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AKHA TRADITIONAL COSTUME G35



These clothes are an example of the traditional costume worn by the Akha people of south-east Asia. The photographs below show similar items of clothing being worn by Akha people.



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The Akha people are believed to have originated in China and Tibet. Today they are found living in several countries - China, Laos, Burma and northern Thailand. Because of the presence of many tourists, the Akha of Thailand are the most familiar. The Akha are relatively recent immigrants into Thailand, having arrived there in the early twentieth century. There are several other tribal peoples, each with their own distinctive traditions, living in the same area as the Akha.

Movement from place to place was a part of the traditional Akha way of life. They tended to live on high, thickly forested mountains and practised a form of agriculture called slash and burn - they would cut and burn tracts of forest to create temporary fields in which they grew crops such as rice, soya beans, tobacco and opium. When the land became less productive they would move their village and its fields to a new location. However, the creation of strict international boundaries, rival claims of land ownership (including claims by both logging companies and national parks) and population growth has made this semi-nomadic way of live impossible. The Akha also hunted in the forest using crossbows but, again, some modern laws designed to protect wildlife have led to a diminishment of this tradition.



Traditionally the Akha lived in bamboo houses raised on low wooden stilts. These huts were divided by gender - one side was for the women and the other side, occupied by the men, was used as a more public area. Cooking was done on an open fire and there was no electricity or running water. Because most villages were perched at the top of a mountain the job of fetching water from a lower water source was often labourious. It was done by women, perhaps four or five times a day. The men worked on the surrounding rice and tobacco fields, from dawn until dusk.

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The traditional costume of the Akha is perhaps the most colourful of all the hill tribes in the area. The basic cloth is usually indigo coloured cotton. In the past cotton was grown in each village, though this is less common today. The photograph on the right shows an Akha woman spinning the raw cotton to make yarn.

Bands of coloured cloth are then stitched onto the backing material. In addition beads, buttons, feathers and silver coins and baubles added, particularly to the headgear. The silver items give both glitter and underline the wearer's wealth. The style of headgear varies from tribal group to tribal group - some are pointed, while others are flatter. Colourful leggings are strapped around the legs. The items in this box give a good idea of this form of dress, although the hat lacks the silver coins and baubles which are widely used. The box also includes a decorated basket and pipe. Pipes are used to smoke both tobacco and opium.







Above: A very splendid silver head dress. The lady's teeth are stained with betel nut juice - a popular snack. Above right: Akha ladies dancing and singing. Right: Inside a traditional house. Note the leggings on the lady - and the boy wearing 'western' style clothes behind her.

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The traditional Akha way of life today is under great pressure. All sorts of factors play their part in this. Land dispossession, the war on drugs, tourism, television, education, medicine and so on - all have an effect on the older ways of thinking and behaving. Many Akha do not wear traditional clothing factory - made copies of western-style branded goods from China are much cheaper. The photograph on the right shows Akha people (gambling in the street) wearing such items. The photograph on the left shows two Akha children.





On the other hand, an increasingly important source of income, particularly in Thailand, is tourism. In some places Akha wear their traditional costume in part to attract back-packers and other western tourists to visit their villages and spend money (left). Items of traditional clothing are often made specifically to sell as souvenirs to tourists. The photograph on the right shows a group of Akha men who have travelled to Bangkok to sell their traditional-style goods.



Right: Traditional Akha head dresses and jewellery for sale on the internet.



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Traditional Akha villages can be distinguished by the presence of spirit gates and a swing. A gate can be seen on the right. There are usually two gates at the entry and exit of each village. It is believed that such a gate will keep bad spirits out of the village. The villagers build new gates every year and dedicate them to the spirits with many sacrifices. Only men are allowed to help in the construction of these gates. Once built the gates should be used when entering or leaving the village, although it is forbidden to touch them.



The Akha swing ceremony, the best known of all hill-tribe rituals and celebrations, is held in mid-August and September when the rice and corn are almost ready for harvest. Traditionally, the Akha believe that once elders have passed on into the spiritual world, they take on the role of guardian spirits who watch over the village and see to the welfare and well-being of their living relatives. As a sign of their gratitude, Akha families and village communities take part in the annual swing ceremony in which, over a period of four days, families make ritual offerings to their ancestors.



A new village swing is made each year. The new frame must use at least two of the postholes of the old frame and its shadow must not fall on any house. Men secure the four poles, tie them together at the top and suspend a long rope from it, with a loop at the bottom end. The village holy man makes offerings at each posthole to the earth spirits, to avert any accidents. When all is ready anyone who wants to can now ride the swing for this and the following two days.



Many people wear traditional costume for this festival, even if they don't usually do so. The ceremony is used to mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood. For the first time in their life, Akha girls are dressed in their full adult attire, complete with a heavily-ornamented head-dress. For Akha girls and women, the costume and particularly the head-dress reflects stages in their life, evolving through childhood to adolescence and culminating in the elaborate adult attire worn for the first time at the annual swing ceremony.