

## THE TRIBAL ARTS OF NORTHERN THAILAND COSTUMES AND TEXTILES

By

Ian R. Lyons

The tribal arts of northern Thailand is an area of ethnological and aesthetic concern that is still very much unexplored. Six major tribes of the Lisu, Meo, Karen, Yao, Lahu, and Akha represent a population of over 200,000 located in these foothills of the Himalayas. Laos, Burma, Tibet and China are strong cross-cultural influences with the tribes and particularly in their art forms. Many factors have brought certainly one of the most profound reasons for the tribes coming from Laos, China and Vietnam to take refuge in this historically neutral country.

Today the tribes come into the markets of Chiangmai and Chiang Kong dressed in their remarkably colorful and sophisticated styles of clothing, still unable to speak to each other except by using the dialect of the northern Thai language that they are beginning to learn. They are as foreign to each other as they are to the Thais. The most striking awareness that the Thai people have of the tribes comes from the dress of the six major groups. These are of such diverse contrast and unique style that they attract enormous attention. Silver jewelry, seed embroidery, appliqué work, cross and chain stitching embroidery with animal and insect adornments makes the tribal costumes some of the most vivid and distinct fashion designing to be found in the world including the prestigious Paris and New York coutures.

Chiangmai is often titled the Shangri-La of South East Asia. It is a magical city of ancient moats, mountain orchids and the finest crafts to be found in Thailand. In the morning the markets have small gatherings of tribal people coming to buy their dyes, needles, thread, commercial clothes as well as food stuff. Opium is still the most valuable product from the tribes. They deal with traders back in the mountain villages trading opium for Thai currency and silver rupees from India that become their source of jewelry, both as coins and as silver.

The Yao and Meo are the richest of the tribes as well as "best-dressed," with these facts directly related to their being the major opium growers. The Akha, Lisu, and Lahu are second financially, with the Karen being the poorest and, at one time, slaves to the Meo. The striking appearance of the members of the various tribes and their notably aristocratic manner absorbed my interest, and my work at McKean brought me into their villages. I later became involved with the Tribal Research Center in Chiangmai and finally brought together a representative collection of men

and women's costumes of the six major tribes combined with silver work and ceremonial pieces including wedding and funeral garments. I presented my Master's thesis on this collection, and last January the Pontiac Creative Arts Center displayed the first known American exhibition on the tribal art of northern Thailand.

The Meo and Yao migrated into Thailand from southern China and are recorded in Chinese chronicals dating back to the Shang dynasty of about 1500 B.C. In their migration to Thailand, they brought opium, outstanding silversmiths, embroidery skills including the "mystery stitch" and their unwritten tonal language. Yunan, Hunan and Kwangsi are the Chinese provinces that the Meo and Yao have populated for the last 4,000 years. The white, black and red Meo are the three main divisions of the Meo tribe, denoting their distinction by wearing white, black and red markings on their dress.

Women are the principle investments and artisans of the tribes. Meo women wear most of the silver jewelry owned by their husbands. They work in the opium and rice fields and tend to the children while their men hunt and carry out the "heroic" aspects of tribal life.

The Meo woman's costume consists of a skirt, blouse, leggings, turban, apron and silver jewelry. Batik printing on black-dyed kapok woven fabric creates the extremely intricate skirt. Pleating is done on the skirt by sewing sections together in accordian pleats and steaming it over boiling water with the threads tightened. The skirt is then left to dry. The border of the skirt is a separate strip of the same kapok fabric with blocked patterns of cross-stitched embroidery with appliqué. Strong geometric designs compose these patterns.

Classifications are given to many of the designs based on botanical motifs having to do with stem-pod descriptions, flower representations and animistic concepts such as "Water Spirit" pattern, "Dead Child Jungle Spirit" pattern, "Tiger" spirit and numerous other types of nature designs. There is a collection of patterns classified by the Meo as "Ancient Ones" because of their Chinese heritage. The "Ancient Ones" are usually done only in white or gray colors and placed on the bottom sections of the apron and also on the bottom sections of the Yao women's pants. The Yao have taken many of the Meo patterns for their costumes, and the "Ancient Ones" are the most popular. Evergreen-like tree motifs make up the majority of these special designs done in various combinations using a cross-stitch. More than five yards of four-inch-wide black kapok go into the sash sections of the Meo apron. The ends are a combination of embroidered squares ending the ties with hanging red warp strands of kapok. The apron section

is quite often a grid-type batik pattern having appliqué work in the open spaces on this grid. Three or four borders of appliqué usually surround the grid. No embroidery is done on the apron section. The apron also serves as a baby carrier on the mother's back.

The blouse is of black shiny market cloth and was formerly made of silk. It is trimmed with embroidery and small silver bells around the collar strip. The sash from the apron ties the blouse closed. The back collar panel is similar to a sailor's collar. Special embroidery is done on the inside of this flap with silver bells and coins sewn onto the end. The turban completes the costume with "pin size" needle point and rosette tufts bordering this short band which is fastened in the back with silver buttons.

Men of the Meo tribe have a waist sash and short jacket that leaves the midriff bare accompanied by full pants gathered at the calf (a Muslim style). Market rubber sandals are worn by the men while the women usually go barefoot. These sandals allow for traction but do not absorb water which is destructive to the feet, and on muddy slopes during the Monsoon this is a very important fact. The sash ends meet in the front with their points creating a two-part triangular shape.

Embroidery is worked on these triangular-end sections with matching borders meeting and ending with an open area filled with "Ancient Ones" patterns. This triangle of embroidery placed against the black pants creates an impressive effect. The jacket is made of black shiny market cloth of the women's blouse that was once done in silk. Appliqué in a triple zigzag design of red and white kapok cloth borders the front of the jacket. Silver bell buttons close the jacket, crossing one end over the front with the buttons placed down the side in Chinese fashion.

Meo silver work mainly involves solid silver collars in graded sizes worn around the neck. Quite often the Meo trade jewelry with the Yao as well as designs. Distinguishing the types of silver jewelry from the tribes is very difficult. There are various special clothing articles for Meo children such as caps made in different styles of appliqué. The child's costume is much simpler than the adult costume, usually of a plain shirt with shorts or skirt and a small silver collar. The basic concern for all tribal children is to cover them and not adorn them.

The Yao are related to the Meo in origin and have the most dramatic costume of all the tribes. Full ungathered pants, a long overcoat, eight yards of sash and four yards of turban create this powerful image. The

pants consist of two matching panels of embroidery, a panel for each leg. The cuffs are usually of the Meo "Ancient Ones" designs with the rest of the panel in combinations of the unique Yao designs. There are over ninety Yao designs that form hundreds of combinations. Some of the titles are "Bird Walk," "Kittens Playing," "Tiger Paw," "Opium Flower," "Celestial Crown," "Flower Pod" and "Little Chicks." The cross-stitch makes up most of the embroidery. All of the cloth is kapok dyed black with market dyes. The embroidered threads are market materials since very little is now done in their own plant and vegetable dyes. Occasionally one comes across an old piece of embroidery in the natural dye colors which are usually shades of brown, black, maroon and yellow. The coat is made of the polished market cloth that the Meo also use. A thick red collar of strands of yarn is the major accent outlining this full length coat. The sash ending in embroidery closes the coat. A turban wrapped several times around the head creates a cross "v" pattern in the front with the embroidered ends often draping over the side as a finish to this outstanding headwear.

Yao silver work is most extraordinary. Chains, brooches, bracelets, necklaces, pipes, rings, and huge earrings make up some of the most beautiful designs imaginable. Repoussé work is done on much of this silver in animal, plant and geometric motifs. Cloisonné is done on a few of the neck pieces. Yao silversmiths are the most skilled of the tribes and they are especially renowned for their hand-woven silver chains. The silver comes from the Indian rupees mentioned before which are close to 85% pure silver. The Yao man's costume involves a simple hip length jacket with bell buttons attached on the side in Chinese fashion. Sometimes a square of embroidery is placed on the front with little silver caps or studs accenting the corners. Once again, the Yao man is not the person for adornment.

Thailand's Lisu are a Tibeto-Burman people. They migrated into Thailand from Burma and are an extension of the Hua Lisu or "Flowery Lisu." There are noticeable facial differences between the Lisu and the Yao and Meo. These represent virtually the characteristics of the Tibetans and Burmese as opposed to those of the Chinese. Costumes of the Lisu women emphasize multi-colored values creating "rainbow" designs. A full-length dress with the cross-over Chinese collar comprises most of this costume. The upper shoulder section of the dress is of appliqué work creating a circular bib with colors and design that are very similar to those used by the Seminole Indian of the southern United States. Red, black, yellow, green and turquoise in various widths are placed in graded parallel circles developing this bib with both sleeves and shoulder areas. The remaining sections of the dress are solid colors with the sleeves in black or red and the body of the dress usually in blue or turquoise.

A long belt of many separately sewn strands of kapok creates two rainbow clusters of cords ended with small tassels and joined by a red sash. The strands are particularly unique in that each one is a sewn cord with a filling in the middle. These sashes are quite valuable to the Lisu for they take over a year to make. Turbans are sometimes worn which once consisted of large cords of kapok fabric wrapped around the head. Today most of this fabric comes from Thai markets.

The Lisu women cover themselves with silver jewelry during the New Year's Festival, the Festival of the moon, and weddings and funerals. Long silver dress pieces in tiered sections attached by smaller chains are worn down the back of the dress. On the fringe-ends of these pieces are found bells, small tear-drop shapes and little manicure implements for picking the teeth, wax removers for ears, chin-hair tweezers, nail cleaners and little containers for special ointments. At their festivals they dance for days and this silver creates an enchanting, hypnotizing rhythm from the soft jingling of all the pieces.

Men of the Lisu wear a stunning black velvet jacket with the Chinese cross-over collar. On this velvet (purchased at the market) an intricate grid pattern of silver studs or caps develops a shoulder bib design similar to the women's dress. A mosaic of various geometric grids creates an outstanding effect with the silver glistening on the black velvet background. Black full pants gathered at the calf and a black cord turban complete the Lisu man's costume which is the most sophisticated of the men's costumes of the tribes.

Akha, like the Lisu, come from the Tibeto-Burman group. They came into Kweichow and Yunan provinces along with the Meo 4,000 years ago. Since then they have moved into northern Laos and during the last eighty years have relocated in Thailand. They are one of the poorest of the tribes and the most nomadic. The Akha are strictly animistic, as are all of the tribes, except for the Karen, attaching considerable importance to the souls of the dead. Their religious involvement in animism is based on the simple belief that benevolent and malicious spirits dwell in all things, causing sickness and curing sickness. Appeasement of these sporadically emotional deities is their main concern.

The Akha women wear a costume of black woven kapok consisting of a short blouse and a short pleated skirt. The blouse has seeds sewn to the collar and cuffs. As mentioned above, the Akhas do not harvest opium and consequently use seed instead of silver for their costume. Various kinds

of seeds, such as "Job's tears," a long tubular seed that is shallow making sewing much easier, are used as decoration for the blouse. The skirt is plain, accompanied by a small sash decorated with seeds and plastic buttons from the Thai markets.

An additional belt is given to married women with some trade shells, seeds and two gourds representing male sex organs, one worn on each side of the hip. A special hat is worn by married women constructed from bamboo flattened to create half of a cylinder which is then decorated with Burmese lead coins, seeds, bird feathers, fluorescent insects and gibbon fur. Unmarried women wear a skull cap having similar decoration but without the bamboo extension. Akha men wear a jacket that is similar to the women's blouse. Black pants bound at the calf are worn. The Akha men are the least involved with costumes in comparison to the men in the other five tribes.

The Lahu and the Karen are the last two tribes to be considered in this brief survey. The Lahu are of Tibeto-Burman extraction. There are definite similarities and relationships that the Lahu have with the Lisu and Akha, including their mutual origin, but they find themselves closest to the Karens, having, as they claim, been "brothers of the same clan" at one time. The Lahu are the newest of the six tribes to Thailand, having moved from Burma and Laos not more than fifty years ago. They originally migrated from Yunan, China, into Laos and Burma, undoubtedly using the same mountain paths as the Meo and Yao.

Once again, the women are the more interesting as to costume. Two styles of dress are seen in the various divisions of the Lahu (the Lahu Nyi, Lahu Na, Lahu Shehle, and Lahu Shi). One dress is similar to the full length Lisu design. It is of black dyed kapok with the shawl collar done in geometric grids of silver caps or studs very similar to the Lisu man's jacket. Quite often this pattern of silver studs continues down the side of the dress creating strong horizontal and vertical designs on the black background. The other style is very similar to the Thai dress involving a 3/4-length blouse worn over a "phasin" or a full length skirt that is wrapped around and held up with cords. The blouse is closed with large circular and rectangular silver buttons. The buttons are heavily designed with animal and plant motifs in repoussé.

Some copper and aluminum (from cans) bracelets, usually poorly crafted, are worn. The Lahu and Karen are the only tribes that will use other metals than silver for jewelry. A black turban of thick cords of kapok cloth is sometimes worn. Lahu men are difficult to distinguish

from Thai village men in that their dress is basically a simple black jacket shirt with black 3/4-length pants. Since the tribe doesn't deal in opium, there is very little silver jewelry except for the buttons and silver caps or studs on the single style of women's costume.

The last of the six tribes is the Karen. They are the poorest of the tribes and the largest in population. Skaw, P'wo, B'ghwe, and Taungthu are the four divisions of this tribe. During the last hundred years, the Karen have steadily migrated into Thailand from Burma. Much of this migration was due to severe persecution by the Burmese for their having so intensely taken up the Christianity brought in by western missionaries. The Karen have been used as slaves by the Burmese and the Meo tribe. Thailand has served as a land of refuge for them, and unlike the other tribes which are slowly moving back into Laos and Burma after the Viet Nameese War, the Karen are staying.

Karen costume basically uses red, white and black. Karen women have two kinds of dress for their life. Until they are married, the girls wear a loose-fitting long white dress of undyed kapok with red trim with long red pendent strands of kapok yarns around the bust line. At marriage the women make for themselves a 3/4-length blouse that is virtually a square with a slit in the middle woven from black kapok. The lower half of this blouse has the same intricate geometric design around the entire piece. Colored yarns and seeds (Job's Tears) compose these outstanding designs often alternating seeds with yarn in a grid of four horizontal seeds followed by four horizontal lines of embroidered yarn.

Colors are usually red, white and orange for the yarn and the seeds are always natural in color--browns, reds, and ivories. Small lines of seeds are sometimes sewn to the ends of sleeves and around the collar slits. The Akha and Karen do this kind of work identically. The short blouse at marriage has a particular purpose in that it is designed to facilitate easier breast feeding denoting the status and main purpose of "Womanhood" for the Karens. A long "plain" style kapok skirt is worn with the woman's blouse sometimes with ikat work in horizontal rings going down the skirt and on the bottom border. This is also done by the Laotians and Thais. Designs are usually botanical in nature repeating the patterns around the skirt. Black kapok and red kapok make up the material.

Married women on occasion wear a turban that is a narrow back-strap-loom woven white strip with long red strands of yarn sewn on to it creating a flowing head piece with the strands draping over the shoulders. The P'ho Karen are particularly taken by the red strands, and their

unmarried women's dress is a forest of red over the white background that is said to be enormously seductive in movement.

Jewelry for the Karen is mainly made of seeds, copper and other inexpensive metals. The unmarried women wear various strings of seeds over their white dresses. Some of the seed necklaces are woven into one- and two-inch width strands very similar to the technique that the American Indian uses with glass beads. On occasion long thin chains are attached to the earrings and drape under the chin from the one earring to the other creating a stunning effect. Large tubular earrings pull the ear lobes to enormous sizes. Karen jewelry is not valuable as to silver content, but it certainly is ingenious and highly inovative in the use of natural materials.

Karen men wear a pull-over shirt that is in the same design as the married women's blouse. The color of the shirt is crimson red with long warp yarns of kapok hanging from the bottom or the sides under the arm. They are plain shirts with some patterning in the weaving. Like the blouse, the shirt is four strips woven on back-strap looms and sewn up three-fourths of the sides allowing slits for the arms and up three-fourths of the front and back leaving an opening for the neck. Karen men buy their black pants from the Thai markets and wear no jewelry.

Other kinds of interesting weavings are found in tribal "yams" or carrying bags. Each tribe has their own decoration on these bags. The Meo do batik resist on their black-dyed kapok. Yao bags have both embroidery and batiking on natural kapok. The Lisu do their rainbow appliqué with silver buttons and also weave the colors into the material. The Akha and the Lahu often trade for the Lisu and Meo bags which are of better quality than the simple black bags they make for themselves. The missionaries have been working with some of the Lahu in developing better "yams" and other items.

The Karen have crimson bags with long strands of warp yarn hanging from the sides. Small bags for children are often made duplicating the details of the large ones. The size of the bags varies from five-inch squares, to four-foot widths used for traveling. One or two large pieces are woven for the body of the bag, folded over, and one long narrow piece is attached to the sides of the main piece creating a shoulder strap which is sometimes also used on the forehead for heavy loads carried on the back.

Missionaries have been working with the tribes for the past fifteen years developing these arts of weaving, jewelry-making, embroidery and appliqué work. They send these items to Bangkok; from there they go to



luxury stores like Bonwit Teller's in New York. Unfortunately, the tribes are not passing on these skills to their children due to the modern influences coming from Thai contact.

The "Tribal Arts of Northern Thailand" are one of the most dramatic and intriguing areas of ethnic study in the world today. Little work has been done to date, and there is so much to be gained from these six exciting and important cultures.



1. Yao women:  
Her facial characteristics display Chinese origin. There is pride and stature to this elegant lady.



**2. Meo woman's costume:**

Black and red are the primary colors for this dress. The skirt is most intricate from the elaborate appliqué and embroidery work on the border to the batik on black-dyed kapok. The apron is composed of red appliqué geometrical flowers within white and red borders. At the ends of the sash are strands of red-dyed kapok hanging from a band of embroidery. These skirts are particularly beautiful as they swing down village paths.



**3. Yao women's costume:**

This is an outstanding design with the most fabric and embroidery of all the tribes. Market cloth with market dyes and thread make up much of the costume today. The intricate embroidered symbols are not being taught to the children, and consequently the art form could very well be lost during the present generation.



**4. Lisu woman's costume:**

The Lisu women wear a most colorful costume with a rainbow shawl of colors very similar to the Seminole costume of the southern United States. It is a seductive style with the gown split on both sides. Market cloth and the village sewing machine make up most of the costume today.



5. Mao baby and mother



**6. Mao woman batik:**  
The wax-resist method creates black fabric with white design.



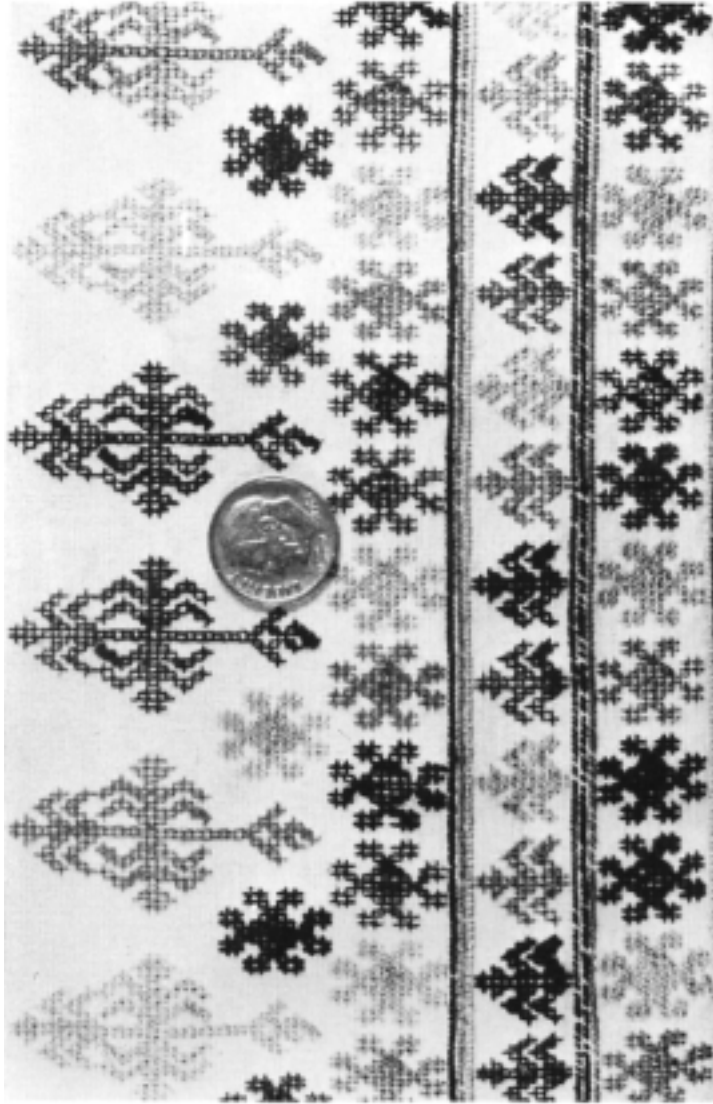
**7. Unmarried Karen girl weaving:**

The back-strap loom is the principle apparatus used by the tribes for their weaving. The nomadic pattern of the hill tribes makes it difficult for them to set up complex standing looms.

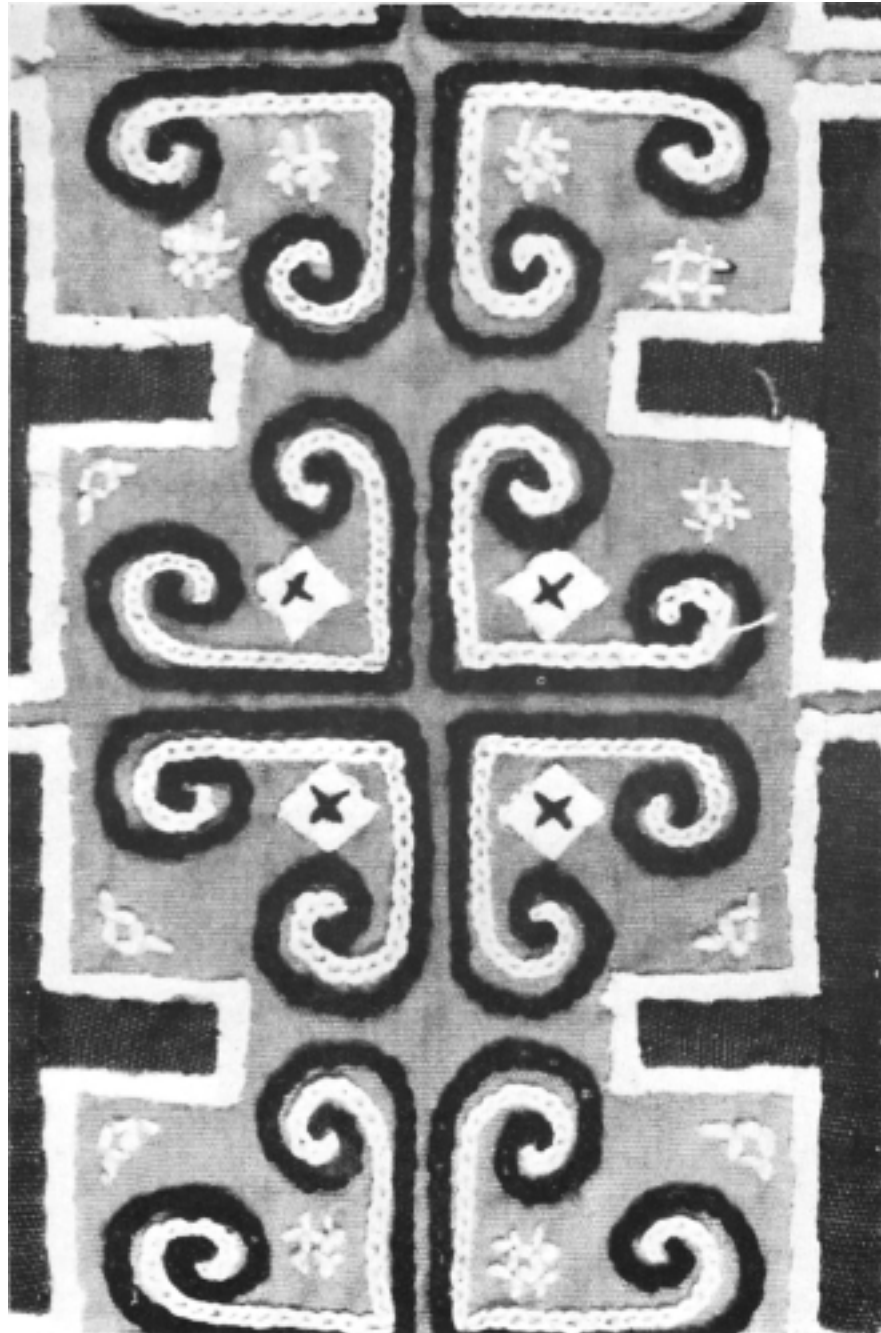




8. Mao women embroidering:  
Missionaries have given them eye glasses to prevent their loss of  
vision from this intricate work.



9. Yao wedding shawl:  
The bottom borders of the shawl are worked in chain and cross-stitch on natural woven kapok. The star motifs are titled "Kittens Playing" and the tree motifs are titled "Evergreen." The shawls are presented to the bride by family and friends. Many shawls are draped over her shoulders at once. The stitching is finished on both sides of the embroidery with the thread ends completely hidden.



10. Meo embroidery and appliqué in hand spun and hand-woven kapok.



11. Akha married woman:  
Gibbon fur, Indian rupees, tin buttons, seeds and bamboo make up this elaborate hat. The silver neck piece she is wearing is designed with three silver buttons handmade by the Akha.