

THE LISU CONCEPT OF THE SOUL¹

by

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The Lisu are a Tibeto-Burman people who live in parts of Northern Thailand, Burma, eastern India and Yunnan. The group whose concept of the soul I discuss here live in Chiang Mai province in Northern Thailand. These Lisu produce rice for subsistence and poppies for a cash crop of opium by means of swidden agriculture (for a general description and photographs see Dessaint, 1972; for a bibliography of sources, see Dessaint, 1971).

According to Lisu belief, every person is composed of two aspects, a body and a soul. Although the soul is often spoken of as a single thing, it is held to be multiple. Women have seven souls and men have nine. If a person's souls are absent from the body for an extended period of time, he cannot remain alive, and while the soul is gone, he will suffer from insomnia, anorexia, bad dreams, listlessness, and general malaise.

When a person dies, the survivors spend much effort to get the soul to go to the land of the dead and not to linger among his or her kinsmen on earth. If an adult is about to die, seven or nine pieces of unbroken husked rice and seven or nine pieces of silver are put in the mouth depending on whether the person is a woman or a man. The person is told "You do not want to stay here, go on. Do not be lonely, go on."

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I observed a child dying of malnourishment. There had been a lengthy course of ceremonial and medical treatment. The parents put cooked rice into the mouth of the still living but comatose child and said, "If you want to stay here, come back; if you want to go away, go away now." Later that day the child died.

If the dead person is an adult, the song of the dead may be sung for him. The intent of this song is to instruct the dead person's soul to join the rest of the dead and not to linger among the living :

Today you have died. The sky takes your strength, the earth takes your bones. To die is your grandfather's custom, you must follow this custom. God made you die. The time is right. God makes the sky take your strength, he makes the earth take your bones. Your grandfather and greatgrandfather also died like this, so you also must go there. Do not be lonely for this life. You go straight.

The song goes on to describe the path to the land of the dead and cautions the person's soul not to deviate from the path. The other funeral ceremonies are also to induce the soul to leave the realm of the living and move to the realm of the dead and to caution it not to return and cause trouble.

If the dead person has descendants who regard him as an ancestor spirit, then the descendants must also separate their souls from that of the dead and establish a place on the household altar for the spirit. In all of these ceremonies, people repeatedly say, "The sky has taken your breath (strength, soul), the earth has taken your bones." They confirm the final separation of the soul from the body in death.

All departures of the soul from the body are not, however, final. One's soul may be discontented and wander away, it can be frightened away, it may want to stay in a place for nostalgic reasons, or a spirit may capture it and hold it prisoner. If one of these events should happen, the person exhibits characteristic symptoms, and the obvious remedy is to return the soul to the body.

The conclusion that an illness is the result of soul absence may be reached through inference from the symptoms or through one or more of several diagnostic procedures which include shamanistic seance and con-

sultation of various "oracles". Once the diagnosis of soul absence has been made, several therapeutic procedures are available. Unless a spirit speaking through a possessed shaman, has indicated that a particular procedure is appropriate, any of them may be employed.

Perhaps the simplest technique is to put an egg into a bowl of uncooked rice, wrap a string around the egg and, holding the bowl, to call the person's soul to return. The string is then tied onto the person with a prayer that the soul has returned from wherever it was and that the person enjoy good fortune in the future. Everyone's soul is called in this way just before the beginning of a new year so that everyone will start the new year with his soul.

There is also a set of spirits whose members may be called on to help return a lost soul. One of these is the bridge spirit. When this spirit is invoked, a bridge must be constructed. The bridge may simply be two sticks stuck into the ground with a string tied onto their tops and a scratch in the earth to connect their bottoms. Or it may be a large elaborate bridge across a stream. It may be any sort of "bridge" between these two extremes. If it is a small bridge that does not cross water, then a chicken is sacrificed; if it is a large bridge, a pig is sacrificed and the bridge spirit is asked to take the soul of the pig to whoever is holding the soul and trade the two.

The spirits of the rest house and path bench are members of this class of spirits. To invoke them one simply constructs the appropriate structure, but no sacrifices are required.

Another pair of spirits are the "spirit of two tables" and the "spirit of three tables". To invoke the aid of one of these spirits, one prepares either two or three tables inside the house and sacrifices a pig.

All of these ceremonies are similar in pattern. In addition to the soul bringing spirit, the village guardian spirit, lineage spirits, greatgrandfather spirit, and hill spirits may be invoked to help the soul bringing spirit. The other spirits are asked to help find and deliver the soul, and the soul bringing spirit is requested to take the offerings and exchange them for the soul, or to find the soul and induce it to return. If an

animal is sacrificed, it is offered first alive, then it is killed and cooked and offered again cooked. At the conclusion of ceremonies which require animal sacrifices, the cooked meat is eaten. If a pig has been killed, there will be a feast.

More than one of these ceremonies can be performed on the same occasion—e.g., a bridge ceremony with a pig sacrifice, a sacrifice for the two table spirit, and one for the three table spirit. When this happens, there is a large feast after the ceremonies are concluded.

If a particular ceremony is not prescribed, many factors influence the choice of which ceremony will be performed. Giving feasts is a major way of establishing social status and prominence. With the means and the desire to gain prestige, one will sacrifice pigs. If one does not have the assets for a feast but wants to make a modest contribution to his prestige, he will build a rest house and a bench. A person who does not want to gain prestige on a particular occasion, or who does not have the means to do so, will perform a minor ceremony. If the condition of soul absence persists, people may conclude that a larger ceremony is needed.

When animals are sacrificed, they are examined for information. The livers of pigs and thigh bones of chickens which have been sacrificed are studied to ascertain whether the offerings have been sufficient and whether the soul has returned. If these "oracles" are negative and the symptoms persist, then other ceremonies may be tried or other diagnoses made.

Often, then, soul calling ceremonies are something more than simple curing rituals. They may involve distributions of pork and liquor and may indicate attempts to gain prestige. In this sense they are economic and political acts as well as curative and religious.

In addition to being an important aspect of the Lisu theory of disease and eschatology, the notion of the soul is a component of a very pervasive dualistic system. I have already mentioned relations that can be characterized : man : woman : nine : seven.

Relative altitude (higher : lower) is important in this scheme. On ridges or hills overlooking Lisu villages are fenced compounds which contain an altar for the village guardian spirit. If the village has one, a similar altar for the mountain spirit will be even higher on the same

ridge or hill. Below are the houses of the people. Inside each established house is an altar at the back of the house, opposite the door. Since houses are built with the doors on the downhill side, the altar is above the living space of the house. We see, then, that spirits are above people or spirits : above : people : below.

Left and right are also important. To establish left and right one faces downhill; in a house, the door. On house altars the more powerful spirits are placed on the left side of the altar and the weaker ones on the right. This arrangement is also to be observed in the arrangement of altars for outdoor ceremonies. We can therefore say that left : powerful : right : less powerful. This is also indicated in the construction of houses when the "big" (trunk) end of the ridgepole is placed at the left end of the house and the small end on the right.

Since more powerful spirits are placed above less powerful ones, and more powerful spirits are placed to the left of less powerful ones, we can see that above : left : below : right.

A desire that people enjoy wealth and health is expressed in many prayers. The desire for wealth is often indicated by the phrase, "Let the left hand hold gold, let the right hand hold silver." This follows from the fact that gold is more valuable than silver and that "left" is the locus of the higher degree of value or power. Furthermore, gold is counted to be a "male" metal and silver is classed as "female".

Only men may have direct dealings with spirits. Women may not make ceremonies or sacrifices nor may they enter the compound of the village guardian spirit or the mountain spirit. Women's relations are thus confined to the realm of the human. We may thus conclude that Spirit : human : men : women.

This dualism is pervasive and more examples could be cited. But the important one here involves the soul and the body. When a person dies, his soul is said to go to the sky (above) and his bones (body) to go to the earth (below). Furthermore, when soul bringing spirits are involved, they are asked to search "The 7 levels of the earth and the 9 levels of the heavens." We can conclude that soul : body : above : below.

We may tabulate these relationships in the following form :

man	woman
nine	seven
higher	lower
spirits	people
left	right
strong	weak
soul	body
sky	earth

We can conceive of these lists as indicating items with negative and positive qualities somewhat along the lines of the Chinese theory of Yin and Yang. If the positive and the negative are combined, a neutral state results. Thus if women (negative) enter a spirit compound (positive), the place would be in a neutral state inappropriate for the spirit (positive). Of humans, who are negative relative to spirits, the men are positive, and so it is they who interact with the spirits.

It follows, along this logic, that a unit composed of a soul (positive) and a body (negative) would be in a neutral state. It is this neutral state which defines the state of general vigor and health. If the soul is subtracted from this unit, it becomes negative, unhealthy, and finally, if deprived of the balancing positive animate element long enough, dead.

The idea that one ought to be sick if one's soul is gone therefore follows quite logically from the supposition that there are positive and negative qualities which can combine to produce neutral states, and that the soul is positive and the body is negative.

This thesis receives further confirmation from the observation that certain preparations are ingested not to cure patients but to produce in them "super vitality". These preparations are compounded of parts of animals that are thought to be especially vigorous—monkey blood, deer horns, leopard bones. If, on some scale of vitality, these animals are considered to be positive relative to neutral human capacities, humans could only become "super vigorous" if the preparations are thought to have an additive effect. Thus if a positive element is combined with a neutral one, the neutral one becomes more positive. In general, then, the

things that are thought of as positive and negative combine in an additive way so that a positive and a negative result in a neutral; a neutral and a positive result in a positive, etc.

I suggested earlier that if one has descendants, he becomes one of their ancestor spirits. How is it that a human soul can be transformed into a spirit? Recall that the soul is thought to go to the sky and that the soul and the sky (above) are both positive entities. By the additive nature of this logic, it follows that the soul should be doubly positive; it should have more power than a soul located in neutral territory (neither above nor below). Thus it follows that after a person dies, his soul ought to become a spirit by the accretion of power entailed in being located "above".

Not all people who die proceed to the land of the dead, however. The Lisu recognize two types of death: normal death and death that involves unnatural swellings, bloodshed (e.g., gunshot, childbirth), and drowning. The latter class of deaths are called "bad deaths" in contrast to normal ones. Spirits of peoples who have died under these conditions of "bad death" join a group of spirits called "bad death spirits". There are several of these spirits called by different names depending on the relation of the dead person with the living one—whether they were of the same lineage and whether the living person knew the dead one.

Human souls can, then, become either ancestor spirits or bad death spirits. Ancestor spirits ultimately become lineage spirits as they become more remote from the living generation. The great-grandfather spirit is the most junior of the lineage spirits. It is these lineage spirits who look after their descendants and aid people in contacting the other spirits by speaking through the shamans. Lineage spirits, like other spirits, can be offended by people and cause people to fall ill until they make an appropriate offering. They are represented on the household altars and are "fed" (given offerings) on different occasions such as thanksgiving for rice, for corn, and at the new year, depending on lineage custom.

Bad death spirits, unlike other spirits, cannot be offended. They do cause disease and misfortunes, but not because they have been offended. Since these spirits do not reside in the land of the dead, no one constan-

tly makes offerings to them; they have to extort offerings by inflicting misfortunes on people. If they cause great trouble, they can be driven away by invoking the aid of other more powerful spirits. The reason that they are thought to act in this capricious way follows from the general logic of the spirits. Those spirits with a location, in the spirit land or land of the dead, can be given offerings and can be offended. The spirits without a locale cannot be given offerings and therefore must extort them on an ad hoc basis.

So far I have indicated the idea that soul absence results in a category of disease follows from a quite general dualistic logic. I have also argued that the idea that human souls are to the bottom of the field in the first hard rain; the plants are not planted so early that they wilt in the sun before rain comes, and so on. One's power depends directly on one's production of wealth; it is a consequence of the productive capacities of the person.

From the Lisu prayers addressed to spirits, it is evident that these spirits are thought to have power in the same sense people do. If this is the case, it ought to follow that each spirit represents some productive capacity or potential. This is by and large the case.

For each ecological domain that is used by the Lisu (e.g., jungle, field, stream, etc.), there are spirits for each of the evaluative criteria; for selecting a field site (e.g., amount of sunlight, tree growth, soil type), there are spirits; for each of the political divisions into which lowland kingdoms have been organized (e.g., kingdom, province, county, township, village), there are spirits. The ecological areas are productive and are used by the Lisu. The criteria for field selection are likewise agents of production. The political domains, although they are not an aspect of contemporary Lisu life, are known to be productive in terms of taxes and prerequisites. In general, it is the case that spirits do represent things that enter in production or which are productive in some way.

The qualifications are necessary because there are some spirits with no obvious productive capacity, e.g., the spirit of the bitter-fleshed porcupine burrow. There are not many of these spirits, and I suspect that all of them could be accounted for by reference to specific experiences of

individual Lisu. If someone is subject to a misfortune which is remedied by an offering to a spirit which has been offended, then the spirit must exist. If something behaves in a spirit-like way, and a shaman confirms it in a trance, it is considered to be a spirit. Such was the case for the spirit of the bitter-fleshed porcupine burrow.

The point is that spirits are generally entities posited by the mapping of the notion of productivity to some entity with power. If this argument is correct, then it would follow that human beings, insofar as they are productive, have an occult component, a soul. Can we adduce any evidence aside from the argument to support this contention?

When people's souls have left them, they exhibit characteristic symptoms of malaise and do not go about their business of production. The Lisu make this connection quite explicitly and suggest that if one does not work to produce wealth, he loses power by losing wealth. So when the soul is absent, a person loses his productive capacity. It appears, then, that the idea that people have souls is a specific instance of a much more general logic under which there is an occult entity which represents productive aspects of environments.

This analysis of the Lisu concept of the soul indicates why, for the Lisu, it is reasonable to suppose that people have souls, why people should be ill if their souls leave their bodies, why it should be an efficacious therapy to return the soul to the body, and how it is plausible to infer that human souls ought to become spirits. It also shows how the giving of wealth for status at feasts is informed by the same logic that makes it reasonable to infer that certain spirits exist.

Bibliography

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