

The Lahu-speaking Peoples of the Yunnan-Indochina Borderlands: A Threefold Religious Heritage and its Consequent Syncretisms¹

Anthony R. Walker

Abstract

Over the centuries many Tibeto-Burman speaking Lahu highland communities have been influenced by, and sometimes been incorporated into, a way of life pervaded by Buddhist ideas and practices—of both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions. But those who, to varying degrees, have accepted aspects of Buddhism, seldom, if ever, have entirely abandoned their ancestral ‘animo-theism’.

Since the late 19th century and continuing to the present day, Christianity—first in its Protestant, and subsequently Roman Catholic, manifestation—has impacted greatly on many Lahu communities, the consequence of active proselytization, initially in Northern Thailand but subsequently in Burma, China and Laos. Christianity has been less tolerant of syncretism than has Buddhism; nonetheless, many beliefs rooted in their ancestral animism survive in Lahu Christian communities.

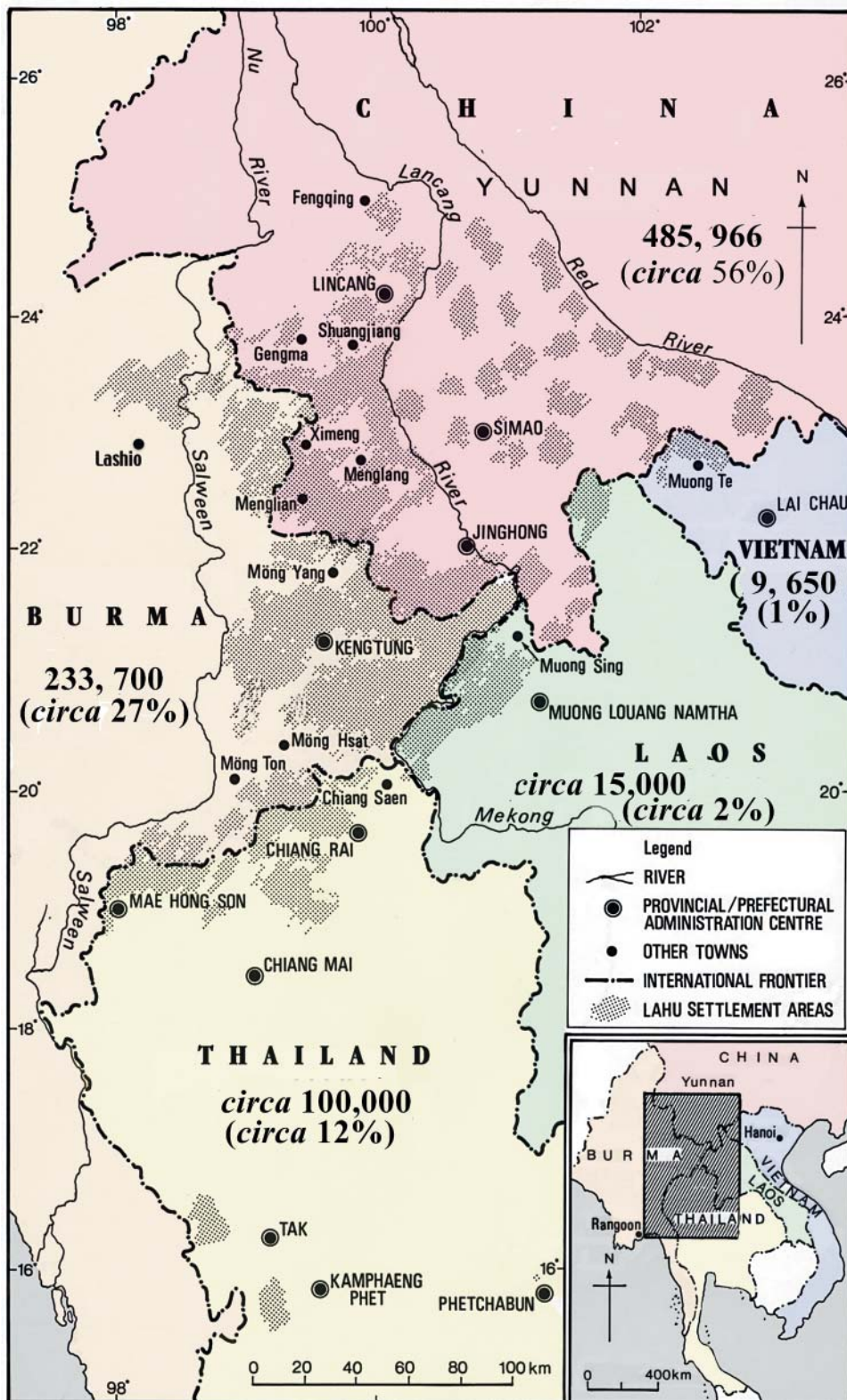
This paper discusses the principal characteristics of Lahu animo-theism as the bedrock of Lahu ethnic religion, explores the history of the associations various Lahu-speaking communities have had with varieties of Buddhism and Christianity and, finally, highlights those areas of their religious culture that demonstrate the extent to which they have succeeded in syncretizing old and new ideas concerning the realm of the extra-mundane.

Introduction

There are, perhaps, in excess of 800,000²—mostly mountain-dwelling—people,

¹ I prepared a version of this paper for the ‘Sixth South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Religion’ meetings held in Colombo, Sri Lanka (June 4-7, 2015). In the event, I did not attend the conference; nonetheless, this paper reflects its theme, viz. *Heritage in the History, Culture and Religion of South and Southeast Asia*.

² The total figure can only be an estimate due, especially, to very imprecise data for Burma (Myanmar), which, after China, certainly has the largest Lahu population. The 2010 census in China counted 485,966 Lahu (Seac & Guo 2014:7); for Burma a 1993 estimate given by *Asia Harvest*, a Christian missionary website, is 125,000 (Anon. n.d.[c]), but more recent estimates listed by another Christian website, the *Joshua Project*, give 223,000 for ‘Lahu’ (probably Lahu Na or Black Lahu) (Anon. n.d. [d]) and 11,700 for Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu) (Anon. n.d. [e]), thus a total of 233,700; for Thailand, recent figures range from 80,000 (Corner n.d.) to 100,000 (Anon. n.d. [f]); for Laos a 1995 estimate gives 15,000 (Anon. n.d.[g]); for Vietnam a 2009 figure is 9,651



Map 1. Distribution of the Lahu-speaking peoples across the Yunnan-Northern Southeast Asia Borderlands

whose mother tongue is one or another of the dialects of Lahu, a Tibeto-Burman language within the Yi (Luoluo) branch of that family. They live in the uplands that constitute much of the borderlands of southwestern Yunnan and the four Southeast Asian states of Burma, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand (see Map). A small diaspora—originally from northwest Laos—now lives in North America, mostly in southern California, but also in Minnesota and North Carolina (Anon. n.d. [a]).

There are many culturally significant divisions among the Lahu peoples (cf. Walker 2003: 91-100)³. Those mentioned in this paper are the Lahu Na or Black Lahu, the Lahu Shi or Yellow Lahu (essentially, dialect- and area-based divisions) and the Lahu Nyi or Red Lahu and the Lahu Shehleh (etym. obsc.), both divisions belonging to the larger Lahu Na language group).

The underlying world view of these Lahu people is animistic and polytheistic (see below), but over the centuries many Lahu communities have been influenced by Buddhist ideas and practices—of both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions; some in effect, have become Buddhists. But those who have accepted Buddhism, either wholly or in part, have seldom entirely abandoned their ancestral ‘animo-theism’.

The fundamentals of Lahu animism

Upfront, I must insist the label ‘animism’ not be taken as a synonym for ‘primitive religion’, a concept more-or-less impossible to define from any useful cross-cultural perspective, nor as the religion of so-called ‘primitive people’, a patronizing term which most modern-day anthropologists prefer to shun. Rather, animism describes a worldview premised on the supposition that all culturally-significant phenomena in the visible and tangible worlds comprise material form and non-material ‘spirit essence’. Surely this is no less reasonable a belief than one that posits the existence of an intervening deity?

Beyond the simple duality—material form/spirit essence—there is another that distinguishes between unremarked spirit essence and remarked in-dwelling ‘animo’. This last is an Esperanto word I have borrowed from American anthropologist Morton Klass (1995: 101) because it usefully combines the notions of ‘spirit’ (in Lahu, *ne*) and ‘soul’ (Lahu *aw*, *ha*) in reference to what Klass (*ibid.*) terms the ‘incorporeal dimension’ with which animistic peoples endow ‘some or all humans, ... some or all living things, ... [and] some or all material entities.’

Unremarked spirit essence *ipso facto* is unnamed and without a set of defining characteristics. But when a collectivity of Lahu single out a particular phenomenon as being of special significance to them, it is quite likely that its ‘incorporeal dimension’—its animo—will be named and provided with a range of defining characteristics. The range of ‘remarked phenomena’ with personalized animo Lahu identify as *aw*, *ha* or ‘souls’, includes human beings, animals, crops and farming equipment, while those

(Anon. n.d.[f]) and for the United States, 10,000 (Anon. n.d.[g]). Using the higher Burmese and Thai estimates, these figures add up to 863,317; with the lower ones, the total comes to 725,617. I suspect the higher figure is closer to the truth.

³ My early attempt in this journal (Walker 1974) to bring some order into the confused picture of Lahu sub-ethnic divisions needs by now considerable revision.



whose personalized animo they term *nẽ* or ‘spirits’ embrace mountains (cf. Walker 1977b, 2015), rivers (cf. Walker 1976c; 2011zf), trees (cf. Walker 1982), sun (cf. Walker 1976d), moon, rainbow (cf. Walker 1977a), lightning (cf. Walker 1977c), landslides, roads, domestic hearths, old Buddhist temples (Walker 1981b), and so on. But what is marked as significant by one group of Lahu may not necessarily be so viewed by another. For example, I never heard the Lahu Nyi of my study villages in northern Thailand talking of, or performing, ritual activity directed towards, the *ya, k’aw nẽ*, the ‘pathway (or road) spirit’, or to the *a, mi_ nẽ*, literally ‘fire spirit’ but especially associated with the domestic hearth; both of these supernatural entities are mentioned repeatedly in Chinese-language ethnographic accounts of the Lahu in Yunnan (see, *inter alia*, Guo 1991: 24, 79; Liu 1990: 373; Luo 1992: 119; Song 1985: 210). This is just as I would expect, given that diverse Lahu communities, or even the same community at different points in time, likely will select a somewhat different range of phenomena that, to them, are of special significance.

Quite logically, the Lahu view an in-dwelling animo, whether ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’, as ‘owner’ (Lahu, *aw, sheh_ hpã*) of the material phenomenon within which it dwells. Consequently, if Lahu want to make use of the material form—be it a tree, a piece of land, a section of a waterway, etc.—it stands to reason they must first seek its owner’s permission. And this precisely is what Lahu traditionalists do when, for example, they wish to clear a new swidden (cf. Walker 1978a), or to set up a new village (cf. Walker 1983). Thus, Lahu Nyi farmers with whom I lived in North Thailand, before clearing a stretch of forest to make way for a new rice swidden, would pray like this (cf. Walker 1978a:720-722 for the full text, including original Lahu language):

Oh spirits of the waters, spirits of the rocks, spirits of the hills, spirits of the streams here at this place, I bring for you uncooked rice and beeswax candles and I inform you of my wish to cut a rice swidden. I request your permission, oh spirits of this place, so please receive these offering that I have prepared with my own hands.
And so on.

Before building a new village, the Lahu Nyi village headman prays to the spirit of the locality like this (cf. Walker 1983: 175-178 for the full text in Lahu and English translation):

Ah ho! We people of this community bring for you here at this place beautiful beeswax candles and beautiful rice prepared by our own hands; here at this place we buy, we barter for this hill so that we may live here.

[Opposite page]

Figure 1 (top left). A Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) spirit master in North Thailand raising a basket holding cloth and items of silver jewellery as offerings to his super-mundane patron.

Figure 2 (top right). Lahu Tabon spirit master in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, performing spirit propitiation rite involving the sacrifice of a chicken (corpse circled in black) and offering its blood (in two small teacups) at entrance of symbolic house; the spirit master throws the wooden divining sticks (circled in red) to determine whether or not the sacrifice has been accepted.

Figure 3 (below). Following sacrifice of chicken, the Lahu Na spirit master (in Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, Yunnan) throws wooden divining sticks to determine success or failure of sacrificial rite.

Here at this place, under your feet and under your hands, we buy and we barter, so lord, great lord, pure lord, if your dwelling place is here, please move away to the bottom or to the top [of this hill].

...

Three times in one day, three times in one night, shield and protect each one of us from [sharp] points of iron and copper, from [sharp] points of wood; shield, protect and save us from all sickness and death by [sharp] points.

...

The entire village community will live here, the senior village headman will live here; oh, if you should have your dwelling place here, we beseech you to move away to the top or to the bottom [of this place], oh lord, pure lord of this place.

In some cases—through appropriate propitiation—the spirit owner is believed to become the super-mundane guardian of those who honour and propitiate it. For example, the animo of a particular mountain, through propitiation (during which prayers are uttered like the one just above) becomes the spirit guardian of the people who live and farm, herd and gather, and hunt and fish in this locality (cf. Walker 2015). During the period of their residence here, the community addresses its guardian/s as *cao, tu̇ cao, ui_ cao, yaẇ cho, ka, ve*, meaning ‘great lord/s of this place’ (number is imprecisely stated and, I suspect, not even considered).

So the in-dwelling animo may become guardian or protector of people closely associated with it; at the same time, should people malign or neglect that animo, either wantonly or by accident, Lahu believe it quite as capable of causing harm as it is of offering protection. Many are the times a Lahu spirit diagnostician informs his client that an angered water spirit, forest spirit, tree spirit or other such super-mundane entity is the cause of his or her sickness or other misfortune. Sometimes a person is said to have offended the spirit by failing to offer appropriate ritual respect; but more often, it would seem, spirits are believed to act capriciously. Dozens of men, women and children may, for example, cross a particular waterway without mishap; then one falls sick and people say he or she has probably been ‘bitten’ (in Lahu ‘*che, ve*’) by the resident water spirit.

In-dwelling animo, whether spirits (*nė*) of natural phenomena, like forests, waterways, lightning, rainbow, etc., or souls (*aw, ha*) of people, animals, or even guns, may be rendered quiescent through appropriate propitiation, but only so long as the animo remains bound to the material phenomenon it customarily inhabits. If animo and material counterpart separate, the former becomes what Benjamin (1979:10)—writing in the context of the beliefs of the indigenous peoples of the Malay Peninsula—terms a ‘free spirit’. Although Lahu do not consider all free spirits as invariably maleficent, they certainly view a number of such super-mundane entities as potentially very dangerous (see below).

With respect to human beings (*chaw yȧ*), Lahu (in company with most peoples in their part of the world) believe that when physical body (*aw, to*) and immaterial soul (*aw, ha*) are tightly bound one to another, the individual lives in safety, good health and in accordance with the norms of society. In stark contrast, when a person’s *aw, ha* escapes from his or her body, Lahu believe this presages danger and sickness, or psychological and social abnormality.

The normal, healthy, relationship between human body and *aw ha*, Lahu say, may be disturbed in a number of ways. The first, and most common, is when the *aw ha* deserts its material anchor. On occasion, Lahu say, an *aw ha* may be frightened away from its bodily anchor due to its owner having suffered some terrifying experience, for example by unexpectedly encountering a dangerous animal or strange person in the forest, by experiencing a close brush with death, etc. Alternatively, they may attribute soul loss to the *aw ha*'s desire to be somewhere else—frequently with a deceased loved one—or else claim that, due to its less than sturdy condition, the *aw ha* has fallen victim to the machinations of a malicious spirit. In everyday language Lahu describe this latter situation as the spirit having ‘bitten’ (*che ve*) its victim. But in the language of prayer, as often as not, the offending spirit will be addressed with words that indicate they believe it to have ‘captured’, not merely ‘bitten’, the *aw ha*. For example:

If you have set this person's soul in your iron prison, if you have put it into your copper prison [in this case, ‘iron and copper’ constitute a poetic couplet signifying ‘strong’], please now release this soul; do not punish this poor and unworthy person!

Whether it is said that the *aw ha* has voluntarily abandoned its material counterpart, or that it has been carried away by a malicious spirit, the Lahu's required antidote is a soul recall rite (*ha* [or *aw ha*] *hku ve*). Indeed, calling back the souls of human beings is an ubiquitous aspect of the Lahu peoples' traditional ritual response to misfortune. Among the Lahu Nyi with whom I lived in North Thailand, a ritual specialist—almost always a male elder of the community and one familiar with the verbal and manual intricacies of the rite—was in charge of the proceedings which, in order to assuage the embarrassment of the returning soul, people said, invariably took place after dark. Omitting the liturgical details (for which see Walker 1972a [which includes the original Lahu language texts]; also Walker 2003:186-192), the following words the officiant addresses to the wandering or captured *aw ha* encapsulate the essence of the recall rite:

Tonight, this good night, the time is not ripe for you to tarry in the land of the dead, the time is not ripe for you to tarry in the land of sickness! Tonight come back! By morn tomorrow be back in the house!

...

Oh soul, tonight, this good night, do not linger in the land of the dead, do not linger in the land of sickness! ... Come back now to the side of the master of this house, come back now to the side of the mistress of this house!

Do not follow the path of death; do not take the path of sickness. Tonight, this good night, listen to the sounds of the rice mortars in the village and come back! Listen to the sounds of the cocks and the hens and come back! By morn tomorrow be back in the house, come back!

Tonight, this good night, oh soul, ...take this ... silver that we have fashioned with our own hands and come back! Put this silver into your feet, put this silver into your hands and come back!

Much less frequently, the souls of other entities, such as guns, crops and animals, are also recalled. Thus, Lahu hunters call back the souls of their precious hunting guns when they constantly fail to hit their target; no amount of fine marksmanship, they say, will enable a hunter to bag a game animal until the soul of his gun has been recalled in the rite known as *na^* ‘gun’ *ha* (from *aw_ ha*) ‘soul’, *hku ve* ‘to call’ (Walker 1978b for details). Similarly, if the soul of the rice crop, the *ca ha* or *ca aw_ ha*, leaves the crop, the Lahu farmer must be sure to recall it (cf. Liu 1994:5 6-58), otherwise no amount of hard work on his and his household members’ part will ensure a good yield from the seed stock planted in the following year.

Sometimes, however, when people, crops, or domestic animals are struck by disease, Lahu believe it is not soul recall that is required but rather the propitiation or exorcism of the spirit or spirits (*ne^*) believed to have caused the problem. Lahu classify both attached and unattached spirits as *ne^*, but consider the latter potentially much more dangerous than the former.

Many ethnographic accounts of Lahu animism (my own included, cf. Walker 1976: 380-381) attempt to classify according to certain hermeneutical categories the various *ne^* that Lahu recognize: e.g. ‘guardian spirits’ (of house, village, field, locality, game animals), ‘nature spirits’ (of mountains, waterways, rocks, trees, sun, moon, lightning, whirlwind, rainbow), ‘spirits of demoniacal possession’ and ‘spirits of the bad dead’—all these within my classification—while Chinese authors, like Liang Kesheng 梁克生 and his co-writers (1992, Ch. 9, pp. 15-17), list ‘nature spirits’, ‘spirits of the bad dead’, ‘spirits released through sorcery’ and ‘vampire spirits’.

All such classifications, it must be emphasized, are not indigenous ones, but rather have been imposed on the ethnographic data by outside observers. The Lahu themselves, so far as I have been able to gauge, if compelled to classify at all, talk only of ‘good spirits’ (*da_ ve ne^*) and ‘bad spirits’ (*ma^ da_ ve ne^*), while recognizing that some ‘good spirits’ are, on occasion, harmful and some *ne^* (for example, the charcoal spirit or *shi^ g^eu_ ka^ -eh ne^* of my study community) essentially are neither good nor bad.

One of the best general descriptions of the Lahu concept of *ne^*, in my opinion, comes from the pen of Chinese scholar Zhang Qiang 张强 (1994: 46-47), who, in a paper more directly concerned with the Lahu concept of *G^ui_ sha* than with the *ne^*, has this to say about the spirits:

The *ni* 尼 (= *ne^*) have no specific form, nor are there different classes of them. Each one has its own function and is not subordinate to any other one of them. But human beings must not offend these *ni*, otherwise misfortune will befall them and the beauty of the human world will be destroyed [Chinese poetic language]. For example, the Lahu believe that those people who are killed by being struck by lightning, by drowning or by fire have offended one or another kind of *ni*. Thus it is very common among the Lahu to have various kinds of ritual activity through which to request protection from the *ni*. Nonetheless, the physical form of a particular *ni* cannot be described. The people will come to know of the benevolence or malevolence of a *ni* only when they experience fortune or misfortune.

Lahu seem, generally, to fear more acutely those spirits associated in one way or another with people—dead or alive—than those associated with non-human phenomena. Among the Lahu Nyi with whom I lived, among the most feared spirits were said to be the *meh* and *mvuh*, both associated with those who had died ‘bad deaths’ (in Lahu *suh ma da ve chaw*), and the *gu*^ spirits that some people (cf. Walker 2003: 144 n 71) likewise thought were associated with the ‘bad dead’, but others believed to be spirits released by sorcerers for the purpose of harming their victims (the latter explanation seemingly is the more common one, even among Lahu Nyi [cf. Nishimoto 2003: 131]). Then there were the *chaw tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]* (Lahu Nyi dialect; Lahu Na, *taw[^]*) or ‘human *tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]*’ (the most feared of three categories of *tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]* spirit, cf. Walker 2003: 155) and, indeed, the most feared of all human-related spirits. They are said to be the familiar spirits of people who are inherently evil, although not through any fault of their own. My Lahu informants recognized that such people have no means of ridding themselves of the evil entity they host; that in fact, they are probably quite unaware they host a *tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]*. For these reasons, I believe we may usefully employ the term ‘witch’ to translate the Lahu designation ‘*suh⁻ tsuh[~]/taw[^] caw[^] ve chaw*’.⁴

In the Lahu Nyi community I studied, people told of how a witch’s *tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]* would periodically leave its host’s body, either as an immaterial spirit, or else in the form of a cat, or some other animal, in order to cause injury. The *tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]* (or *taw[^]*), it is said, may either bite its victim (in this case, literally), or else enter his or her body, thereby upsetting the soul-body relationship described above. The bite of a *tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]*, my Lahu informants told me, is usually fatal; moreover, so they said, teeth marks sometimes may be seen on the victim’s neck. Nobody is able to observe an attacking *tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]*, they declared, except for the victim, who sometimes identifies its human host. In this event, it may be expected the named ‘witch’ will be driven out of the village forcefully. If a *tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]* is believed to have invaded the victim’s body, the situation is very dangerous, although not necessarily fatal. As already noted, the host cannot expel the spirit, but a *ne[~] te sheh[^] hpa[~]* or ‘spirit master’, it is told, may be able to do so.

Exorcism and, more commonly, propitiation are the means by which Lahu counter the machinations of malicious spirits. As therapies, exorcism and propitiation may be employed in conjunction with, or quite apart from, soul recall. For example, somebody falls sick and a soul recall rite is performed. The sickness persists. A ritual diagnostician (see Walker 2003: 183-186) determines that the patient has been ‘bitten’ by the lightning spirit (*mvuh[~] hteh[^] ne[~]*). The appropriate propitiatory rite is performed (Walker 1977c for details). The patient fails to recover. Another diagnostician is consulted. This time it is the rainbow spirit (*a⁻ la[~] mi shi[^] jaw ne[~]*) that is identified as responsible and a second

⁴ I may still be under too great an influence of the East Africanists, who were the majority of my teachers of social anthropology at Oxford. I am certainly aware that the clear-cut distinction between a witch—as a passive generator of evil—and a sorcerer—as an active practitioner of malign magic, is not as clear-cut in many parts of the world as it was reported to be among many East African people (cf. Middleton & Winter 1963: 8-9, 12). I do, however, find the terminological dichotomy applicable to the Lahu situation, where a *tsuh⁻ tsuh[~]/taw[^] caw[^] ve chaw* may usefully be distinguished as a ‘witch’, from a *maw[^] pa[^]* (spirit specialist), who is commissioned to perform sorcery (cf. Walker 2003: 292-292).



Figure 4. Lahu Nyi wooden spirit-offering post with leaf cup containing rice grains and beeswax candles for the spirit(s)

propitiatory rite performed (Walker 1977a for details). And so it goes on until the patient recovers or dies (or seeks alternative medical assistance (Lahu herbal, Tai herbal or ritual, Chinese traditional and modern Western are all possibilities open to one or another Lahu community in modern times).

It is quite beyond the bounds set for this paper to describe in detail Lahu spirit propitiatory and exorcistic rites. Instead, I shall offer only two, very much abbreviated, examples. For a propitiatory rite, I consider *sha_law_ve*, ‘praying for game’ by propitiating the spirit guardian of the wild animals (one of the attributes of the resident mountain spirit or *hk’aw ne*). For a spirit exorcism, I choose *jaw pa_jaw ma g’a_ve*, ‘driving away the male and female *jaw* spirits’.

At its simplest, the Lahu Nyi *sha_law_ve* rite⁵ involves setting up a wooden or bamboo offering post (*sho lo*), about 150 centimetres high (Fig. 4), at a spot in the forest where the propitiator has come across game tracks. Atop this post is a leaf cup (*u cu lu*), into which the propitiator has put offerings to the spirit: some unlit beeswax candles, a few raw, but husked, rice grains, a little salt and a

few chilli peppers. He is now ready to chant the propitiatory prayers, extracts of which are as follows (Walker 1976b: 219-222 for the original Lahu language text):⁶

Oh today at this place I offer this silver, this golden altar, you who watch over a thousand wild boars, a thousand wild sows on the right hand side, you who watch over a million wild boars and sows on the left hand side, great lord of this place. Oh I ask for wild boars and sows, I ask for stag barking deer and doe barking deer and today bring for you these offerings, which I place under your feet and under your hands.

...

I put my request under your feet and under your hands; let me have wild boars and wild sows, stag barking deer and doe barking deer, give me flesh that I can divide up [i.e. large game sufficient to share with all the villagers, as custom dictates], give me flesh to eat; today, before the setting of the sun, give me flesh to eat; receive these offerings.

⁵ See Walker 2003: 233-237 for a more detailed account, not restricted to Lahu Nyi, and Walker 1976b for a detailed account of the Lahu Nyi rite, including Lahu language texts.

⁶ James Matisoff (2009: 121-134) has re-edited and re-translated the first of the two texts in my original paper and published it as the principal content of a chapter for a book honoring my late wife, Pauline Hetland Walker.

For my example of an exorcistic rite, viz. *jaw pa_ jaw ma g'a_ ve* ‘driving away the male and female *jaw*’, I need to explain certain traditional Lahu Nyi cosmological ideas. Lahu tradition—probably derived from Tai neighbours (cf. Milne 1910: 201)—has it that a solar eclipse comes about when a celestial tiger eats the sun (*mvuh_ nyi* [sun] *la_* [tiger] *ca_ ve* [eats]), while a lunar eclipse is caused by a celestial frog eating the moon (*ha pa* [moon] *pa_* [frog] *ca_ ve* [eats]). Lahu Nyi tradition (whether or not modern-day Lahu give credence to it) relates that, on such occasions, the blood of the sun or moon falls down to earth, where it is caught on treetops. Here the drops of blood transmute into malicious *jaw ne_* or *jaw* spirits. If and when a Lahu villager fells those trees, either to build a new house or to repair an old one, unwittingly he may bring some of these malicious ‘free spirits’ back home with him. Here they will continue to dwell—a threat to the household members’ health and good fortune—until they are driven out.

Jaw spirits must be exorcised by spirit masters, who need to make fairly elaborate preparations for the ritual banishment. From wild banana root the spirit master must carve, or at least oversee the carving of fairly crude representations of a horse and an elephant (Fig. 5)—



Figure 5. Images of elephant and horse offered as transport for, hopefully, departing malicious spirits (elephant height 14 cm, length 24 cm; horse height 13 cm, length 23 cm)

transport on which the spirits will be dispatched. From strips of split-bamboo cane he or an assistant(s) weaves *leh-o_* (usually considered guards against malicious spirits but on this occasion said to be gifts for the *jaw*) as well as head rings, which the household members wear during the exorcism and into which, informants explained, any *jaw* spirits remaining in their bodies will enter; at the conclusion of the ritual activity, the spirit master discards these rings outside the village area. From strands of *zuh* (cogon grass = *Imperata cylindrica*) the spirit master, or one who is assisting him with the preparations, weaves a symbolic *vui_ naw* (lit. ‘green snake’, i.e. the green pit viper (*Trimeresurus popeorum*)); also a replica human corpse, wrapped in a piece of white cloth. Some of my informants ventured the opinion that the symbolic snake is fabricated to strike fear into the *jaw*, but I would lean towards an interpretation of the artefact as somehow being symbolic of these spirits themselves. This is because, when Lahu Nyi actually observe this species of snake climbing on a house roof, they take it as a sure sign that *jaw ne_* are present in the dwelling. As for the replica corpse, all seemed to concur that it was a substitute for the real thing—that which the *jaw* spirits really seek. Finally, from branches of two different species of tree: *chi_ hpu* or Chinkapin (*Castanopsis tribuloides*) and a *yaw* or Crepe Myrtle (*Lagerstoemia macrocarpa*), the top of a young wild banana (*a_ paw_ naw*, *Musa spp.*) and a long grass called *pa_ lao_* (unidentified; found particularly in old swiddens), the spirit master or his assistant fabricates what looks much like a broom. In Lahu it is called a *jaw yeh_*, meaning *jaw* spirits’ house. It is certainly not a broom, but a collection of materials bound together for the spirits to take away with them so that they may build a rest hut for themselves on what, the Lahu hope, will be their very long journey taking them far away from the Lahu houses they are now inhabiting or—better said—infesting.

After further preparations, including the spirit master’s appeal for assistance from his spirit patron (see Walker 1976a: 386-394, 1985a: 39-40), the *jaw ne_* are driven

out of the house. I shall not detail all the ritual actions that accompany the exorcism; I have described them several times elsewhere (Walker 1976a, 1985a, 2005a, b, c). Here, as with the propitiatory rite discussed earlier, I shall concentrate on some stanzas of the principal exorcistic prayer, in the hope that this will adequately convey the underlying principles of spirit exorcism. The spirit master begins (Walker 1985a: 42-46 for the Lahu language text):

A HTO! [words said to frighten the spirits] Today, on this good day, if there are death-dealing *jaw* spirits, illness-bringing *jaw* spirits in these peoples' house, I command that you stand up on your *jaw* feet and depart, you male *jaw* spirits and you female *jaw* spirits, give up [causing trouble] and be gone!

...

Today, on this good day, if I am able to drive [you spirits] away no more than a single time, the divine Pi ya[~] [the spirit master's supernatural patron] can drive [you away] nine times!

...

Away yonder, where the heavens end, yonder is a place where in one day you can eat seven kinds [of food]; oh, away yonder, in one day you can drink seven kinds [of drink]!

...

The frog once drank the moon, the tiger once ate the sun, so if there are death-dealing *jaw* spirits, sickness-inflicting *jaw* spirits, lift up your *jaw* feet and depart; you male *jaw* spirits, [you female *jaw* spirits] give up causing trouble and be gone!

...

Away yonder where the moon cannot shine, the sun cannot shine. Away yonder in one day there are seven different kinds of food to eat, seven different kinds of drink! Oh, there is a white market with nine stalls, a red market with nine stalls; there is an eating house and a drinking house!

...

Today, stand up on your *jaw* feet and go; [take this] *a yaw*, lord of trees, and you male *jaw* spirits, [you female *jaw* spirits], cease your trouble-making and go!

...

Today nine *jaw yeh* have been made ready for you; oh, if there are death-dealing *jaw* spirits, sickness-inflicting *jaw* spirits, lift up your *jaw* feet and depart; you male *jaw* spirits, [you female *jaw* spirits], give up causing trouble and be gone!

...

Do not be counted within these people's house with nine rooms; do not be counted within these people's house of nine divisions!

...

Today, this day, if I am able to drive [you spirits] away no more than a single time, the divine Pi ya[~] [the spirit master's supernatural patron] can drive [you away] nine times! A HTO! A HTO!

Lahu theism

I cannot categorize the traditional Lahu worldview, despite its bedrock animism, simply as ‘animistic’. This is because, for as long as I can determine, Lahu communities have entertained notions of *sha* or deities; moreover, a great many (but not all) Lahu-speaking communities have for long exalted a creator-divinity they call G’ui_u sha (the etymology of this word is not entirely clear, but the first syllable *g’ui* may be linked to an ancient Tibeto-Burman root **ray*, meaning ‘being’, in the sense of ‘self-existing first cause’ [Matisoff 1988: 1155]).

As a matter of fact, many of the accounts of Lahu metaphysics (including several of my own, *viz.* Walker 1969: 46; 1970: 175-176; 1972b: 249-252; 1975: 336) begin not with its animistic, but rather with its theistic dimension. Thus, Gordon Young, grandson of the pioneer American Baptist missionary among the Lahu in Burma and China (see below), in his 1962 book on the mountain peoples of northern Thailand, begins his account of Lahu Nyi and Lahu Na religion by declaring these two Lahu-speaking peoples to be ‘theistic animists’, because ‘[t]hey believe in a ‘Father God’ who is the creator of all things good’ (Young 1962:10). James Telford, the Scottish-American who succeeded Gordon Young’s grandfather as head of the Baptist mission in Kengtung, Burma, after first declaring the Lahu to be animists, goes on to write (1938: 3-4):

For long decades before the Lahus came in touch with Western civilization and missionaries, they had knowledge of and worshipped a Supreme Being, whom they called *G’ui sha*. In many ... villages there are temple huts, to which the priest ... and villagers go on holy days to worship *G’ui sha*. *This worship of their Supreme Being is entirely different and apart from their animistic beliefs and practices* [emphasis added].

Finally, let me cite three representative Chinese-language sources on Lahu theism. The first is Guo Jiaji 郭家骥 (1991: 73), who writes:

While they [the Lahu] believe all things possess *hun* 魂 (souls), at the same time they have created the idea of an almighty *tian shen* 天神 (sky deity), Esha 厄莎 (= G’ui_u sha), who is able to control all phenomena. ... Esha is ... both omniscient and omnipotent.

Next, we may consider the views of Zhang Xiaosong 张晓松 and Li Gen 李根, who write under the joint pen name ‘Xiaogen’ 晓根 (1994: 41), ‘Not only is he [G’ui_u sha; the Chinese original uses the male pronoun] the creator of everything on earth and in heaven, but he is the one who determines the whole social life of the Lahu people’. The final Chinese author I shall cite here is the aforementioned Zhang Qiang 张强 (1994:46), who writes:

Esha is the creator and is the greatest of all the *shen*. It [no gender is attributed in the Chinese] changed the stagnant and chaotic universe into a vital and colourful

world. It taught human beings how to cultivate and led them away from uncivilized and barbarous times. It safeguarded the lives and the fertility of the Lahu people and their animals. It ensured bumper harvests and a peaceful world.

Of these English and Chinese-language definitions of Lahu theism, only Zhang Qiang talks (I believe correctly) of the creator-divinity G'ui sha as simply 'the greatest of all the deities'. The others, especially those of the Westerners, Gordon Young and James Telford, appear to champion Lahu monotheism, not just theism. But we need also to know that the notion of a high god (the cosmic creator), among a multitude of gods, is not uncommon. Indeed, it is a more or less ubiquitous characteristic of the traditional (ethnic-based) religions of Southeast Asia and the south-western borderlands of China (see Walker 2003: 159-160).

There is, nonetheless, good reason to characterize as unique the theism widespread—but not universal—among the Lahu. This is because, in this part of the world, it is much more common for people to regard their high god, their creator-divinity, as a remote, almost insignificant, supernatural entity in comparison with the much more immediate territorial guardians, sickness-bearing spirits, etc. But this, certainly, is not the case among many Lahu communities, including those I studied in North Thailand, for whom G'ui sha (as also among the Kengtung Lahu described by Telford) is at the very centre of their ritual lives, often with village temples (Fig. 7) and a priestly hierarchy dedicated to the regular worship of this almighty creator-divinity (cf. Walker 1970: 190-194; 1981a; 2003: 362-413, 2006: 122-123). But this admitted and, consequently, the ethnographic stress on Lahu theism in no way discredited, I would venture to say that the ideas and ritual practices concerning G'ui sha in many 20th and 21st century Lahu communities are the result of historical events that occurred in Yunnan from the late 17th to the early 19th century, which, ironically, had to do with the Lahu's encounter with non-monotheistic Buddhism (the details are in the following section). But, what I believe to be the older Lahu theistic ideas are still manifest in several modern-day Lahu communities; American anthropologist Delmos J. Jones (1967: 89) came upon them, I believe, among The Lahu Sheh Leh in North Thailand, for whom, as he writes, 'the concept of God [G'ui sha] is an important element [but], the spirits [*ne*] are more important, for it is they who cause sickness, and it is they who are called upon to cure it. God in the words of the spirit doctor [of one of Jones's study villages] "does not do very much".'

The overriding importance of the G'ui sha concept in many Lahu communities that also maintain parallel beliefs in spirits, and the recognition of this—even though remote—high god in other Lahu communities, whose greater concern is with the spirits, surely is sufficient justification for the use of the term 'animo-theism' to categorize the belief systems of the majority of Lahu-speaking peoples.

The Lahu people's encounter with Buddhism

The Lahu peoples' encounter with Buddhism has been long and multifaceted, encompassing both major schools: Theravāda and Mahāyāna. I shall begin with the former and treat with the latter subsequently.

As Lahu communities migrated southwards through Yunnan and, some of them, into what are now the Southeast Asian states of Burma, Laos and Thailand, they encountered Theravāda Buddhist Tai (Dai) peoples as their politically-dominant, irrigated rice-farming, lowland neighbours. Several ideological concepts and ritual traditions emanating from these Tai neighbours have slowly—but deeply—penetrated the world views and ritual practices of many southern-dwelling Lahu communities.

A very good example is that of the Lahu Nyi in North Thailand and the Burmese Shan State. The great majority of these communities are not immediately identifiable—nor indeed would they identify themselves—as Theravāda Buddhists. Nonetheless, ideas of merit and demerit (cf. Walker 2003: 123, 283), the making of merit by building rest shelters for weary travellers (cf. Walker 1985b), the absorption of demerit by taking the life of sentient beings (cf. Walker 1984: 281), the observation of a vegetarian diet on certain major ritual occasions (cf. Walker 1981a: 703, 703 n. 66; 1984: 290, 290), the coincidence and naming of principal village temple festivals with Theravāda Buddhist merit days and religious festivals (cf. Walker 1984: 280, 290, 292), the naming of temple officials and temple artefacts after Shan and Northern Thai Buddhist prototypes (cf. Walker 2003: 387-388; 2006: 116-119; 2012: 12-13)—all these, and more, are clearly the consequence of long-term and sustained contact with lowland Buddhist neighbours. There is very little evidence for these accretions having occurred due to formal evangelistic forays into the mountains by members of the Buddhist *Sangha*.

Much less common than such long-term and disparate accretions, but also, it seems, occasionally to be found, are entire Lahu communities that are unambiguously identifiable as Buddhist (even though—as among Tai Buddhists themselves—the animotheistic dimension has almost certainly not been rejected). In the 1960s, for example, I learned from Lahu Na (Black Lahu) Christian informants, who had moved into Thailand from Burma, that there were some Lahu communities in their former homeland that had quite thoroughly adopted the Theravāda Buddhism of their Shan neighbours (as have the Waic-speaking Palaung [cf. Milne 1924: 312-334]), erecting temples and supporting monks and novices in their highland villages. Quite likely, these Theravāda Buddhist Lahu are members of the Lahu Shi or Yellow Lahu division.⁷

More recently in Thailand, some Lahu communities have witnessed more active and formalized Buddhist proselytism, albeit nowhere as intensive as that of Christian missionaries, whether foreign or local (see next section). Under the ‘Dhammacarika Bhikku Programme’ or ‘Monks Travelling Dhamma Programme’, established in 1965 as the joint brainchild of a former monk who had become head of the Department of Public Welfare’s then ‘Hill Tribes Division’ and the abbot of one of Bangkok’s most prestigious monastic institutions, teams usually of five ordained monks—sometimes with lay assistants—began to move into Lahu and other hill communities. Their ultimate goal was to woo these villagers into the Theravāda fold and, consequently, integrate

⁷ I note the Christian evangelical website, ‘The Joshua Project’, in its entry for Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu) in Burma (Anon. n.d.[e]), has 55% of these people as Buddhists (10% are said to be Christians and, presumably, the remaining 35% follow what, elsewhere, the Project rightly classifies as ‘ethnic religion’. The Project’s entry on ‘Lahu [probably Lahu Na or Black Lahu] in Burma’ (Anon. n.d.[d]) has 80% Christian, with no mention of Buddhism at all.

them more fully into the mainstream of national life (cf. Anon. 1973; Lester 1973: 123-124). As Lester (p. 124) describes the scene, '[t]he mission begins with passive presence.' The monks make no attempt to preach the Buddhist dhamma and refrain from denigrating local religious customs. 'The Bhikkhus walk into the area ... and quietly settle down explaining only that they have come for the welfare of the people ... [they] carry on the ritual of the monastic life' necessitating five monks in order to perform the twice-monthly lunar rituals. Only if the villagers enquire of them, do the clerics seize the opportunity to begin explaining the principles of Buddhism to them.

Between 1965 and 1969, seven Lahu villages received visits by Dhammacarika Bhikku and between 1968 and 1969, eight Lahu youths ordained as novices in the Sangha (see Walker 1970: 68-69). With the establishment of a special 'Monk and Novice Training Centre' on the grounds of Srisoda monastic complex at the foot of Doi Suthep (the mountain that towers above the city of Chiang Mai), additional Lahu youths were admitted to the novitiate (cf. Bhatiasevi 1994).

The Dhammacarika Bhikku Programme certainly has impacted on a number of Lahu communities, hastening their age-old assimilation of Buddhist ideas and ritual, but permitting them to retain traditional beliefs and practices, rather than having to accept 'an exclusive alternative like Christianity' (Wongsprasert 1985: 11 [1988: 132]). So far as I am aware, however, it has not resulted in the development of unambiguous Lahu Buddhist communities, like those said to exist in eastern Burma.

* * *

Southern Lahu associations with Theravāda Buddhism are certainly a significant factor in the religious culture of these people, but their assimilation of Buddhist ideas and ritual practices originating among politically dominant lowland neighbours is not particularly surprising; the same situation is to be found among many other upland peoples, e.g. Palaung (already noted above), Tai Loi (Scott and Hardiman 1900: 517-518, Banhong Wa (Luo 罗 1995: 359-362), Lua' (Kunstadter 1965), Khammu (Proschan 1993: 141), Mal/T'in (Desssaint 1973), Pwo Karen in Thailand (Andersen 1976), and several more peoples and sources that space dictates I omit from this paper). What is much more remarkable, however, is the impact Mahāyāna Buddhism (or, more accurately, a particular heterodox sect thereof; see below) has had (and continues to have) on so many Lahu communities—even those living in the Theravāda-dominant southlands, most of whom are unaware of this heritage of Northern Buddhism. How did this situation arise?

Until recently, the story of Mahāyāna Buddhism among the Lahu—both in Chinese and Western writings—has been a very confused one. My own attempts to interpret the muddled picture emerging from the source materials available to me began in the 1980s (see Walker 1985c) and culminated in Chapter Six: 'Mahayana Buddhism in the Lahu Mountains' of my 2003 book *Merit and the Millennium* (this chapter is abridged in Walker 2009 and expanded in Walker 2014: 23-101). In brief, the picture I discerned emerging from the data was one of a Han Chinese monk named Yang Deyuan 杨德渊 and a few fellow clerics at the famous monastic retreat on Jizu Mountain 鸡足山, north-east of the Yunnanese city of Dali 大理, sometime during the second half of the 17th century, setting out on a journey that would bring them to the Tai-dominated region of modern-day Lancang 澜沧 County, close to the China-Burma border. Here,



Map 2. Location of Nancha (boxed) and other principal Lahu and Wa Buddhist temples in the Lahu and Wa mountain areas

in the Luohei Shan 倮黑山, the Lahu Mountains 拉祜山 in modern usage [cf. Walker 2012: 28 n 22], at a place called Nancha 南柵 (Lahu Na, ca)⁸ in today’s largely Wa 佤-occupied Ankang 安康 township of Lancang County, Monk Yang established the first Mahāyāna Buddhist monastic complex that specifically catered to the spiritual and secular needs of the surrounding Wa and Lahu peoples. (The mythology surrounding this event suggests Monk Yang at first wished to build his temple amidst the lowland-dwelling Tai peoples, but their princely rulers would not permit it for fear of compromising their own Theravāda Buddhist tradition [cf. Anon. 1993b: 252].)

Monk Yang succeeded in establishing Nancha both as the principal centre for the dissemination of his teachings among Lahu and Wa and as the headquarters of a theocratic organization of monastic institutions and warrior monks bent on challenging the authority of Tai princes—holders of official appointments from the

imperial Qing government—as well as the Qing government’s ever-expanding political domination of southwestern Yunnan. Yang Deyuan trained a number of notable disciples, some of whom succeeded him as abbot of Nancha, while others established daughter monasteries in several important areas of Lahu and Wa settlement (Map 2).

I cited several Chinese sources (*inter alia* Li and Yang 2003: 268; Li and Zuo 1983: 28; and Huang 2001: 179) claiming Yang Deyuan to have served as an official of the pretender Southern Ming dynasty under Emperor Yongli 永历 (r. 1647-1661), before he ordained as a Buddhist monk. It was this background, these sources implied, that explained Monk Yang’s anti-Qing sentiments. I mentioned in addition that the work *Lahu Zu Shi* 拉祜族史 [History of the Lahu Nationality], edited by Li Bao 李保 and

⁸ The Mandarin pronunciation of this name is ‘Nanshan’, but it is known as ‘Nancha’ to the local Lahu and Wa, which is the form I shall use in this paper. The name is said to derive from the dialect of the neighbouring Tai people. Although in Chinese the first part of the name is represented by the character 南, *nan*, meaning ‘south’, but here representing the Tai word *naam* or ‘water’, while the character 柵 *shan* is an attempt to represent in Chinese characters the Tai word *chua*, ‘bad’. So the name refers to ‘the place with a bad water supply’—for the truth of which I can certainly vouch!—(cf. Xu 1993: 265).

Yang Wenan 扬文安 (2003: 268), informs us that ‘not only was Monk Yang a learned Buddhist monk, but well known also for his medical skills ...’, the work declaring that ‘wherever he went in the Lahu mountain areas, ... [he] practised medicine, while at the same time propagating the Buddhist doctrine of *pu du zhongsheng* 普度众生 [universal salvation]. In this way he laid down his roots among the Lahu people and gradually ... became a god-like figure in ... [their] minds.’ Finally, I noted that, if Yang Deyuan did indeed combine the attributes of a privileged Ming dynasty background, hostility towards the new Qing rulers (as usurpers of Ming authority), the aura of a Buddhist holy man and expertise in medical practice, this would have constituted a heady mix in the minds of the Lahu, a people seemingly predisposed to follow men of obvious religious merit, particularly in their search for health, prosperity and relief from political oppression (cf. Walker 2003: 505-547).

Several Chinese sources declare that Monk Yang’s teachings belong to the Mizong 密宗 or esoteric tradition of Buddhism; this identification led me to suggest that Yang might have been stimulated by tantrism, introduced to him during his years of residence in the Jizu Shan monastic complex, a major centre of Tibetan pilgrimage (cf. Walker 2014: 51, 64 n 104).

More recently, the research and writings on Monk Yang Deyuan and his religious milieu at Jizu Shan by Hong Kong-based Yunnanese scholar and Lahu specialist Ma Jianxiong 吗件雄 necessitate that I modify some of my previous suppositions regarding early Buddhist penetration of Lahu society. Of particular importance in this connection is Ma’s (2011: ¶¶ 12-15, 23-27)⁹ linking of Yang Deyuan (along with other monks associated with him at Jizu Shan) to the heretical teachings—so declared by the Qianlong Emperor in 1746—propagated from Jizu Shan by a Yunnanese Han monk, Zhang Baotai 張保太 (1659-1741) (cf. Seiwert 2003: 405-411).

Zhang Baotai’s sect and its teachings were known as Dacheng Zongjiao 大乘宗教 [Big Vehicle Religion] (Seiwert 2003: 406), a designation—by design or by chance—almost identical to the Chinese term for Mahāyāna Buddhism more generally, namely Dacheng Fujiao 大乘佛教, [Big Vehicle Buddha Religion]. (This may be why so many Chinese scholars have identified—or have I misread them as so identifying?—Monk Yang’s teaching simply as ‘Mahāyāna Buddhism’, a usage I have followed thus far in my own writings.) If Ma’s, apparently very reasonable, identification of Monk Yang Deyuan’s teachings with Zhang Baotai’s ‘Dacheng Zongjiao’ is indeed historically justified (I do not have at hand documentary evidence with which independently to confirm or deny this association), then it is clearly necessary for students of the history of Lahu Buddhism to accept a more restricted interpretation of ‘Mahayana Buddhism’ for Yang Deyuan’s cult than that I have hitherto allowed.

Zhang Baotai’s ‘Dacheng Zongjiao’, in effect, was a synthesis of ideas and practices he, or perhaps his teacher, Yang Pengyi 樣鵬翼, had derived from Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian sources. These teachings included a strong millennial component, with Zhang Baotai apparently proclaiming himself a manifestation of Maitreya, the Buddha

⁹ To date, I have been able to read only an on-line version of Ma’s 2011 paper; this reproduction is not paginated but, instead, has numbered paragraphs.

of the coming *kalpa* or epoch (Seiwert 2003: 408). Likely, it also encompassed a strong anti-Qing political message (see below). According to Ma (2011: ¶12), Zhang Baotai formulated his teachings while residing in Tengyue County 腾越县, present-day Tengchong 腾冲 in Baoshan 保山 Prefecture) on the Yunnan-Burma frontier. At that time, Ma (2011: ¶13) writes, Tengyue was ‘a base for the Ming political refugees who had surrounded the Yongli emperor earlier in the Qing dynasty, then escaped to Burma’.

In 1681, Zhang Baotai established a small temple in the vicinity of Jizu Shan, where he became more proactive in disseminating his teachings. Since Jizu Shan, as Seiwert (2003: 406) remarks, ‘was an important centre of Buddhist pilgrimage ... [with] a constant flow of pilgrims from distant places ... Zhang Baotai used the opportunity to propagate his teachings among them.’

It is not quite certain, although most likely, that Zhang preached an anti-Qing, pro-Ming restoration political message at his Jizu Shan temple. But it would be half a century after his arrival in Jizu Shan before the imperial authorities took action against him. In 1730, he was arrested and sentenced to death, but his execution, was kept on hold and he languished in prison until 1735, when he regained his freedom under an amnesty to celebrate the enthronement of the Qianlong emperor. Subsequently re-arrested, Zhang died a prisoner of the state in 1641 (Seiwert 2003: 407).

Liu Qi 劉奇, Zhang Baotai’s Sichuanese disciple, who became his Master’s successor in Sichuan—indeed proclaiming himself Zhang’s reincarnation (Seiwert 2003: 407)—renamed the Dacheng Zongjiao teachings as Xilai Zhengzong 西来真宗 [True School/Sect (*zhengzong* 真宗) Coming from the West (*xilai* 西来)] (Seiwert *ibid.*). Under Liu’s Mastership, an anti-Qing, pro-Ming political stance became one of the principal components of the sect’s teachings: ‘a mixture of political and religious aspirations including the expectation of Maitreya’s descent and the restoration of the Ming dynasty’ (Seiwert 2008: 407). But Liu Qi was ‘cautious to operate clandestinely’, as Seiwert (p. 408) notes. Possibly it is this that lies behind the labelling of Monk Yang Deyuan’s Buddhism as ‘Mizong’.

Zhang Baotai’s Dacheng Zongjiao subsequently came under the umbrella of that diverse collection of heterodox, quasi-Buddhist, sometimes secret, Chinese folk religious cults known as Bai Lian Jiao 白莲教 or White Lotus Religion (Ma 2011: ¶11; for the White Lotus Religion, see, among many others, Overmyer 1976: 89-108; Ter Haar 1992).

Returning specifically to Monk Yang Deyuan, according to Ma’s (2011: ¶24) account, his birthplace was in Youyang 酉阳 County, a remote area of Sichuan bordering on Hunan Province.¹⁰ This place was well known as a White Lotus stronghold (Ma *ibid.*). While Yang was still a child (which would have been in the early 1700s, if, as Ma [*ibid.*] records, he died in 1805), he moved to Jizu Shan, where he ordained as a monk and, as implied by Ma’s study, where he absorbed the teachings of Zhang Baotai’s Dacheng Zongjiao cult. At any rate, following the Qianlong emperor’s 1746 crackdown

¹⁰ This datum contradicts that of Liang *et al.* (1992: Ch. 9, p. 28 [each chapter is separately paginated]), who place Yang’s birthplace in Qiuyang Prefecture of Shanxi Province.

on the sect (he proclaimed it an ‘evil religion’ and a threat to his dynasty’s stability), Monk Yang is said to have fled from Jizu Shan, escaping across the border into Hsenwi in Burma (Ma *ibid.*). He appears to have passed many years as a wandering monk in Burma, before returning, in his old age, to Yunnan, where according to Ma (*ibid.*), he built the Nancha temple complex in 1790. (This date is about a century later than I had previously estimated, but it fits well with the life dates of several of Yang’s historically recorded Nancha disciples [cf. Walker 2003: 311, 324]).

Yang Deyuan’s likely affiliation with the ‘Big Vehicle Religion’ of Zhang Baotai and Liu Qi and with the White Lotus religious complex, with which it subsequently affiliated, greatly enhances our understanding of the religious teachings and theocratic political structure this monk brought to the Lahu Mountains. Liu Qi followed Zhang Baotai in embracing religious syncretism, espousing millenarianism and establishing a cult hierarchy. Moreover, whether, as is likely, he was following his religious mentor or not, Liu certainly favoured the elimination of the Qing dynasty and the reinstatement of the Ming. Yang Deyuan would pursue similar goals at Nancha.

Monk Yang successfully syncretized Buddhism’s Śākyamuni (Chinese: Shijia Mouni 释迦牟尼), the historical Buddha, with the Lahu’s own concept of an almighty creator-divinity, G’ui sha. As Li and Zuo (1983: 29) write, ‘Buddhism incorporated belief in Esa 厄萨 [i.e. G’ui sha], claiming that Śākyamuni was, in fact, Esha, whose power was unmatched ... [;] only when people gave their total obedience to Esha and to Guanyin, a goddess subordinate to Esha, ... would disasters be eliminated, peace reign on earth, harvests be plentiful and the dead proceed to the Western Paradise’ (see also Liang *et al.* 1992: 29, Anon. n.d.[b]: 94). And, of course, in the Mahāyāna tradition, Śākyamuni is a component, together with other Buddhas of past, present and future epochs, of transcendental ‘Buddhahood’. It is this association of the creator-divinity G’ui sha with transcendental Buddhahood that accounts, I believe, for the apparent—but only apparent—monotheistic character of G’ui sha, as understood by non-Christian Lahu peoples.

Yang Deyuan fostered millenarianism among his Lahu followers, for whom Maitreya (Mile fo 弥勒佛), the Buddha of the next *kalpa* (Sanskrit, ‘epoch’), would become an important object of veneration and symbol of their millennial dreams (cf. Song and Li 1981: 1-2). (Much later, in 1918, when another Lahu monk-leader led a revolt against the, by then, Republican Chinese authorities in Mangnuo 忙糯 (in present-day Shuangjiang 双江 County), some of the Lahu rebels ‘carried with them paper portraits of Mile fo’ (Anon. 1993a: 45).

Historically speaking, probably the most important of the varied facets of Yang Deyuan’s religion that Lahu absorbed was the temple hierarchy he fostered. This began at Nancha—the mother temple—and stretched right down to the level of individual Lahu village communities. Nancha begat a number of daughter temples, set up by former disciples of Yang Deyuan, whom he dispatched (in the tradition of Zhang Baotai’s Dacheng Jiao; cf. Seiwert 2003: 406) to preach the religion in other areas of the Lahu and Wa Mountains. And it was not long before these daughter temples likewise gave rise, at the township level, to their own subsidiary religious complexes, each one of which, in turn, had a dozen or so village temples under its jurisdiction (Liang *et al.* 1992:



Figure 6. Reconstructed main hall of Dongzhu temple (a principal daughter temple of Nancha) located in the mountains above Menglang Valley in Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, Yunnan Province.

Figure 7. Lahu Nyi village temple in North Thailand dedicated to the worship of the omnipotent creator-divinity, G'ui₁ sha



Ch. 9, 29). For the Lahu, all the supra-village temples were da fofang 大佛房 [great Buddha houses] or, in Lahu, haw₁ yeh₁ lon₁ ‘big haw₁ yeh [lit. ‘palace houses’] and each one constituted a regular Mahāyāna Buddhist monastic community comprising a foye 佛爷, the senior monk or abbot, and a number of heshang 和尚, ordained monks and novices.

These major temples were built in Chinese Buddhist style (Figs. 6, 8). Minimally, they had a public worship hall, with an altar on which were one to three images (if one only, it would represent Śākyamuni [Anon. 1993b: 262]; if two, Śākyamuni and Guanyin 观音, the Goddess of Mercy (the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, in the Indic world) (Li and Zuo 1983: 27); and if there were three, the third statue would be that of Mile fo 弥勒佛, or Maitreya, the Buddha of the coming epoch (Song and Li 1981:1). Beyond this hall were the residential quarters for the monks and novices and, in front of it—as a concession to Lahu tradition—there was an open space for gourd-pipe



Figure 8. Artist's impression of a principal Buddhist temple in the Lahu Mountains of south-west China circa late 18th century at festival time; three Lahu paying obeisance to the head monk, while others engage in gourd-pipe dancing (Lahu village and its temple in background)

dancing, apparently a major ritual activity on the occasion of any temple festival attended by lay people.

Village-level *fofang* (Fig. 9) were very different from their supra-village counterparts (cf. Li and Zuo 1983: 28; Liang *et al.* 1992: ch. 9, p. 41). They were simple wood-and-bamboo structures with an altar, but with no Buddhist image set on it, only bamboo or wooden containers to hold incense and purificatory water. There were no monks or novices associated with these village temples; instead, a caretaker, either the village headman himself, or a special appointee known in Lahu as the *fu_sheh_hpa* (literally, 'master [*sheh_hpa*] of the temple [*fu* , from Chinese *fofang*]) was responsible both for keeping the temple in good repair and for conducting and/or supervising the obligatory rituals on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month, when his principal

responsibility was to ensure his fellow villagers observed a more thoroughly Buddhist lifestyle (abstaining from meat and alcohol, from killing animals, etc.) than was deemed necessary on ordinary days. On these occasions (called *shī nyi* or merit days among Lahu in North Thailand), the *fu_sheh_hpa* 'would dress in a plain robe and beat a gong in order to remind the villagers of the restrictions [for that day]' (Li and Zuo 1983: 28. On these days, as also when they faced some particular misfortune or other, the villagers would go to their *fofang* 'to burn incense and to kowtow [prostrate themselves]' (Li and Zuo *ibid.*).

Over time, the hierarchical monastic structure, with its headquarters at Nancha, acquired a politico-military dimension. This became evident when the disciples of Monk Yang: Tongjin Heshang 铜金和尚 (1769-1813) followed by Tongdeng Heshang 铜登和尚 (?-1888), succeeded, one after the other, as abbot of Nancha. Tongjin was active in a massive revolt against the local Dai prince of Mengmeng 孟孟 (present-day seat of Shuangjiang 双江 County in Lincang 临沧 Prefecture), which occurred in 1799-1800 and was led by a Lahu warrior with the Chinese name



Figure 9. Lahu village temple in Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, Yunnan Province

of Li Wenming 李文明. Tongjin's principal role in this revolt was to provide the rebels with Buddhist legitimacy by establishing a *fofang* at their Baka 把卡 headquarters (in present-day Shuangjiang County). The outcome, however, did not favour the rebels. Because the Mengmeng prince enjoyed the recognition of the imperial authorities, he was able to call for assistance from the Qing army, whose superior force and weaponry repulsed the rebels, slaughtering Li Wenming and many others in the process. But Monk Tongjin survived, surrendered to the Qing authorities, de-robed and assumed the secular name Zhang Fuguo 张辅国 (literally *fuguo* translates as 'protector of the country'). The imperial authorities rewarded Zhang by conferring on him the office of hereditary *tumu* 土目 [local ruler under Qing overlordship]. But it would not be long before Zhang again rebelled. In 1813, the Qing authorities executed him; he was forty-four years old (Zhang and Liu 1993:8; Ma 2011: ¶25). Monk Tongdeng, who succeeded Tongjin (Zhang Fuguo) as abbot of Nancha, was another thorn in the flesh for the imperial administration, until his final insurrection was put down in 1887 and he himself executed the following year (Liang *et al.* 1992: Ch. 5, p. 44).

It is not possible in this paper to describe and explain the history of the Lahu's monastic organization and its military resistance to imperial Qing and early Republican officialdom, Dai princes and Han gentry (see Li and Yang [2003: 57-90] for the details); instead, I present summaries by two major Chinese authorities on southwestern Yunnan and on the Lahu people, *viz.* the historian Fang Guoyu 方国瑜 and the anthropologist Ruey Yifu 芮逸夫. I begin with the late Professor Fang, who writes (1943: 36):

The Luohei [Lahu] Mountains originally had no written language. It was only because the *foye* were compelled to study the scriptures that they came to learn how to read and write the written language [i.e. Chinese]. Consequently the learning of the *foye* was greater than that of the common people. Moreover, because of the religious constraints [imposed upon them], the behavior of the *foye* was generally good and the people trusted them ... The prestige of the *foye* was thus high. The Luohei [had for long] lived together without chiefs and their organization was very loose; sometimes there was neither a Han official nor a Baiyi 摆夷 [Tai] *tusi* 土司 [indigenous leader with imperial mandate to rule] [to control them]. If some quarrel arose between villagers, there was nobody to whom they could take their dispute. Especially when quarrels arose between different village communities, no method of arbitration existed. But from now on there were *foye*, whom both antagonists would obey, to settle their quarrels ... After many years the *fofang* became administrative offices ... [and the] *foye* became the chiefs and gave orders to the people ... Among the *foye* some dominated over others and therefore a military-like organization came into being, with the *foye*, to realize their intentions, leading their followers into war ... If anybody wanted to be a chief, he had first to become a monk and follow a Buddhist lifestyle. ... From that time on, all the rebellions that occurred in the Lahu Mountains were centred on the *fofang* and their leaders were *foye*.

In notably similar vein, the late Professor Ruey (1948:2) writes:

The monks were very upright people and so the Luohei believed and respected them. The Luohei lived in family units and had no chiefs. Their organization was very loose. In those days there were no Chinese officials [to administer them]. From time to time disputes arose and, because there was no place to go to seek arbitration, clashes would occur between different fortified villages. In such cases the *foye* were available and would attempt to resolve the dispute. ... [Thus] the *foye* became the chiefs and the *fofang* became their *yamen* 衙門 [administrative offices]. Therefore, to take advantage of these privileges, ambitious men among the Luohei became monks. From that time on, the *foye* no longer abided by the Buddhist precepts. The bells and drums were no longer effective [Chinese literary style for 'the Buddhist precepts were no longer followed'; instead, the *fofang* became places where soldiers were trained and politics discussed.

Although I believe it incorrect to assume Lahu lacked any form of supra-household and supra-village leadership prior to the arrival of Buddhist monks among them, it is indeed evident Buddhist clerics were frequently able to place themselves at the forefront of Lahu politico-military organization. Finally, it has to be told, Buddhism—or should we perhaps say Zhang Baotai's 'Great Vehicle Religion' as practised by Lahu (and some Wa)—paid dearly for fostering theocratic institutions that challenged the supremacy of Tai princes and the imperial authority. Whether they confronted Tai princes, who ruled in the name of the Emperor, or imperial officials directly, inevitably the Lahu incurred the wrath of the Chinese State. Inevitably also, the militant clerics and the institutions they represented bore the brunt of imperial ire. As Professor Fang writes (1943: 37), 'in the ten years of pacification during the Guangxu 光緒 reign [1875-1908], almost all the *fofang* and *foye* in the Luohei Mountains disappeared.'

All this is certainly true for the supra-village level *da fofang* and their associated clergy. But village temples (or *haw⁷ yeh⁷*) survived—and still survive—in many Lahu communities, both in the Lahu heartlands of southwestern Yunnan and among the diaspora in Burma and Thailand (Figs. 7, 9). But those who were in charge of these temples lacked formal Buddhist instruction or literacy and operated only as part-time specialists. Inevitably, therefore, the ideological and liturgical bases of much of earlier Lahu Buddhism has been forgotten, even to the extent—as among the Lahu Nyi I studied in North Thailand—that many present-day Lahu are no longer able to recall their Mahāyāna Buddhist heritage.

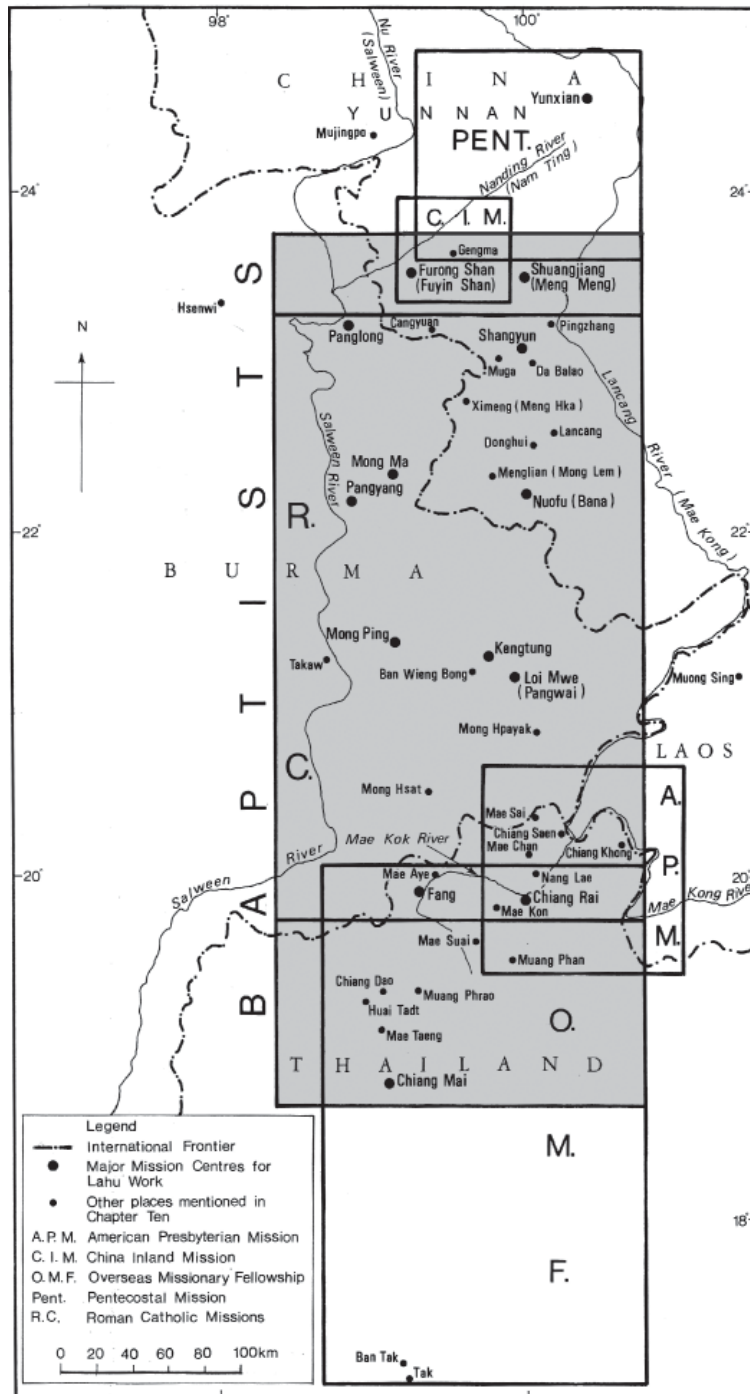
Christianity among the Lahu

The third major strand in the Lahu people's religious heritage is Christianity. Although this religion has long been domiciled in many parts of East and Southeast Asia, it is still regarded, especially in those countries where Lahu peoples live, as an essentially Western import. This, of course, is because Christian missionaries from

Europe and the United States were the first to introduce it to many parts of this region. Subsequently, it is true, much of the proselytism has been carried on by indigenous believers themselves—among the Lahu, first by Karen (cf. Walker 2008) and later by Lahu themselves—working both alongside and independently of Western missionaries of American, British, Australian, French, Italian, Brazilian and other nationalities. In recent decades, Lahu Christians, originally from Burma but domiciled in Thailand, have converted large numbers of Lahu Nyi in North Thailand, while those still living in Burma have sought to reinvigorate existing Lahu Christian communities and proselytize among non-Christian Lahu in Yunnan.

Modern Chinese works that touch on the history of the Lahu peoples' encounter with the Christian religion frequently tell how Lahu in Yunnan, when confronted with the proselytizing efforts of the first American Baptist missionaries, told them: 'The Lahu cannot wear two hats, we have believed in Buddhism for generations and our belief cannot be changed' (Chen 1963: 22 [1968: 42]). What these Lahu apologists for the older religion (if indeed they ever made such a remark) probably did not know was that a few of their people had donned that 'other hat' some twenty years earlier, not in China but in North Thailand, and not at the behest of American Baptists, but of American Presbyterians (Walker 2003: 554-570; 2010a-e). Subsequently, from the very start of the 20th century American Baptists and their converts dominated the Lahu mission field (Map 2), both in eastern Burma (Walker 2003: 570-592, 647-683; 2010f-g; 2011a-f, h-j, l-n, p-q) and in southwestern Yunnan (Walker 2003: 592-617, 2011g, k-m, o, r-t). In the former Shan state of Kengtung, the Baptists for a time had to compete with American Presbyterians based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, but who had expanded their evangelistic work into Kengtung (Walker 2003: 581-582). During the second decade of the 20th century, Italian Catholic missionaries from the diocese of Toungoo, members of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) based in Milan, joined the Baptists in Kengtung (Walker 2003: 588-589; 2011u-v). In Yunnan, the Protestant multi-denominational China Inland Mission (some of whose missionaries were themselves Baptists!) (Walker 2003: 613-617), as well as Chinese Pentecostals based in Kunming (Walker 2003: 613), contested American Baptist hegemony. Then, from the mid-1930s, Roman Catholic priests and lay brothers also began work in the Lancang (SW Yunnan) field, hitherto evangelized exclusively by American Baptists. The Roman Catholic missionaries were mostly Frenchmen from the Apostolic Prefecture of Dali; they were members of the Order of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, whose mother house was in Bétharram on the Franco-Spanish border, hence several of them were of Basque ethnicity (Walker 2003: 617-623; 2011x-z).

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, all foreign missionaries were expelled from Chinese territory. The longer-established Lahu Baptist organization managed to survive—and still survives (cf. Yamamori and Chan 2000; Chan 2001; Walker 2003: 699-717, 2011r-t; Nishimoto 2014), but the Roman Catholic community seems to have withered away. As for foreign missionaries working among Lahu in Yunnan, some came to Thailand, where the very first Lahu converts were gained, but whose small community of Lahu Presbyterians did not survive. Among the most active of the new wave of Christian missionaries among Lahu (and other hill peoples) in



Map 3. The territorial extent of various Christian missionary organizations proselytizing among Lahu.

Thailand in the early 1950s were ex-China Inland Mission workers: British, Canadian and American, who now renamed themselves as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) (cf. Walker 2003: 624-626). They were joined and, ultimately, superseded by Baptists from Burma (cf. Walker 2003: 721-730). Today, Protestant Christian Lahu, not all Baptists, constitute about a third of all Lahu living in the kingdom.

Two Bétharram fathers from the Yunnan field also came to work in North Thailand (cf. Walker 2003: 626-627, 2011z), where the Bishop of Dali had been designated acting Bishop of Chiang Mai. But following initial contacts with Lahu in the Fang area, these priests did not pursue their Lahu work, involving themselves instead with the lowland Tai (Khon Mueang) majority. Since the 1970s, however, a PIME priest, no longer able to work in Burma, has evangelized with considerable success among Lahu in the Fang area. There are probably about 5,000 Lahu Catholics in Thailand today (cf. Walker 2003: 730-732; 2011w).

Meanwhile, in Burma, following the military coup of 1962, foreign missionaries, who had been in the country since before the country's Independence in 1948, were permitted to remain, but only if they took Burmese citizenship; all others were expelled. The result was that both Baptist and Catholic work among Lahu became entirely indigenous. And it has certainly flourished. Outside of China, Burma, almost certainly, has the largest number of Lahu Christians (*circa* 178,000 or 80% of all 'Lahu'—probably Lahu Na—and *circa* 1,200 or 10% of all Lahu Shi). Most of these Lahu Christians are Baptists, but we should not forget that a Lahu priest is now the Auxiliary Bishop of Kengtung, appointed to that see by Pope John-Paul II in 2001 (Anon. 2007; n.d. [h]).

It is not my intention to detail the history of Christianity among Lahu in Burma, China or Thailand. I have covered the story with, I hope, reasonable thoroughness in Part Three (pp. 551-733) of my 2003 book, *Merit and the Millennium: Routine and Crisis in the Ritual Lives of the Lahu People*; also in thirty-seven illustrated one-page spreads for Brunei's *Borneo Bulletin* newspaper (Walker 2010b-g; 2011 a-zf) and, for the first Lahu Christians in North Thailand only, in Walker 2010a). Here, I shall concentrate on examples of how Lahu Christians have synthesized their animo-theistic and Mahāyāna Buddhist heritage with their more recently-acquired Protestantism or Roman Catholicism.

A characteristic of pre-Christian Lahu religion facilitating the rapid spread of Christianity—Protestant and Roman Catholic—among many Lahu communities in Burma, Yunnan and, relatively recently, in Thailand too, is its propensity to generate prophets, who raise millenarian expectations among their followers. For example, the pioneer American Baptist, William Marcus Young (1861-1936), who began preaching in the Kengtung bazaar in 1901, just two years later wrote back to his mission's headquarters in the United States (W.M. Young 1903a: 3): 'There is some excitement over some dreams among ... [the Lahu] ... Parties in three separate villages had dreams that Christ was coming this month, that unless they quit their drinking, gambling and licentiousness and accepted Christ quickly, they would be cast into the fire when he came.' A month later, in another letter to mission headquarters, Young (1903b: 4-5) expanded on these 'dreams', now replacing 'Christ' with 'God'. Thus:

I ... find that some ten years ago [*circa* 1893] they had some visions or dreams in many Muhso [Lahu] villages scattered widely ... that the true God was coming soon [and] that they would be cast into Hell when he came if they did not give up drinking, gambling, the use of opium and all evil habits, and follow the true



Figure 10. Lahu baptism by total immersion in the river, Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, Yunnan Province (courtesy: Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe).

Figure 11. The reconstructed (following destruction during the Cultural Revolution) principal church of the American Baptist Mission at Nuofu, Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, Yunnan Province.

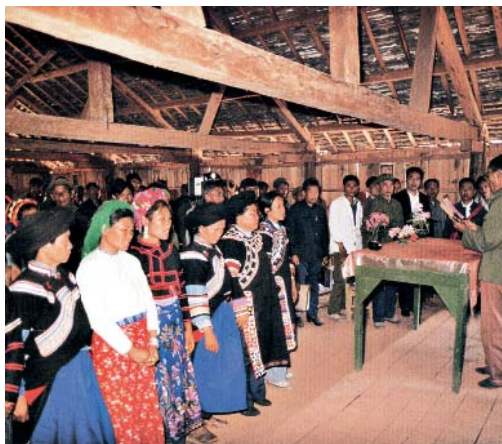


Figure 12. A Sunday service in a Lahu Baptist village in Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, Yunnan Province (courtesy: Yunnan Meishu Chubanshe).



Figure 13. The Most Reverend Peter Louis Ca Kü (Ca, Hkui), the first Lahu prelate of the Roman Catholic Church, appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Kengtung, Burma, in 1997 by Pope John-Paul II.

God at once. *Many who have heard the preaching of the Gospel* [by the Baptist missionaries] *regard it as the fulfillment of their dreams* [emphasis added].

Towards the end of 1904, we find Young (1904: 1-3) again writing on Lahu millennial expectations. Declaring his mission's 'work among the Muhsos is now opening up at a pace that far exceeds our expectation', and he continues:

The Muhsos say the true God dwelt among men, that he has gone away, that he will come back again. They give his name as Ya su [Young took this to mean Jesus, but if it is his rendition of *ya^h suh^h*, it would mean 'new man'] ... [and] say the foreigner is to bring them the knowledge of the true God ... they say ... [t]hey [the Lahu] send teachers through the country to warn people not to drink liquor or to follow any of the grosser sins.

These are but very brief extracts from Young's correspondence (see Walker 2003: 573-588 for a fuller treatment), but they clearly adumbrate the contemporary millennial hopes of a great many Lahu, expectations that came to focus on William Young himself, as the 'foreign messiah' to the Lahu, successor to the Buddhist holy men who had led the Lahu's struggle against Tai and Han overlords in Yunnan, the one who would bring them into a new age, free from outside political oppression (Walker 2003: 579-581).

Thirty or so years later, in Yunnan rather than Kengtung, Roman Catholicism benefited from similar Lahu messianic expectations. In 1935, the young, rather frail-looking Basque priest, Jean-Pierre Oxibar (1898-1964) of the order of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (the Bétharram fathers) introduced the teachings and liturgical practices of *Ecclesia Romana* to Lahu in Lancang County. His evangelistic efforts, as another Bétharram father would later write (Mieyaa 1973:9) 'began like a fairy tale' and (in more theological vein) 'there was a breath of that great wind of the Pentecost, which had thrown the pagans at the feet of the Apostles'. And again Mieyaa (1973:17) writes, 'Begun as if by a magic wand, the evangelization progressed like a miracle', with 'Father Oxibar ... [having] no need to venture out to meet the Lahu villagers. Spontaneously, they came flocking to him.' Fr. Oxibar succeeded in converting some ten thousand Lahu 'en masse', a feat Mieyaa (1973: 7) describes as 'both extraordinary and rare in the history of the Church in the 20th century' (my translations from the French). Father Oxibar's description (as quoted in Mieyaa 1973:18) of his reception when visiting Lahu villages, *viz.* having beeswax candles lit for him, his hands and feet washed in water said to impart blessings to those who subsequently used it, and, above all, being addressed as 'Father G'ui_u sha', make quite clear that his Lahu hosts accepted the Basque priest as a prophet and participant in G'ui_u sha's divinity. For Fr. Oxibar and his fellow priests this may have been a 'New Pentecost', but for the Lahu it was surely the arrival of a new prophet, who would lead them from Chinese oppression. Moreover, when other priests joined Oxibar in Lancang to evangelize among Lahu, the latter addressed them as *a pa lon^h* 'big father'; it was only Oxibar whom they addressed as *a pa G'ui_u*. As Fr. Jean Saint-Guily (1964:3), one of his colleagues in Lancang, wrote in his obituary for Oxibar, *a pa G'ui_u* is the title 'the pagan Lahu use when they speak of a prophet present

in their region'. At great feasts, like Christmas and the lunar New Year festival, Saint-Guily writes (*ibid.*), Oxibar received on his chapel porch delegation after delegation of Lahu Christians from different villages, who brought him gifts. He would preside over the feasting and bless the seeds around which the Lahu would dance in circles for a long period of time. Again, there can be little doubt that these Lahu were treating their new *a pa G'ui*, in the manner they were accustomed to honour a prophet, as also their former Buddhist abbots (see Walker 2003: 505-547; 2011y).

The importance of the Lahu prophetic and millenarian traditions as facilitators of conversion to Christianity is particularly evident from William Young's successes in early 20th century Kengtung, Burma—the so-called 'Kengtung Movement'—and from the religious fervour Fr. Oxibar generated in Lancang, Yunnan in the mid-1930s. There are other examples from different places and at different periods, but space does not permit me to discuss them here. I must, nonetheless, re-emphasize the intimate relationship that has existed, more or less from the start of the Christian missionary enterprise among Lahu, between Christianity and Lahu messianic ideas, themselves much coloured by long association with millennial Buddhism. William Marcus Young and Jean-Pierre Oxibar may have been poles apart in terms of the Christian dogmas they propagated, but their success as missionaries obviously was closely related to the fact that both of them were accepted by sizable components of the Lahu population as *a pa G'ui*, 'divine fathers', prophets who participated in the divinity of G'ui sha and whose arrival among the Lahu stimulated the messianic hopes of an oppressed mountain people to become the equals of their lowland-based rulers. But political oppression cannot stand alone in explaining the very considerable attraction that the Christian religion seems to have had—and apparently still has—for the Lahu peoples, since they are certainly not alone among mountain peoples who, historically, have experienced oppression by lowland rulers.

I suspect the Lahu attraction to Christianity is, in part at least, associated with the strongly developed ideas that many Lahu-speaking peoples exhibit for the practical as well as theoretical primacy of G'ui sha as creator-divinity. Closely-related Tibeto-Burman speaking peoples, like Lisu and Akha, and, for that matter, some branches of the Lahu-speaking peoples themselves, certainly do not lack the concept of a creator-divinity. But they do not, as do many non-Christian Lahu communities, ascribe to this entity a pre-eminent rôle in determining people's day-to-day lives. Why this unusual reverence for G'ui sha? Not, I believe, because of some atavistic preference for Semitic-style monotheism, but rather due to the association of G'ui sha with the transcendental Buddhahood of the Mahāyāna tradition that is traceable to the teachings of Monk Yang Deyuan among the Lahu in the latter part of the 18th century. It must certainly be noted that most Christian missionaries among Lahu have found no need to use any other name than G'ui sha for the Semitic God of Christianity; it must also be stressed that Christian Lahu have by now fully synthesized the Christian conception of a monotheistic deity with their long-established notion of G'ui sha, their preeminent creator-divinity.

Christian proselytism, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, shows no sign that it has run its course among the Lahu people. Newly converted communities may be found in Thailand, Laos and Yunnan. Nonetheless, the majority of today's Christian Lahu are second, third, fourth or even fifth-generation members of this religious

persuasion. Such people do not regard Christianity as an alien tradition foisted upon them by outsiders. Rather, it is an integral part of the culture into which they were born. Japanese anthropologist Nishimoto Yoichi, who has lived with and studied Christian Lahu in North Thailand, writes that ‘Christianity has been well integrated in the culture of Christian Lahu’ and he tells us: ‘For Christian Lahu, there is hardly an[y] inconsistency between “Lahu tradition” and “the new religion of foreign origin” ... [such as] outside observers often expect ... [among] Christian highlanders’ (Nishimoto 2000: 70). In those Lahu Christian village communities of Yunnan, Burma, Laos and Thailand, wherein a Protestant pastor or a Roman Catholic priest (the last apparently no longer operative in Yunnan) has replaced a traditional priest, spirit specialist or Buddhist monk, and where a high percentage of the people ‘go to church on Sundays to pray, sing hymns and listen to Bible readings and a sermon’, this is not because a foreign missionary insists, but because this is what is conceived as the *chaw maw aw, li* ‘the way of the elders’ (cf. Nishimoto 200:73).

The ‘Christianity of the Lahu people’ Nishimoto (2000: 70-71) tells us, ‘is colored with ethnicity and seems to work less to promote universal brotherhood as Christians than to promote a group consciousness as Lahu-cum-Christian.’ Arguably, of course, such union of Christian religion and ethnicity occurs in many—perhaps most—minority Christian communities the world over. But back to Nishimoto, who writes:

Many sermons of Lahu pastors address the problems and sufferings of the Lahu people ... Christian Lahu often compare themselves to the people of Israel in [the] Old Testament and talk about their loss of country, wandering, diaspora, and subjugation to other peoples. Christian Lahu are interested in those aspects of this world religion which would explain and give possible solutions to their plight as an oppressed ethnic minority.

But millenarianism (such as we saw in William Young’s ‘Kengtung Movement’ and Father Oxibar’s ‘New Pentecost’), Nishimoto (2000: 71) remarks, is no longer ‘radical or apparent’ among the Baptist Lahu in North Thailand. This said, Nishimoto goes on to write (*ibid.*): ‘millenarian aspiration has survived as an important undercurrent in ... Lahu Christianity. Salvation both in the other and in this world is a concern of Christian Lahu ... [with] Lahu pastors preach[ing] about how to behave as good Christians in order to enter heaven. Christian Lahu associate the popular Christian idea of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ with the liberation of the Lahu people from the[ir] present plight’.

Turning to another crucial component of traditionalist religion, belief in the powers of malicious spirits, Christian Lahu feel no need to propitiate or exorcise the *ne* or spirits in the manner of the traditionalists, as described in the first section of this paper. This does not mean, however, they have altogether rejected belief in spirits. For example, Nishimoto (2000: 71-72) records his Christian Lahu informants in North Thailand telling him: ‘there are by far more evil spirits in Burma than in Thailand.’ But these same Christian Lahu do not perform rituals of propitiation and exorcism in the manner of the traditionalists, because they believe *G’ui sha* to be ‘more powerful than the spirits’. Indeed, as Nishimoto (*ibid.*) learned, ‘[o]ne of the important reasons to be Christian’ was

the perception of this ‘religion’s ability to compete with the malicious spirits.’ These Lahu do not see acceptance of Christianity as a denial of the reality of spirits, which they now equate with the demons of Christian belief, saying that ‘Lucifer, the fallen angel in the Bible, is ... the ‘boss’ of these evil spirits’ (Nishimoto 2000: 74).

In sum, although the religious tradition Western missionaries brought to many Lahu in their mountain homes was undoubtedly for them an extremely alien one, for reasons I have tried to adumbrate above, significant numbers embraced its teachings and liturgical practices. But more than this, they were able to incorporate the new ideology and practices into their world view and into their day-to-day lives so that these became for them and, especially, for their descendants, as much ‘the way of the elders’ and integral to their ‘Lahu-ness’ as are the super-mundane ideas and practices of those who have remained faithful to more traditional ways. This is the combined achievement of missionaries—foreign and indigenous—and of Lahu mountain farmers themselves.

Brief concluding remarks

In this paper, I have endeavoured to highlight the principal characteristics of each of the three strands of the Lahu’s religious heritage, as understood by Lahu themselves. For Buddhism and Christianity, although leaving a great deal unsaid, I have attempted also to provide the bare essentials of the history of these movements among Lahu-speaking peoples.

My principal purpose has been to examine the manner in which Lahu have been able to unite old ways and practices with new ideas coming to them by way of Buddhist monks and through the teachings of Protestant pastors and Roman Catholic priests.

I have pointed to the Lahu people’s millennial dreams, fired by political domination and oppression by lowland authorities, as responsible for their enthusiasm for following sectarian Buddhist monks, Protestant pastors and Roman Catholic priests, whom they have seen as saviours come to lead them to a new world of emancipation and egalitarianism. I have also emphasized the singular importance of the Lahu’s concept of an almighty creator-divinity, G’ui sha—a concept that was amenable to re-interpretation by Buddhist teachers in terms of transcendental Buddhahood and by Christian evangelists as the monotheistic deity of the Semitic tradition.

Finally, I venture to say, just as members of the Chinese Communist Party like to tell us they practise ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ so too did Lahu practise ‘Buddhism with Lahu characteristics’, just as many today subscribe to a ‘Christianity with Lahu characteristics’.

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