

THE DIVISIONS OF THE LAHU PEOPLE

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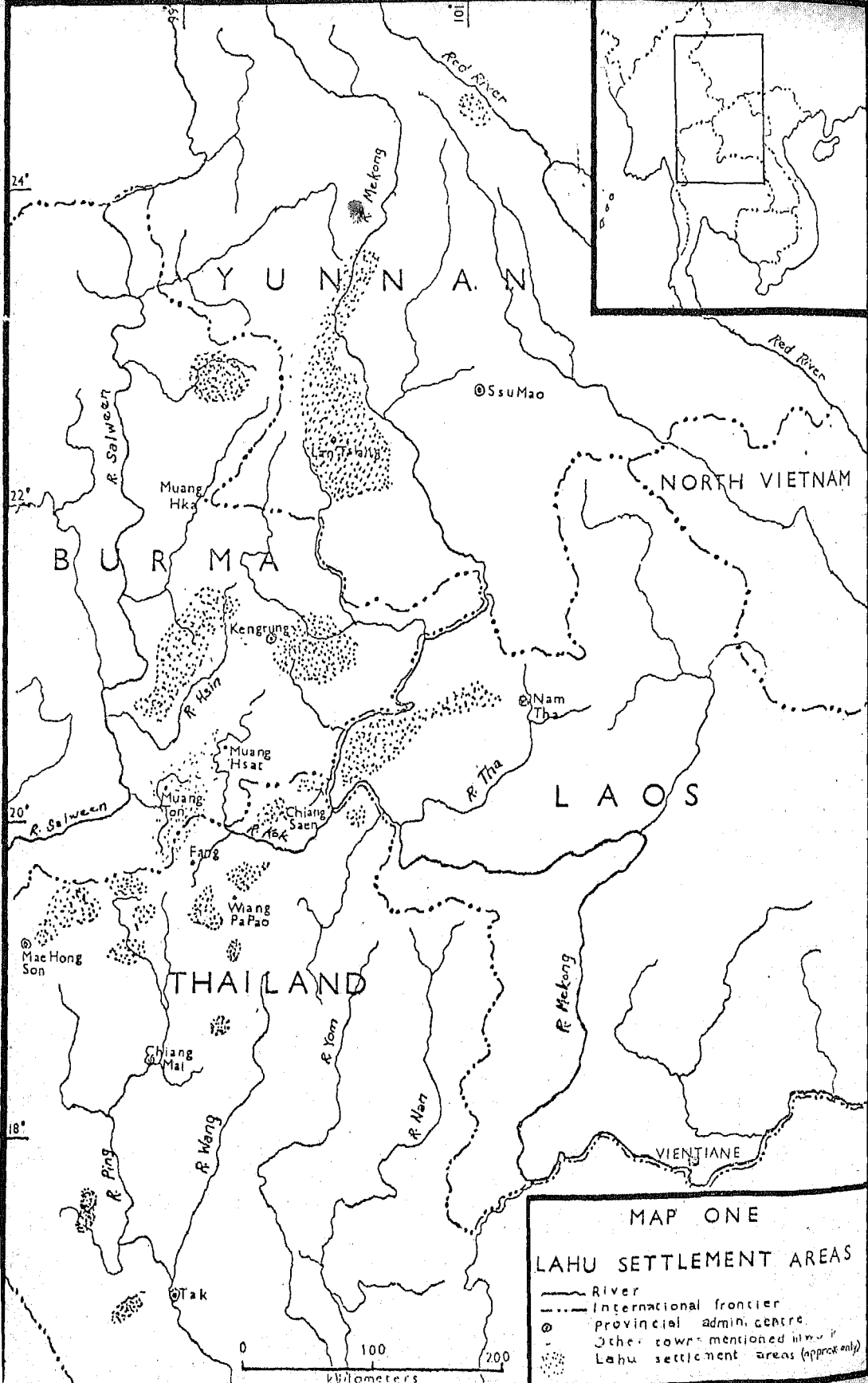
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I

The Lahu are a Tibeto-Burman-speaking people whose small villages are scattered throughout the rugged Yunnan-Indochina borderlands.¹ About sixty percent of their total today live in southwest Yunnan. Originally they came from further north, and in recent centuries they have migrated southward into eastern Burma, north Thailand and north-west Laos.² Although a common language and a number of shared cultural and social traits enable us to distinguish the Lahu from other hill peoples such as Akha, Lisu, Meo, Yao, etc., they are by no means a homogeneous "tribe". They recognize among themselves many named sub-groups or divisions, e.g. Lahu Na (Black Lahu), Lahu Shi (Yellow), Lahu Nyi (Red), Lahu Hpu (White), and Lahu Sheh Leh (meaning unknown), to mention only the better-known. The existence of such divisions, and the variety of names given to them, has been the cause of considerable confusion in the ethnographic literature, and even among the people themselves. The purpose of this article is to attempt some clarification of the available data and to point out areas where further research is necessary.

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- 1) I conducted fieldwork among the Lahu (mostly Lahu Nyi) in north Thailand from 1966 to 1970 while I was research officer at the Tribal Research Centre, Chiang Mai. For making possible this long period of field research I thank my sponsor, Her Britannic Majesty's Ministry of Overseas Development (now Overseas Development Administration, Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and the Director of the Tribal Research Centre, Khun Wanat Bhruksasri. I thank Dr. James A. Matisoff, Dr. Delmos J. Jones and Mr. Jairus Banaji for allowing me to cite unpublished dissertations, and my wife, Pauline Hetland Walker, for her skilful editing and typing.
- 2) Approximate population figures for Lahu are as follows: China 180,000 (Moseley 1966:162); Burma 80,000 (Lewis 1970:80); Thailand 16,000 (United Nations 1967:8); Laos 5,000 (Lewis 1970:80). The figures for Burma and Laos are largely impressionistic.



MAP ONE
LAHU SETTLEMENT AREAS

— River
--- International frontier
● Provincial admin. centre
○ Other towns mentioned in text
■ Lahu settlement areas (approx. only)

The first problem in the ethnographic accounts is that it is not always clear what group is indicated by each name. A division has not only the name by which its members identify themselves but also the several names given to it by other groups, and a common mistake is the assumption that different names represent different groups. On the other hand, it may happen that two distinct groups use the same name.

Let us take for example the two largest divisions in Thailand, the Lahu Nyi and the Lahu Sheh Leh. In both divisions the people usually refer to themselves as "Lahu" or "Lahu ya" (Lahu people), and add a distinguishing adjective only to the name of the other group. Thus a Lahu Nyi might say, "We are Lahu; they are Lahu Sheh Leh." The Sheh Leh in turn give the name Lahu Pa Li to the Lahu Nyi. When pressed to distinguish their own from other Lahu divisions, members of the first group generally call themselves Lahu Nyi.³ Those in the second group seem to prefer the name Lahu Na rather than Sheh Leh for themselves,⁴ although they are quite different from the Lahu Na of Yunnan and Burma, who comprise the largest of all Lahu divisions. According to Gordon Young (1962: 20), the author of a popular guide to Thailand's hill peoples, the original name of the Sheh Leh in Yunnan was Lahu Na Moe.⁵

But these are only the Lahu names for the two divisions. Adding to the confusion, the Northern Thai call the Lahu Nyi Mussur Daeng or "Red Mussur" (*mussur* from Burmese through Shan to Northern Thai: "hunter"; *daeng*: "red" in both Shan and Northern Thai) while they call the Lahu Sheh Leh Mussur Dam or "Black Mussur" (*dam*: "black" in Shan and Northern Thai). The Northern Thai names seem to be based simply on the colour of the women's dress: both divisions traditionally

3) My information here conflicts with that of Young (see note 16).

4) Spielmann (1969:322n10) suggests that the Sheh Leh call themselves Lahu Na because the latter are the most prestigious division of the Lahu people, but it seems more likely that Thailand's Sheh Leh identify themselves to strangers as Lahu Na because their Northern Thai neighbours call them Mussur Dam, "Black Mussur" (see note 17).

5) Young writes this name "Na-Muey". I prefer "Na Moe", following the orthography used in Burma and Thailand by Christian Lahu, who are the only substantially literate section of the Lahu population outside China.

wear a black costume, but the Lahu Nyi women sew bright red bands on their blouses and sarongs. In Burma the Lahu Nyi reportedly are sometimes called Lahu Meu Teu or "Southern Lahu" (from Shan *meu teu* "southern country") in contradistinction to the Lahu Na who are called Lahu Meu Neu or "Northern Lahu" (from Shan *meu neu* : "northern country").⁶ These names refer to geographical distribution, the Lahu Nyi living entirely in the southern area of Lahu settlement, south of Kengtung and into Thailand. (Apparently there are no Lahu Nyi in Yunnan.) Thus we find at least four different names for each division : Lahu Nyi/Lahu Pa Li/Lahu Meu Teu/Mussur Daeng for one, and Lahu Sheh Leh/Lahu Na/Lahu Na Moe/Mussur Dam for the other.

The picture is further complicated by a controversy over the Lahu Sheh Leh. Young, as mentioned above, regards the Sheh Leh as a distinct group, who came originally from Shunning district of Yunnan and are more properly called Lahu Na Moe.⁷ Jones (1967 : 16), having been told by his Sheh Leh informants that they are really Lahu Na or Black Lahu, dismisses the Sheh Leh category altogether and describes his study villages as "Black Lahu" villages. Jones' claim that the Lahu Sheh Leh and the Lahu Na are one and the same division is contested by Spielmann (1968 : 295-7, 1969 : 326-30), who argues, on the basis of field experience with both groups, that the Sheh Leh people of Thailand are socially and linguistically distinct from the Black Lahu of Yunnan and the Burmese Shan State. These Lahu Na, he shows, are represented in Thailand by a mere seven villages, all of them Christian. My own research supports Spielmann's conclusion that the Sheh Leh are different from the main Black Lahu division.

II

With several names for each group, and disagreement even among the people themselves about which name to use, it is not surprising that

- 6) Information from Lahu Na Christian informants recently arrived from Burma. See also Young (1962:9n). Once again my spelling, following the standard Lahu orthography, differs from Young's "Mong Taue" and "Mong Neu".
- 7) Spielmann (1969:327) disagrees, maintaining that "Na Moe" is simply the name of the numerically dominant Sheh Leh descent group.

the ethnographic literature is confusing. In addition to the groups already mentioned there is a host of others.⁸ Which are the main divisions, and how are the smaller groups related to them?

Many early writers have stated that there are two main divisions of the Lahu, but few agree on the names. "The Red and the Black", says Woodthorpe (1896:597); "the Great La'hus and the Yellow La'hus", say Scott and Hardiman (1900:580), adding "but a commoner division is into the Red and the Black, and there are very many subdivisions of them." Writing like these authors about Burma, Jamieson (1909:1) regards Black and Red as the major groups and the Kwi (Yellow Lahu)⁹ as an "allied tribe", while Telford (1937:90) fails even to mention the Red Lahu and names Black and Yellow as the major divisions.¹⁰ Ruey Yih-fu (1948:1) multiplies the confusion by telling us that in Yunnan the Lahu are divided into "Great Lo-hei" and "Small Lo-hei" (Lo-hei is the Chinese name for the Lahu people as a whole)¹¹

- 8) Lahu Na Hpeh, Pa Nai, Hka Hka, A Leh, La Hu (there is a tonal distinction between La' hu—, the people, and La, Hu—, the subdivision), Hu Li, Ku Lao, Ve Ya, La Ba, La Law, Ka Leh, Law Meh, Baw Fa, Na Moe, Kai Shi and probably others. All these subdivisional names were given to me by Lahu informants in Thailand, except for the Lahu Ka Leh and Lahu Law Meh who are listed by Telford (1937:90). Khin (1968:30) lists two more, the Lahu Ba Cho and the Lahu Mae Ne; his "Lahu Net" are presumably Lahu Na.
- 9) The Shan call all Lahu "Mussur", except for the Lahu Shi whom they call "Kwi".
- 10) Although Telford admits that his simple classification might be rejected by both Lahu Na and Lahu Shi, the total omission of Lahu Nyi seems strange in this authoritative work by one who lived with the Lahu for more than twenty years.
- 11) This name is probably derogatory. Scott and Hardiman (1900:579) quote a report that the Chinese use the name Lo-hei (Scott and Hardiman spell it "Loheirh") "out of pure mischief". Their informant maintains that "La'hu would have been an equally easy sound, but to the Chinese mind it would not have been so appropriate a designation, for it would not have conveyed the contemptuous meaning of Loheirh." "Blackness" is suggested as the contemptuous connotation of this name. The Chinese anthropologist Ruey Yih-fu (1948:1) also implies that "Lo-hei" is somehow derogatory, for he says that although these people are referred to by this name, it is more polite to address them as "Hei-chia", literally "Black Family". As the word "black" (*hei*) is present in both impolite and polite names, it is difficult to accept that it necessarily suggests "barbarity" as has sometimes been thought. Whatever its connotations, the term "Lo-hei" has now officially been dropped by the Chinese People's Government in favour of the indigenous name "Lahu" (SCMP 1953).

while in Burma, he says, they are divided into "Red Lo-hei or Great Lo-hei" and "Black Lo-hei or Yellow Lo-hei". Another Chinese writer, Lin Ping (1961 : 151) writes that they are divided into "the long-sleeved Lahu tribe, the short-sleeved Lahu tribe, etc., four or five divisions." Young (1962 : 9-27) recognizes three major Lahu groups represented in Thailand : the Black, the Yellow and the Sheh Leb; the Red, he maintains (1962 : 9n), are a splinter group of the Black. Jones (1967 : 16), as discussed above, dismisses the Sheh Leb category and says that the Lahu comprise three divisions : Black, Red and Yellow.

One clear fact that emerges from the literature is that between Lahu Na (Black) and Lahu Shi (Yellow) there is a major cleavage of long standing. History, geography and language point to this conclusion. Centuries ago, if the modern Chinese writer Ch'en Yin (1954 : 46) is right, during the southward migration of Lahu in Yunnan the Black Lahu took a westerly route while the Yellow and the White Lahu took an easterly one. In recent centuries the population centres of Black and Yellow Lahu have been in far separated parts of Yunnan, that of the Black lying towards the southwest in the present-day autonomous counties of Lan-ts'ang and Meng-lien, while that of the Yellow is further east, in the modern Hsi-shuang-pa-na T'ai autonomous area to the southwest of Fu-hsing-chèn (Ssu-mao) (cf. Young 1962 : 24). The fact that the Shan have entirely different names for these two divisions, Kwi for the Yellow and Mussur (Mussub, Mussö) for the Black and other Lahu, further implies an ancient division. Territorial separation is reflected in the markedly different dialects of Lahu Na and Lahu Shi, the latter being so divergent, according to the linguist Matisoff (1972), that "it is not easy for the Yellows to communicate with their brethren who speak other dialects."¹² But although the distinction between Black and Yellow is well established, lack of data for the Yellow Lahu makes it impossible to pinpoint the sociologically significant differences between the two.

12) Noting the differences between Lahu Shi on the one hand and, on the other, Lahu Na and closely related dialects, Matisoff (1972) writes : "'Yellow' Lahu . . . is clearly divergent . . . The tonal, grammatical, and lexical differences are pronounced, and the system of segmental phonemes is quite idiosyncratic as well . . ."

As for the other groups, large and small, it appears likely that they are either subdivisions or splinter groups of the Yellow Lahu or the Black Lahu. Certainly among the Lahu Shi (Yellow) there are subdivisions. In Thailand I was told of three of these: Lahu Shi Ba La, Lahu Shi Na Keo and Lahu Shi Ba Keo. Telford (1937: 90) mentioned these three (listed by him as Balang, Namkyo and Banceau respectively) and added a fourth, Lahu Shi Meukeu. Young (1962: 24) says that the A Do A Ga and the Na Tawn are other subdivisions of the Yellow Lahu in the Burmese Shan State. My own experience of Yellow Lahu (limited to Christian converts) is that these people identify themselves first as Lahu Shi and then as a member of a particular subdivision. A man does not announce that he is a Lahu Ba La, but rather that he is a Lahu Shi Ba La.

Other groups do not identify themselves by name with a parent division as do the Lahu Shi subdivisions, but it is probable that many of them are splinter groups of the Lahu Na.¹³ This is particularly so of the Lahu Nyi and Lahu Sheh Leh. In the absence of adequate linguistic and sociological data from Yunnan and the Burmese Shan State, which are the chief Lahu settlement areas, it is impossible to determine the relationship of all groups with any certainty. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to untangle some of the threads in the material we have.

III

According to Ruey Yih-fu, as mentioned above, the Lahu in Yunnan are divided into "Great Lo-hei" and "Small Lo-hei". This classification is almost certainly Chinese rather than indigenous. Bruk (1960: 31), a Soviet ethnographer who had access to modern Chinese sources, reports that the Lahu of Yunnan are divided into the more familiar Lahu Na and Lahu Shi. Ch'en Yin (1964: 46) mentions these two divisions but includes also the Lahu Hpu (White Lahu). In the Burmese Shan State the picture grows more complex. In the northerly areas of Lahu settlement, it is reported, the major distinction is between Great Lahu and

13) The first syllable *na_v* (low-falling open tone) in the divisional names Na Moe, Na Tawn, Na Hpeh, is not to be confused with the word *na[^]* (high checked tone) meaning "black".

Yellow Lahu; in the south it is between Black Lahu and Red Lahu (Scott and Hardiman 1900: 580).

These variations in nomenclature may be less complicated than they first appear. The available evidence suggests that the people whom the Chinese call "Great Lo-hei" are the people who call themselves Lahu Na or Black Lahu, while the "Small Lo-hei" are the people who call themselves Lahu Shi or Yellow Lahu. The basis for assuming that "Great" and "Black" Lahu denote the same division is that the Lahu Na are the most numerous Lahu division and that some writers, particularly Young (1962: 9), refer to the Lahu Na as the "great" or "root-stock" Lahu. Moreover, the Great Lahu of Burma are said to have come from Mienning and the Yellows from Ch'ing-tung T'ing (Scott and Hardiman 1900: 580); that is, respectively west and east of the river Mekong, as has been reported for the Black and Yellow Lahu. Thus in the north of the Burmese Shan State (near the Yunnanese border) the major distinction among the Lahu people is, as in Yunnan, between Black and Yellow divisions.

Further south in Burma, it appears, a major splinter group of the Lahu Na has come to be called the Lahu Nyi.¹⁴ The fact that their two dialects are extremely close is the basis for my assumption that the Lahu Nyi come from the Lahu Na. I assume further that the Red Lahu broke away from the parent Black Lahu in Burma rather than in the original Chinese homeland, for there is no mention in the literature of Lahu Nyi in Yunnan. The fact that they are also known as Lahu Meu Teu or "Southern Lahu" (as opposed to "Northern Lahu" for the Lahu Na) suggests that they have always been a southerly extension of the Lahu people. Today, in fact, they are located in the southern areas of Lahu settlement in Burma, east of the river Hsim and concentrated in the two districts of Muang Hsat and Muang Ton, whence they stretch through into the Thai provinces of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son. The idea that the Lahu Nyi are an offshoot of the Lahu Na is by no means new. Young (1962: 9n) was the first, to my knowledge, to

14) Whether they first adopted the name "Red" Lahu (*nyi*: "red" in Lahu) of their own accord or because their Shan neighbours called them "Mussur Daeng" (*daeng*: "red" in Shan) is unknown.

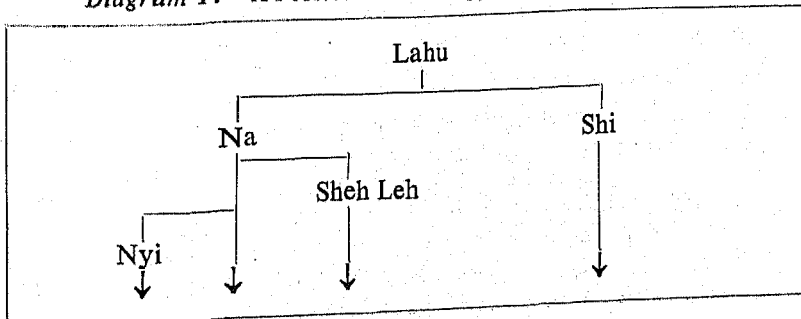
suggest this. He maintains that these two divisions have been geographically separated for some 150 years, but unfortunately he gives no evidence to support his estimate.

In Thailand, the recent literature refers to four major Lahu divisions: Na, Nyi, Shi and Sheh Leh. It is now clear how the first three may be related to each other. The Lahu Nyi appear to be a group who have broken away from the Lahu Na, representatives of the "Great Lahu" of the western areas of Lahu settlement in Yunnan. These two divisions resemble each other closely in language and custom. The Lahu Shi are very different from both the Lahu Na and the Lahu Nyi, and it is a reasonable conjecture that they represent a southerly extension of the "Small Lahu" of the more easterly areas of Yunnan.

The Lahu Sheh Leh probably fit into this picture somewhere between the Lahu Na and Nyi on the one side and the Lahu Shi on the other. Language is the chief factor in this hypothesis. The dialects of the Lahu Na, Lahu Nyi and Lahu Sheh Leh are all quite similar, while the Lahu Shi dialect is highly divergent. Of the three first-named dialects, Lahu Na and Lahu Nyi are very close to each other, while Lahu Sheh Leh differs somewhat, particularly in tone structure (Young 1962: 10, 22; Matisoff 1972).

This linguistic evidence also suggests a chronology for the fission of the Lahu people. First, there must have been a break between Lahu Na and Lahu Shi. At a much later date, it appears, the Lahu Sheh Leh broke away from the Lahu Na, while in more recent times still, there was a break between Lahu Na and Lahu Nyi (see diagram). Historical and geographical evidence cited earlier seems to fit this chronological hypothesis.

Diagram 1. A Possible Chronology of Lahu Segmentation



Numerically, the dominant division in Thailand is the Red Lahu, with Sheh Leh second; Lahu Na and others comprise a very small minority.¹⁵ In Burma and Yunnan, however, Lahu Na are by far the most numerous.

IV

While this analysis helps to clarify the data from Thailand, it fails to show how the Lahu Hpu and numerous other sub-groups (Lahu La Ba, Ve Ya, etc.) are related either to each other or to the two major divisions, the Lahu Na and the Lahu Shi. There is little in the existing ethnographic record that will help us. Telford (1937: 90) includes the Lahu Na Hpeh, Hu Li, Ku Lao, La Law, Ve Ya, La Ba, Hpu and Ka Leh as subdivisions of the Black Lahu. Until further research has been conducted, I can only assume that he is right. Probably all these groups have at one time or another broken away from the Lahu Na. However, unlike the Lahu Shi subdivisions which seem to consider themselves Lahu Shi first and a particular sub-group second, the Lahu Na splinter groups do not necessarily recognize themselves as parts of a larger entity. A man who is a Lahu La Ba does not call himself a Lahu Na La Ba.

The position of the Lahu Hpu or White Lahu is even less certain. According to Lewis (1970: 81), a missionary with many years' experience among the Lahu, these White Lahu are more properly called Lahu Ku Lao and are known as "White" Lahu "since the men wear short, white jackets." If these people are the same as the Lahu Hpu mentioned by Ch'en Yin, and if Ch'en Yin himself is right in suggesting that they were with the Lahu Shi during their southward migration several centuries ago, then their relationship with the Lahu Na must have been severed at a very early date. Unfortunately I have no linguistic data for the Lahu Hpu which might help us sort out this problem.

15) A rough estimate is Lahu Nyi 10,000, Lahu Sheh Leh 3,500, Lahu Shi 700, and Lahu Na 400. The Lahu Nyi and Shi figures are approximations from Young's old figures of 9,200 and 650 respectively (Young 1962:89); Spielmann (1969: 322) is the source for the Sheh Leh and Na figures.

V

Among the major Lahu divisions for which we have some modern information—the Black, Yellow, Red and Sheh Leh—it is evident that these groupings are cultural rather than structural. Membership of a division determines how a Lahu will speak, dress, perhaps build his house, placate the spirits and worship his supreme supernatural, G'ui, sha. The divisions have no corporate existence. There are neither divisional chiefs nor divisional territories. A man need not necessarily marry within his division, although he usually does, nor is it necessary that he live with members of his division. The tendency is for each Lahu village to be inhabited by members of a single Lahu division, but it is not uncommon in a village to find a number of persons whose divisional heritage differs from that of the majority. Members of other divisions may comprise one or more households in the village, or they may be spouses of members of the dominant division. Although they conform to the customs of the majority and are identified with the majority by outsiders, within the village these people—in my experience—continue to be recognized as members of the group in which they were reared. But although their “difference” is noted, there seems to be no restriction on their participation in village affairs.

In fact divisional affiliation shares many characteristics with ethnic affiliation. It would appear that birth and, more importantly, childhood rearing, are the chief factors in determining both the ethnic and the divisional allegiance of an adult. But he is free to move elsewhere, to marry into another division or ethnic group, and to identify himself with another people if he so wishes. Alternative options may be kept open. For example a Lahu man who marries a lowland Thai girl and settles in a Thai village may be considered by himself and by other Lahu to have “become Thai”, but if he returns to the hills he can easily reestablish his Lahu and drop his Thai identity.

Why colour identifications—Black, Yellow, Red, White—came to be used is unknown. A common assumption is that they refer to the dominant colour of the people's clothes (cf. Woodthorpe 1896: 597;

Spielmann 1969: 321). This may be true for the "Red"¹⁶ and even for the "White" Lahu, but I have found no convincing evidence that the designations "Black"¹⁷ and "Yellow" refer to costume, either today or in the past. Telford (1937: 90) suggests skin pigmentation as the basis for the names, Black Lahu having swarthy skins and Yellow Lahu "being of a yellowish turn". Young (1962: 25) also mentions the relative fairness of the Yellow Lahu. But such racial explanations are difficult to sustain in view of the oft-reported intermarriage among Lahu of all divisions and indeed between Lahu and other ethnic groups. We should note that colour identifications, especially Black and White, are very common among the peoples of southwest China. But, as Feng and Shryock (1938: 106) observed, "the connotations must be separately determined in each case."¹⁸ In some cases the designations are Chinese rather than indigenous and refer either to the dominant colour of the national dress or to the people's relative sophistication in Chinese eyes, black signifying barbarianism and white, sinicism (Clarke 1911: 17). In other cases the colour names are indigenous and ancient, and their meanings may be quite different from those of the Chinese. Among the

- 16) But even this is disputed. Certainly my own Red Lahu informants indicated the bright red stripes of their women's blouses and sarongs as the reason for their name, which they accepted as a reasonable identification both in their own language ("Lahu Nyi") and in Thai/Shan ("Mussur Daeng"). However, Young (1962: 9) suggests that some Lahu Nyi resent this designation which is, he says, a direct translation into Lahu of the Shan and Northern Thai "Mussur Daeng" in which *daeng*: red refers to "rawness" rather than colour of dress. I suspect that this was an explanation given to Young by Christian Black Lahu with whom he grew up.
- 17) Although Lahn Na do wear predominantly black clothes, this does not distinguish them from the Lahu Shi, Sheh Leh and several other Lahu divisions who also dress basically in black. It appears that the Sheh Leh are called "Mussur Dam" by the Northern Thai because of their black clothes.
- 18) Banaji (1972), analysing the widespread use of colour names throughout Inner Asia, shows that their symbolism is variable and complex. In his wide-ranging survey of the literature he finds, for example, that "black" connotes variously "uncivilized, barbarian . . . of superior descent, of pure descent . . . poor, simple, common, base, low-born, vulgar . . . great, foremost".

Lolo, for instance, the Black Lolo are the aristocratic class, who sometimes (at least in the not too distant past) marry their daughters to the sons of Chinese officials or into distinguished Chinese families, while all other Lolo belong to the White division and are (or were) subservient to the Black Lolo (Feng and Shryock 1938: 106). Among the Lahu the designations of the two major divisions, Black and Yellow, appear to relate neither to dress nor to Chinese opinions. They are accepted by the people as indigenous, but their connotations are unknown.

VI

Amid the profusion of ethnic minorities in northern Southeast Asia, names alone have too often proved a source of confusion. It cannot be lightly assumed that different names represent different groups, or that similar names denote the same group. Not long ago in Thailand, Lahu hit the national headlines because of their part in a rebellion against the Burmese administration of the Shan State. Some otherwise well-informed people I met at the time were under the impression that there was a "Mussur rebellion" in addition to the "Lahu rebellion". Again, I know of Red Lahu, patients at a Thai government hospital, who identified themselves as "Mussur Daeng" and were castigated for their illegal political affiliations. (The Thai press frequently labels those Meo who supposedly have collaborated with Communist insurgents as "Meo Daeng", Red Meo.) And the confusion is not confined to laymen. Several students of Lahu society (cf. Scott 1906: 96-7, Soulie and Tchang 1908: 355n, Grierson 1927: 80, Seidenfaden 1930: 85) have mistaken Musso, a variant spelling of Mussur, for Moso, which is another name for the Na-hsi people of northwestern Yunnan. This confusion led several of them to claim for the Lahu a recorded history dating back to the eighth century (cf. Scott 1906: 96, Seidenfaden 1930: 85).

The existence of divisions¹⁹ compounds the problems of identification and description. To compare Lahu villages belonging to different

19) There are divisions also among other ethnic groups in this region, e.g. Blue Meo, White Meo, Black Meo, Red Meo, Flowery Meo (de Beauclair 1970:60-61); and Skaw, Pwo, Thongdu and Kayah among the Karen (Hinton 1969:1).

divisions without recognizing that the people themselves consider their heritages to be significantly different simply confuses the ethnographic record. Whatever they call themselves or are called by others, the subdivisions of the Lahu people maintain certain distinctive social and cultural forms.²⁰ If Sheh Leh communities prefer to call themselves "Black Lahu" this fact in itself is significant, but it does not mean that they are the same people as the Lahu Na of Burma and Yunnan. Of course it may yet develop that the Lahu Na are not a homogeneous division, and that attempts to categorize them as such, in the way that Sheh Leh or Nyi are classified, are mistaken. Further field research alone will solve this problem.

More ethnographic and linguistic field research is needed in all areas of Lahu settlement, in order to identify and compare systematically the salient characteristics of each division. Information from the Burmese Shan State and southwest Yunnan, where the majority of Lahu live, is particularly vital but also difficult to obtain. North Thailand has for years been open to Western scholars, but unfortunately the two oldest divisions, Lahu Na and Lahu Shi, are only sparsely represented; the largest divisions in Thailand are Lahu Nyi and Sheh Leh, probably offshoots of the Lahu Na.

The variety of socio-cultural patterns among the divisions militates against any facile generalizations about "*the Lahu*". In gathering and collating data, students of hill societies in northern Southeast Asia must be alert to divisional as well as ethnic distinctions.

20) Compare, for instance, Jones' study of the Lahu Sheh Leh (Jones 1967) with my study of the Lahu Nyi (Walker 1970).

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Pl. 1. Lahu Na or Black Lahu Girl
Photo: A.R. Walker



Pl. 2. Lahu Nyi or Red Lahu Girl

Photo: A.R. Walker



Pl. 3. Lahu Sheh Leh Girl
Photo: A.R. Walker

