



NORTH THAILAND LAST TRIBES

by Eric Lafforgue



Miss A Na tells a secret to Lu Mue. Big ears village, Ban Mai Nai Soi, fourth section

Kor Yor tribe (Kayaw), aka the Big Ears or Long Ears, as they wear since their youngest age some huge ear rings. This tribe can be found in North Thailand where, as the Long Necks, they are Karenni refugees from Myanmar. Most of the ones i met are christians, and wear some Jesus cross around the neck.

They are different from the long Neck women, as they have their own language and traditions. In Thailand, like the Long Necks, they can be seen in tourists villages that she share.





Uncle Ja Yo, Ban Bor Kai village Lahu playing traditional Nor Ku Ma instrument. Lahu people are famous for their musical instruments, made of wood and bamboo. Uncle Ja Yo told me that when he was young, he used his Nor Ku Ma to seduce the girls from the other villages, playing loud to attract them all around the valley! Lahu people live in the mountains of China, Myanmar, Laos and northern Thailand. There are approximately 30,000 Lahus now living in Thailand. There are four tribes within the Lahu: Black, Red, Yellow and She-Leh. I met the Black ones, called like that because of the black colors of the women's traditional clothes sleeves. Before, their domestic animals like chickens, pigs and buffaloes were kept in the basement corral of their houses, but Thai government has asked them to separate for health security. So now, you can find 2 villages: one for the humans, one for the animals! Most of the time, Lahus remain in the same place, but if some strange deaths happen, they can decide to leave the place. The Lahus are animist and believe in one spirit with overall control of all the others. Many Lahus have been converted to Christianity and have abandoned their old way of life.



On picture 1, Miss Na Kue is standing in front her house, and you can see that there is a bamboo sign over her head : a shaman has put it to forbidden the entry to strangers, as bad spirits are around...Lahu women are skilled in weaving cloth, they produce patchwork trims, and unusual embroidery work.

On picture 2, miss Na KUE is pausing with her two kids. She had the first one at 15, a common thing in the tribe. Some women still deliver the babies by standing and hanging to beam of the roof, in the traditional way. After the birth, the woman must eat only rice and chicken for 12 days. But not a chicken with white feather !



This old woman, Miss Tee Mo, (she is 67 years) is karen. She lives in Mae Soi-U , north of Thailand, close to burma border. The Karen are animist and have a lot of believes. She has asked the shaman to put some chicken bones on the roof of her house to protect it from the bad spirits which are always wandering around she told me. On the picture she wears some traditional decorations around the knees, made of laqued rattans and coton called Kae Bo. She is very sad as she told me she is the last one in the village to wear this, the next generation do not want to use them anymore. Karen people believe that after death, you enter a world which is the same than on earth, with people working in fields, taking care of the animals... They think that when the sun is down on the village, the sun is rising in the world of the deads.

On the left, Tonpee totems. Every year, the tribe rises another tompee, while men dance, and women sing. It's the time for girls and boys to meet and to plan weedings.



Every morning , Karen people go into the forest to take wood for fire, hunt, and collect leaves for the roofs.

They also produce some sticky rice alcohol. Everything is done in a traditional way. A man takes care of the sticky rice to ferment it for few days. Then it is boiled in a jar totally closed, and after few minutes, the alcohol comes out from the bamboo sticks. The place is rather weird as the girl who works is dumb and the man who helps her is mentally disturbed.

The atmosphere is full of alcohol vapors all day long, and the job is rather exhausting. The only decoration in this sad place is an old portrait of the royal family.



Lisu tribe Grand Mother is Celebrating the new year in Ban Nam Rin village, a place on the way to Mae Hong Son, when you come by car from Chinag Mai, after 1400 curves ! During the celebration of their new year, mid february, people dance , and have a big banquet with the whole village, and a shaman who blesses the kids. Behind her, the papers represents the good spirits for the year. There are about 30 000 Lisu living in 150 villages in North Thailand. The Lisu originated from China, and started to settle in Thailand around 1920. The Lisu grow rice and vegetables for subsistence and used to grow opium for sale, but it is supposed to have stopped now. Most Lisu live close to water because they believe water has a special power. Within each Lisu house is an ancestral altar. And in each village, there is a "village guardian spirit shrine" which is located above the village, in a roofed pavilion which women are forbidden to enter. The Lisu also worship Wu Sa (the creator spirit), and a multitude of spirits of the forest, ancestors, trees, the sun, moon





Long Neck women in Huay Sue Tao village

The long neck women are Burmese refugees. Five hundred Kayans live in Thailand. Around forty thousands tourists come to visit them each year. The young one on the picture explained me that they still wear the coil, as they feel pretty with it, but they do not want to put the bi gones, like their mothers used to do !

They start to put the coils when they are children. They add a coil each year that passes. It takes almost two hours to remove a coil from the neck. The neck is not stretched, the shoulders are pushed down, making the neck look longer.



It takes almost two hours to remove a coil from the neck. A fake legend says that if women fall they die by breaking their neck. Long neck women keep their coils during the sleep. To prevent their skin from sores, they cover it with leaves. Young generations wear a necklace to feel prettier but also to attract tourists. One theory claims the rings were designed to deter attacks from tigers. Tigers grab victims by the neck. Another says they were meant to lessen the women's beauty to ward off men from rival tribes.

