

play!



029 A Hmong musician welcomes the New Year on his gheng.

Equipment
Nikon D70

Location
Phongsali, Laos

text & photos VICTORIA VORREITER

Language of the Gods

The Golden Triangle gets into the groove

Oral culture remains vibrant in the foothills of the Himalayas, where Myanmar, Laos and Thailand once knew no boundaries. The guardians of bardic tradition – master musicians, shamans, headmen, matriarchs and patriarchs – have passed down a rich trove of songs, stories and ceremonies through countless generations to keep alive the history of their people, a diverse diaspora that has migrated for millennia from mountaintop to mountaintop, from the highlands of China and Tibet, and along the great rivers of Southeast Asia.

Here in remote hill villages of the Golden Triangle, over 130 distinct groups and subgroups reside, maintaining their cultural identity to a high degree. Each community is uniquely marked by the language, dress and features, the tenets, traditions and arts that reflect their world. Each also safeguards a vast repertoire of vocal and instrumental music that sustains their lives, from the first breath to the last sigh.

For the traditional peoples of Southeast Asia – animists highly attuned to nature’s cycles – sound is a portal to understanding the universe. Auditory perception is as keenly honed as the visual. They listen to the melodies and rhythms

030 A Lisu She She musician plays during the New Year Festival.



Location
Teng Chong, Yunnan, China

Equipment
Nikon D70



Equipment
Nikon D70

Location
Keng Tung, Myanmar

031 An Eng musician celebrates the Fertility Festival.

Location
Keng Tung, Myanmar

Equipment
Nikon D70



032 Lahu Shi villagers celebrating at the Harvest Festival.



033 Karen S'gaw musicians play bird-like tones on their kwae free-reed horns.

Location
Chiang Mai, Thailand

Equipment
Nikon D70



034 A Mien musician accompanies a bride and her wedding party (The bride is believed to be sheltered from evil spirits by the red umbrella-like covering).

Location
Phayao, Thailand

Equipment
Nikon D70

of their forebears at a deep level and with great reverence, for music is sacred and is integrated into every facet of life, from the life passages of individuals, the cycles of the seasons, the wellbeing of the community, to the perpetuation of the ancestral heritage.

Incantations, chants, songs, percussive or tonal calls, and instrumental music animate every ceremony and festival, propelling the participants through hours and days to satisfactorily appease the spirits. Music is not merely accompaniment or entertainment on such occasions. Rather, music is a channel for attainment. In the tribal cultures of Asia, where transformation of human consciousness is regarded as holy and worth seeking, songs, intoned prayers and dances are performed as the very essence of their lives.

Tribal societies recognise music as a dynamic medium with mysterious and mighty powers, able to transform body, mind, heart and soul. Age-old melodies specially designated by ancestors are performed to intoxicate young couples in love, soothe babies to sleep, and guide the soul of the deceased into the spirit world. Pulsating rhythms are expressly chosen to incite shamans into hypnotic states, restore health to the afflicted, and harmonise the disparate energies of a community into one with a single thudding drumbeat.

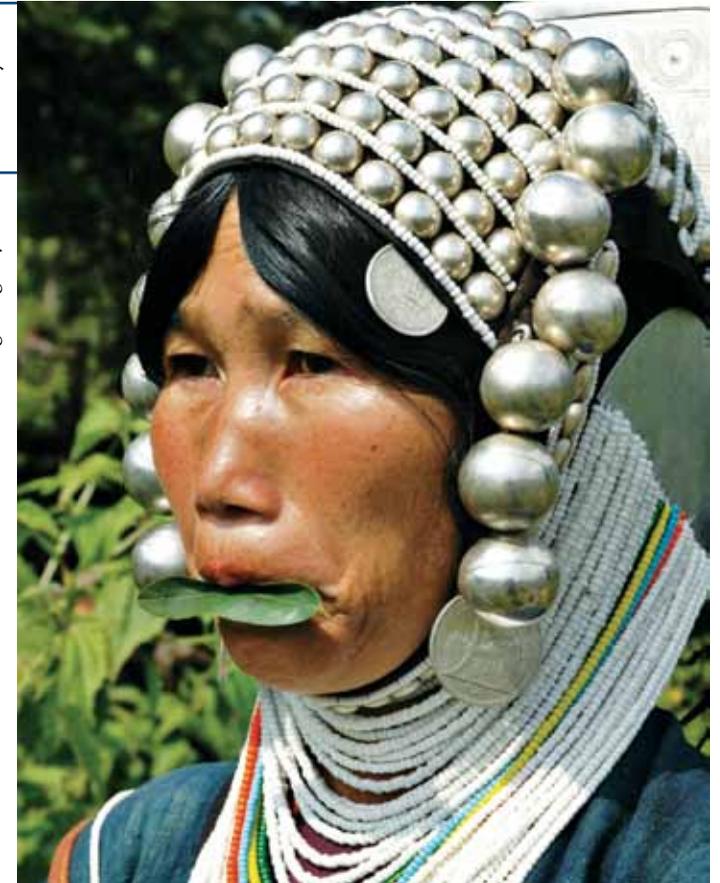
Most importantly, it is the responsibility of every family and village to honour their ancestors, spirits, and souls in

order to ensure abundance and wellbeing. Musical ritual becomes the singular means to communicate with the supernatural world, for music is the language of the gods. It is not surprising that music is integral to emotional life, initiation, healing and the sacred experience.

In most animistic societies rooted in oral culture, no written record of their beliefs exists. Rather, they are imprinted in the memories of those who continue to live them as expressed through songs, stories, poetry and prayers. These are the living archives of centuries of accumulated culture, history, and tenets of faith, anchoring members of a community to their life-source and instilling them with a sense of identity and belonging.

An all-night healing ceremony or a three-day wedding has great significance beyond the function of treatment or union. These highly organised, meticulously observed rites fulfil a sacred purpose that is engrained in people's consciousness and essential to their worldview. For the traditional peoples of the Golden Triangle, songs are the chronicles and oracles of tribal ways of life. **AG**

An American researcher/filmmaker and musician living in Thailand, **Victoria Vorreiter** is passionate about documenting the traditional songs and ceremonies of the peoples of the Golden Triangle. tribalmusicasia.com



035 An Akha Loimi woman plays ancestral melodies on a leaf.

Location
Keng Tung, Myanmar

Equipment
Nikon D70