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But is it Authentic?

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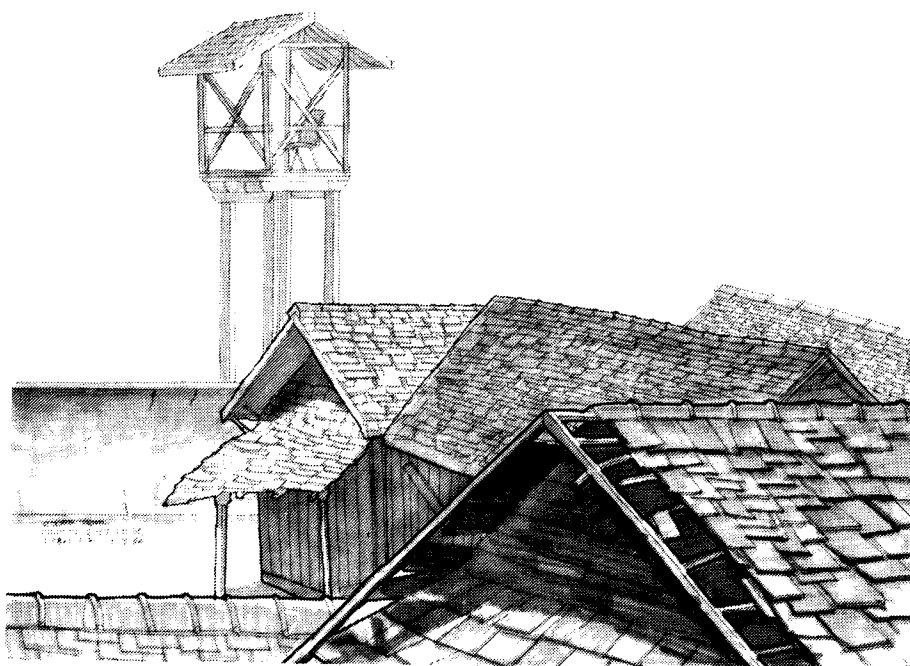
Dear Peter,

After the heat, fumes, crowding and traffic of Bangkok, Chiang Mai seems like paradise. Verdant and cool, Chiang Mai is situated in a valley over 1000 feet above sea level, 440 miles to the north of Thailand's steamy, sprawling capital. Chiang Mai is Thailand's second largest city, a large town really, that blends provincial Thai culture with bits of indigenous hill tribe and the west. At first glance much of the city seems but a smaller, quieter extension of Bangkok, dominated by a thriving urban culture of T-shirts, jeans and rock music. Indeed, Chiang Mai's pop culture, a result of contact between Thailand and the modern West, is similar to Bangkok's and just as ubiquitous. The provincial variant draws on the capital for sustenance, following the latest trends in music and dress. Chiang Mai also boasts a veneer of Western tourist culture - shops, signs and restaurants - a result of its de rigueur status among package tourists and itinerant "world travellers" that come to luxuriate in the climate, buy the local handicrafts and photograph the numerous wats (monasteries), temples and the many hill tribe villages surrounding the city.

Urban tinsel, however, has not obliterated the past. In traditional matters, northern Thais continue to assert their separate identity, a mixture of Thai, Burmese, Lao and Chinese culture. Northern Thais regard the lowland culture of the central Thais with a distinct attitude of superiority, even disdain. They have resisted assimilation. Buddhism, as practiced in the north, differs in several respects from the central Thai variety. The many wats and temples in the distinctive northern style are kept in good repair. Local handicrafts, such as celadon pottery, laquerware and silkweaving are thriving and remain responsive both to local needs and the demands of the tourist industry. The local Thai dialect is widely spoken.

Hill tribe culture, alas, is not as resilient. Chiang Mai is the main Thai urban trading station for the Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Yao, Karen and Hmong, the ethnically and culturally distinct, semi-

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nomadic tribal groups occupying the mountainous border areas of Thailand, Burma, Laos and China. They have been less successful than the northern Thais in retaining their cultural integrity in the face of foreign influence.

Thailand's hill tribes are "stateless societies," disenfranchised minorities whose destinies are in

large part controlled by the majority Thai culture. Like the Veddah of Sri Lanka, the Ja-hut of Malaysia, the Ainu of Japan, the Maori of New Zealand or the aborigines of Australia, the Thai hill tribes can be termed "Fourth World" societies, an anthropological definition, differentiating these sub-cultures from the politically-bounded societies of the First, Second and Third Worlds that surround them.

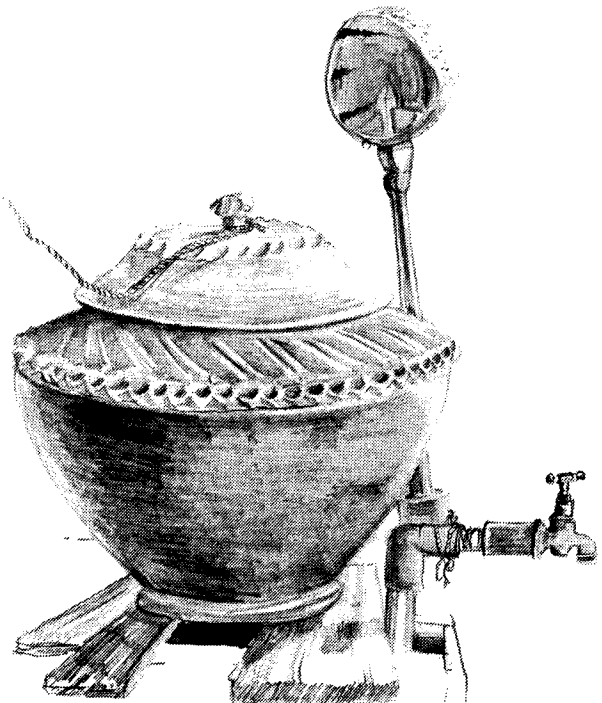
The hill tribes make up an estimated 8-10% of the total Thai population, about 200-500,000 persons. They migrated to Thailand over a long period of time in waves, from China, Burma and Laos, the biggest influx being after each of the World Wars. Each new wave has brought in tribes from areas differing in dialect and dress from older settlers. Thus, the Akha have two branches, each with a completely different style of dress and the Hmong have two sub-groups, the White and the Blue (names applied by the tribes themselves to differentiate one group from another)

Though the hill tribes, and some tribal sub-groups, each have their own language, customs, music and dance, they are most obviously distinguished by their arts, in particular their distinctive tribal garments, traditionally crafted from naturally-dyed, homespun cloth ornamented in a variety of ways. The Yao and Akha decorate their garments with intricate needlework patterns, while the Lisu do applique. The Hmong are well known for their monochrome batik and batik-applique combinations. The Karens are distinguished by their fine weaving. Shirts, trousers, skirts and vests are elaborately worked with these techniques and decorated

with hand crafted ornaments and a variety of trade goods: beads, Burmese coins, Indian rupees, bone, bits of tin and silver. Jewelry, either homemade or traded, completes the costume (Venetian red-glass bead necklaces have long been popular items, relics of the longstanding overland and sea trade between Europe and Asia). Created primarily by women, and worn as everyday wear by both sexes, the garments are continuously refurbished and replaced. Old, worn-out clothes are usually discarded.

The mountains that once insulated the hill tribes from all but infrequent contact with each other and the occasional missionary or trader, thus insuring cultural integrity, are now less formidable barriers to communication. Roads and transportation have been improved, allowing easier trade with Chiang Mai and other urban centers. Even the remotest villages are now accessible by air. The Thai government, intent upon integrating the hill tribes into the cultural mainstream, insuring their now uncertain political loyalty, weaning them from destructive slash-and-burn agriculture and replacing profitable opium with other cash crops like orchids and coffee, has set up schools and clinics in numerous villages. The Thai monarch, King Bhumibol, has also sponsored a variety of projects to improve the economic lot, health and housing of the hill tribes. Chiang Mai University even has a Tribal Research Center, part of the Tribal Welfare Division of the government's Department of Public Welfare. The Center researches tribal culture and provides the government with vital statistics. Though most northern Thais, in fact, regard the hill tribes as shiftless, lazy heathens (few of the tribes are Buddhist) with a weakness for opium, they are fast becoming one of the region's biggest tourist draws. Today there is a new breed of missionary and trader, the foreign "trekkers," tourists organized in groups or on their own that hike the highland trails for a few days to a month for a taste of "unspoilt" hill tribe life, spreading Western culture and the cash economy in their wake.

Increasing contact with Western tourists and Chiang Mai's urban Thai





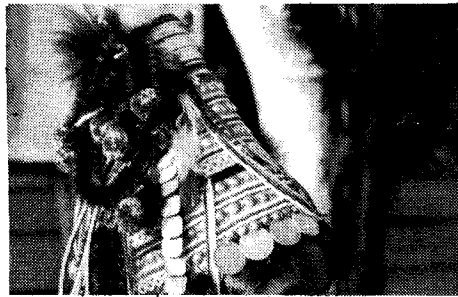
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culture has wrought tremendous changes in hill tribe custom, dress, music, dance and art. Though often suspicious of traditional Thai culture and Buddhism, many hill tribe villagers have happily accepted secular, mass culture, listening to Western and Thai rock and pop rather than their own musical forms, combining traditional wear with T-shirts and jeans, or discarding conventional garments altogether for urban dress.

Hill tribe art, the most popular and portable aspect of hill tribe culture among tourists, has undergone some of the most radical transformations. Villagers in the vicinity of Chiang Mai, faced with a host of modern conveniences, are increasingly dependent on the city for goods they once made themselves. They now purchase handicraft supplies like synthetic yarn and thread, day-glow dyes, plastic buttons and beads, feather dusters (in lieu of home-dyed chicken feathers), machine-milled and printed cloth (even imitation Hmong batik) and sewing machines at stores like the Hill Tribe Supply Center. Traders have added these items to their traditional repertoire for sale to up-country villages.

Traditional garment-craft, weaving and other art forms, like basketry, are fast diminishing in the face of mass-produced competition or are being altered, at the behest of urban shops, boutiques and traders, to service the foreign cash-and-carry consumer. Hmong batik is now rarely produced for village wear. Instead, cloth bolts, batik-applique pillowcases or bedspreads are more common. Some Karen weaving has also been redirected to this sort of production or is being sold for urban wall-hangings. Yao and Akha needlework and Lisu applique are now commonly found on pillowcases and Western-style vests or headbands. Old clothing is no longer discarded, but sold to traders or the boutiques to be refashioned into Western-style wear. Quick to learn, and perhaps anxious to by-pass the urban middleman, many tribal entrepreneurs are making and selling similarly modified clothes on their own initiative.

Though the hill tribes have long incorporated external cultural artifacts into their dress (like the Burmese coins and the Venetian-glass beads), in the present context change is no longer gradual and is externally and commercially oriented. Pillowcases and headbands are no longer functional art forms, they are commercial art forms, produced to fulfill an outsider's idea (or the local perception of an outsider's idea) of what makes a suitably authentic and eminently saleable hill tribe souvenir. Though Thai government officials at the Tribal Research Center speak of inte-



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(one has been heard humming Leo Sayer's "I Love You More Than I Can Say"). Hutheesing has also noticed Thai elements creeping into their lifestyles: when the boy's father recently came down from the highlands to visit, he was greeted not by the traditional Akha greeting, but by his son's newly learned wai, the traditional palms-together Thai salutation. Though the Akha girl is still capable of the intricate needlework necessary for fine Akha garments, she rarely has the time to sew them. The communal context that nurtured the development of such elaborate attire is lacking in the city and there are other distractions, like TV.

There are other Akha in Chiang Mai. Hutheesing has noted eight Akha girls supported by the Chiang Mai Cultural Center to do nightly dance performances. There are also a few Akha at the Diamond Hotel that perform traditional dances for guests. Unlike the elaborate, precisely controlled movements of Thai

gration, "uplifting the hill tribe standard of living while allowing them to maintain much of their traditional way of life," assimilation, via trade and tourism, is a de facto process.

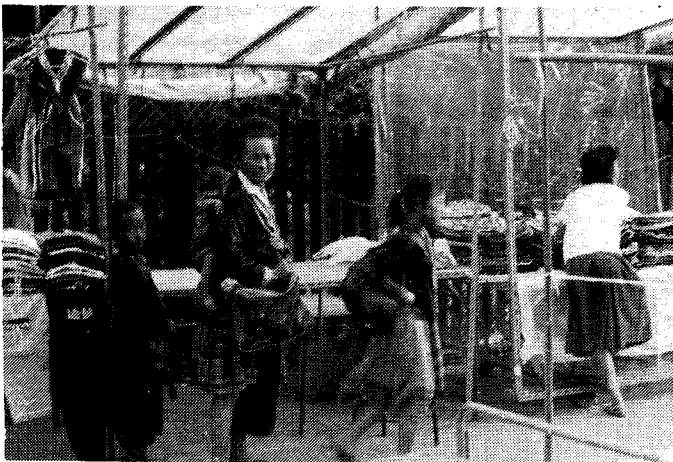
During my recent visit to Chiang Mai I visited Otome Hutheesing, a sociologist studying contemporary hill tribe life. Hutheesing received her Ph.D. from the University of Leiden, Holland and subsequently taught at universities in Holland, India, the United States and Malaysia. Most recently she was a senior lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia where her work involved the sociology of the family, social inequality processes and culture and cognition. Her present freelance research among the Akha and Lisu hill tribes is an attempt to criticize conventional academic frameworks of research.

Hutheesing lives in a small, timber-framed home off one of Chiang Mai's by-lanes, a tree-shaded street peppered with hotels, restaurants and a sprinkling of world travellers. She has ready access to information on the Akha: the house is also occupied by Assu and Adjoe, two Akha youngsters who have come to Chiang Mai to attend secondary school, the first two Akha to do so. They have adjusted quickly to urban ways, eschewing traditional dress for T-shirts and jeans and traditional music for the latest pop tunes

classical dance, Akha dances are "informal hopscotch affairs," accompanied by the soft, thin sounds of the Akha whistle. Taken out of the village context and danced on a city stage before a foreign audience they become meaningless and don't fare well in competition with hard-driving urban rhythms and dance movements. To remedy this lack of competitive edge, urban Thai and Chinese organizers have tried to spice up the traditional repertoire with contemporary, Western movements; at one performance even the cha-cha was thrown in as a grand finale. Like the village artists modifying garments to suit urban tastes, these dancers must take their cue from the outside. They have little control over the development of their dance.

The Night Bazaar provides yet another context for the acculturation of the Akha and other hill tribes. The Bazaar is held every evening along a number of adjacent streets in downtown Chiang Mai. Thai and Chinese sellers predominate, though a few Tibetan and Nepali traders are also present. Wares range from inexpensive mass-produced clothes and household items typical of night markets on the Southeast Asian mainland, to the equally ubiquitous (and equally mass-produced) Nepali and Tibetan trade goods: Buddhist and Hindu icons, prayer wheels, opium weights and scales, related drug paraphernalia and other trinkets. The Bazaar is popular among locals, visiting Thais and foreign tourists. For the visitor unwilling or unable to go to a hill tribe village, the Night Bazaar affords the opportunity to purchase traditional and contemporary hill tribe goods. Hutheesing observes that the Bazaar is, "altogether a perfect example of cultural diffusion that has taken place, either in the goods displayed or the way traders attire themselves."

The few Akha at the Night Bazaar are primarily women, a number of whom are divorced and have run away from their villages. All live in Chiang Mai, alone, with kinfolk or with boyfriends. Among the Akha, if divorced it is thought to bring bad luck to return to one's family. The Night Bazaar affords the divorcee an escape from life as a battered wife or marriage to a heroin addicted husband. (This last has become a real social problem among the hill tribes in recent years. In the past, opium was grown and



harvested primarily for sale as a cash crop, to be refined into heroin elsewhere. There was some addiction among older people. Now, heroin is finding its way back to the villages and is increasingly being used by young people.)

Though estranged from their villages, these Akhas have become a conduit for the Akha arts. They readily accept innovation, wearing and selling traditional clothing an

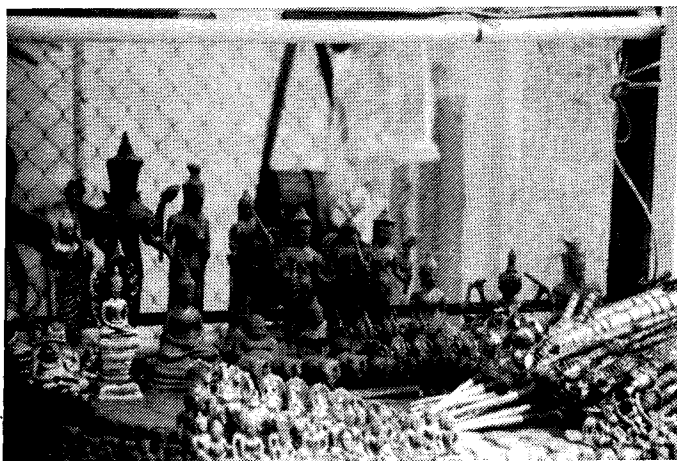


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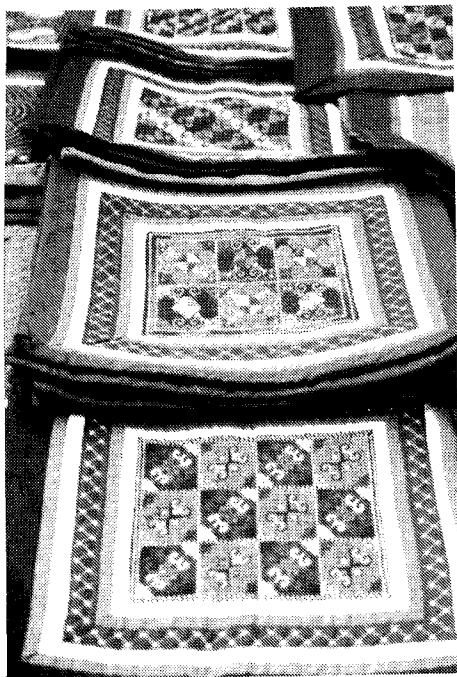
few Karen sellers and one Lahu. By far the biggest hill tribe contingent at the Night Bazaar are the Hmong. Called the Meo by the Thais, the Hmong, along with the Karen, are the most Christianized of the hill tribes. The Hmong sellers are both male and female and come down to Chiang Mai only in the evenings for the Bazaar, returning each night to their village of Dui Pui; about 18 miles from Chiang Mai. Like the Akha, the Hmong attire themselves in tribal dress and mixed, Western-cut attire. They sell a

garments cut to Western tastes. Although they will not wear the traditional garments of another tribe, these Akha entrepreneurs will willingly dress in Western-cut attire of another tribe such as a Yao-design vest or a Lisu skirt. Whereas other tribal clothing is unacceptable, Western-style tribal wear, like Thai pop culture, is secular and chic.

There are a number of other hill tribe people selling at the Night Bazaar. Hutheesing has identified a



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variety of tribal goods as well as some Nepali and Tibetan items. Apparently, they do well enough to encourage imitation: at least one Chinese trader at the Night Bazaar dresses in Hmong tribal gear to sell hill tribe arts and Tibetan-Nepali trade goods.

The Hmong have also set up a number of shops near the entrance to Dui Pui to cash in on the considerable tourist traffic. Dui Pui is one of the closest hill tribe villages to Chiang Mai, accessible by truck. This lucrative venue has also been infiltrated by Nepali, Tibetan and Chinese traders.

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Just about everyone in the village sells a pastiche of tribal, Thai and Nepali-Tibetan goods. The unwitting tourist might easily buy a mass-produced Thai imitation of a Burmese opium weight from a Nepali trader at the Hmong village, thinking his newfound purchase an "authentic hilltribe souvenir."



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Though Dui Pui and the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar are the two major arenas for the sale of hill tribe goods and the diffusion of external cultural influences, trading of hill tribe goods for eventual sale to tourists occurs in all the major towns and villages of northern Thailand. Thai and Chinese sellers from Chiang Mai and Bangkok travel to Mai Sai, Chiang Rai and other northern towns collecting old clothes, old baskets and other odds and ends and place orders for bulk cloth and made-to-order clothing for urban markets and shops in Chiang Mai, Bangkok and overseas.

Traditional hill tribe arts were originally produced in a communal, rural context where the weaving, dyeing, sewing and decoration of cloth were meaningful activities and the wearing of finely-worked clothing a source of pride and prestige. Now, when tourists or traders purchase old, discarded traditional hill tribe clothing, they change this traditional context, imbuing the cast-offs with antique, cash value. In this new context these functional art forms are transformed into either fine art for display or functional art of a different sort: clothing to be worn by the tourist, conferring prestige on the wearer not through traditional criteria but via a more cosmopolitan aesthetic and the snob appeal of association, however tenuous, with an exotic, vanishing culture.

Recutting and redesigning old clothes, or commissioning hill tribes to produce Western-styled garments or bulk cloth introduces an entirely new spectrum of values into hill tribe garment production. In this commercial context, buyers and wearers, though unaware or only slightly cognizant of traditional standards are directing much of the evolution of the product, injecting their own aesthetic and commercial criteria. Like hill tribe music and dance performed on a city stage, this is no longer a source of pride, but a source of cash.

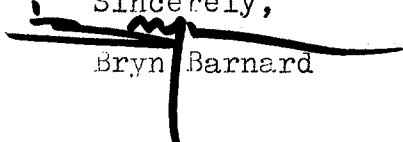
Hutheesing believes the assimilation of the hill tribes into urban commercial structures and mass culture is inevitable but lamentable: "I watch the disappearance of the hill tribe cultures with sadness. Perhaps I'm sentimental, but I think it is disheartening to see crafts, dances and music being replaced with machine-made materials and sounds. Craftsmanship and

and pride in their work is vanishing, while the hill tribes are not enriching themselves, materially nor spiritually."

As the hill tribes are absorbed into urban Thai culture and begin to distance themselves from the their traditional communal existence, the need to produce traditional wear will undoubtedly also diminish. An increasing proportion of hill tribe art will probably be diverted to contemporary, externally oriented production. Quality may be maintained, improve or decline depending on the criteria of the foreign market. Certainly traditional aesthetics will have a diminished role.

The danger here is that, bereft of old garments for stylistic reference and without traditional communal standards as an aesthetic framework, it may soon become difficult for the urbanized hill tribes to differentiate between the traditional and the spurious. Indeed, today in Dui Pui some Hmong sellers, when questioned, appear to have difficulty distinguishing traditional and contemporary Hmong arts from the Yao, Lisu, Akha or even Tibetan goods they also sell. Perhaps in time, the future descendants of the hill tribes may display today's applique pillows, opium weights and batik bedspreads as heirlooms in their urban living rooms, souvenirs of a traditional past.

Sincerely,


Bryn Barnard

List of Illustrations

1. Sketch; view of rooftops from Chumpol Guest House, Chiang Mai; marker and felt-tip pen on bristol board; BEB
2. Sketch; mo narm and kaboi (water container and ladle); pencil on bristol board; BEB
3. Photograph; dancing girls during Songkraan (Buddhist water festival) parade, pseudo-Akha clothes, African earrings.
4. Photograph; traditional Akha headdress, front, side and back views. Indian rupees and Burmese coins incorporated into decoration; BEB
5. Photograph; hill tribe family at the Night Bazaar, Chiang Mai; BEB
6. Photograph; display of Hmong cross stitch work, pillow cases and table cloths, Night Bazaar, Chiang Mai; BEB
7. Photograph; Hindu and Buddhist icons, pipes and opium weights on sale at Night Bazaar, Chiang Mai; BEB
8. Photograph; display of Hmong cross stitch work on pillow cases; BEB
9. Photograph; Akha embroidered vests refashioned into Western-style "world traveller" garb, sidewalk boutique, Chiang Mai; BEB

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