

A LAHU NYI (RED LAHU) PRAYER AT CHILDBIRTH

Lahu text and brief ethnographic note

by

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The Lahu text given here is just one short example of a vast body of Lahu ritual poetry, some of which I was able to record during my anthropological investigations of Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) in the northern Thai uplands.¹ This contribution is best viewed not in isolation but as part of a series of papers on Lahu ritual and religious poetry which have appeared in this and other journals.²

The Ethnographic Context

Among the Lahu Nyi communities I studied, the birth of a child occasions the presentation of certain ritual offerings by the child's parents to the senior religious functionary of the village, the *to bo pa*.³ These gifts are then offered to G'ui_v sha, the supreme and creating supernatural of these Lahu.⁴ The purpose of the offerings and the accompanying prayer is to inform G'ui_v sha that a new member of the

1. My fieldwork was primarily among Lahu Nyi in Phrao and Wiang Pa Pao districts in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces respectively. For an ethnographic introduction to the Lahu Nyi of this area see Walker 1970b, 1975c. Regarding the Lahu people as a whole see Walker 1975a, 1975b.

2. See list of references.

3. *To* from *aw_v to* "body"; *bo* from *aw_v bon* "blessing, merit"; thus "blessed or meritorious body". *Pa* is the male suffix.

4. The etymology of the name G'ui_v sha is obscure. By itself, the syllable *g'ui_v* means "water, liquid, juice" (Matisoff 1965-9 : 612), but the meaning of *sha* (mid-level tone) is unclear. Stern's (1968 : 300) translation of G'ui_v sha as "Living Breath" is interesting but difficult to accept. In Lahu, "life" is *a sa_^* and "to be alive" is *a sa_^ te ve*. "Breath" is *aw_v sha₋*, the second syllable *sha₋* differing in tone from *sha* in G'ui_v sha. *G'ui_v+sha₋*, therefore, means literally "water breath" and is used to refer to "the cool atmosphere of a stream, the pleasant coolness around running water" (Matisoff 1965-9 : 614).

community has arrived, and to request divine protection for the infant.⁵ The offerings themselves, which are prepared by a member of the newborn's household (usually the father), are as follows:

- (a) a *hpeu_v k'o₋* (fig. 1A). Literally *hpeu_v* means "nest". This is a small basket loosely woven of bamboo. To its sides are affixed a number of slender bamboo sticks, each one topped with a small ball of cotton wool. Lahu usually compare this offering to the bowl of flowers that their lowland Buddhist neighbours, the Northern Thai people, place in front of the Buddha image in their temples.
- (b) some *peh^v haw* or beeswax candles. These are usually placed inside the *hpeu_v k'o₋*. Beeswax candles are an important element in Lahu Nyi ritual, as most religious ceremonies among these people are initiated by the lighting of such candles.⁶ They are said to illuminate the way for the supernaturals to attend the ceremony.
- (c) a *ku_v ti_^* (fig. 1B). This object comprises flat pieces of bamboo, notched at one end, and attached at a 45° angle to a bamboo handle. Lahu told me that the *ku_v ti_^* (etymology unknown) represents a flower like those which Buddhists bring to their temples.
- (d) a *hto^v hi⁻* or "custom (*hi⁻*) flag (*hto^v*)" (fig. 1C). The *hto^v hi⁻* comprises several flat pieces of split bamboo hung from a horizontal bamboo rod, itself attached to a bamboo handle. The symbolism of this object is obscure, but it is most likely an imitation of flags found in Buddhist temples.
- (e) a *li^v tsuh_^* (fig. 1D). Literally "custom (*aw_v li^v*), bound together (*tsuh_^ ve*)."⁷ This is a small bundle of bamboo sticks tightly lashed together with a strip of bamboo "rope". Sometimes the sticks are topped with balls of cotton wool.

5. I have been incorrect in saying previously that birth "occasions no ceremony" among these Lahu (cf. Walker 1975a : 337, 1975b : 120). It is true, however, that their birth rituals are minimal.

6. In distinguishing themselves from Buddhists and Christians, the Lahu Nyi often refer to themselves as *peh^v tu⁻ pa₋* "beeswax burners" (*peh^v* from *peh^v haw* "beeswax", *tu⁻* from *tu⁻ ve* "to light", *pa₋* "men").

The *to bo pa__* or, in his absence, his wife (who holds the title of *to bo ma*) receives these gifts, lights the beeswax candles and prays to *G'ui, sha* for the health of the newborn. This prayer, which may be sung or chanted, can be offered in one of several places: the *to bo pa__*'s house, the headman's house, or the *haw⁻ yeh_v*, the village temple.⁷ The *haw⁻ yeh_v* is most appropriate, since it is dedicated to the honour of *G'ui, sha*. But it is proper to make offerings in this building only on a festival day. These Lahu observe two such days (known as *shi⁻ nyi* or "merit days"⁸) each month at the time of the new and full moon. If the child happens to be born on a *shi⁻ nyi*, the *to bo pa__* will take the gifts to the *haw⁻ yeh_v*. And if a *shi⁻ nyi* is close at hand, the child's father may decide to await that day before giving his offerings to the *to bo pa__*. But if the gifts are to be offered on an ordinary day, the rite takes place in the house of the *to bo pa__* or the headman.⁹

On the occasion when I recorded the prayer given below, the offerings were received by the *to bo ma* and taken to the headman's house. There she presented them at the "offering bench" (*teh*) which the village leader alone keeps for the Divine Headman (*Gui, ma a daw^v*).⁹ This *teh* is a low wooden shelf (30 cm. wide, 20 cm. deep, 5 cm. high) set against the back wall on the same side of the house as the headman's sleeping quarters.

The Text

As in three previous contributions to this journal (Walker 1974a, 1975f, 1976a), I shall present this prayer text and translation in three stages. First is a formal transcription in the standard Lahu orthography

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7. *Haw⁻* from Shan "a prince's palace", *yeh_v* "house" in Lahu; thus "princely house".
 8. *Shi⁻* from *aw_v shi⁻*, the second part of the couplet *aw_v bon aw_v shi⁻* "blessing, merit"; *nyi* "day"; thus "day of blessing, day of merit."
 9. The Divine Headman is the prototype of all earthly headmen. According to Lahu Nyi cosmology, at least as I understood it from informants in my study communities, everything on earth has a divine prototype in the heavens. I was told that without a divine prototype, there could be no earthly representation.

developed by American Baptist missionaries in Burma and China.¹⁰ Here I have broken the text into stanzas in order to facilitate cross-reference, although no such structure is recognized by the Lahu. Second I give a "working translation" which is, as near as possible, a word-by-word translation from Lahu to English. In this version I omit tone marks (easily found by reference to the formal transcription) and use hyphens to join syllables into words.¹¹ Finally, I present a formal English translation of the prayer.

Formal Transcription

1. No[˧] g'a G'ui[˧], ma a daw[˧] co ti[˧] co sheh[˧] bvuh[˧], mi[˧], ma ya[˧] hpu a daw[˧] yeh[˧], ma aw[˧] ce[˧], bvuh[˧], mi[˧], ma a daw[˧] yeh[˧], ma aw[˧] ce[˧], te[˧] ce[˧] meu[˧] hta[˧], hi[˧] ceh[˧], k'aw[˧] ceh[˧], chi haw[˧] ga-o[˧], meh[˧].
 2. Ya[˧] ka[˧], du[˧], ka[˧], te[˧] cō ma[˧] gui[˧] ga[˧] leh ce[˧] ne[˧], ya[˧] hpu la[˧] meu[˧], a, aw[˧], na a pa te[˧] peu[˧], bvuh[˧], leh na[˧], hi[˧] ceu[˧], k'aw[˧] ceu[˧] meu[˧] hta[˧], g'aw leh po[˧] pi[˧] ce[˧].
 3. Ya[˧] hpu neh hpu te[˧] peu[˧], bvuh[˧], leh naw[˧], chi ceu[˧], k'aw[˧] ceu[˧], g'aw leh po[˧] pi[˧]-a ce[˧].
 4. Na[˧] pu[˧] sha[˧] yeh[˧], la[˧] sha hpaw[˧] haw[˧] ta[˧] ve ya[˧] o, hpa[˧] ka[˧], ma ka[˧], ma[˧] gui[˧] te[˧] co-e u[˧] hta[˧], nyi hk'a lo[˧], ce[˧]-a.
 5. A pa sha[˧] nyi a[˧] ga[˧], htaw[˧] ya[˧] o, ya[˧] hpu li[˧] hpeu[˧], li[˧] tshu[˧] ka[˧], tan[˧] la leh ya[˧]-o.
 6. G'ui[˧], ma naw[˧], a[˧] keh[˧] la[˧] k'o[˧] leh chaw[˧] ya[˧] va[˧] ya[˧] ka[˧], ma hpaw[˧] ma sha o meh[˧].
 7. Shaw[˧] hpu te[˧] ma[˧], g'a veu la[˧] htaw[˧], ya[˧] hpu kui[˧], nyi k'aw po[˧] yu[˧], taw[˧] ve, g'ui[˧]-o, sha-o ve.
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10. Although its use is for the most part restricted to Lahu Christians, this is the most widely used orthography outside Yunnan, where a "reformed" romanization has been sponsored by the Chinese government. The Lahu among whom I worked were illiterate, but a member of the Christian community assisted me in recording the texts presented here. For information on this orthography see Telford and Saya David 1938, and Matisoff 1970. Identification of the tone marks will be found in any of my previous Lahu text articles in this journal (see list of references). Matisoff's *Grammar of Lahu* (1973) is the most complete analysis extant of the Lahu language.
 11. A major problem of the missionary orthography is that each syllable is written separately, followed by its own tone mark. Even literate Lahu sometimes stumble when reading aloud, because of the difficulty of distinguishing word boundaries.

Working Translation

Verse 1

1. *no-g'a* : up there
2. *g'ui-ma* : divine, partaking of G'ui-sha (the supreme supernatural)
3. *a-daw* : headman, the one who thinks (on behalf of the whole village community) (*daw-ve* : to think)
4. *co* : life
5. *ti* : first meaning unknown, but here means "everlasting"; compare *ho-ti* : all-knowing, *ka-ti* : all-true. Thus 4-5 means "everlasting, unending life"
6. *co sheh* : precious life (*sheh* from Shan, "a jewel")
7. *bvuh* : cry out (in prayer)
8. *mi-ma* : earth, of the earth
9. *ya-hpu* : person (*ya*) white/pure (*hpu*); in ritual language means simply "man"
10. *a-daw* : headman. 8-10 means "the earthly headman", the headman of the village community in which a new child has been born
11. *yeh-ma* : house
12. *aw* : four
13. *ce* : corners. 8-12 "within the four corners of the village headman's house"
14. *bvuh* : cry out (in prayer)
15. *mi-ma a-daw* : earthly headman (see 8-10)
16. *yeh-ma aw ce* : house four corners (see 11-13)
17. *te ce* : one corner
18. *meu-ha* : in. 15-18 "in one corner of the headman's house"
19. *hi* : custom
20. *ceh* : tree
21. *k'aw ceh* : nine trees. 19-21 (couplet) refers to the ritual paraphernalia found on the offering bench in the headman's house
22. *chi* : these
23. *haw* : under
24. *ga-o* : reach
25. *meh* : a word placed at the end of a sentence to stress the speaker's words; thus 15-25 "I really do reach under (i.e. pray at) the nine custom trees at one corner of the headman's house"

Verse 2

26. *ya-ka du-ka* (couplet) : child
27. *te co* : one life
28. *ma gui* : not separate
29. *ga* : want
30. *leh* : and
31. *ce ne* : ? (Informant said these words were used only for sound effect; "*na sha ve* : good, pleasant to listen to")
32. *ya-hpu* : man; refers to father of the baby
33. *la meu* : own hands (*la* : hands)
34. *a* : oh!
35. *aw-na* : above
36. *a-pa* : father
37. *te peu* : one time
38. *bvuh leh* : cry out (in prayer) and
39. *na* : sickness
40. *hi* : eight
41. *ceu* : kinds
42. *k'aw ceu* : nine kinds. 40-42 (couplet) "all kinds of sickness"
43. *meu-hta* : on/from (not strictly translatable)
44. *g'aw* : count, i.e, take note of
45. *leh po pi-o* : and let pass. 39-45 "take note of all sickness and let it pass from [this child]"
46. *ce* indicates that speaker is making request on somebody else's behalf

Verse 3

47. *ya-hpu neh-hpu* (couplet) : man and woman; here, father and mother of the baby
48. *te peu* : one time
49. *bvuh leh* : cry out (in prayer) and
50. *naw* : you
51. *chi ceu k'aw ceu* (couplet) : nine kinds, ten kinds (of sickness), i.e. "all kinds of sickness"; compare 40-42

52. *g'aw leh po pi-a* : count (take note of) and let pass (see 44-5)
 53. *ce* (see 46)

Verse 4

54. *na-pu* : eternal (?)
 55. *sha-yeh* : offering house. This is the second part of a poetic couplet *haw-yeh sha-yeh* meaning the village temple.
 56. *la-sha* : right hand
 57. *hpaw* : side
 58. *haw* : under
 59. *ta-ve* : put
 60. *ya-o* has no meaning, is used only for sound effect
 61. *hpa-ka ma-ka* (couplet) : husband and wife
 62. *ma gui* : not separate
 63. *te co-e* : one life
 64. *u-hta* : upon
 65. *nyi hk'a lo* : look/watch (*nyi-ve*) over
 66. *ce-a* (see 46 above)

Verse 5

67. *a-pa* : father
 68. *sha nyi* : offering day
 69. *a ga* : not reach
 70. *htaw* : even though
 71. *ya-o* (no meaning)
 72. *ya-hpu* : man
 73. *li-hpeu* : custom (*aw-li*) basket (*hpeu-k'o*); see fig. 1A
 74. *li-tzuh* : kind of offering; see fig. 1D
 75. *ka* : also
 76. *tan* : offer
 77. *la leh* : come and
 78. *ya-o* (no meaning)

Verse 6

79. *G'ui-ma* : G'ui-sha, the supreme supernatural
 80. *naw* : you

81. *a* : not
82. *keh la* : cleanse, purify
83. *k'o* : if
84. *leh* : and
85. *chaw-ya va-ya* (couplet) : the people
86. *ka* : also
87. *ma* from *nyi-ma-shi* : heart
88. *hpaw* : side
89. *ma* : not
90. *sha-o* : easy, content, happy
91. *meh* emphasises statement; thus 85-91 "really the people's hearts will not be happy"

Verse 7

92. *shaw* : wood
93. *hpu* : white
94. *te-ma* : one
95. *g'a veu la* : have brought
96. *htaw* : even
97. *ya-hpu* : man
98. *kui-nyi* : perspiration
99. *k'aw* : nine
100. *po* : drops
101. *yu-taw-ve* : come out
102. *g'ui-o sha-o ve* (couplet) : Oh G'ui-sha!

Formal Translation

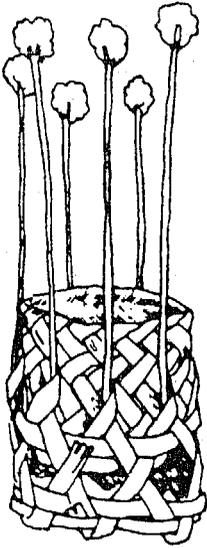
1. To the everlasting life, to the precious life of the Divine Headman up there, I pray;¹² within the four corners of the village headman's

12) Because the divine prototypes (see note 9 above) partake of the divinity of G'ui-sha, the supreme supernatural, and this prayer is being recited in the village headman's house, it is appropriate that it should be directed to the Divine Headman. But in praying to the Divine Headman one is also praying to G'ui-sha; hence the direct address to the latter in verses 2, 6 and 7.

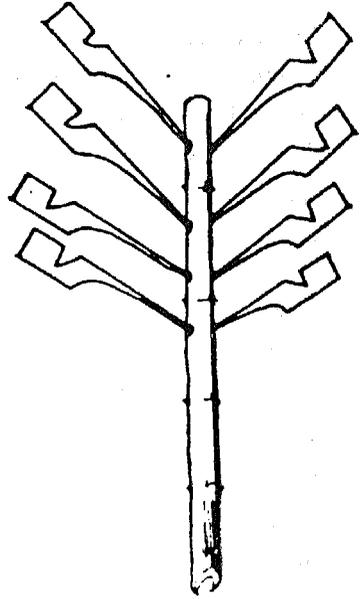
house, I pray; at this one corner within the village headman's house, I reach under the nine custom trees.¹³

2. This man does not want to lose the life of his [newborn]¹⁴ child, so [he brings offerings] made by his own hands; Father above,¹⁵ cry out but one time and protect [his child] from the eight kinds, the nine kinds of sickness.¹⁶
 3. The father and the mother [of this newborn child] pray but one time, You please protect [their child] from the ten kinds, the nine kinds [of sickness].
 4. They put [their prayers] at the right-hand side of the eternal *haw⁻yeh_v*,¹⁷ so let the husband and wife not separate, look upon them.
 5. Even though the day on which we make offerings to Father G'ui_v sha has not yet arrived, [the father of the newborn child] comes to offer this *hpeu_v k'o₋* and this *li^v tsuh_^*.¹⁸
 6. Oh G'ui_v sha, if you will not grant purification, these people's hearts cannot be happy.¹⁹
 7. Oh G'ui_v sha, even though this man has brought only one piece of white wood, nine drops of perspiration fall from him!²⁰
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- 13) "Nine custom trees" is simply a poetic way of referring to all the offerings which are kept on the "custom bench" (or offering bench; see page 141 above) in the headman's house. To "reach under the nine custom trees" means to humble oneself in prayer before this offering bench.
 - 14) Words in brackets do not appear in the Lahu text but are implied.
 - 15) Here G'ui_v sha, the supreme supernatural, is addressed directly.
 - 16) "The eight kinds, the nine kinds of sickness" is a poetic form meaning "all sickness". The same is true of "the ten kinds, the nine kinds" below.
 - 17) Through the agency of the *to bo ma*, her clients symbolically place their offerings in the divine prototype temple in G'ui_v sha's heaven (compare note 9 above).
 - 18) See introduction and fig. 1, above, for explanation of these offerings and the festival days (*shⁱ-nyi*) on which they are normally presented to G'ui_v sha.
 - 19) There seems to be some notion that birth produces defilement, although the idea is not particularly developed among these Lahu people.
 - 20) This is simultaneously poetic understatement and overstatement. The number of offerings is understated, but the relative effort required to produce them is overstated.

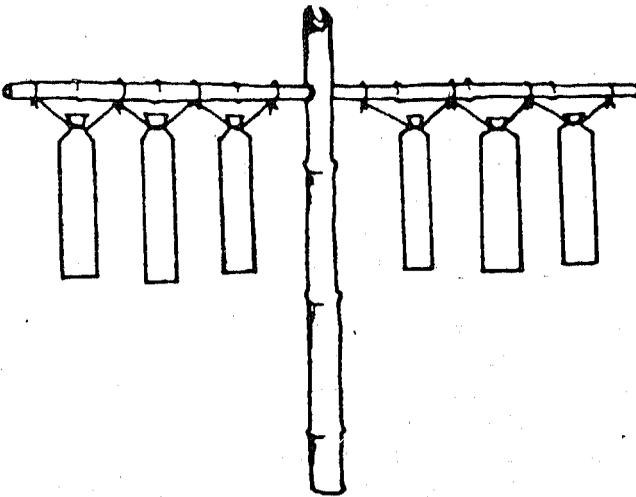
Fig. 1. RITUAL OFFERINGS



a. Hpeu,k'o—



b. Ku,ti,



c. Hto'hi—



d. Li'tsub,

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