It is hoped that by reading carefully through these pages, looking at photos and going over the human rights documents that have been provided, you the reader, will get an increased grasp of the Akha situation in Thailand and neighboring countries.

Take note, look at other resources and consider what moneys or energies you could contribute to the Akha cause, or to the similar needs of other hill tribes in Thailand. Writing letters of protest to your government or to the Thai government or embassies is an effective means of helping as well.

Do your activities in Thailand help them or contribute to the suffering and exploitation of the hill tribe peoples in Thailand?

With more than 300 Akha villages in Thailand alone, not to count other hill tribe villages, or the nearby countries, there is a lot to report. We continue to offer a close up look at the realities for these communities which is seldom made public.

# Akha Journal of the Golden Triangle

## This Issue

A very busy year has prevented us from being able to get this magazine out on the schedule we wanted. However we hope this issue makes up for it. We felt it important to include articles from the past in Thai language for the Akha who haven't read them yet, as well as many human rights documents.

We had hoped for a better year for the Akha, but under one name or another the killings and abuse go on as it did for many of the hilltribe.

Thaksin's "Drug War" and US financial aid led to an appalling slaughter in Thailand done in the shadow of the Iraq conflict, with more than 2274 lives lost of supposed drug dealers while the government continues to deny responsibility. The cracks in the operation continue to appear as it comes about that people who were not involved in drugs got their name on some list and are no longer with us. The human rights and democratic implications for Thailand are not good.

We note a number of the murders of the last year as well as some of the cases from last year which still have not been included in the national press or been investigated despite the Amnesty International Report on Thailand of 6 June, 2002.

The Akha continue to loose land to the deceptions of the forestry department which continues to plant pine and call it forestry.

Meanwhile, in many ways the Akha are showing what the really successful crops are such as coffee and tea. If the government was looking for forms of investment they are not short of opportunities. Investment in the hilltribe communities continues to be lacking.

Pah Nmm Akha finished the first phase of its road to the fields, opening up the opportunity to get a crop of tea and coffee and fruit trees planted but the road will need a lot of investment in time and funds to continue to make it passable.

We include a large section on the mission activities in this issue, particularly the residential schools, as we see this as the biggest threat to the Akha. There is a concerted effort to "convert" all of the Akha with little regards to where it has already failed or to their cultural rights as under ILO 169.

Historical and contemporary record in the United States, Canada and other countries show the horrible way in which the indigenous have been treated by the conquering white races the world over. Forced or coercive removal of tribal children for the exceptionally big dollar business of "Mission Building" has moved at an unprecedented pace as globalization now gobbles after the last of the natural lands inhabited by the indigenous. White colonists continue to deny the connections between missions and colonization, those white people who say they oppose it refusing at the same time to deny the process a means of survival.

After all, if it's white, it must also be right, seems to be the final logic which is brought out with the evidence of where western civilization spends its money. Laws that are already on the books to protect the indigenous are not enforced. The dwindling of global resources is top on the agenda, oil production reaches its peak, and the American lifestyle, source of all these missionaries, hypocritically marches on with the highest level of consumption, waste and obesity in the world.



## ABOUT US

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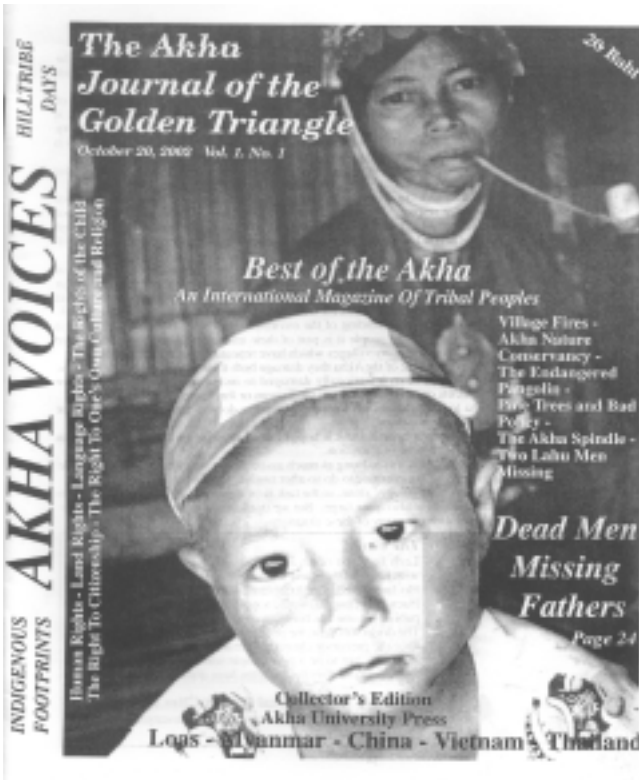
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**Akha ceremonies** make regular use of a small liquor flask (lower left) which the Akha make many of once a year. A special gourd made into a spoon is used to add water to this “dry” whiskey. The whiskey is guarantee for any oath or legal ceremony to ensure its finality. There are 13 ceremonies a year in a traditional Akha village in addition to funerals and weddings, births of children and healings.



## The First Edition

The first edition of the Akha Journal was published with 7,000 copies which went out to the public, overseas and to 190 Akha villages in Thailand.

The first edition was the typical magazine size we planned on with the exception of this one second edition which is much larger.

Editions will be monthly or bi monthly in the future.

Unlike many Chiangmai magazines which try to be fancy at expense of content, the Journal is not cluttered with advertising.

A rudimentary press from England helped start the process but explained why Gestetner presses and Land Rovers can be seen scattered around Thailand abandoned. As in heaven, the British make better cops than printing presses.

We are hoping to buy a new press for the journal and Akha book publications. Printing the Journal ourselves gives us better control of timing and content. Akha language content will increase with time.

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## Dear Friends of the Akha:

The drug war heats up with everyone and their brother getting shot except drug dealing business men, drug dealing politicians, drug dealing army, drug dealing cops, as these all get to stay "clean" or go on vacation, a Thaksin mandated vacation, rather than the morgue, which is where they belong with their lessers if we are going to be fair about this.

The good side to all this if there is any, is that Thailand is finally getting a lot of notice about their rather regular extra judicial killings which are suddenly jumping up, course they told the UN which is investigating, to go away as they don't have time for such nonsense.

Thaksin has yet to discover that poverty and bad policy makes for drugs, and that villages without encouragement or poverty alleviation don't make good allies in this war.

Neither do on again off again torture programs.

Meanwhile in Pah Nmm Akha where the Akha Nature Conservancy takes shape, drug traffic pushed out of the cities jumped way up, everybody and their brother making it on motorbikes to the closest hilltribe border villages to see if they can make up for falling supply and rising prices.

Handing out mandates has not been our style except with missionaries, army, police, forestry and a few others, and not so odd that we hand out mandates to the drug runners coming through the village that their occupation is not wanted in the area.

We brace for another war here, while the politicians and Thaksin sip sodas and crack peanuts in the gallery.

A jolly good drug war.

Meanwhile, the Akha Nature Conservancy which is taking shape will help Akhas get their coffee and tea plants started, as well as plant native tree species on the deforested lands or poorly reforested lands by the rather ner do well forestry department, to reclaim water shed and also to protect rice lands and other useable areas for food supply. An Akha village is still a heck of a bargain on a person to person basis when it comes to the resources that are taken from the environment.

Your donation, directly assigned to the nature conservancy, can buy two broad leafed trees for each US dollar.

For coffee or tea, ten cents buys one plant for a needy family. Coffee and tea do not require pesticides, herbicides or the cutting of trees. As well they provide cash rewards in 18 months for tea and

3 years for coffee. The market is stable at \$1 a pound at the Akha doorstep, this years supply is already completely bought up.

We've been running this project a very good long time and a mighty fine number of people benefit either by coming to the project or getting good info off the web, or seeing projects that we run in action, all for free, that we think it time a few more people stepped forward and donated for the benefit to all.

I've been rather busy, hoping to get the journal number two typed up and out the door, just a few things on the plate.

Be a donor, help keep the Akha alive, come see our projects and where the money gets spent, and what we get done in a real time environment.

A little bit goes a long ways to offering hope and protection to endangered communities and environments.

Your support helps protect the human rights of the Akha people in Thailand. We live with the Akha and your donation goes directly into their villages. **We do not remove children from their families or traditional villages either physically or psychologically.**

**Your volunteer time for certain tasks is also needed, helping with the research on the internet, writing letters and promoting the Akha cause around the world.**

Matthew McDaniel  
Chiangrai Province, Thailand

Donations by PayPal: [akha@akha.org](mailto:akha@akha.org)  
Donations by check or money order may be sent to:

The Akha Heritage Foundation  
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**Drug companies  
want to be the only ones  
to sell you drugs!  
Opium was a legal  
cough suppressant in the  
USA until 1920's**



## Editorial:

### The Loss of Justice

One can scarcely imagine that in 3 months time more than 2274 people in Thailand were murdered in the name of the drug war. Connections to US Policy are also of deep concern. In January Mr. Crane of the US White House Office of Drug Control Policy visited Thailand and praised them for their work in the Drug War and promised continued support. The killings soon followed in February and ran for three months.

Repeated contact with the ONDCP got us little response and eventually the payment for asking was that they blocked our email, questions not allowed.

The US Leahy ammendment blocks security aid to countries where gross human rights violations occur. In the months that followed the killings no international effort has made an inquiry into the Thai policy.

Thailand was not punished financially, US money continues to flow and Cobra Gold went on as usual, international concerns taking priority.

Documentation of specific killings showed a lot

of inconsistencies and reasons for concern. This is of course why we appeal to the rule of law, for the very reason that tyranny in the hands of government benefits but a few people.

While many Thai citizens expressed concern about the Iraq war, few rose up to demonstrate a wholesale slaughter in their own country. Black lists were drawn up by the police and the people were killed. Individuals who appeared at the government offices asking why their name was on the list or seeking amnesty were killed anyway, without appeal. The unwillingness of the government officials to show mercy to these individuals lacks morality.

Thai society well knows that big business, government officials and particularly the police are rife with corruption. Few are ever caught let alone punished. Murder is overlooked if one comes from a connected family. In time it will come clearly to light that the mass killings did not rid the country of drugs, that it did not eliminate the most important dealers who in many cases are the privileged police and politicians themselves.

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## Letters:

Dear Thailand Travelers:

I live in Chiang Mai for two years now. I own a music pub, dedicated to Jim Morrison, the charismatic singer of the Doors. My staff is and was always Akha. Most tourists do not know about how bad the situation is for the Akha's.

Thailand is well known as a tolerant country where everybody respects each others religions or nationalities.

The Akha people are still fighting for citizenship and many do not have an I.D. It is really sad that people without I.D. can not leave their provinces and can not own houses or land. This is really discrimination. The Thai tourist industry makes a lot

of money by organizing trips to the Akha villages and many postcards you can buy have pictures of hill tribe people on them.

The Thai government promised to change the discriminating laws about citizenship but the promises were never reality. The hill tribe people belong in Thailand and they deserve I.D. cards!

Without this they always have to struggle and they are not free. Please help the Akha, they really need it. The 20 Baht you paid for this magazine is helping already.

Paul.Horstermans

"The Doors Musicpub" Chiang Mai.

horstermans@hotmail.com

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## The Akha projects are simple in design:

Village visits and first aid care

Health care facilitation

Nutrition assistance

Farming investment

Forestry education

Environmental protection

Safe water projects

Networking between villages

Fostering leadership

Protection of culture

Promoting human rights

Supporting traditional education

Publishing in the Akha language

### Projects In Holding

The Akha Fish project is partially completed, we hope to finish it soon..

The spinning, weaving and cloth dying project still has much work to accomplish before completion.

### Current Projects

The Akha coffee project is going best, thousands of plants being planted this year, with many more plants ready for next year. Coffee, tea and fruit trees are significant investment in the Akha community which will provide increased economic security.



## A Brief History of the Akha

The Akha are an Indigenous mountain people who live in Laos, China, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand. They may have originally come from Tibet via Mongolia, spending considerable centuries in China's Yunnan Province. Estimates of their population range from 200,000 to 400,000 people.

The social structure of the Akha does not resemble that of the west or nation states. As a result, they are often misunderstood, pushed aside, or exploited.

They are capable hunters and expert farmers. They are able to use just about every plant in their environment for either shelter, food or medicine. Akha Zauh (The Law) which is tied together in a manner of social organization most closely resembling an environmental theology governs their life and society.

The Akha see the earth as an environment in which they have been placed to grow and carry on their lineage with thanksgiving back to their parents, and parents before them, the continuation of a great line of human beings.

Their obligation to live correctly and carefully, balanced in the environment in which they live, governed by their orthodox law, is taken very seriously. What others may consider foolish or superstitious is a careful orchestration of life, based on specific knowledge and concern for the environment around them. They live almost entirely from that environment, and those who would change them, can claim no such skill or respect.

Akha Zauh is not to guide one life, one family, one village, it is to guide an entire people, not for one century, but for millenia. Limited consumption of natural resources around them guaranteed the survival of their communities.

The Akha do not have a tradition of schools or writing, but rather teach their children by a means of songs, recitals and story telling, a strong oral tradition built on what the Akha call "Heart Book", which is all the accumulated knowledge one holds in their heart.

Akha who leave their tradition for other religions often do so because they have been wrongly convinced that they need not have obligation to either their society or their environment during a time of great poverty.

Living in their high and cool mountain homes they are often misunderstood regarding their culture and traditions by people who have grown up

in other societies.

Quite stable if secure and left to themselves the Akha have frequently been forced to move their villages.

The Akha began immigrating into Thailand more than a hundred years ago, living in the mountains at locations where villages had existed for much longer before them. While some villages in Thailand may have only been established for 30 years, many are in fact much older.

The Akha are a people without a country they can call their own, often having had to move due to war. They are a tribal people with little power or representation. As a result they often have no land rights, and when land is taken away from them entire villages have ended up with no land to farm. The land they have lost is often planted in mono crop alien specie pine for later harvest. Little farmers displaced by big powerful farmers, that is all.

In many cases the Akha lack national identity papers which makes life nearly impossible. They become easy targets for exploitation. They are considered squatters on the land on which they live.

Having a cash oriented society forced on them, they have to make hard decisions in order to feed their families. Human rights are taken for granted in the west, while for many people in the world such as the Akha, there is little protection.

Those who would blame the Akha for deforestation, do not mention how they have been forced to move so often, and how this has prevented them from being in places long enough to do things such as rearing fruit trees for the nutrition of their children, or building rice terraces to prevent erosion and water loss.

Villages lack clean water, adequate medical care and have few resources for a cash economy. Malnutrition and infant mortality are high as a result of the oppression that is faced in the villages at the hands of policy makers. Take their lands, move them, offer them nothing in return, force them into ever deeper poverty.

There are many attempts now to present Akha culture as a picture show, while failing to present the true conditions many villages face with food shortages.

Currently there are more than 300 Akha village in Thailand with more than 70,000 Akha. Many Akha also live in Thai cities and towns.



# Akha Life

Pics by Mark Naftalin



## Lives of The Akha

Much work and investment is made in the Akha lands and villages. The Akha say it takes fifty years to build a home and village. When one looks at the time it takes to shape the land, the trails, the water supplies, the terraces and all the planting ground, one comes to understand just what is involved. What ever the project it has to be done in addition to the regular rice and corn farming, and all the other vegetable foods. The Akha gather plants from food to medicinal sorts and plant them around their farms and villages. In a matter of years the village becomes a pharmacy of healing botanicals.

Times and farming are changing and the Akha are adapting to new crops. The greatest change is their loss of lands to forestry and their farming for cash to be able to buy rice. This encourages the use of pesticides, herbicides and many un natural means which are generally accepted as good in the west but greatly concern the Akha and organic farmers. In the name of development the land is destroyed, the water and life polluted. Fortunately large leaf tea and coffee crops don't require herbicide or pesticides for most farmers. Planting coffee close enough together eliminates the sunlight weeds need. More work must be done to look at sources of natural fertilizer instead of chemical fertilizers. Small leaf teas put a large burden on limited water supplies, but bring a higher price. Coffee and tea plantations continue to grow and offer hope to Akha farmers that they will be able to survive what ever attempts are made by the Thai government to impoverish them.

Village life is accented by ceremonies that the traditional Akha carry out in their environmental belief system. To say animism would be to offend the truth as animism usually refers to "ancestor worship" and in no case can it be identified that the ceremonies that the Akha carry out are any more ancestor worship than Thanksgiving or going to a cemetery to see father's gravestone. The Akha have a keen sense of where they came from, how they got to where they are, and who they are related to. Endless attempts have been made by American missionaries to destroy this system, the greatest offender being Paul Lewis. As one Akha said to him, "With one hand you destroyed all we had, and with the other you picked through the rubble of our lives and lifted out what you could sell."

Akha life is intertwined with a deep sense of awareness about the balance of nature, the plants, animals, insects, their seasons and life. For many

westerners Akha life just isn't fast enough. The Akha recline, say they will finish this or that, it seems it will take years, but eventually the Akha weave this or that project into their lives and it is finished. They do everything with the awareness that it all takes a long time, and that they are not going anywhere so why should it matter to rush off and do it? Will one then live longer, or will it be a sequence of rushing here and there in a flurry?

Akha life is dotted with small events and surprises, from sweet rice wine pudding, honey gathered from the wild, eaten within minutes of spotting it in a tree, the bees swarming, seldom stinging as their latest labor is gobbled up by hungry workers clearing the brush.

In the winter time the Akha go to the mountain to gather wild chestnuts. Sugar cane is planted here and there and if the Shan army didn't steal it all it still will be. Bamboo gives delicious sprouts during the rainy season, some sweeter than others. The Akha boil it or dry it and sour it for use later in the year.

Fields are rotated and used again in four to five years if forestry doesn't steal them in the meanwhile,



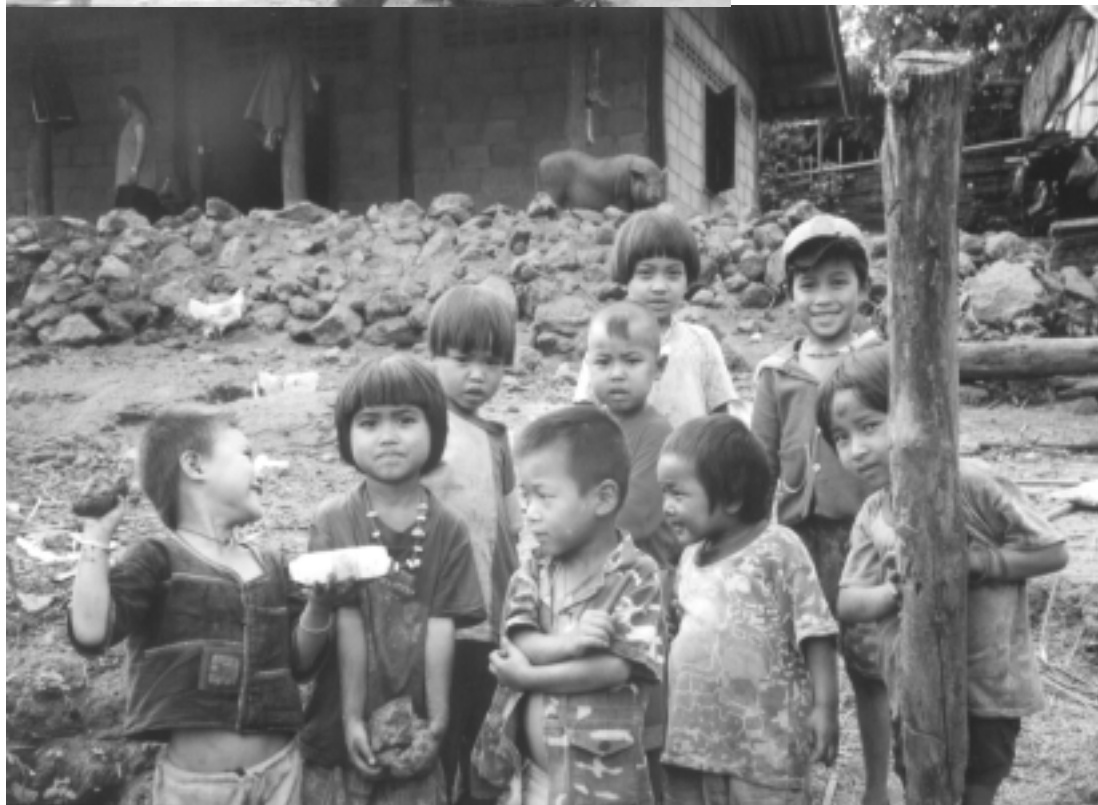


forcing the Akha to move to another field. Seldom does forestry ever work with the Akha to common goals, as that would be a humiliation to the forestry people as compared to villanizing the Akha and just continuing to try and push them completely off the mountain. The real motives of the forestry department are made clear by this lack of cooperation in forest management.

Akha women work in their spare time on ornament or embroidery of clothing, handbags, jackets, leggings, a head dress of silver or pewter.

Religious holidays give regular breaks in the work pattern. Ceremonies are longer breaks yet, with dances and special foods, games and recitals.

Weddings and funerals make









**Akhas who work near the Chiangrai elephant camp. A village water pump.**



for days of celebrating all through the village with lots of protein for everyone.

Some Akha live in town or work in town, moving back and forth or even providing a taxi service to villages. Other Akha buy and sell products they collect from the villages from broom to ginger. Crops such as tomatoes or fruit are grown for export to towns and as far away as Bangkok or Malaysia.

Akha have taken the position of teachers, doctors, lawyers, city administrators and even generals through out Burmese society.

Akha women and men migrate all over Thailand.



**A new water buffalo calf**





## Broom Works

The Akha gather the tassels from a tall grass in the mountains and roll it on the ground till all the seeds are gone, then bundle the remaining stems and lay them out in the village to dry. After some time a truck comes to the village and buys large quantity of these broom bundles for as high as 17 baht a kilo. The Akha range as far as Burma to gather these tassels.



## The Akha Rice Harvest

In the mountains between Maesuai and Fang this Akha family harvests their rice by threshing the rice against a board lattice or beating it with a traditional rice stick called a “cheh deeh mah”. After cutting the rice with a sickle and bundling them

sheaves, they are then carried to one area where the rice is beaten off onto a large tarp and then hauled back to the village in rice bags which the Akha either carry on their backs or with horses. A horse costs about 8,000 baht. During the winter the rice is kept dry and milled as needed in a local mill.



## The Akha Blacksmith

Every Akha village has a blacksmith who is skilled in making hoes, cultivating tools, knives, and even hunting guns. Hunting guns have many intricate parts that must be carefully formed by hand without machines. A billows made out of a piece of tree keeps the home made charcoal white hot. Blacksmiths are known for their particular skill be it guns or fancy knives, customers coming from other Akha villages bringing their own piece of steel to have something beaten into shape. The Akha generally don't put steel shoes on their horses but the shoes can be found in shops up in Burma where some people make use of them. A machette bought in town, can be reheated and tempered by a good blacksmith who can adjust the shape and make it into a good and sharp working tool. Machettes bought in town do not hold an edge.



## Akha Houses

Every spring in the dry season is the time for repairing or building new Akha houses. A village task, everyone goes to work, first on your house, then on mine, till all the work is done. Few nails are used, rather everything is either notched together or tied with bamboo strips. Houses are of good size and well protected from the weather, elevated for good air, dry and cozy on the inside. An average sized Akha village may have 40 to 50 such houses while a big village may be over 300.











### **Basket Making**

Seh Mah Akha village has been making baskets for years for the different night markets in Thailand, putting to use their extensive knowledge and skill in the working of bamboo. Bamboo is cut into strips and then woven carefully together to gain the form and pattern the maker wants. In some cases colorful grasses are placed along with each strip of bamboo to give a colored pattern to the outside of the bamboo boxes. Bamboo items can also be stained different colors after they have cured and dried out.

Sem Mah Akha is a village near Haen Taek which has been split for many years by the catholics. The village has also lost much of its land to PTT, Forestry and PDA project schemes as noted by the signs around the village farming and forest areas.





### **The Akha Gate Ceremony**

Akha gates are rebuilt each year, two per village, one on each end. For there to be an Akha gate as the one at left a special elder is needed in the village called a “Dzoeuh Mah”. If this elder is not to be found in that particular village then only a post gate is built as is shown above. Gates may last from four to five years in Thailand before falling down. But up in Burma many more gates can be seen because of the dryer weather.

Missionaries such as the catholics and Paul Lewis did much to destroy traditional Akha culture in Burma so not many gates can be found.

Gates are decorated with stars and objects which represent evil that the village wants to keep away. Many gates are adorned with carved wooden birds, planes and helicopters.

Stars are also made and put on trees around the gate to mark the area as protected from cutting.

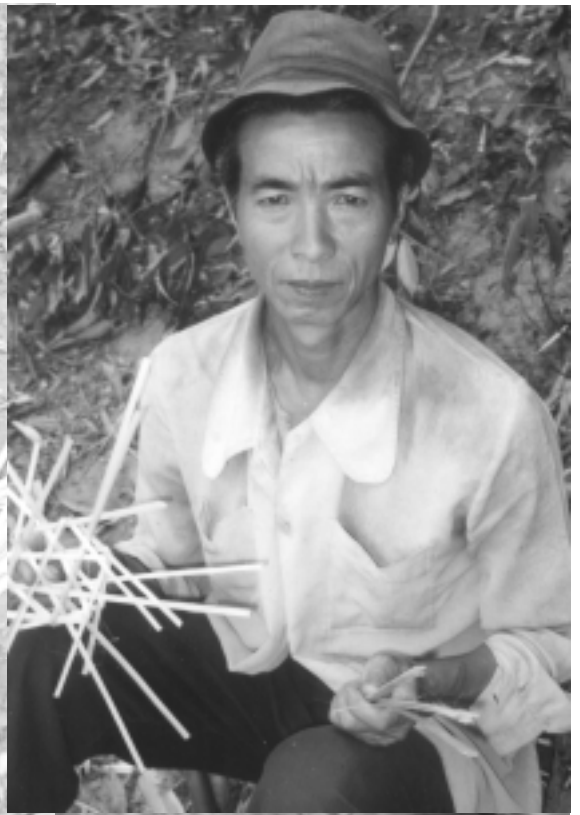
## Making Stars

Ah Baw Zah of Pah Nmm Akha in Ampur Mae Faluang makes strips of bamboo called “ah nay” which are then woven into stars.

Green bamboo is sharp and it is easy to slice one's hands on a strip of it. Even the smallest string of bamboo should never be grasped and pulled on as it is incredibly strong and will cut into the hands like wire.

The Akha are expert at working bamboo and wood with knives, many kinds of knives. Fine work can be done with a large machete sharpened on stone, or with a more delicate knife made specifically for splitting bamboo strips. Such a knife has a short blade and a long handle which is allowed to rest against the arm while working the bamboo across the short blade. Moves are slow, the blade is twisted to split the bamboo through agility more than force, lessening the chance of cut fingers.









### Rice Cakes

Previous page: For every major festival sticky rice grown in a special field is steamed and then pounded in a wooden pestle till worked into a sticky mass. Small black seeds called “luuh seeh” are added along with some salt and the paste is shaped into cakes which are given to guests.

Akha spirit women called “Gneeh Pahs” hold a healing ceremony in a village house. The ceremonial rice box is shown and the whiskey flask, used in ceremonies. A man reads a pig’s liver to determine the blessing on a new house.



## Akha Economics

Despite the Thai governments best attempts to take all their farm land and eradicate their “primitive and unsavory” life stye the Akha continue to hold on the best they can. Many young women have been forced to make the choice of prostitution in hopes of a better life. This woman at right tries to support herself and her son by selling flowers on the streets of Chiangmai at night which just doesn’t pay much compared to the alternatives. The Thai government is a creature with no sense of cause and effect and even less compassion for the “NON-THAI” inhabitants of the land. We unfortunately can not say much in praise of this Thaksin government in light of decree after decree punishing the mountain people with unbareable conditions and abuse. There has yet to be seen a reform of government brutality and corruption which deprive the poorest people hope for the future.

Ranging far afield, the Akha make it to the southern oceans, plying their mountain wares where ever they can find to go.





## Portraits

Nothing is quite so fascinating as all the different Akha villages and the enormous variety of Akha people who inhabit them. Masters of various skills needed in the community each life carries a mysterious story of struggle, tragedy, hope and joy against overwhelming odds. We try to show many of the Akha personalities in this section.

Gneeh Pah Moeuh Leh is a spirit woman healer. The crustians try to silence these skilled women who are knowledgeable in healing wounds of body and heart, turning back sickness and making special herbal potions. Crustians accuse them of worshipping the devil as reason to destroy the positions of these wonderful women, who are singers, dancers, poets of history and the human spirit. Gneeh



Pah Moeuh Leh has seen many changes in the world around the Akha but loyally travels to villages and homes where she is called, staying up all night to perform the traditional ceremonies. Akha from the village gather in the house in great numbers to hear her sing, watch her dance and deal with the illness of the effected person. The crustians who say that she is working with the devil, can't explain how she can do good with the power of evil???





### **A Woman of Dreams.....**

A Gneeh Pah can be heard throughout the night singing her plaintive chants and songs, calling poetry from heart to heart to remind of parents and days gone by, the conditions of life and poverty, of struggle and the reality of God in the lives of their people. God gave some of them wealth, and some of them poverty, but sickness can take them all.

Gneeh Pahs are well known throughout the villages and even villages where the Christians have destroyed much of Akha culture, labeled the spirit women as witches and banned the ceremonies, the Akha still know where the nearby Gneeh Pahs live and visit them for cures to ill health of either themselves or their children. Traveling to visit Gneeh Pahs is one of the surest signs that conversion of villages imposed by the missionaries is not a matter of village consensus but one of force and coercion, the traitors in the village being rewarded financially by the Christians for their evil work.





### **The Ladies On The Hill**

Two generations of Akha women from different villages meet for a wedding in the mountains. Akha clothes are carefully built and decorated by hand over many years.

**Ah Baw Loh** takes the time to hand cut his tobacco crop to keep his pipe running late into the night. The Akha grow a host of useful crops and herbs, quite full of variety, each one for a use around the house. Special bushes for a coarse broom, another plant for water gourds or lufa sponges, a seed for crushing for its sour flavor, another seed to put in the ceremonial rice cakes.



