

The Hmong Peoples of Southeast Asia



Ethnicity:

According to fragmented history, the Hmong swept down into China many centuries ago from the steppes of Siberia, Mongolia and Tibet. In China, Hmong, whose name means "free people," had their own government with their own laws. They were one of the earliest native or majority people in China. The Hmong, being a nomadic tribe of farmers, began a never-ending quest for land that took them throughout China, and on into Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, with about 250,000 still living in Yunnan province in China.

The Hmong today, are a people without a homeland. As early as the seventeenth century, Hmong have lived as refugees throughout Asia, enduring the substantial loss of their own culture under the violence against them. As a result, the survival of Hmong literature, historical documents, and cultural artifacts is sparse.

The Hmong, are a proud and independent people who, down the long years, have evolved into a tribe of itinerant hill farmers, many thousands of whom have established villages in the hills of northern Thailand where they are called "Mao," which means barbarian. Their population in Thailand is about 70,000. Many of the Hmong people in Thailand today began life in this country in refugee camps, having fled persecution in neighboring countries.



For years, the main crop harvested by the Hmong was the opium poppy. Opium, and its conversion to heroin, brought income and debilitating addiction to the hilltribe people; and it has only been during the past decade that the efforts of the Royal Project in Thailand, along with non government organizations, have been successful achieving a vast reduction in poppy cultivation. The majority of hilltribe farmers now grow a variety of cash crops including coffee, tea, rice, vegetables and fruit. With government help, such products are now marketed worldwide.

Religion:

Their traditional religion is animism, which is the belief that good and evil spirits influence every aspect of life. The Hmong live in fear of these spirits and have regular animal sacrifices to appease them. The Hmong, believe that natural objects possess souls. Household spirits abound in each home, protecting all therein from bad spirits, illness and death. Every house has an altar of a piece of paper covered in cock's feathers affixed with chicken blood. Every Hmong village boasts at least one shaman (holy person), whose job it is to look after the well-being of all in the village. He or she, being called in to cure a person who is sick, is likely to fall into a trance and to perform ritual dancing in order to drive out the illness. All of these spirits are demonic and keep the Hmong in bondage and darkness.

Maintaining culture and religion have come under severe pressure as the realities of modern living take their toll: while the movement continues of entire villages in the pursuit of better land, more and more are settling into permanency; pickup trucks have all but replaced the sturdy hill ponies; Hmong children are being educated in Thai and U.S. schools, colleges and universities, and yesterday's poppy farmer is today's hilltribe coffee entrepreneur.

For all that, the unique culture and traditions of the Hmong people are as strong today as ever they were, and seem destined to remain that way.

Christianity:

There have been few converts to Christianity. Many Hmong in Vietnam and Thailand have turned to Christ, but the Hmong in China are still waiting to hear the gospel of Christ. Only one percent profess to be Christian.

The largest single Hmong settlement is no longer in Asia, but in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. In the wake of the Vietnam War, tens of thousands of Hmong, who had fought alongside the Americans against the North Vietnamese, and against the communist forces of Laos, fled persecution in Vietnam and Laos to make a new life in the United States. They were courageous and disciplined fighters and many thousands were granted U.S. citizenship. The Hmong number 8.5 million worldwide.

