

BANGKOK POST SUNDAY JUNE 3, 1984

Colourful peoples of the North

"Peoples of the Golden Triangle" by Paul and Elaine Lewis. Thames and Hudson, London. Distributed in Thailand by Elephant House L Soi Ruam Rudee, Bangkok. 300 pages. 600 Ba Reviewed by Bertil Lintner.

IN THEIR newly published book, "Peoples of the Golden Triangle," Paul and Elaine Lewis have delightfully managed to combine the format of an attractive, coffee-table volume with a competent, in-depth study of tribal cultures and traditions in northern Thailand.

It is not the first book published on the subject, but by far the best one I have ever seen. In a systematic and easily accessible manner, it deals with the Karen, the Hmong, the Mien, the Lahu, the Akha and the Lisu peoples; their spiritual beliefs, social structure and means of livelihood. The Lewises literally follow the lives of these six different peoples from the cradle to the grave and they do so with a practical, down-to-earth approach.

"Peoples of the Golden Triangle" is pleasantly free of sensational speculations about the sexual mores of the highlanders, or their dependence on opium as a cash crop — which unfortunately too often has been the case in many previous publications. When the Lewises talk about courtship among youngsters in the villages, it is described in the same natural way as the highland peoples deal with such matters; when they mention the poppy it is in its economic and social

about the Lahu.

It is also commendable that they insist on using the names the highlanders call themselves, that is, Hmong instead of Meo or Miao, Mien instead of Yao and Lahu instead of Muser. The only exception are the Karen, since they have no generic term of their own to cover all the subgroups of their tribe.

By dealing with them separately, the emphasis is on the highlanders as different peoples with varying historical background, cultures and traditions — not simply lumped together under the somewhat misleading epithet "hill-tribes." The Lewises poetically explain that "just as an intricately woven tapestry has a theme repeated throughout its design, so we can attempt to characterise each tribe by finding a dominant cultural theme distinguishing it from other tribes."

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The successful result is no doubt largely thanks to the personal experiences of the two authors, Mr and Mrs Lewis. They are a missionary couple who have lived and worked among the peoples of the Golden Triangle since 1947. For the first 19 years, they were based in Kengtung, the easternmost of the Shan States of Burma and the home of large Akha and Lahu communities. Since 1968 they have been on the Board of International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches in Chiang Mai. Both of them have studied linguistics and anthropology and are fluent in several tribal languages. Paul has even compiled the first and only Akha-English dictionary, which was published by Cornell University in 1968.

In describing the customs of the highlanders, they have, however, not adopted a dry anthropological approach, but give vivid accounts often interspersed with anecdotes of personal memories from their years in the hills. One such story is about some young Lahu men, who had come to Chiang Mai to attend a training programme and were obviously worried about their girlfriends back home. The Lewises helped them send a message by recording a traditional love-song, which they played on their gourd pipes to be broadcast over the tribal radio station in Chiang Mai.

"By means of the gourd pipes they begged their girlfriends not to marry anyone else, but to wait for their return. Later we found that the message was received and the request granted — all by means of those melodious pipes," the Lewises recall in the marriage section of the chapter about the Lahu.

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It could be argued that there is much more to be said about the peoples of the Golden Triangle than the Lewises have put together in their 300-page volume, and it is perhaps regrettable that it is limited to the six tribes which are recognised by the Thai Government as *Chao Khao* ("Mountain People"). Having spent some years in the northern hills, one misses, for instance, a chapter on the various tribes of Mon-Khmer origin who are also scattered throughout the northern border areas.

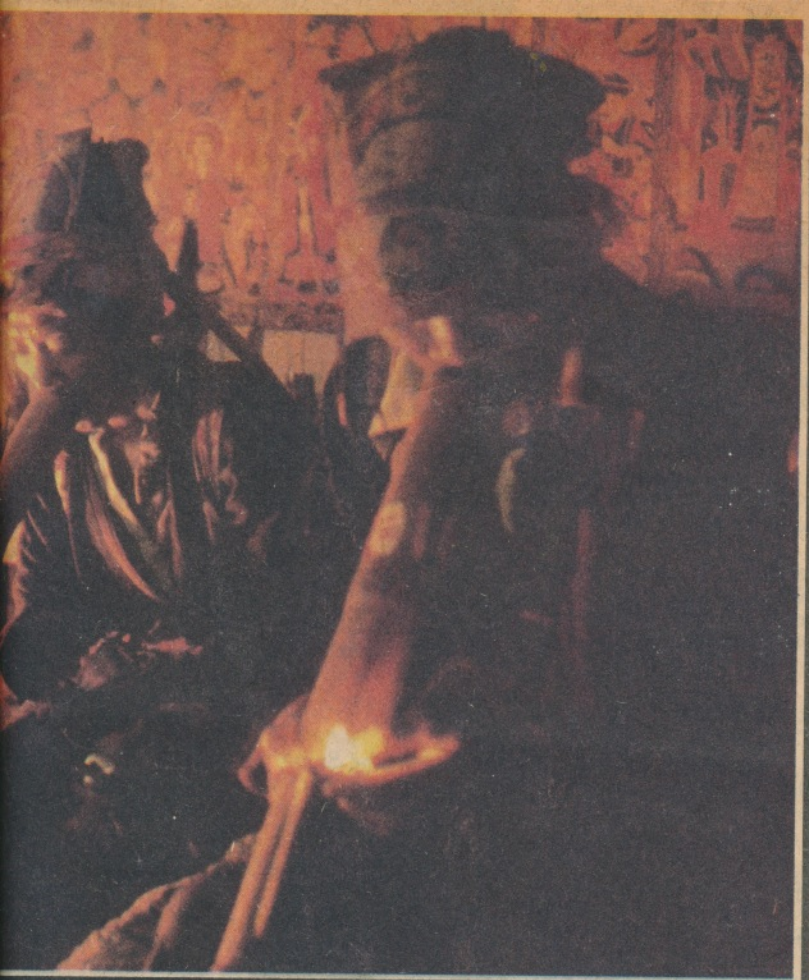
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However, despite these minor criticisms, the book deserves to reach a wide audience and people heading up into the hills should, in spite of its weight, make sure that it goes into their backpacks along with their water-canteen, anti-malarial tablets, toilet rolls and sleeping-bag.











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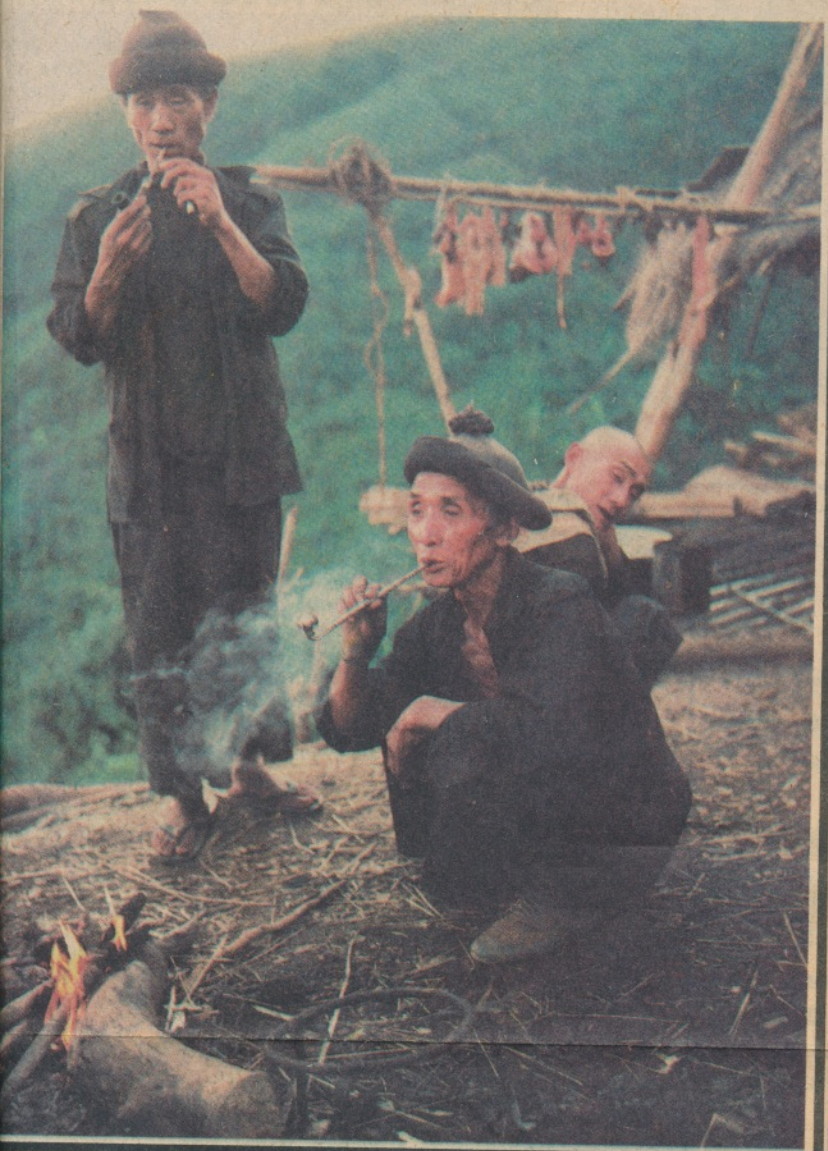
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● Clockwise, from top left: Mien priests resting and smoking water pipes;

Pwo Karen woman likes to cover her arms with a variety of bracelets made of silver, copper, brass or aluminium;

Lisu women making rice cakes for the New Year festival;

Mien girl learns to embroider at an early age;

Lisu children playing in the village grounds;

Akha men enjoying a smoke from their opium pipes.





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