

# A LISU SHAMANISTIC SEANCE<sup>1</sup>

by

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Lisu are slash and burn agriculturalists who live in the hills of Northern Thailand, Burma and Southern China.<sup>2</sup> Among the Lisu of Northern Thailand whom I studied, misfortunes take many forms—pigs wander away or do not return to their pens at night, fields may be infested with insects, and people are stricken with a variety of illnesses. Misfortune of one kind or another is an everyday event. Perhaps no people simply accept misfortune. Lisu are no exception. They attempt to find and correct the causes of misfortunes in terms of their own view of causality and order in the universe.

In the Lisu view the universe is populated by spirits as well as humans. Often misfortune is attributed to the activities of these spirits. There are many spirits which may be offended by human actions, and in retribution visit misfortunes on people until they atone for the offense. Spirits of long deceased ancestors of patrilineal lineages, lineage spirits (*nì zà*), can communicate directly with people by riding or possessing shamans (*nì phà*).

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  - 2) Dessaint, A.Y. "Lisu Annotated Bibliography," *Behavior Science Notes*, 1971, 6: 71-94. .... "The Poppies are Beautiful This Year," *Natural History*, 1972, 81: 30.

In order to understand the Lisu view of the order of the universe we must comprehend their relationships with these spirits. One important way of appreciating these relationships is by observing direct interaction between people and spirits during shamanistic seances. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to such an understanding by describing a shamanistic seance.

First, however, let us examine the shaman's role and his place in setting bad situations aright. Shamans are men who have been chosen by the spirits of their patrilineal lineages to be "horses". If a man begins to act in bizarre ways—to have fits, lose energy and want to stay at home instead of working in his fields, to run about madly and bash his head against trees, to have nightmares—people will infer that he has probably been chosen by the spirits to be their "horse". To find out what to do, they ask an established shaman to call his spirits so people can ask them. The spirits usually indicate that the man has been chosen to be a shaman. Having been chosen, the man may not refuse the will of the spirits, at least, if he resists, there will be dire if not always fatal consequences.

As these symptoms and interpretations develop, news of the new shaman spreads. Then, explaining that their spirits have told them of the new shaman, shamans from surrounding villages come to initiate the new one. They take the neophyte to a place deep in the forest where they set out a number of lighted beeswax candles and bamboo cups filled with mashed beans or water. The neophyte eats the beans and candles and drinks the water.

One of the shamans calls his great-grandfather spirit to him, and this spirit questions the neophyte about his lineage spirits—who is senior to whom, who is most powerful, who can do what things. The neophyte answers and then the shaman asks which spirit the neophyte would like to ride him first. The neophyte answers that the most junior spirit should come first.

Meanwhile, other shamans call powerful spirits to ride them. Just as when someone gets a new horse all of the children want to ride, all of the spirits want to ride the new shaman. These powerful spirits

drive off the bad spirits with lighted joss sticks. The bad spirits must be taught at this time that they may not ride the shaman, for should they ride him when he is trying to cure someone, they would eat the patient's soul, and he would die. Spirits of other lineages may try to ride the new shaman, but they are not allowed to. When this initiation is finished, only the spirits of the neophyte's lineage can ride him and he is able, with their help, to cure people and to communicate with the world of the spirits.

Following this ceremony, the new shaman seeks further instruction from a senior shaman of his own lineage. During such training sessions the new shaman and the senior one are both possessed and the senior shaman demonstrates and teaches the various aspects of the role. Lisu say, "The spirits of the senior shaman instruct those of the junior one."

In addition to instructing the new shaman, the "training sessions" are important for establishing a consensus among villagers that this person is really a shaman. In the "training sessions" I observed, the senior shaman's spirits repeatedly asked people in the audience to judge whether the trainee's behavior were appropriate. The new shaman must not speak gibberish; he must be intelligible.

The senior shaman's spirits also catalogue the various functions of the shaman and describe just what offerings to the shaman's lineage spirits the beneficiaries of these services should make. Again, the spirits ask for confirmation from the people in attendance.

The shamans' duties involve communicating with the spirits whenever necessary. They diagnose illnesses and other misfortunes, separate the souls of the dead from those of the living after a death, drive away bad spirits, return objects which have been intruded into victims (*tai*) either by spirits or sorcerers, exorcise witch spirits (*phyi phā*) and other bad spirits which may possess people, cure diseases, and extend peoples' lives by writing letters to god (*wūsā*).

One of the most important functions of the shaman is to discover the causes of disease and other misfortunes. Therapeutic actions, which aim to correct misfortunes, are predicated on an etiology of the misfortune. The shaman invokes his spirits, who ride him, and people can ask

the spirits directly about the causes of misfortunes. The shaman is therefore very central in dealing with misfortune.

Because of the shaman's importance in discovering the causes of misfortunes, and because misfortunes are not uncommon, shamanistic seances are frequent. In the village I studied hardly a week went by without a shamanistic seance for one purpose or another. Seances are, then, everyday events, just as misfortunes are.

Before describing a seance, I shall describe a Lisu house so the positioning and movements of the shaman and others will be clear. The houses are built on hillside terraces. Houses face downhill, with a door which opens onto a verandah which is shaded by the overhanging thatched roof. The floors are pounded earth. Houses are typically about thirty by thirty-six feet but some are larger and some smaller. The walls are constructed of split bamboo planks. On the back wall, at the height of the top of the wall, opposite the door, is an altar which either rests on legs or is hung from the rafters. On the altar board are arranged Chinese cups and/or bowls. Each of these represents a spirit. To the left, as one faces the altar, are cups for the householder's mother, father, grandmother and grandfather. The other cups or bowls represent lineage spirits. The more powerful spirits are located to the right of less powerful ones. Left and right are determined by facing downhill, with one's back to the altar, so actually more powerful spirits are to the left of less powerful ones.

On either side of the space given over to the altar there are walls which separate sleeping quarters. To the right side of the house (left as one faces the altar) is a cooking space. Along the front walls there are usually split bamboo platforms to seat people. Near the center of the house is a hearth used for cooking or preparing tea. There may be a split bamboo platform under the altar. This is the general pattern of Lisu houses although there is much variation according to lineage custom.

Inside the house there are usually several short wooden stools. If the seance is in response to an individual's being sick, the patient usually sits on a stool near the hearth, and faces the door. The shaman positions

himself in front of the altar and stands on the platform if there is one under the altar. Other people sit on the platforms near the front of the house or on stools. Anyone may speak to the spirits when they possess the shaman, but usually one or two men will attend to the shaman. They keep the altar cups full of water, provide joss sticks, bring the things the spirits request and catch the shaman when he leaves his trance. During the seance lighted joss sticks are kept on the altar.

The shaman may invoke his spirits with a prayer, or he may simply whistle for about a minute before becoming possessed. Typically, the prayer lists some of the shaman's lineage spirits, tells them this is a good day or night, addresses them as "the ones who can see, who can hear, who know everything," and "the ones who take care of the horse, the ones who ride the horse," and asks them to come down. When he is possessed, the shaman's voice assumes a singing or chanting quality quite distinct from ordinary diction.

The seance was to find out the cause of Widow Woman's illness. The shaman was Fish Man.<sup>3</sup> What follows is a description of the seance and a translation of the dialogue between the spirits and the people. This is a translation of a tape recording of the seance. I recorded and translated many of these seances with the help of Lisu villagers and my Lahu assistant, Sala A Yi. The one presented here is typical of a diagnostic seance.

Spirit: I, third generation daughter (*sāch† amyì*) have come down. People, why have you called me? Third generation older brother, senior to me . . . . People, I have come. Third generation daughter has come to your place. You who are senior to me, come help.

People: Come down quickly.

Spirit: People have called me, so I am calling you. The people have become sick.

People: Where we offended, we do not know. What is needed? Come tell us quickly.

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3) For more on Lisu curing and the place of shamans in the process, see Durrenberger, E.P. "Lisu Curing: A Case History," *Bulletin of The History of Medicine*, forthcoming.

Spirit : I will tell. I am third generation daughter.

People : Please tell us where we offended. Please tell us. If you do not tell, it is your fault.

Spirit : If I tell, people, you must use silver and gold. I will tell. If I tell you, you cannot do everything.

People : We can use [whatever is needed].

Spirit : People, people, third generation great-grandfather (*sāch̄t̄ pīphā*) will tell.

People : Please tell us what is needed quickly.

Spirit : I will tell you. I cannot not tell you.

People : Please tell us quickly. Do not wait for us people to tell you, tell us quickly.

Spirit : People . . . People . . .

People : Where was the offense? You, spirit who can see, tell us. If you have something to tell us, please tell us.

The shaman took a cup from the altar and sprayed Widow Woman, who was inside the sleeping room, then sprinkled the right side of the altar enclosure, the wall of the sleeping room, and handed the altar cup to Widow Woman.

Spirit : People, people, third generation daughter has come down and spoken wrongly. You people used only one chicken.

People : Do not say that; if you do not tell us, we do not know. We have called you.

Spirit : I told you wrong, told wrong. Like this, like that. Third generation great-grandfather spirit on the gold and silver altar will tell.

People : Tell us whether animals or silver is needed.

Spirit : People, people, she has been sick for many days. I will tell you about the offense.

People : What should we do for it to be good? Please tell us. People do not know.

Spirit : I will tell you : I will tell you straight.

People : People do not know, cannot do. Please tell us.

Spirit : I will tell you.

People : What must we people for it to be good?

Spirit : People, people . . . . One senior to third generation daughter will tell.

People : If you have something to tell us, tell it. What should we do for it to be good ?

Spirit : I will tell who sent the sickness. I will tell who put the sickness. If I tell you, it is like this; if I do not tell you, it is like this.

[The spirit addresses the house spirits] If you sent this sickness, you have no honor (*dù majū myī majū*). Spirits senior to me, do you look after your descendants like this ? [to the people] You looked for me, so you must keep long hearts (be patient). If you keep long hearts, you are honorable (*dù jū myī jū*).

People : We cannot keep short hearts.

Spirit : Altar spirits, keep soft hearts. If you keep soft hearts, you are honorable.

People : What should we do to have honor ?

Spirit : If you keep long hearts, you will have honor. People do not know, cannot do . . . . If you altar spirits sent this sickness, you do not have honor. More than this, third generation daughter will tell.

People : You must tell us : you must teach us.

Spirit : I will tell about your whole village.

The shaman coughed and stumbled.

People : Hold your horse, do not let it fall.

Spirit : I will tell you. I will tell about people who do not know.

People : Please tell us how to cut away this sickness.

Spirit : I have seen third generation woman, but she did not tell me anything. Three generations, four generations, you look after your children. After they know about this, you spirits look. If your descendants are sick, you have no honor. This the country of other people. There is much sickness. The people will laugh at you. The descendants of others do not get sick. The descendants of others are not sick. [To Widow Woman]

You who look for silver and gold, you should not look for silver and gold in the fields; you should stay in the house and teach your children. At the top of the village, bottom of the village, you have no relatives. I ask you, third generation spirit, my senior, are you angry or not? These are third generation daughter's words. Third generation daughter's words are thick. I do not know, but I have a soft heart. I cannot say more than this.

People: You must have a soft heart.

Spirit 1 I am third generation . . . people, third generation daughter, the golden woman, silver woman (*phwū lo mā swī lo mā*). I will tell.

People: We want you to tell us, so we have called you.

Spirit: I am the last daughter, I will tell you. People . . .

People: What must we do to cut away the sickness?

Spirit: If I tell you, you will be poor and hungry.

People: Do not tell us twice; tell us once only.

Spirit: Third generation older brother has spoken wrongly. People . . .

People: If you do not tell us, it is your fault. What should we do to cut away the sickness? If people do not listen, it is their fault.

Spirit: Too much to eat. People, people . . . .

People: You tell us, you teach us.

Spirit: I will speak. If I tell you, you will be poor.

People: People are sick and have called you.

Spirit: You need to look for an able man at the top of the village, at the bottom of the village. Do not have a heavy heart, look quickly.

People: We have nowhere to look for one, we are satisfied with you.

Spirit: You must use much.

People: We can use it, please tell us.

Spirit: People, three generation daughter told you wrong.

People: It does not matter, we can use what is needed. What should we do to cut away the sickness?

Spirit: I, the daughter, will tell you.

People: If you have something to tell us, please tell us everything.

Spirit : There, where you cut wood, call my friend and make a ceremony there. Before, third generation daughter told you and you did not keep it in your hearts. You have big hearts. What has happened to you now ?

People : People are like pigs and dogs.

Spirit : Third generation older brother told you wrong. People, I do not know, so go look at the top of the village, at the bottom of the village. Look at the top of the village and the bottom of the village and make the sickness well. People, people, you have cold hearts. You eat too much.

People : Let us not have trouble.

Spirit : There is much essence of disease. There is no more than this.

People : If there is no more, thank you.

Spirit : People, I have told the altar spirits to keep soft hearts. Now they have soft hearts.

People : If you tell them, may they have soft hearts.

Spirit : Now it will be good for the people. It has become well. People, I do not know, I cannot do. I have told you much. I do not know, so I have told wrong. I have spoken wrongly, people. I have received many joss sticks and much water.

The shaman came out of his trance and the seance ended. When shamans come out of their trances, they do not remember what has happened or what the spirits have told the people. In this case, the spirit indicated that a ceremony to the spirit of a certain hill should be made and the essence of disease should be sent from the household.

I think some of the interesting aspects of this seance have to do with the relations between spirits and people. We see that spirits, as well as people, can lose and gain honor by their actions, and that the people do not have any especial awe for their spirits who are fallible, just as people are. We see, for instance, that household spirits can lose honor by not fulfilling peoples' expectations of them to keep the household members from harm. In some seances people ask for much more specific information—should they offer a pig or a chicken, what has been

the offense, and so on. Many ceremonies, among them, those for hill spirits have standard forms, so more specific information is not needed.

The spirits repeat that if they tell the people the causes of the sickness, the people will have to use wealth and will become poor. Ceremonies are often occasions for feasts where food is distributed, which brings honor to the sponsor of the feast.

In this seance we see a shaman in action in his role as purveyor of important information for diagnosis, and something of how Lisu relate to some of their spirits, as instrumentalities rather than with awe. We also see that ceremonies are a way of distributing wealth in feasts and that the honor of spirits, as the honor of people, must be earned.