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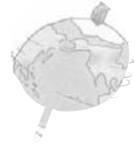
The Magazine for Handspinners

**Akha
Spindles**
*and other
Ah-ha!
experiences*

Caption



*Akha cloth from the collection
of Judy Bossert, Salmon, Idaho.*



THE Akha Spindle

by Connie Delaney

Like most people in the spinning community I was introduced to the Akha spindle by Lynn DeRose Mason's article in the Spring 1995 issue of *Spin-Off* magazine. In that article Lynn provided a wonderful introduction to several types of traditional supported spindles and how to spin with them. But at that time in my own work, I was more interested in seeing how fast I could get my high whorl spindles to go. Spinning with a supported spindle didn't sound fast enough for me.

Then last summer I was doing a spindle spinning (or "spindling," as I call it) demonstration in Heber, Utah. One of the guild members, Riki Darling, came up to me holding the cutest little spindle I'd ever seen. It was an Akha spindle. She showed me how to spin it in the hand, drafting cotton fibers, the same way Lynn DeRose Mason did in the *Spin-Off* article. The long bottom shaft fit perfectly in the palm of Riki's hand and left her fingers free for twisting. It rotated beautifully. Riki let me try it and I was hooked. I loved the feel of the spindle and didn't want to let go. I rushed home and ordered two Akha spindles of my own. Since they arrived I haven't been able to put them down.

Researching the Akha story

My passion for spinning with the Akha spindle inspired a quest to learn more about the people who invented it and their traditional methods for using this spindle. I started out with a piece of information from Lynn's article—that this spindle was

used by the Akha people of Southeast Asia. After an exhaustive search through encyclopedias and other references, I finally I found the word "Akha" in an article on southeast Asian languages, and learned that the Akha people are from the Hill Tribes of northern Thailand.

A search on the Internet for Akha in Thailand found the Akha Foundation, and a search of books at Amazon.com found several books on the Hill Tribes. I immediately ordered the books through my local library and e-mailed the Akha Foundation with a plea for information on traditional Akha spinning. Matthew McDaniel, of the Akha Foundation, replied right away. He said that he didn't know much about spinning except that it was important to wear a very short skirt! Apparently the Akha women hike up their skirts in a provocative way as they flip the spindles off their thighs.

I grabbed my little spindle and tried rolling the bottom of the long shaft up my leg (roll up for Z-twist singles) the way I do my high whorl spindles. Perfect! Even



Riki Darling's handspun and handknit vest is modeled by her granddaughter. Riki spun the cotton yarn on an Akha spindle.

better than perfect! My Akha spindle spun better than any high whorl spindle I had ever tried. The ultra light weight of the spindle was perfect for drafting a thin cotton yarn. It whirled at lightning speed.

Then one day the library called and said the books I had requested had arrived. Now I had two books, both with pictures, and there in front of my eyes was an Akha woman in a short skirt rolling and launching the spindle off her thigh.

Plying with an Akha spindle

By this time I was struggling with the question of how best to ply on my little spindle. For the first skein, I tried using my favorite Peruvian method of winding a center-pull cross on my hand, but the thin cotton strands practically amputated my middle finger and turned into an impossible snarl because of the tightly spun, kinky singles. Next I tried filling both my Akha spindles with singles, supporting them in cereal bowls, and plying onto a high whorl spindle. This worked but it didn't feel right. Once I tried putting paper on the shafts of the spindles and removing the cops to knitting needles. This produced a worse kink disaster than the Peruvian method. I was at an impasse.

I couldn't figure it out by myself so I e-mailed Matthew again, but he had no idea what I was talking about. I pored through my books on the Akha tribes and found one small clue. The Akha women seem to do most of the work in the village, including growing the crops. Each day as they walk to the fields, they use that time to spin yarn. They carry bamboo canisters on their hips to hold the spindles and short rolags of cotton that they previously prepared with a bow. They spin as they walk, and when the spindles get full they roll the yarn into a tight ball, toss it into the bottom of the bamboo canister, and start spinning another spindle. When they get home, they throw any finished balls into a basket to wait until winter, which is when the women weave. (They boil the yarn in starchy rice water to condition it for weaving.)

Inspired by this process, I spun a spindle full of singles and wound it off into a tight ball. I was amazed to end up with a little



To ply cotton spun from an Akha spindle, wind the singles into small tight balls. The two balls fit comfortably in your hand for plying. Winding the balls tightly will prevent the singles from kinking.



An Akha baby smiles from his grandmother's lap. Photo courtesy of Judy Bossert.



Akha women wearing traditional headdresses. Photo courtesy of Judy Bossert.

ball that fit perfectly in the palm of my hand, like those Chinese relaxation balls you buy in specialty shops. Quickly, I spun another spindle. Now I had two balls that I could hold comfortably in my hand for plying—perfect. The tightness of the balls prevented the singles from kinking. I was able to draft right off these balls into a long strand of two-ply yarn. The feel of the yarn pulling off the small balls in my hand was delightful. I spun my spindle down my thigh (roll *down* for S-twist) and produced a perfect, balanced yarn, all by using just one spindle.

Following the Akha way

Having taken a trip to Thailand in the early 1970s, my friend Judy Bossert was able to show me several pieces of traditional Thai cloth. The Akha women specialize in beautiful bright embroidery on a black or dark indigo background. Fortunately for my purposes, Judy's cloth was not hemmed on the edges and one had a small rip, so I could pull out a piece of thread. The dark background was woven from singles that were spun a bit thicker than the singles I was making on my spindle. The brightly-dyed embroidery thread is a tight two-ply, just like my yarn.

As for fiber, my library books clearly showed rolags about 6 inches (15 cm) long sitting in the bamboo canister with the

spindle. I had been holding a beautifully prepared roving with a Scandinavian wrist distaff, but was frustrated at how it kept getting caught by the fast twirling spindle. So I pulled my beautiful roving into pieces, rolled them up, and created short, thick, soft rolags. These I was able to hold effortlessly in my left hand and draft with no tangles. Once again, the Akha way was best. It was wonderful not to be tied to the wrist distaff anymore.

Still, I wasn't willing to completely surrender to native wisdom about all aspects of my spindle. I thought the bamboo canisters were cute, especially since the Akha women decorated them elaborately with braids and beads, but I didn't want to carry something like that around. Not, that is, until I took my Akha spindle along on a car trip with friends. When we arrived at our destination I pulled my spindle out of my backpack and found that the shaft had broken! Three days of being unable to spin taught me my lesson. Now I carry my spindle around in an old Tupperware canister. Someday maybe I'll decorate it with beads.

During the time I was researching the Akha spindle I stayed in touch with Matthew. He encouraged the tribesmen to make traditional spindles to sell and help support the tribes. This turned out to be an involved process as the wood had to be carefully selected and then buried in the

ground to become more dense. When they were ready, I purchased two and was delighted to receive some very rough-cut and obviously hand hewn spindles in the mail. The spindles had no finish on them because the hands of the spinner would oil them over time.

One of the spindles was wrapped with a beautifully spun single in an S-twist. This confirmed the reports in the books that I had read that the women spin the spindles down their knees while walking through the village. ❖

Connie Delaney is the author of Spindle Spinning: From Novice to Expert, and the designer and producer of SpinCraft Patterns. She gives workshops on knitting and spindle spinning at fiber festivals and is always looking for something new to twirl. To learn more about the Akha Heritage Foundation, contact Matthew McDaniel at 386/3 Sailom Joi Road, Maesai, Chiangrai, 57130, Thailand. akha@loxinfo.co.th; www.akha.com.

Resources

Authentic Akha Spindles, handmade by tribal craftsmen, can be purchased through the Akha Foundation for \$20 plus \$6 shipping and handling. These spindles are hewn from native materials in Thailand and each one is different. Before sending money, please contact Matthew McDaniel directly via e-mail (see address above). We also recommend that you contact your local spinning supply shop because many carry Akha spindles.

Anderson, Edward F. *Plants and People of the Golden Triangle: Ethnobotany of the Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand*. Portland, Oregon: Dioscorides Press, 1993.

Mason, Lynn DeRose. "Spinning with a Supported Spindle." *Spin Off* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 74–81.

Young, Gordon. *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand*. Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1977.

Spinning Tips with the Akha

No leader yarn is needed to start. Simply catch the top notch in your loose fiber, turn the spindle clockwise in your hand, and pull until you have some yarn. Slip the loop that is caught in the notch down the dowel and you are ready to go. To secure the yarn, wrap it several times up and around the dowel and catch it once or twice in the notch.

To begin each length of yarn, I spin the spindle with my fingers and draft about 6 inches (15 cm) of yarn. When the spindle reaches to my thigh, I roll the shaft up my leg, giving it a fast spin, then draft rapidly with my left hand. My right arm swings out to the right as the yarn lengthens.

If the spindle starts to slow before I've fully extended my arms, I let it dangle between my shoes and give it a controlled kick-start with my left foot (kick forward with the left foot for Z-twist). Again, I draft back with my left hand to keep up with the twist.

When my arms can't reach any further, I stop, wrap the yarn around a finger to keep twist out of the fiber supply, then wind on. Stretching the thumb and forefinger of my left hand apart and flipping my wrist back and forth, I catch the yarn first with my thumb and then with my finger, using my hand like a niddy-noddy. I wrap the length of yarn into a butterfly between my fingers until I can catch the spindle, then I unwind the butterfly from my fingers as I wrap the yarn onto the shaft of the spindle. (This process is quicker to do than to say.) Then I start spinning again.



Connie's right arm swings out to the right as the yarn lengthens.