

THE AKHA SWINGING CEREMONY

by

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Among the six major tribal groups included within the research program of the Tribal Research Centre located in Chiang Mai, the Akha are classified among Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. Their language is closely related to Lahu and Lisu. These last languages form a branch of Lolo.

The original settlements of the Akha were in Yunnan Province and from there, in South China, they have migrated into Burma and Thailand. This migration began about 50 or 60 years ago. Formerly, Akha villages in Thailand were scattered only through an area west of the Paholyothin Highway in the Districts of Mae Chan and Mae Sai in Chiang Rai Province, and north of the Mae Kok River which flows eastwards out of Burma, through the town of Chiang Rai, and on into the Mekong River. Now, however, because of a continued southward movement, Akha villages are also found in the Districts of Chiang Saen and Mae Sruai of Chiang Rai Province, and one village is located in King Amphoe Mae Ai in Chiang Mai Province.

Gordon Young (1961:85) estimated that there were 25,200 Akha in Thailand. In 1968 a United Nations team conducted a survey of opium cultivation in the mountains of northern Thailand. Incidental to this information they collected demographic data and estimated that there were 6,442 Akha in Thailand. This number is 2.3 percent of all those people living above the altitude of 600 meters. Hanks and Sharp (1964: Appendix II), surveying this entire area, which they named the "Mae Kok River Region", found a population of 6,288 Akha.

The Akha are like other tribal groups in northern Thailand with regard to their religious and ceremonial aspects. They are both animists and worshippers of their ancestors. We are concerned here with one important ceremony, the "Swinging Ceremony", which is as significant as the rites associated with their New Year festival.

In 1967 the Swinging Ceremony observed in Saen Chai village in Mae Chan District of Chiang Rai Province began on 22 August and ended on 25 August. Usually this ceremony lasts for four days. The time at which a Swinging Ceremony is held in each of the Akha villages in northern Thailand varies, and this time varies according to the most auspicious day of each village's headman. (See below). However, this ceremony is always held during August, the tenth lunar month of the Akha calendar.

Few people can remember the history of this ceremony, but the chief spiritualist of the village explained that this ceremony is held to celebrate the maturation of planted rice. The story associated with the ceremony is given below.

When the god¹ Apremiere created the world, the gods Umsa and Umyae were also created. Both of the created gods are still able to control rain and, through direct contact, to make the sun shine. These created gods were made as man and wife. They had one son and one daughter named Umsahyee and Umsahyeh. The New Year ceremony is believed to have been started by Umsahyee; the Swinging Ceremony is believed to have been started by Umsahyeh—in order to honor their god-parents and to assure plentiful and timely rain, sunshine, and a good harvest of rice.

The Akha people regard Umsahyeh as their first female ancestor. From her to Akha now living there are 60 generations. Because the ceremony is in honor of a female god, the ceremony is performed by Akha women. For the ceremony the Akha women of all ages put on their very best, most beautiful and most elaborate clothes and come together at the swing which, in all villages, must be located near the spirit gate and which, in the village of Saen Chai, was also located next to the courting plaza.

There are three types of swing. When one enters this Akha village, passing through the Spirit Gate and past the courting plaza, one will see two swings. One is the swing which was started by

1) The writer has used the word 'gods' because the Akha insisted that those named beings for whom this ceremony was conducted were not spirits and were not human beings; they have been created and had lived in the world with no parents.

Umsahyeh. It consists of four posts made of thin tree trunks shorn of all branches except for those at the very top. These four posts are fixed in the ground at points which form a square, and the tops are joined together by a rope with a loop at the end which hangs down.

Another type of swing has only two upright posts made of more sturdy tree trunks. On their tops these two posts are notched and placed in these notches is the swing wheel axle. Attached to the axle there are four arms or spokes made of two adjacent tree branches at the ends of which swings are attached. This type of swing looks like a water-wheel or a ferris wheel.

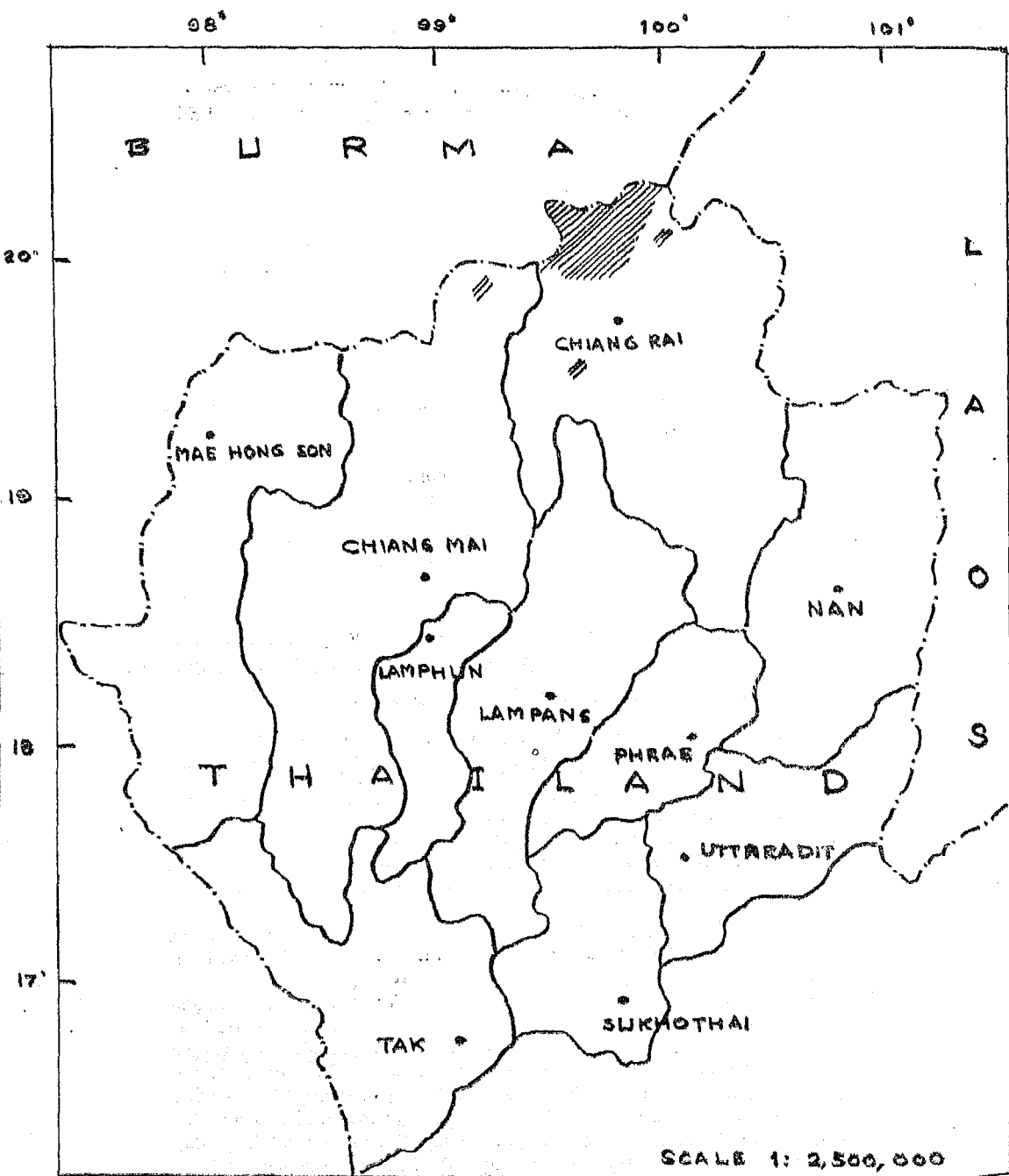
The Akha at Saen Chai village said that only married women may swing with the swing of the first type, and the men and the unmarried women with the second type.²

There is another type of swing in front of every house. These are the swings for the children. Like the first swing described above, they are constructed with four small saplings squarely imbedded in the ground, tied together at the tops, from which point a cradle is hung.

This Swinging Ceremony is a village ceremony, not a household ceremony. Therefore each Akha in every household takes part in building the swings and in the ceremony proper.

As indicated above, the Akha perform this ceremony on the auspicious day of the village headman.³ There are five weeks in an Akha month.⁴ In each week there is one day which is the auspicious

- 2) The writer was told that the four-post swing was for married women and the water-wheel-like swing was for men and unmarried women. He was also informed lately that both men and women could swing with both swings.
- 3) Saen Chai village's headman is a *Jeuma*. He is Saen Chai's younger brother. Saen Chai regards himself as a *Khama*, which is a head of all Akha villages in Thailand.
- 4) The Akha think in terms of a 12 year cycle. A year has 12 months and a month has thirty days but there are five varying weekly time periods of five days or six days or seven days in a month. The symbols of the twelve years are the same as those used for the twelve days. These are: 1. the day of the ant, 2. the day of the buffalo, 3. the day of the tiger, 4. the day of the horse, 5. the day of the rabbit, 6. the day of the termite, 7. the day of the mule, 8. the day of the giraff, 9. the day of the monkey, 10. the day of the chicken, 11. the day of the dog, and 12. the day of the pig.



day of the headman (the auspicious day of the Saen Chai village headman that year was the day of the buffalo). This ceremony may be performed during any week of the proper month. Each year the old men in the village have a meeting at the headman's house and consider the day for the Swinging Ceremony.

Since in Saen Chai village in 1967 the auspicious day of the headman, or Jeuma, was the day of the buffalo, the Akha in that village began building the swings on that auspicious day. Because the ceremony covers a period of four days, the first part of it was begun one day prior to the auspicious day. These days then were the days of the ant, the buffalo, the tiger and the horse.

On the day of the ant, the day of the first part of the ceremony, the Akha slaughtered chickens and offered them to their ancestors. On the second day, or the day of the buffalo, they built the swings. On the third day, or the day of the tiger, they slaughtered pigs and one ox. The first day was to honor the ancestors; the second day was for constructing the swings; the third day was for feasting. On the fourth day they swang.

On the first day of the ceremony, the Akha in each house slaughtered one chicken, cooked it and offered it to their ancestors. The wife of the household head, and not the village spiritualist, performed this ceremony of offering. When the ceremony ended, the ancestors, having attended, were invited to return to the spirit world.

The Akha have a specific method for slaughtering chickens when offering them to ancestors. It is not the same method as that usually employed. They have a specific place within the house, a special hammer and a separate chopping block. The hammer and the chopping block cannot be used every day. These pieces of household equipment are kept in a specially reserved place and are brought out only for slaughtering chickens for the ancestors. A glass of water, a glass of rice whiskey and a chicken are brought out to a ritually designated place for the offering and ceremonial killing.

The water used in this ceremony must be taken from the stream used as a daily water source by the headman's house. This water is carried to the village in bamboo tubes. Water from the other streams also used by village households as their daily water source cannot be used. When bringing the water from the stream, if those Akha bringing it see a snake, that supply of water must be thrown away and a new supply must be fetched. Water contained in the tubes, not used for the ceremony, cannot be drunk until the ceremony of slaughtering the chicken has been completed.

To kill the chicken, they hit the chicken's head with the hammer (never cutting the chicken's throat and never using the blood for cooking). While killing the chicken, the Akha close the house door so that the dogs will not enter. After killing the chicken, they pour water on it three times from a ceremonial water glass; and then they cut off the legs and the wings. The two legs and the two wings are placed on the shelf reserved for the ancestors which can be found in every Akha house. It is said that the legs of chickens are used by spirits as walking canes and that the wings are used by the spirits as fans. When the legs and wings have been cut off, the chicken is placed on the open hearth fire to singe its feathers. The chicken is then cooked and placed on a low, round table. This table is also a specific table used only for offering things to the ancestors. This table is always kept in a special box.

After preparing the table for the ceremonial meal, the housewife invites all ancestors, including Umsahyeh. On the first day gongs and cymbals are beaten. These two percussion instruments are played only during those ceremonies associated with the ancestors.

On the second day of the ceremony (the day of the buffalo, which at the time this study was made was August 23, 1967) the Akha built the swings. Saen Chai said that each year new swings have to be built at the old locations because the old swings have rotted and cannot be used.

The building of the new swings was started when an Akha from each household had arrived at the house of the headman. This occurred at approximately ten o'clock in the morning. The headman who performed the ceremony was dressed in his usual clothes; his head was wrapped in a pink satin turban and on top of this he wore a conical rattan hat. He also carried a rectangular hand-woven cloth bag. From the headman's house the procession went to the swinging place. The headman, or Jeuma, was the last one in this procession. The procession was divided into many groups. One of the groups went out to cut the trees for the posts for the main swing. Another group searched for the liana to make the rope. And the remainder of the people, including the headman, helped each other in demolishing the old main swing, and making a clearing for the new swing, which involved the digging of four new holes.

The main swing was constructed on the side of a slope. Two holes were located on the high part of the slope's ridge and the other two were on the lower part. That hole of the two which were on the high part of the ridge and was closest to the village was the "key" hole or the most important hole. This hole is never moved, but the location of the other three holes may be changed. The headman of the village is the first man who cleans the loose dirt from this old key hole and then the villagers help in completing the digging of all the holes until they have reached about one meter in depth. When the new trunks for the new swing have been cut and trimmed to points and are ready to be put into the holes, the headman places husked rice, a fresh chicken egg, water and a piece of silver into the key hole and inserts the post.

Before all the posts are put into the holes, four liana ropes are loosely attached to their tops. When all the posts have been placed into the newly dug holes, four men climb to the tops of the posts where the ropes will be tightened. They pull the ropes and make two posts bend together and then, again with the ropes, they tie them into pairs. The two pairs of tied posts are joined by a one meter piece of carved wood and then firmly tied together at the top.

A rope made of the liana with a loop at one end is hung from the top attached to the one meter piece of carved wood. The bottom of the loop extends down to one meter above the ground. The headman puts three bunches of grass and three pieces of stone on the loop and shoves the loop so that it swings to and fro three times. This is believed to be the swinging of Umsahyeh. Then the headman gets up onto the loop and swings three times. After this the others swing.

When using this loop for swinging, the men put one foot into the loop, but the women use a small stick which is put through the loop and on which they can then sit. Men swing standing; women swing sitting. Attached to the swing rope and over the swinger's head is a pull rope about two to three meters long used by the people below to help make the swinging better.

The second swing, the one which looks like a water wheel, is built with no ceremony and is not utilized as a formal part of the swinging ceremony. The old posts of this swing may still be used if strong enough. Only the axle and the spokes are changed.

While the first two types of swing are being built, the swings for the children, in front of every house, are being built, too.

While the men build the swings, the women prepare their clothes for the ceremony. No one goes to the fields during the time of this ceremony. In the evening the women come together at the swings for swinging. At night they make music by beating drums, gongs, cymbals and sections of bamboo. These bamboo sections are those which serve as water containers as well as musical instruments and they produce sound by being pounded down vertically on the ground. During this ceremony at Saen Chai village, three young and beautiful girls pounded the bamboo tubes in front of the headman's house and in front of Saen Chai's house. At the same time, other young Akha boys and girls enjoyed themselves at the courting plaza. Some girls and young women sang songs and danced. The young men chose their partners and, at the courting plaza, flirted and petted.

On the third day of the ceremony (the day of the tiger, August 24, 1967), and in the early morning, another chicken was killed by each household and was offered to the ancestors. Then one pig and one ox were killed. The pig which was killed could have come from any house and the donor depended on the considerations of the old men at the meeting that was held to decide when to initiate the ceremony. At the ceremony performed in 1967, the ox was the ox of Saen Chai. These two animals were cooked and then served to the old men. Saen Chai also said that part of the meat of these two animals could be sold or bartered within the village.

After the morning feast on the third day, music was played in front of Saen Chai's house. Men danced and three pretty girls with bamboo sections provided the rhythm by pounding the bamboos on the ground. Saen Chai's son explained that this was for the enjoyment of the old men. At about three o'clock in the afternoon the swinging was begun. The children swang all day.

On the fourth day, or the last day of the ceremony, the day of the horse, August 25, 1967, the swinging was held from three or four o'clock in the afternoon until six o'clock in the evening. The Akha said that this day was the most enjoyable day. At six o'clock the headman swang for the last time. Then he tied the swing rope to one of the four posts. The ceremony was ended.

No one is allowed to cut or chip the posts; if they do, they will be punished and the punishment would be a fine of one pig paid to the headman.

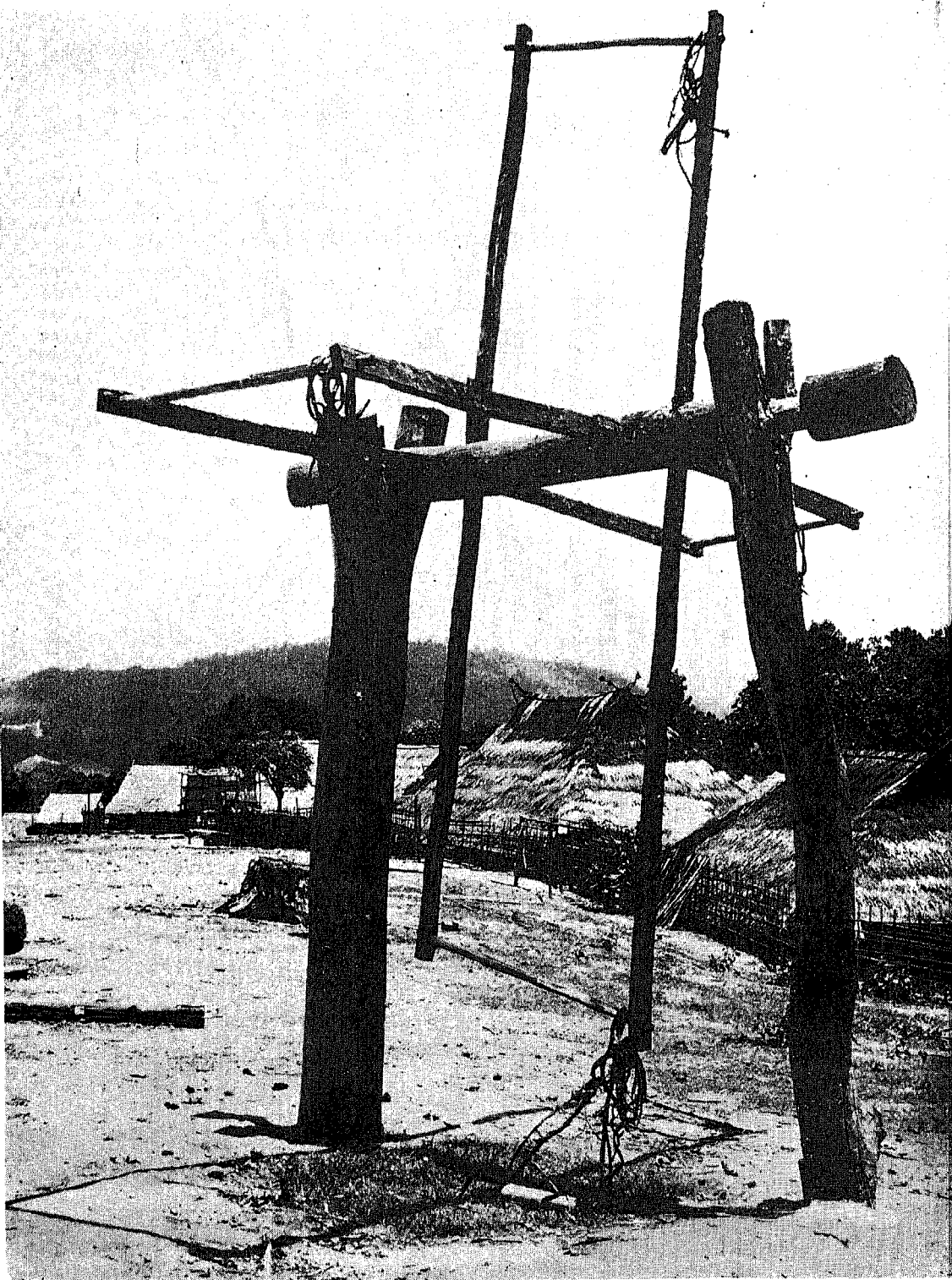
Every ceremony and every festival performed in the village has much meaning for the Akha girls. The explanation for this is that, when a girl reaches 15 years of age, regarded by the Akha as the beginning of womanhood, her dress will be gradually changed from that worn by a child to that worn by a woman. All pieces of dress associated with becoming a woman may not be put on at the same time. One piece is put on after one ceremony. It can be said that a girl, in order to become a woman, has to pass four steps involving four ceremonies. When she is a girl, she puts on a hat with no red

and white beads, but when she reaches 15 years old, the hat will be decorated with such beads. She wears a brassière for the second step, and a belt that serves as well as a loin girder for the third step. The high-shaped headgear with its beautiful decoration comes at the fourth step. Girls who have already passed these four steps are mature women.

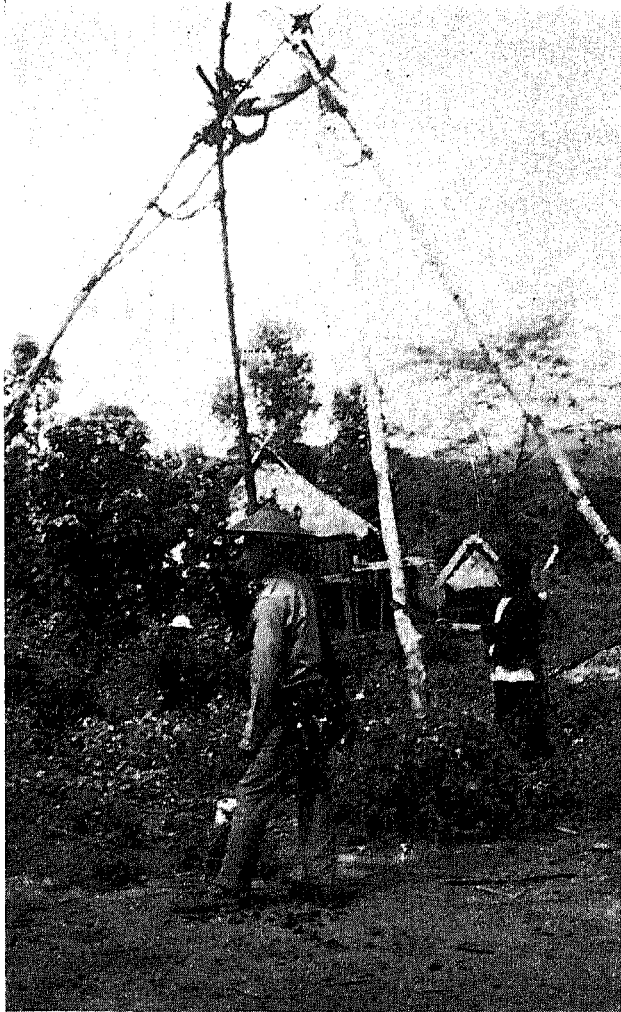
The days of the Swinging Ceremony are times of enjoyment. It is the time for children to play and for the young people to enjoy themselves courting. Nobody works the fields. When this ceremony ends, the small swings for children are pulled down. Only the village's graceful main swings, which are symbols for Akha villages, remain.



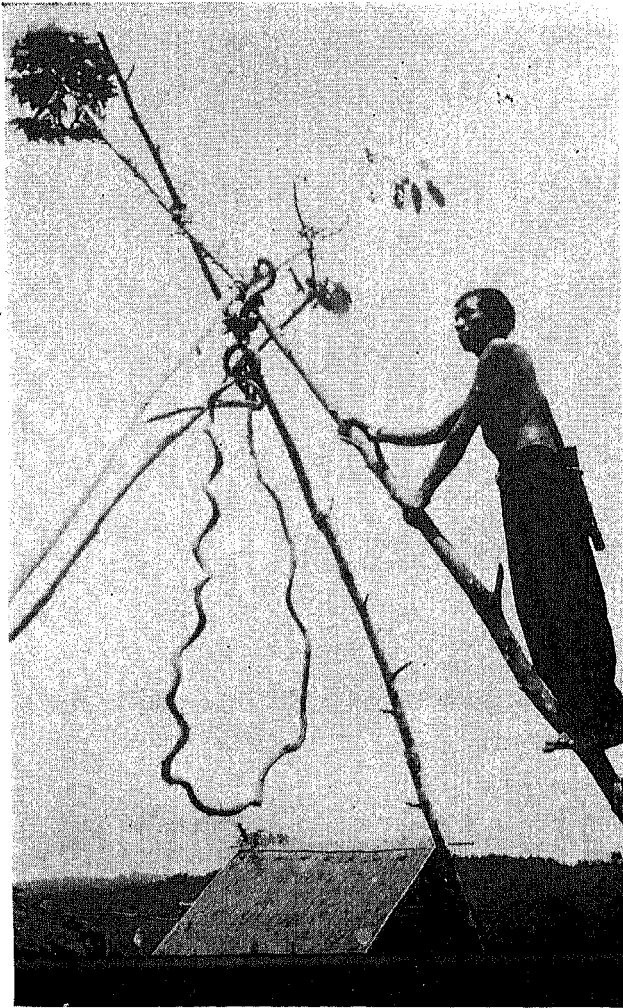
The swing, symbol of an Akha village.



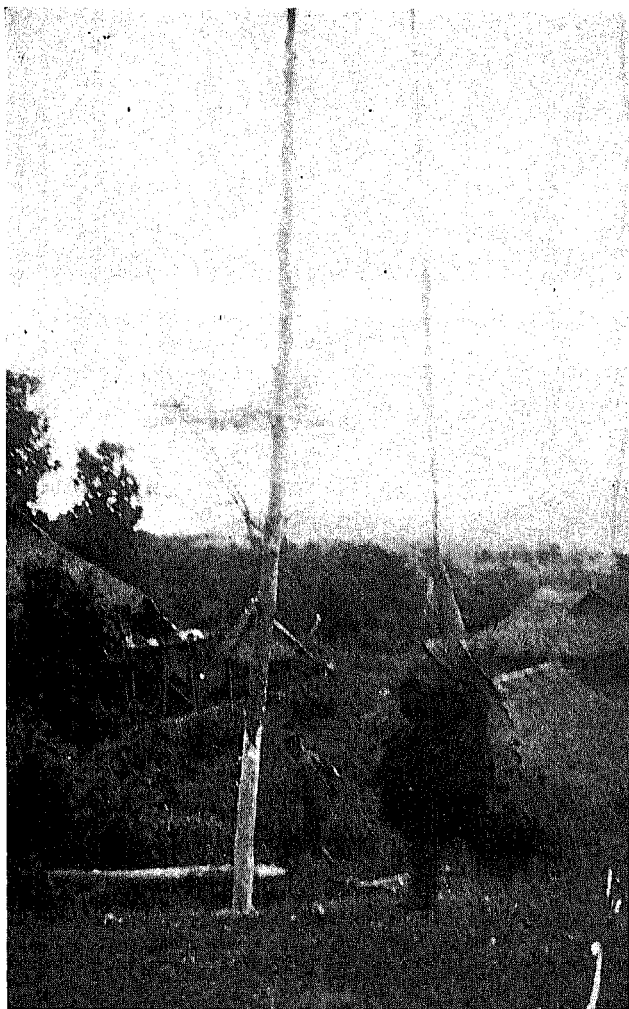
The water-wheel-like swing.



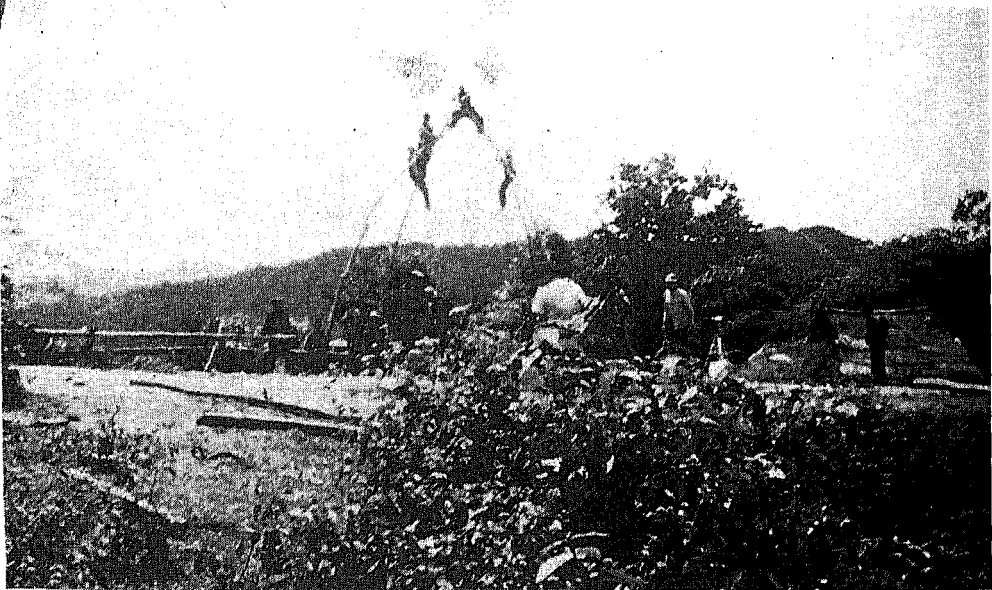
The village headman or Jeuma presiding over the Swinging Ceremony. The other Akha man is chipping the swing post.



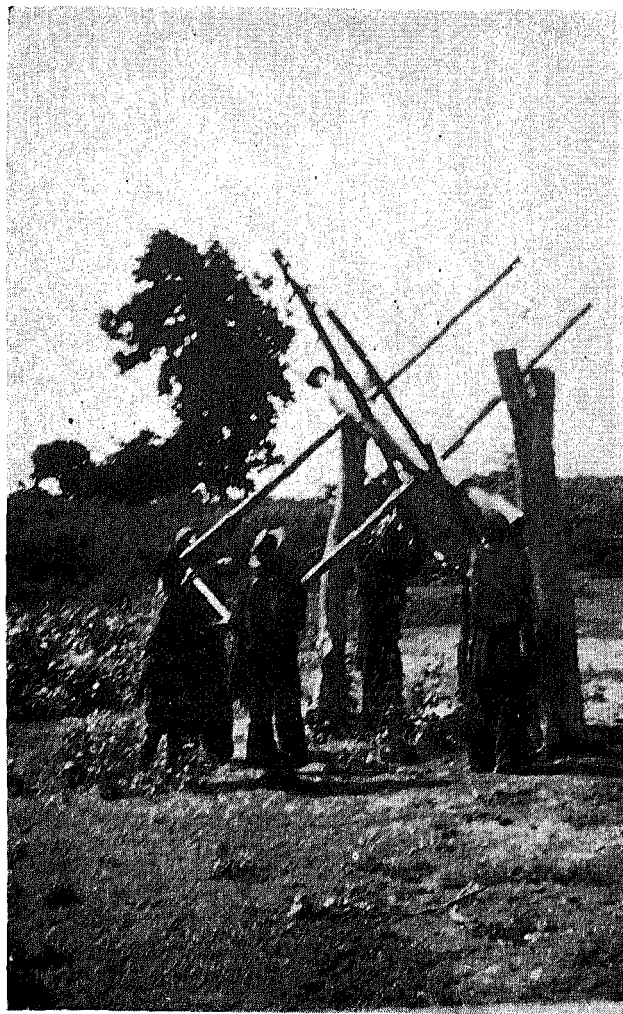
The swing for children.



An Akha man swinging.



Four men on the four swing posts help each other in tying the four posts together.



The water-wheel-like swing being constructed.