



DO YOU CARE ABOUT WHAT YOU EAT? YOU SHOULD, ACCORDING TO 'FOOD INC' 12



TRIBAL GIRLS gather around Voreiret to ponder her images.

An American music instructor sets out to preserve the traditional tribal culture of the Golden Triangle

MANDIE TRIPATHI
THE NATION ON SUNDAY

American researcher Victoria Voreiret reckons some of the tribal people living in the Golden Triangle jungle spanning Thailand, Laos and Burma are at risk of disappearing over the next few decades. She's talking about people she's met, like the Tungyoo man in Kalow, Shan State, who thinks he's warmer than 10 blankets with his tattoos of jungle animals and the charismatic Eng head shaman of Nam Lin Mai in Keng Tung, Burma, who can ward off wild animals and evil spirits. Then there are the Akha U'lo women who can sing age-old lamentations for the deceased and Lisu Shae Shae shamans in the mountains of southwest Yunnan, who walk through fire and climb ladders of swords.

Most of us will only see these people in Voreiret's photographs before they disappear forever along with their traditions. But she's determined to preserve them, as evidenced in her new exhibition titled "Patterns, Passages, Prayers: Traditional Cultures of the Golden Triangle," on view at Tamarind Village, Chiang Mai.

The fruit of her trek into the mountainous terrain of the Golden Triangle, the exhibition features more than 50 images along with tribal artifacts that offer a rare insight into the traditions of the tribal peoples of this region through their costumes, textiles, rituals and spiritual beliefs.

A former classical violinist and lecturer at DePaul University School of Music in Chicago, Voreiret set off five years ago to explore the primal role played by music in traditional cultures of the Golden Triangle. Based in Northern Thailand, she regularly travels to Burma and Laos, where she's constantly struck by the diversity of ethnicity, the cultural heritage and especially the vibrant musical culture. This exhibition, an extension of her "Songs of Memory" show, which featured the musical instruments of various tribal groups, focuses on the distinct everyday activities of the tribes, such as weaving, harvesting crops and tending livestock and on rites of passage such as birth, courtship, marriage and death. Of great interest are rare objects like Mien sacred texts, Karen ceremonial dress and a colourful collection of children's caps.

Three main themes run through the show. "Patterns" refers to the way tribal peoples adorn their bodies through cloths, tattoos and jewelry. "Passages" refers to the people in their environments as they move through time and space and seasonal cycles. "Prayers" depicts those who are afraid people honour their spirits through magic.

In Kalow, a settlement in Burma's Shan State, Voreiret found a Tungyoo man with the intricate and symbolic tattoos keep danger away. The images etched on his body since puberty include a lizard, peacock and rabbit, along with a magic square on each forearm for protection against black magic.

In Phongsali, Laos, the researcher stumbled upon a beautiful Akha Nangyi woman who has embroidered her deep indigo tunic with bands of bright colours and silver chains. Silver coins, a sign of



LOLOPHO girls dancing.

wealth and beauty will be added through the years to fill the entire bodice of her tunic.

Last year, in the remote jungle of Chiang Mai, she encountered a Lisu shaman playing the *nan-ku-ma*, a reed pipe instrument that plays a primal role in tribal life.

Other photos in the exhibition show the ethnic groups at colourful festivals. They include shots of Akha-pull Inlail shamans conducting a blessing ceremony at the Spirit Gate in Muang Sing, Laos, and Lisu shi villagers celebrating their New Year Festival in Keng Tung, Burma.

About 40 per cent of Voreiret's material comes from Burma, hence to the most traditional tribal peoples, with Laos coming a close second. Thailand and China are becoming very modern, she says. With her 200 hours of footage and thousands of photographs, she wants to produce a one-hour documentary film, publish books and hold regular exhibitions as well as open a folk museum that would help preserve their fast disappearing cultural heritage.

"It's just one world. I can't change the world, but I think I can preserve their culture," Voreiret smiles as she recounts the physical challenges she faced in finding her way to these tribal villages. She travelled with her interpreter, usually for between two to five weeks at a time, braving different weather conditions.



THE MEMORIAL laments of the Akha U'lo women's chorus are in danger of disappearing.

Melodies from the heart



A PALANG girl brings in the harvest.

“Roads are coming... they now have electricity and telephones... Thousands of years of knowledge will be gone in a few decades. Modernity is an inevitable threat.”

VICTORIA VOREIRET



A Lahu Shi couple, left, and a Lahu Shi man and grandson, during their New Year festival in Keng Tung, Burma.

"I was a city lady and when I started on my trip five years ago, I didn't know anything about camping or trekking. But each trip was a revelation," she says.

With her sunny personality, it was not hard to befriend her subjects and win their trust. "I would always first visit the village headman or the head shaman and explain that I was there because I was interested in their culture, music and spirituality. They seemed happy with that and never asked me about myself or my country."

Having witnessed festivals, ceremonies and rites of passage in many tribal villages in both Thailand and China, she sees and urgent need to document all aspects of these people's cultures before modernity encroaches and wipes out tradition.

"You still find a lot of traditions in Burma and Laos. But roads are coming to the villagers in Thailand and China. They now have electricity and telephones. The young go to school instead of learning the wisdom from the elders. Thousands of years of knowledge will be gone in a

SEE AND STAY

■ "Patterns, Passages & Prayers: Traditional Cultures of the Golden Triangle" is on view at Tamarind Village until July.

■ Visit www.TribalMusicAsia.com

■ Tamarind Village Chiang Mai, a Larma-style boutique property in the heart of historic Chiang Mai, is at 50/1 Rajdamnoen Road, Sri Phoom, Muang district.

■ Call (053) 418 896-9 or visit www.tamarindvillage.com

few decades. Modernity is an inevitable threat."

"Having a museum and a recording studio where shamans and musicians from these villages can come to record their music would be my dream," she says with a grin.



A PALANG girl brings in the harvest.