

“Soon, I will take you
away and make you
my wife.”

Romance

ON A HIGH

Courtship in the mountains

The emotions of courting – the ardour, the adventure, the excitement of public dances and secret encounters – are no different for young people living in lofty villages in the mountains of the Golden Triangle than for those anywhere else in the world. Rather it is the way they court, shaped over millennia by ancestral tradition, culture and history, and by the fact that they live in such remote hamlets, which makes finding a mate so special. This corner of the world, where Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and China meet, is home to over 100 different cultural groups and subgroups. Thus, there is extraordinary variety in how a boy and girl become a couple.

Amid this diversity, however, there are several practices common to all. Wherever you go during the courting season, young people of the hilltribes attempt to make themselves desirable to attract a mate with alluring garments and enchanting music. Throughout the year, girls spend countless hours weaving, embroidering and adorning their festival jackets, skirts, aprons, turbans and bags with brilliantly coloured patterns, tassels, beads and pompoms galore.

A young Akha woman soaring high on a village swing.



In the following courtship song, a Lisu couple alternately questions one another's loyalty.

Girl: "You have suffered a lot, coming a long way to find me. Now I must trust you. What do you want to do now?"

Boy: "How do I know I can trust you? There are many handsome boys in this village. Are you sure you don't like them? Are you sure you like me?"

Girl: "I am sure."

Boy: "If you are really sure, then I must do what my parents and parents before them did; I will give you a silver coin to show you that I am serious, too. This is my promise to you. Soon, I will take you away and make you my wife."

“Are you sure you like me?”

“I am sure.”

To up the dazzling factor, they bedeck themselves with silver adornments – coins, buckles, neck rings, earrings, bracelets and headdresses – which glimmer in the sunlight and by the fire's glow. They hope that with every movement and dance step, they may catch

the eye of their beloved. For a prospective partner, a girl's clothes are not only a beacon of her beauty, clan identity and wealth, but they also reflect her skills and cleverness, attributes important for building a family in such a rugged environment.

Courtship starts in earnest after the Harvest or New Year festivals as bands of young men of marriageable age travel far and wide to other villages to search for a wife. Wearing their finest attire, they carry their musical instruments in special "courting bags" ornately decorated in the colours and designs of their tribe. For several days, songs and instrumental music echo through fields and forests as couples woo one another.

No matter the tribal group, sharing music together is essential for a courting couple, not only to build intimacy that may lead to love, but also to determine if a mate is a worthy life partner. Their highly ritualised courtship songs take many hours to complete in order to properly convey the full series of statements, questions and answers traditionally set out by their ancestors. Yet beyond these similarities, lies an array of courtship rituals that shows the intriguing variety among the different cultures of the Golden Triangle.

Where you can find these tribes:	Hmong	Karen	Akha
	Laos Thailand	Myanmar	Laos Thailand Myanmar

HMONG

The Hmong have a strong tradition of singing based on ancient poetry that has been passed down by their ancestors through the ages. Called *khootseea*, or "sung poetry", this is performed during all ceremonies to express deep feelings and thoughts. Prominent among *khootseea* are songs of romantic love sung during courtship. At no other time is this amatory repertoire livelier than during the New Year ball toss. As they stand facing each other in a line, young men and women lob a courtship ball back and forth, while simultaneously exchanging song verses. There is always an element of improvisation in these witty word games, as the verses they invent incite a partner to decipher the puzzles.

After the ball toss, couples may pair off separately to play musical instruments to one another. Of all instruments, the most remarkable is the *nja* mouth harp, which has tones astonishingly similar to verbalised Hmong. Replicating all the vowels of speech and most consonants, the *nja* "sings" love poems, weaving a magical, sacred web around lovers yearning to express their most intimate feelings. As the sound of this small brass instrument is very soft, a couple must huddle very close together in order to make out its sweet melodies.



1. A hopeful Hmong male blowing on a *nja*.

2. Toss a ball, court a lover.



KAREN

In Karen tradition, funerals are not only a time to send the deceased on their final journey, but they also provide an important occasion for adolescents to court, a rite that perhaps long ago symbolised the renewing of the souls of those who have passed away. Young people in fact look forward to funerals and come from far-flung villages to meet one another. Girls dress in long white tunics with red trimming that define their unmarried state; only when they have wed are they permitted to wear the colourful tunics and skirts they have painstakingly woven for their trousseau.

On this special occasion, Karen Pwo girls wear “singing shawls”, *bia ma hta*, musical instruments in themselves as their tassels of shimmering beetle wings jingle when the girls move. The girls swap call and response verses from a rich repertory of love songs with the boys, who arrive in their most handsome attire with their long hair traditionally swept to one side with metal hairpins.

Courtship continues in the fields or after harvest as young couples create music together. One of the most distinctive Karen instruments, in both physical form and musical style, is the *te na ku* harp. With six to 12 strings, these instruments are often sculpted into the form of a swan or great hornbill and decorated with emblems of flowers, birds, fish or geometric designs – images meaningful to the men who make and play them.

Cradling the *te na ku* in his lap, plucking its strings with one hand, a suitor waxes touching lyrical strains that reveal the beauty of Karen music, and the depth of his love.



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AKHA

The Akha observe the Women’s New Year, *yehku dza-eu*, at the beginning of the rice harvest, which comes at the end of the eighth lunar month. This large village celebration is best known for its spectacular Swing Festival. Boys and girls, dressed in their most ornately embroidered garments and gleaming silver headdresses, socialise as they take turns soaring to great heights on the village swing. Whether swinging individually or in pairs, this activity creates a carefree atmosphere for marriageable couples to begin courting.

The courting season resonates with the rhythmic sounds of various instruments – lutes, flutes, reed pipes and mouth harps. Traditionally, a young bachelor serenades a prospective girl outside her home in the middle of the night with tender melodies, hoping she will invite him in. If she does, it is a sign that they may carry on the courtship. By accompanying his singing with the *dheuham*, a three-stringed lute, a suitor is able to declare his romantic sentiments through metaphors of longing and love.

The Akha also have a surprising tradition of playing the leaf during courtship. Young men and women perform duets alternately in call and response or overlapping refrains by mixing Akha tunes with improvisation. Astonishing virtuosity occurs as each displays his or her own unique flair. A musician creates a penetrating buzzing tone by compressing his or her lips on a leaf, *pui pa*, folded in half, and blowing. Any supple leaf with a smooth end can be used, such as the acacia leaf, which is easily found in the jungle.

Tribal men often acknowledge that in youth, they captured the hearts of their wives with the harmonies of their songs and instruments. Women confess they won over their husbands by the skill of their needles or loom. Courting in the mountains is an exhilarating experience of the senses, captivating the eyes and ears, all in search of the one true heart. **TR**



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1. A young Karen man strums his *te na ku* harp.
2. *Bia ma hta*, a shawl that sings.
3. An Akha couple serenades each other.