

§ 1. High up in the mountains of southeast Asia, you can find the Akha hill tribes living in their traditional villages and farming the land.

§ 2. The history of the Akha people goes back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. They originally came from Tibet and have maintained the physical characteristics of that region, being fairly short and dark in complexion. Today, they live in small villages in the mountainous parts of China, Laos and northern Thailand. The Akha people are rich in culture, history and tradition. But they are also among the world's poorest people. Akha women remain remarkably strong and **cheerful** in the face of such a hard life. Akha men are brave and strong.

§ 3. The Akha have their own way of measuring time where one week lasts 12 days. Each village has its own leader or headman, and under his guidance people follow a code of behaviour known as the Akha Way. Thanks to the Akha Way, each person in these small communities knows their role in society. The men provide for their families by farming crops. They are also talented craftsmen. The women do spinning and weaving and make their own clothes. They wear colourfully decorated black shirts and skirts, and thick black leggings. Their headdresses are especially distinctive. As for the children, even though many of them don't attend school, they all know the names of every plant and animal in the forest. There is no written Akha language but the oral tradition is very rich.

§ 4. Akha villages all look quite similar. The bamboo houses with their thatched roofs stand on stilts (*cəu*) on the hillsides. Every village has two wooden frames that look like a doorway at its entrance and exit. These structures have spiritual significance and are called the 'spirit gates'. Artists cover the frames with carvings of both evil and smiling faces. This is to invite good spirits to enter the village and keep bad spirits out. Each summer the men build a swing in a public open space. Here the young children gather to play, but not just as a playground game — it is part of the yearly ceremony to honour dead ancestors.

§ 5. Sadly, the Akha Way is slowly disappearing from many villages. A growing number of tourists are visiting them and introducing a taste of Western culture. The women and girls only dress traditionally when there are tourists around in the hope they will buy souvenirs. Some Akha have even decided to take things a step further: they are leaving their villages to seek their **fortunes** in the big cities.

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The Akha build spirit gates on the edges of their villages to

- 1) protect the village from danger.
- 2) welcome visitors to the village.
- 3) give artists a place to work.