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Water in Lahu Ritual and Symbolism

Synthesizing Indigenous and Indic (Mostly Buddhist) Ideas among a Tibeto-Burman speaking Mountain People of the Yunnan-Northern Southeast Asia Borderlands

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Abstract. – Notions of water, both as symbol of purity and means of purification, are evidenced in many Lahu ritual activities. Simultaneously, bodies of water and waterways are considered to be the abode of owner-spirits that may cause harm to those who infringe on their aquatic domain without first exercising sufficient respect and/or propitiation. Exposure to Buddhism has brought with it an overlay of Indic notions concerning water, particularly notable among which is the custom of ritually pouring water onto the earth as a means of transferring the merit of a person's gift-giving to others, either living or dead. Lahu attitudes towards water and its use in ritual are among many facets of the Lahu cultural heritage that exemplify a synthesis of animist, theist and Buddhist ideas and practices. This situation serves to remind us of the dangers inherent in categorizing mountain peoples, such as the Lahu, as altogether distinct from their politically-dominant lowland neighbours in the Yunnan-Northern Southeast Asia borderlands. *[Southeast Asia, Tibeto-Burman peoples, the Lahu, animism, theism, ritual, Buddhism, religious syncretism]*

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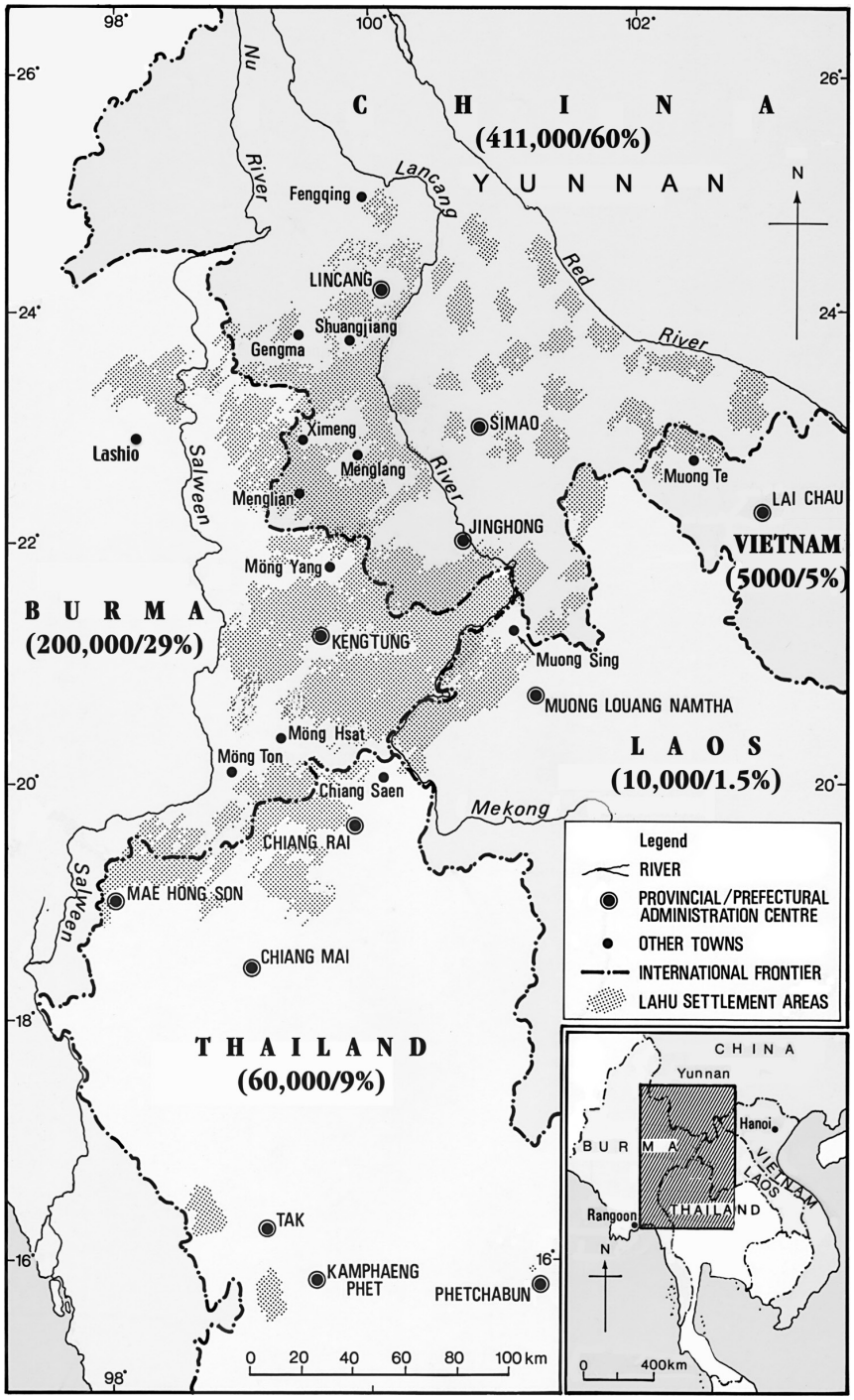
1 The Lahu: An Ethnographic Background

The Lahu (Laˇ hu_) – some groups pronounce the name as "Laho" (Laˇ ho_) – are a people with greater linguistic than sociocultural unity. This notwithstanding, they do seem to recognize themselves as "Laˇ hu_/ho_ yaˇ" or "Lahu people", vis-à-vis peoples of other ethnolinguistic affiliations. (Among fellow mountain folk, these are peoples such as Wa, Lisu, Akha [in modern-day Yunnan, identified as a branch of the Hani 哈尼族 nationality] and Yi 彝, while in the valleys and urban places they are principally Tai and Han Chinese – the latter with some villages in the lower mountains as well.)

The Lahu language belongs within the Central Yi division of the widespread Tibeto-Burman linguistic family (stretching from Ladakh to northern Vietnam, and from Tibet to southern Burma [cf. Matisoff 1986]). Today, Lahu speakers number some three-quarters of a million. The largest single concentration of Lahu people (significantly over 400,000) is in China's Yunnan Province, both to the east and west of the Mekong River (in China called the Lancang Jiang 澜沧江) from where – mostly during the past couple of centuries – some of them have migrated southwards into territories now administered by Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam (Walker 2003: 85–90; see Map). The first two of these Southeast Asian states now have significant Lahu populations, probably over 200,000 and over 70,000 respectively (cf. Walker 2003: 101 f.). In China a special autonomous county, "Lancang Lahu Nationality Autonomous County 澜沧拉祜族自治县" was established in their name in 1953 (Anonymous 1953).

Traditionally, Lahu are an upland-dwelling folk, historically dependent on swidden farming for their



Map: The distribution of the Lahu-speaking peoples.

livelihood.[1] Modern-day Lahu highland settlements vary in their architectural characteristics according to location and to the relative influence of Han and Tai prototypes. As a broad generalization, we may say that Lahu villages in the far northeastern settlement areas in Yunnan resemble those of their Han and Yi neighbours. Based today on irrigated rice production, such villages are home to sedentary communities, some of them boasting over 200 households and more than a thousand people. Houses are substantial earthen structures in the Chinese style, with roofs of thatch or wooden shingles. Further southwest in Yunnan, as well as through the

1 Cf. Walker (1970b: 303–511; 1976c; 2003: 17–27); Wongsprasert (1974); Yin (2001: 47–48, 357–363).

Burmese Shan State, northern Thailand, and northwestern Laos, villages tend to be much smaller and, as such, better suited to a swidden farming economy that, traditionally, has been quite mobile. Thirty houses and 120 people are about normal, but the range is considerable. Houses are usually made of bamboo, raised on wooden or thick bamboo piles and thatched with leaves or cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*). Averaging about 3 by 3.5 metres, they vary in size according to the number of occupants rather than a family's wealth. In some of the southwestern Lahu settlement areas in Yunnan Province, longhouses (up to 15 metres in length) were not unusual, sheltering extended families of some 40 to 100 people, each nuclear family unit having its own apartment and cooking hearth (Song and Li 1975).

Beyond the individual village it is common to find small conglomerations of villages whose leaders recognize one among themselves, usually the head of the community that pioneered the area, as senior area headman. Kin ties, in this bilateral society, do not necessarily link the members of the cluster of neighbouring villages that recognize a senior headman. Indeed, sometimes the village cluster is a multi-ethnic one, so its leader may or may not be Lahu. Beyond this loose and locally-based multi-village polity, one enters the domain of political relations with dominant lowland peoples. Traditionally these have been Tai, and many Lahu headmen formerly received recognition from their local Tai prince, to whom they pledged allegiance, supplied corvée, and paid taxes in cash or kind (cf. Walker 2003: 74 f.). In Yunnan, as central government concern for political control over the imperial borders grew, Lahu leaders increasingly came under the control of Han officials instead of, or in addition to, that of their local Tai lords (cf. Walker 2003: 76–81). In modern times, Lahu have a variety of political associations – some intense, others still largely nominal – with the administrators of the nation states in which they live.

As for Lahu "religious" culture (in so far as the term "religion" presumes a major divide between sacred and secular worlds, in the Lahu context it is not a particularly useful one [cf. Walker 2003: 122 f.]), the indigenous situation is one common throughout the greater Southeast Asia region and we may term it "animo-theism." It is "animistic" because it is premised on the supposition that all culturally significant phenomena in the visible world comprise material form and nonmaterial "spiritual essence." (To the latter may or may not be attributed a special name and attributes.) It is "theistic" because it posits also the existence of deities, including G'ui˘ sha, the great cosmic creator-divinity.

While introducing Lahu supernaturalism, it is probably as well to mention that, in the general ethnographic literature on the mountainous borderlands of China's Yunnan Province and northern Southeast Asia, we frequently read of a great religious divide that corresponds to the topographical, and to the so-called "civilizational" ones. The deep valleys lying amidst the mountains are mostly occupied by Tai, who are irrigated rice farmers, overwhelmingly Theravāda Buddhists, and "civilized"; in the mountains live a medley of ethnolinguistic groups who are mostly dependent on the production of dry rice in swiddens, who are "animists," and who are "primitive" (cf. Hendershot 1943: 242; Leach 1961: 52). Because much of the ethnographic literature on this Asian region on which I specialize has been framed in terms of Buddhism as an essentially lowland phenomenon, it sometimes comes as a surprise to people to learn that there are upland-dwelling peoples who have, long ago, embraced this religious tradition (cf. Walker 2009: 316 and the literature cited therein). Unsurprisingly, given the local political dominance, in historical times, of the Tai peoples, this has been primarily in its Theravāda form. Less well documented (in Western languages, but not in Chinese) is the significant history of Mahāyāna Buddhism among Lahu mountain folk – as well as among some neighbouring Austroasiatic-speaking Wa (Walker 2009).

2 The Harnessing and Use of Water among the Lahu: A Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) Example from North Thailand

Ca˘ Taw¯'s village (named for a former headman), which was the particular focus of my in-depth field research, was situated (the people have long since moved away) at an elevation of 1,300 metres above sea level, on a rather narrow ridge just below the summit of Mae Hpa Mountain in Phrao District of Chiang Mai Province, Northern Thailand (Fig. 1). It was, even by Lahu standards, a fairly small settlement, varying in size over the four-year period during which I lived there, from ten to sixteen wooden-and-bamboo houses, with grass- or leaf-thatched roofs, sited roughly on either side of a main thoroughfare and raised on stout wooden poles a metre or so above the ground. Every house had an exterior porch floored with wooden poles and supporting one or two small sheds in which were stored, inter alia, the household's bamboo tube water containers.

The villagers' water needs were simply but effectively channeled into the centre of the settlement

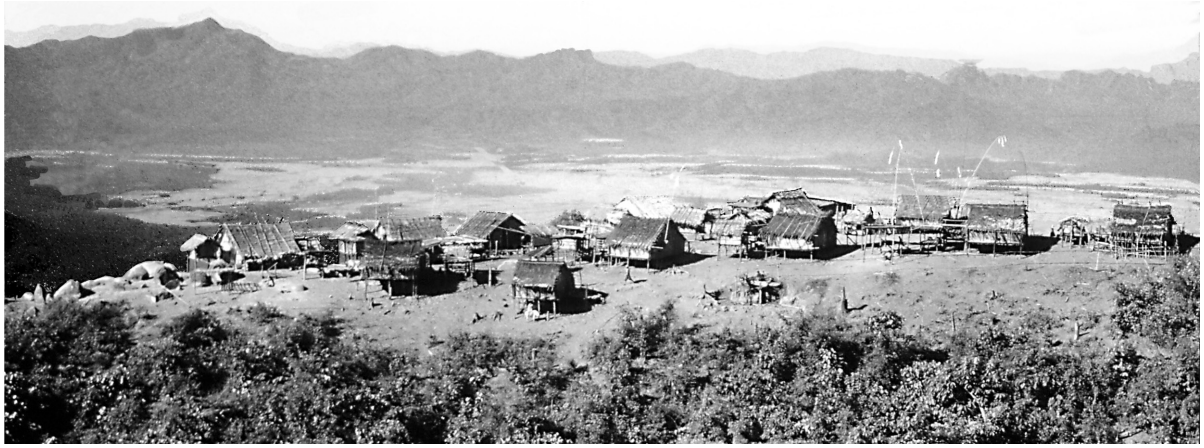


Fig. 1: A Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) village in North Thailand.

by means of an aqueduct constructed from longitudinally-split sections of bamboo, placed end-to-end, with each section supported by forked sticks approximately two metres high (Fig. 2). This aqueduct brought fresh water to the settlement from a spring located in the forest some 500 metres distant. One of the first tasks of the day for one or more (mostly female) members of a household was to gather up half a dozen or so tubular bamboo water containers from the porch shed, stack them in a basket made from loosely-woven strips of bamboo and head for the water source. As there was only a single aqueduct to channel water for the entire village, there was usually a queue of women and girls waiting their turn to fill their bamboo tubes (together with the odd kettle or pot they might have carried along for an additional supply). Naturally, the water-collecting point (Fig. 3) was a favourite place for the exchange of village gossip – a useful location also for an inquisitive anthropologist.

The principal uses that were made of the water brought back home were for cleaning foodstuffs, cooking, drinking (mostly after meals, cold and directly from a bamboo tube) and a little washing of bodies and clothes. But those who desired a bath (usually after a hard day's work in the fields, rather than in the chill early morning mountain air), or who had a sizable quantity of clothes to launder, would accomplish these tasks at the water source, either the spring itself, or at the village end of the aqueduct.

As mountain-dwelling people and dry *padi* cultivators, Ca˘ Taw¯'s folk had little use of waterways as a means of transport – except in order to transport

Fig. 2: Bamboo aqueducts raised on forked wooden posts, bringing water into the village; it is raised sufficiently high above the ground to permit cattle to move freely underneath it. The girl at right washes clothes in a large carved-out wooden trough.

Fig. 3: Mother and daughter at village water collecting point; bamboo tubes are the traditional water-carrying vessels, but kettles and old kerosene tins are now also used.

harmful spirits out of the village on miniature rafts (see below). The backs of humans, horses or mules were the principal means for transporting all manner of effects. Neighbouring streams were fished, and the waters searched for crustaceans, but neither of these activities contributed very significantly to the people's food intake. Nor did Ca˘ Taw¯'s folk need to channel and control water for *padi* production – so important a factor in the farming pursuits of their Northern Thai, irrigated rice farming neighbours – for these Lahu swidden farmers relied entirely on rainfall to meet their agricultural needs.

Sometimes Lahu communities – Ca˘ Taw¯'s people were not among them – harness the energy of nearby streams to operate *padi* milling mortars and pestles. Water is channeled from the stream into a trough at the end of a long wooden hammer. The weight of the water causes the hammer end to rise, until the handle has achieved an angle sufficient to allow the water to flow out of the trough; the hammer then automatically falls onto the *padi*, following which the water collection process is repeated. Milling rice in this manner takes considerable time, but avoids the backache associated with foot- or hand-operated pestles.

3 Water in Lahu Rite and Symbol

There are three major domains of Lahu supernaturalism that incorporate water, both as symbol and for ritual use: (1) the animistic (as earlier defined), (2) the Indic (principally Buddhist), and (3) the Christian. I shall examine in turn the role of water in each of these three domains. I shall, however, avoid saying much about the Christian domain, as this brings into play a set of symbols and liturgical practices derived from a Semitic tradition that, during the time I was living with them, did not impact on Ca˘ Taw¯'s people.

3.1 Water in the Animistic Domain

Water may not be so visibly ubiquitous a feature of mountain villages as it is of riverine or littoral settlements but, whether there is insufficient of it to meet the needs of humans, domestic animals, and plants, or too much, so as to waterlog villages, destroy homes, and wash out crops, are inevitably matters of concern to all mountain-dwelling and mountain-farming communities. There is little wonder, therefore, that Lahu associate water with a particularly significant spirit entity, the *i¯ ka^ law˘ ne˘*, "spirits of waters and streams/rivers."

Water is frequently an important component of animistic ritual, which, for the Lahu case, I shall define as regularly-enacted symbolic action based on a worldview that perceives (as just noted) all culturally-significant phenomena as animated by soul force, and which predates the introduction of Buddhist and Christian ideologies.

Since the penetration of Buddhist-derived ideas and practices (see below), pre-Buddhist, and Buddhist ideas are so much intertwined in Lahu ritual activity that it is doubtless a distortion of the liturgical reality to attempt to isolate individual elements on the basis of their particular ideological origins. As a matter of fact, the division of Lahu supernaturalism into "animistic" and "Buddhist" domains is largely for analytical purposes; in reality, the two merge, often imperceptibly.

Teachers of Christianity have been less willing than their Buddhist predecessors to compromise on what they consider acceptable liturgical practice, but they too have failed to eradicate at least some traditional animistic elements from the worldview

of most of those Lahu who have converted to this Western religion.

Within the matrix of what this writer identifies as "Lahu animism," water appears, variously, as being possessed or, better, "owned" by spirit entities, as an appropriate offering to spirits, as a symbol of new beginnings (at the start of the New Year, or of marital life, for example), and as a potent means of ritual purification (a notion that occurs, of course, in the introduced Buddhist and Christian traditions as well).

Let us examine in a little more detail these apparently "animistic" uses of water among Ca˘ Taw¯'s people.

3.1.1 The Lahu "Water Spirit" or "Water Spirits"

Lahu traditionalists maintain that every waterway – from mountain stream to lowland river – and every body of water – from small pool to large lake – has its resident "owner spirit (*aw˘ sheh_ hpaˇ*)", which takes its name from the particular stretch of water with which it is associated, e.g., Ho˘*-e lon¯ aw˘ sheh_ hpaˇ* "the owner of Huey Luang [in Northern Thai] stream." Generically, water spirits are called *i¯ kaˆ law˘ neˇ* (*i¯ kaˆ*, "water"; *law˘* "stream, river"; *neˇ* "spirit, cognate with Burmese *nat*)), or as just i¯ *kaˆ neˇ*, or just *law˘ neˇ*. Alternatively, they be termed *g'ui˘ neˇ* (*g'ui˘* has the primary meaning of "liquid," hence also "water"); more poetically, these water spirits may be called *law˘ neˇ ha¯ neˇ*, a couplet meaning "spirits of the streams, spirits of the rocks" (*ha¯*). Although, at one level of thought, each waterway is conceived as having a single owner spirit, at another level, the water spirit is thought to be a composite force comprising both male and female elements. Thus, as spirit of the upper reaches of the mountain streams, the *law˘ neˇ* is sometimes invoked (or was among the spirit masters of Ca˘ Taw¯'s village) as *g'ui˘ yaˇ pa_*, "male water spirit," but as spirit of the lower reaches, where the streams become rivers, the same entity may be addressed as *g'ui˘ yaˇ miˇ* or "female water spirit."

These spirit owners of waters are feared for their propensity to cause people to drown. In this connection, among Lahu living in southwestern Yunnan (although not, I think, among Ca˘ Taw¯'s folk with whom I lived in North Thailand), water spirits are often associated with dragons (*cawˇ sheh_ ma* in Lahu), an idea probably absorbed from the Lahu's Han Chinese neighbours. The late Harold Young (1901–1975), who, before the Pacific War, lived for several years among Lahu in Yunnan as an American Baptist missionary, writes in an unpublished work on the these people (Young n. d.: 144) that offended river spirits "often take the form of a dragon" and "[i]f a person is drowned … the expression 'pulled in by a dragon' is used." Young reports, moreover, that such "spirits are said to become so malignant when annoyed that they cannot be appeased by any kind of an offering." By contrast, James Telford (1886–1949), another long-time Baptist missionary among the Lahu in Burma's Shan State, writes "[i]n less ferocious mood the Ika Law Ne [*i¯ ka law˘ neˇ*] just bites and afflicts with trivial pains the careless fisherman or traveler," and he reports a Lahu village headman attributing his backache to "having offended in some unknown way, the spirit of the river in which he has been fishing all day" (1937: 144 f.).

Ca˘ Taw¯'s folk in North Thailand seemed to have the same, relatively relaxed, attitude to water spirits as that reported by Telford. They were not conceived as invariably malevolent, but might "bite" (Lahu: *cheˆ ve*), a person who has had contact with the water they own. There seemed, however, to be no illnesses that Ca˘ Taw¯'s folk specifically associated with these water spirits. Should somebody take sick shortly after having bathed in, waded through, or fished a particular stream, he or she might suspect an attack by the spirit owner of the waterway. Sometimes a diviner or shaman would confirm such a diagnosis.

This writer recorded an interesting example in Ca˘ Taw¯'s village. A young man fell sick and visited a shaman to seek a diagnosis of his ailment. The shaman told him that he had fallen victim to the water spirit of a particular stream because, as the shaman related, some days earlier he had spotted a snake inside a hole close to the waterway and, impulsively, had filled the opening with pebbles. This action, the shaman declared, had angered the resident water spirit. She advised the young man to propitiate the offended spirit in the customary manner, through the propitiatory ritual known as *law˘ neˇ cai˘ ve*, "compensating (*cai˘ ve*) the water spirit." Because the victim's father-in-law happened to be one of the principal spirit masters (*neˇ te sheh_hpaˇ*) at Ca˘ Taw¯'s village, the recommendation was easily executed. The spirit specialist performed the appropriate ritual (see just below) at the exact spot where his son-in-law had purportedly offended the *i¯ kaˆ law˘ neˇ*.

3.1.2 Streamside Ritual Activity

(a) Propitiating the Water Spirit

At Ca˘ Taw¯'s village, the rite to propitiate the water spirit invariably took place at the exact spot be-

side a stream where it was thought the spirit had been offended. Here the officiating *neˇ te sheh_hpaˇ* would erect a small (about 1.3 metres high), wooden offering post called a *shoˇ loˆ* (etym. obsc.). This post was split at the top and had two small sticks, crossed horizontally, inserted into it to keep the cleft open. The spirit master would then put some beeswax candles and a few grains of raw rice inside a leaf cup, called an *u¯cu_ luˇ* (etym. obsc.), and set it in the cleft atop the offering post. At each end of the two crossed sticks he would hang a chain, fashioned from split bamboo rings of about wristband size. These four chains, each about a forearm's span in length, were known as *na_ g'aw na_ juˬ*, a poetic rendering in couplet form of the everyday word *na_ g'aw,* meaning "earring." Sometimes the offering post received additional decoration in the form of a number of pointed bamboo sticks, about 10 cm long, each with a coloured piece of paper or cloth attached to its blunt end. Known as *caˬ ca¯*, these are a variety of ritual "flag." Finally, the presiding spirit master would hang a length of white cotton thread over one of the cross sticks.

Beeswax candles, rice, and *caˬ ca¯*, are all common offerings that these Lahu make to the spirits in which they believe. Caˬ Taw¯'s folk would say that the candles (which were presented unlit) and the rice (uncooked) were for the spirit "to use" (for light and food), while the decorative flags were for its (or their) pleasure, as also were the bamboo chains that, in the offertory prayer, were called "silver and golden pendants." The length of thread was to catch the patient's soul (*awˬ ha*) – better translated, perhaps, as "spiritual counterpart" – which the spirit was said to have enticed from its victim's body (*awˬ to*), thus causing the sickness. When the officiating spirit master had completed all the necessary preparations, squatting down on his haunches with right hand outstretched towards the offering post, he would chant the propitiatory prayer, in which he asked the spirit to pardon his client's offence and, in return for the release of the captured soul, to accept the offerings prepared for it. Here is a (slightly abbreviated) example, chanted on behalf of a villager who had fallen sick after bathing in a stream near Caˬ Taw¯'s village (for the original Lahu language text, see Walker 1976b: 446 f.).

G'uiˬ yaˇ pa_, male spirit of the upper reaches of the waters, G'uiˬ yaˇ miˇ, female spirit of the lower reaches of the waters, you who sit on the stream, you who sit on the rocks; G'uiˬ yaˇ miˇ, spirit of the lower reaches of the waters, G'uiˬ yaˇ pa_, spirit of the upper reaches of the waters, oh today I offer you these flags made by my own hands; I offer you this beautiful rice and these beautiful beeswax candles, prepared by my own hands.

G'uiˬ yaˇ pa_, spirit of the upper reaches of the waters, G'uiˬ yaˇ miˇ, spirit of the lower reaches of the waters, put [all these offerings] together in your feet, put [all of them] together in your hands, stretch out your feet, stretch out your hands and receive this beautiful rice and these beautiful beeswax candles, prepared by my own hands.

Oh G'uiˬ yaˇ pa_, spirit of the upper reaches of the waters, G'uiˬ yaˇ miˇ, spirit of the lower reaches of the waters, if you have put [this person's soul] into your iron prison, into your copper prison, open up your iron prison, your copper prison; oh, if you have stabbed [this person's soul] with your silver needle, if you have stabbed [it] with your golden needle, take out your golden needle, [take out your silver needle]; do not punish people, for people are unable to know all things, they have no truth; it is you who are all-knowing, who are all-true.

Oh today I have brought for you this beautiful rice and these beautiful beeswax candles prepared by my own hands, so please release this [soul], beneath your feet and beneath your hands, I once more beg your forgiveness, oh G'uiˬ yaˇ pa_, spirit of the upper reaches of the waters, G'uiˬ yaˇ miˇ, spirit of the lower reaches of the waters, so stretch out your feet, stretch out your hands and receive this beautiful rice and these beautiful beeswax candles prepared by my own hands.

This man cannot know everything! He came here today to wash himself in this silver water, this golden water so that he might obtain life [= remain healthy]; if, here at this place, you have put [this man's] soul into your iron prison, into your copper prison, open up your iron prison, your copper prison; if you have bound [this man's soul] with your silver chain, with your golden chain, remove your silver chain, your golden chain, and send back, release his soul.

Receive this beautiful rice and these beautiful beeswax candles prepared by my own hands; this man cannot know all things, so please do not punish him!

When the spirit-master had completed his chant, he removed the length of white cotton thread, which he proceeded to tie around his client's wrist, an action believed both to return the soul to its owner's body and to ensure that it will not escape in the future. The remaining ritual paraphernalia he abandoned at the water's edge.

(b) Exorcizing Spirits of the Bad Dead

A stream close by Caˬ Taw¯'s village was the locus for an exorcistic rite that occurred, minimally, once a year. Although the spirit owner of this stream featured quite prominently in this rite, its principal

Fig. 4: Spirit master seated in forest close to a stream raises a basket with offerings of silver, cloth, etc., to the water spirit in front of an offering post, with leaf cup on top containing beeswax candles and uncooked rice grains.

purpose was not to propitiate the water spirit per se, but rather to make use of its waterway to transport a particularly malevolent category of spirits out of the settlement, away from the Lahu's highland homes, down into the valley where the Tai people live.

An examination of some aspects of this exorcism (limitations of space do not permit a full treatment [see Walker 1976a], nor is this necessary for an article focused on water) certainly adds to our understanding of waterways as the means for transporting spirits, if not humankind; it also presents a more positive image of the water spirit, as a spirit-master's aid, not adversary.

Every year, before they embarked on the dangerous task of felling and burning large trees to create new swiddens, every household in Ca˘ Taw¯'s village sought to rid itself of two categories of malicious spirit, called *jaw* and *meh˘*. The former, so these people believed, were intent on bringing human beings to a bloody, violent end (thereby ensuring that they too join the ranks of the malevolent ones), while the latter, they maintained, were the transformed souls of the victims of such violent and/or bloody ends. Here our concern is only with the *meh˘*, for the *jaw* spirits are provided with land transport (in the form of a replica horse and elephant) not with a river-going craft. It may be noted that a *meh˘ jaw^ ve* (literally "beating the *meh˘* spirits") exorcism was necessary, not simply before felling new swiddens, but whenever somebody met with a "bad death," viz. a bloody and violent end, including death during childbirth.

The exorcism of the *meh˘* spirits took place at a stream that ran not more than a hundred metres from the centre of Ca˘ Taw¯'s village. Here, a roughly constructed stick-and-banana leaf hut, called a *meh˘ yeh˘* (*meh˘* spirit house) had to be built to straddle the stream. As the stream (Fig. 5) passed

Fig. 5: Inside a *meh˘* spirit house set up to straddle a stream flowing nearby the village, replica *padi* mortar in the foreground is gift for the spirits.

right through it, the *meh˘ yeh˘* had neither front nor back walls. Inside there was a (relatively) dry area on either side (the banks of the stream), where the necessary ritual paraphernalia were set up – mostly bamboo and banana-stalk replicas of household and domestic objects: foot-operated rice-husking mortar, winnowing tray, spoons for serving rice, a loom, and numerous spinning wheels.[2] These objects were said to be "useful to the *meh˘*" once they had reached the destination to which the exorcist intended to banish them. Most significantly, a small raft was provided to enable the *meh˘* spirits to float away downstream from the village. (Ca Taw¯'s folk, we should observe, never had occasion to build real rafts for themselves.) The upstream end of the spirit hut, but not the downstream one through which the spirits were supposed to leave, was protected with a spirit guard that had a replica green snake (made

2 Ca˘ Taw¯'s folk no longer used such looms, although they can still be seen in most Lahu villages this writer has visited in China.

from grass) attached to it. This was to foil any attempt by the malevolent spirits to proceed anywhere but downstream and away from the village.

A few metres upstream of the *meh*ˇ spirit house, right at the edge of the stream, the spirit master set up a *shoˇ loˆ* offering post with *u¯ cu_ luˇ* containing grains of rice and beeswax candles (just as described earlier) for the *law*ˇ *neˇ* or stream spirit. Higher up the bank, above the *meh*ˇ *yeh*ˇ, the spirit master put up a second *shoˇ loˆ*, this one for the local hill spirit, supernatural "owner" of the entire area. Finally, the spirit master brought to the streamside a basket containing silver jewellery, cloth, candles, and rice grains – offerings for his various supernatural assistants.

All these preparations accomplished, the household members assembled at the stream and entered the *meh*ˇ spirit house, seating themselves on lengths of wood laid out on either side of the stream running through the hut (Fig. 5). Now the exorcist could begin the rites of the *meh*ˇ *jaw*ˆ *ve* sequence, first setting the basket of offerings in front of the offering post for the spirit owner of the stream (Fig. 4) and begging for its assistance like this:

Oh, master of the upper reaches of the stream, mistress of the lower reaches of the stream, today I shall order these spirits to leave this house; oh help and assist me to order them to leave, help and assist me to be rid of them; master of the upper reaches of the stream, mistress of the lower reaches of the stream, here I shall order these spirits to leave this house; help and assist me to be rid of them.

I order but a single time, you order them ninety-nine times; I bring for you here beeswax candles that I have prepared with my own hands and I reach to your side.

Master of the upper reaches of the stream, mistress of the lower reaches of the stream, oh please carefully help me to command these *meh*ˇ; if I order them [to depart] but a single time, you carefully command them ninety-nine times.

The spirit master's next tasks were to call, in similar fashion, on the hill spirit and upon his special spirit patron. We will not worry here with the details (see Walker 1976a: 409–411; 2003: 265–267), but concentrate on what happened at the *meh*ˇ *yeh*ˇ straddling the stream. Here the spirit master's first task was to expel those of the *meh*ˇ whose names could be recalled by the household members. The exorcist first put some puffed millet and sand into a leaf cup. (Some people at Ca ˇ Taw¯'s village interpreted this action as simultaneously feeding the spirits with the millet and driving them away with the sand; but another, more subtle explanation was that the two substances symbolized the people's wish that the spirits not return "until the puffed millet germinates and the sand rots." In the absence of written dogma, Ca ˇ Taw¯'s folk were free to accept whatever exegesis or exegeses they found most reasonable; for most, *chaw mawˇ aw*ˇ *li,* "the custom of the elders," was quite sufficient.)

Standing in the water on the upstream side of the spirit hut, the specialist addressed the people inside as follows: "*A shu*ˇ *suh maˇ da*ˆ *ve aw*ˇ *vi¯ aw*ˇ *nyi caw*ˇ *leˇ* [Who has relatives who died bad deaths]?" The master or mistress of the house would answer him by giving specific names, according to this formula: "Na K'oˇ *hta*ˆ *ga*ˆ *laˇ*, Ca ˇ Teh ˆ *hta*ˆ *g'a*ˆ *laˇ*, A¯ Teh Ma *hta*ˆ *g'a*ˆ *laˇ* [Drive away Na K'oˇ, drive away Ca ˇ Teh ˆ, drive away A¯ Teh Ma]!" The exorcist then took some of the mixture of puffed millet, and threw it onto the roof of the *meh*ˇ house, as he began his exorcistic chant, extracts of which are as follows (see Walker 1976a: 412–414 for the full Lahu language text).

Oh today, Na K'oˇ, Ca ˇ Teh ˆ and A¯ Teh Ma, you three names, oh today, stand up on your *meh*ˇ feet and go away; today, you *meh*ˇ spirits, take away your *meh*ˇ feet and be gone!

Oh, on this lucky day, we have brought for you a *meh*ˇ house with nine divisions,[3] so today stand up on your *meh*ˇ feet and go away!

Down yonder, at the end of the sky, the place where the moon does not shine, the sun does not shine, there are seven different kinds of food to eat in one day, there is a big market, an eating house and a drinking house, an eating place and a drinking place.[4]

Today, this evening we have brought for you a *meh*ˇ house with nine divisions; today, this evening we have brought for you a *meh*ˇ house with nine rooms.

Today, stand up on your *meh*ˇ feet and go away, today male *meh*ˇ unload your troubles and be gone!

Do not cause the people of this household to spin around, either when they are sleeping or when they are sitting, but today stand up on your *meh*ˇ feet and go away, today male *meh*ˇ spirits, unload your trouble and be gone!

At the conclusion of his chant, the exorcist threw more of the mixture of puffed millet and sand at the roof of the *meh*ˇ spirit house, following which he asked for additional names of the bad dead and, using these, repeated the exorcistic prayer. The spirit master continued thus until his clients were unable to recall any further names. Finally, he recited a chant to expel those *meh*ˇ spirits whose names could no longer be remembered.

3 A house with nine divisions means a "grand house."
4 Empty words "to fool the spirits," my informants declared.

Fig. 6: A woman (bottom left) leaving the *mehˬ* spirit house at the end of the exorcistic rite, as the spirit master prevents malicious spirits from following her back home by holding two-pronged metal fork set into carved wooden handle and with lighted beeswax candle.

All the household members would now leave the *mehˬ yehˬ*, taking care to use the upstream opening rather than the downstream one through which the *mehˬ* spirits were believed to be departing. As the people came out, the exorcist stood at the exit holding a two-pronged metal fork (a forked stick might substitute), with a lighted beeswax candle attached, above the heads of the departing people (Fig. 6). Known as a *mehˬ tawˬ leˆ* (etym. obsc.), this ritual fork was said to prevent the *mehˬ* from following the people back home. Passing the spirit master, the people for whom the exorcism had been performed quickly returned home, taking utmost care not to look back at the *mehˬ yehˬ*, an action that people believed to be as good as inviting the malicious spirits to follow them back into the village.

The rites of the exorcistic ceremony ended with the spirit master bidding each of his supernatural aids: water spirit, hill spirit, and personal spirit aid, to return to its own abode, thereby reestablishing normalcy in place of a supernaturally-charged situation. The entire ritual sequence was now complete; it had taken approximately an hour. The ritual paraphernalia was left at the stream to disintegrate in the course of time.

3.1.3 Water as an Offering to Spirits

At Caˬ Taw¯'s village, if not at all Lahu villages, the most frequent offerings for the spirits are beeswax candles, uncooked and cooked rice grains, tobacco, tea, salt, sand, bits of metal (representing coins), live fowl or cooked chicken parts, and chicken eggs; in many Lahu communities this writer has visited in Yunnan, China, incense sticks are also an essential component of the spirit offerings. Water, at least among Caˬ Taw¯'s folk, did not feature as a particularly important spirit offering. But there were two important exceptions, both involving the propitiation of tutelary spirits. One of these was the guardian spirit of the individual houses and the other, the supernatural protector of the entire village community.

Every household maintained a small offering shelf for the *yehˬ neˇ* or house spirit (Fig. 7). This comprised a small wooden shelf, supported by one or more wooden posts about 1.5 metres high and set against the back wall of the house, above the sleeping place of the household heads (husband and wife). On this shelf were two small porcelain teacups of Chinese design, one holding cooked rice and the other, water. The household head renewed these gifts twice monthly, on the occasions of the new and full moon (ritual occasions, incidentally, of Buddhist derivation).

Just as the homes at Caˬ Taw¯'s village had their own tutelary spirit, so there was a spirit entity called G'uiˬ fu_, who was said to keep watch over the entire village community. The shrine to this guardian spirit[5] was located inside the village temple (see below), but otherwise was identical to the spirit shelves in the individual homes. Here too teacups of cooked rice and water were presented, this time by the head priest, at new- and full-moon time. In addition, on the ground beneath G'uiˬ fu_,'s altar, there was a single-noded bamboo receptacle called *liˇ kawˆ* or "custom cup", which the priest would also replenish with water on these same lunar days.

There was one ritual occasion at Caˬ Taw¯'s village involving the solicitation of a spirit's help, dur-

5 If "spirit" is indeed the right word – for opinion was divided among the community elders: some identifying G'uiˬ fu_ as a *neˇ lon* or "great spirit," others adamant that this was no *neˇ* at all, but rather one who dwelt alongside the High God G'uiˬsha (G'uiˬ fu_ yawˬ G'uiˬsha hpawˇ chehˇ ve), or was "G'uiˬ sha's messenger (G'uiˬ sha *ve tcuh yaˇ*).

Fig. 7: Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) house altar with offerings of cups of rice and (right) water.

ing which water functioned as a symbol of the solicitants' expectations of the spirit, rather than as an offering to it. The rite was called *heh hk'aˇ u¯ mui_ ve*, meaning "cultivating anew the way of the fields" and its purpose was to solicit the assistance of the guardian hill spirit of the area on which they had planted their crops in obtaining bumper yields. The details of the rite need not detain us (see Walker 1979b: 699–703). Suffice it to say that the farmers set up two small altars in his field, side-by-side, between which they half sink into the ground two small bamboo tubes. In one of these they put water; in the other, sand. If this writer's informants provided him with a correct exegesis, the water (as also the sand) was not, on this occasion, a gift for the spirit but rather a symbol of the farmer's wish that the grain from his field be as plentiful as drops of water (and as grains of sand).

3.1.4 Water for Enticing Back a Wandering Soul

Ha Hku ve, the rite for calling back a wandering soul, is a quintessentially animistic ritual activity, premised as it is on the notion that sickness results when a human being's *aw˘ ha*, or spiritual counterpart, has escaped from its material anchor, i.e., the sick person's physical body. At Ca˘ Taw¯'s village, among the offerings that the recall master, the *ha hku sheh_hpaˇ*, prepared so as to entice the soul back to its proper abode was a small bowl of water. This was for the soul to drink; in his chant the recall master included the words, "come back and drink as you have been accustomed to drink."[6] Towards the conclusion of the recall rite, the patient had to drink this bowl of water, "just in case the returned soul had sought refuge in it," Ca˘ Taw¯'s people said.

3.1.5 Water as Symbol of New Beginnings

The ritual use of water figures prominently in Lahu weddings, as well as during the most important of the calendrical rites, namely those that mark the start of the new lunar year. Again, no useful purpose is served in this article by detailing all of the several ritual activities that surround these events. Rather, we shall focus exclusively on those that require the use of water.

(a) Water in Wedding Rites

Among Ca˘ Taw¯'s people, an integral part of the nuptial proceedings involved having the groom and bride symbolize their new life as a married couple by sipping water taken from the same cup and that had been poured from the same bamboo vessel. While drinking, the marital partners were required to take special care not to spill even a single drop of the liquid; it is said that, for each drop of water spilled, a child born to the couple would die.

James Telford, an American Baptist missionary among the Lahu in the former Shan state of Kengtung in Burma during the 1920s and 1930s (cf. Walker 2003 and follow index entries under "Telford, James Haxton"), describes this ritual drinking in almost identical fashion (although he reports a

6 The full Lahu-language text is recorded in Walker (1972: 21 f.).

slightly different consequence of spilling water from the one that Ca˘ Taw¯'s people mentioned). Telford (1937: 121) writes:

> The priest fills a cup full to the brim of cold water and gives it to the groom to drink and when he has drunk all of it, the same cup is again filled to the brim with water from the same jug and this second cup is given to the bride to drink. Extreme care must be taken by both of them not to spill a drop of the water; for if on this occasion water is spilled, no children will be born to the young couple.

Xu Yong-an 徐永安 et al. (1990: 340) report similarly for Lahu in Simao Prefecture, Yunnan Province, writing that "the groom and the bride are offered a bowl of clear water to drink. They must not spill any of this water, for otherwise it is believed their future children will die accidentally."

The ritual drinking of water during the nuptial ceremony – but without mention of the tabu on spilling the liquid – is reported for Yunnan's Lahu by Guo Jiaji 郭家骥, who writes (1991: 80 f.) of the rites taking place, first in the bride's home and, subsequently, in that of the groom. In both locations a bamboo table has been set up in front of the household altar, on which are set a bowl of rice liquor and a bowl of water. A length of red cotton thread is put into the bowl containing water. The village headman, Guo writes, acts as master of ceremonies and, at the conclusion of the ceremony, offers the liquor and water bowls to the groom and the bride. "For the first round, the groom drinks the liquor and the bride the water; for the second, the bride drinks the liquor and the groom, the water." This drinking together, Guo says, symbolizes the unity of the couple. Finally, the headman and elders bind the wrists of the couple, symbolizing the transfer to them of their wishes for marital happiness and good fortune. Zhang Xiaosong 张晓松 and Li Gen 李根, present (1997: 163) a Chinese translation of a Lahu marriage chant among Lancang Lahu that goes: "The bowl of water that you drink is auspicious and sweet spring water. It is as enduring as the river waters."

From other ethnographic records on Lahu in Yunnan (in English as well as in Chinese), we learn of additional water-focused marriage rites, notably the requirement that the bride and groom "come before the parents … [to wash] the old folks' hands and feet as a sign of submission and reverence" (Young n. d.: 123). As a demonstration of the newly-married couple's submission to parental authority, as part of the marriage rituals groom and bride are also often required to fetch water (and to mill rice) for the elders. Thus Li Fa Ming 李发明 writes (1991: 67) of the Nanmei Lahu of Lincang County (Lincang Prefecture, Yunnan Province) that "the groom and the bride must first go to the water source to fetch water [for the elders]," while Zhang and Li (1997: 164), reporting on Lahu in the Gengma and Lancang areas, say that "following the wedding ceremony, both groom and bride carry a bamboo tube and go to fetch water at the mountain spring … The newly-collected water … is used to make offerings to the ancestors and the elders." In Bakanan (a Lahu Shi community in Menghai County, Xixhuangbanna Prefecture), according to the same authorities, "following the wedding, the newly-weds go together to fetch fresh water," first for the bride's parents and then for the groom's. Liang Keshang 梁克生 et al., in their draft "A History of the Lahu Nationality" (1992: ch. 8, p. 44)[7] report that "on the afternoon of the wedding day … groom … and bride, [the latter] holding a bamboo tube of hot water, … go to the elders' houses, where they wash the elders' feet … After the elders have had their feet washed, they say 'May husband and wife be happy for ever!'" The same authorities (Ch. 8, p. 45) report that "following the wedding, groom and bride must take bamboo tubes and collect water for the go-betweens, for their [respective] parents and the guests, all of whom bless them as they drink the water."

(b) Water during the New Year Festivities

The ritual activities that surround the ushering in of a new lunar year represent the most complex of all traditional Lahu ritual sequences (cf. Walker 1970a; 2003: 415–438). Again, it is not appropriate that the present article stray beyond reportage of the significance of water in these rites.

At Ca˘ Taw¯'s village, as I think is the case in all Lahu communities everywhere, an essential preparation for the up-coming New Year celebrations is for every household to make glutinous rice cakes. As for Ca˘ Taw¯'s people, early in the morning of the first day of the New Year, they would offer cakes to three spirit entities: the house spirit/s, the village guardian spirit/s and, most importantly for the purposes of this paper, the water spirit/s.[8] The offerings for the water spirit/s they would set on the aqueduct that brought water into the village (Fig. 9). A little later on that same morning, a female member of every household that made up Ca˘ Taw¯'s community would carry water to every other household with

7 Each chapter of this work is separately paginated.

8 Whether such spirits are conceived as composite single entities or pluralities seems to vary from one ritual situation to another and, anyway, does not appear to be a matter that exercises the minds of the Lahu themselves.

Fig. 8: Elder having hands washed at New Year time by a younger relative; in return, the elder blesses the younger person.

which to wash the hands of the master and mistress of the house who, in return, would offer their blessings for a healthy and prosperous New Year (Fig. 8). This ritual act was said to symbolize younger people's respect for their elders and the elders' concern for the youngsters, while simultaneously demonstrating the solidarity of the village community. Later in the day, adult children would come to pour water all over their parents' bodies, while some of the more respected villagers might also receive such a ritual bath from people who were not their immediate kinsmen. Again, those who were bathed had to bless those who had washed them.

The interhousehold hand washing ritual was repeated on the second day of the New Year (these two days being termed the "Female [New] Year"; a "Male [New] Year" would follow a few days later; see Walker 2003: 15 f. for further details and explanation). On the single "Male New Year Day," the hand- and body-washing rites were repeated.

From what I was able to gather from my (repeated) observations among Ca˘ Taw¯'s people, water

Fig. 9: Glutinous rice cakes offered to water spirit(s) at New Year time by setting them on the bamboo aqueduct bringing water into the village.

figured in the rituals of the New Year in two principal forms: first, gifts of glutinous rice cakes were presented to the *i¯ ka^ law˘ ne˘*, as spirit owner of the water channeled into the village; second, the water used for ritually-required hand washing and bathing symbolized respect for elders and elicited, in return, blessings for the young. It also symbolized the social solidarity of the otherwise rather autonomous households that lived together as a single village community.

The comparative ethnography in Chinese for Lahu in Yunnan goes further than this in that almost all writers report one of the highlights of the event as being a race by youngsters to be the first to fetch "new water" at the break of dawn on the first day of the new lunar year. Thus Guo Jiaji 郭家骥 (1991: 86 f.) writes in his book "Yonggan de Lie Hu Minzu 勇敢的猎虎民族" (The Brave Tiger-Hunting Nationality):

> In the early morning of the first day of the year, following the first cock crow, the young men and women – who are already up and about – taking up bamboo tubes and gourd containers, rush out of their houses and dash through the still-misty groves in order to grab new water. Whosoever is the first to obtain the clear mountain spring water on this first day of the new year is believed to bring back good fortune.
>
> First, the new water must be offered to the ancestors at the household altar and next to the family elders for them to wash their faces, following which the elders chant blessing and tie [cotton] threads around [the wrists] of their children and grandchildren. In some places this custom of thread tying is extended to include the pigs, dogs, and oxen as well.

Zhang and Li (1997: 123) in their book "Lahu Wenhua Lun 拉祜文化论" (A Discussion on Lahu Culture), offer a similar account, but with a couple of additional observations. They say:

> In the minds of the Lahu, "new water" is the symbol of purity and happiness. Whosoever is the first to obtain the new water is able to obtain happiness and eliminate misfortune. It is also said that the first to fetch new water will be the first to have his rice crop ripen. On the morning of the first day of the Big Year [= Female New Year], people carry gourds and bamboo tubes and compete with one another to fetch new water. They offer this water to the ancestors and to the [living] elders so as to obtain their protection [and blessings for] a good harvest.

The number of Chinese-language references could be multiplied many times, but these will suffice for our purposes. From them it is clear enough these Yunnan Lahu regard water both as a potent purificatory agent (as did Ca˘ Taw¯'s people in North Thailand) and, at New Year time, as a harbinger of good fortune.

3.1.6 Water as an Agent of Purification

As we shall see, water as an agent of purification appears more frequently in what I have designated as the "Buddhist," rather than in what I term the "animist" domain (although, as noted earlier, these two domains merge, imperceptibly, one into the other). Clearly within the animistic domain, nonetheless, were the rites that Ca˘ Taw¯'s people held to exorcise death-dealing *jaw* spirits prior to their felling and firing the new swiddens. Again, the many details of the rite cannot be given here (for them, see Walker 1976a; 2003: 249–269). Suffice it to say that, towards the end of the exorcism, which took place on a house-by-house basis and during which the household members were required to vacate their residence, the officiating spirit master prepared purificatory water with which the household members washed their hands and feet before reentering their home. After he had poured water into the large pan (or wok), which the family members had left on their veranda for this purpose, the spirit master prayed to his spirit patron, uttering (inter alia) these words: "Open and bestow the boon of pure water [so that], whosoever washes here today may henceforth suffer no sickness" (the Lahu-language text is in Walker 1976a: 405).

3.2 Water in the Buddhist Domain

At the outset, let me clarify that the ritual practices of Ca˘ Taw¯'s people were not overtly Buddhist, either in the reckoning of their lowland neighbours, the Theravāda Buddhist Northern Tai people, or, for that matter, in the minds of these Lahu Nyi themselves. And yet, a careful examination of the artefacts, personnel and liturgical practices associated with the *haw¯ yeh˘* (literally "palace house") or village temple clearly points to Buddhist prototypes, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna. The record of Lahu in Yunnan confirms this.

I have written elsewhere, and at length, about this Lahu Buddhist heritage (cf. Walker 1986; 2003: 310–361; 2006), so here I shall proceed directly to the role water plays – in rite and symbol – within this, largely unrecognized, Buddhist heritage.

3.2.1 The Use of Water in Lahu Village Temples

In Ca˘ Taw¯'s village, the temple did not immediately flout its Buddhist origins; and yet a study of such buildings among Lahu communities throughout the Yunnan-northern Southeast Asia borderlands makes it difficult not to acknowledge that this humble *haw¯ yeh˘* – devoid though it was of Buddhist iconography – was indeed the lineal successor of the Lahu's Mahāyānist *fofang* 佛房 or Buddha houses that existed in the past (cf. Walker 2006).

(a) Although there are no surviving supravillage *fofang* in the Lahu settlement areas of modern-day Yunnan, those that this writer has seen that are still maintained in village communities are notable, inter alia, for their large, fish-shaped receptacles containing water that is believed to have the ability to heal the sick, or else to cause truthless people to suffer, or even to die. As Chinese ethnographer Xu Yong-an 徐永安 explains (1993: 4) in his article "Lancang Xian Nanduan Cun Longzhupeng Zhai Lahu Zu Chuantong Wenhua Diaocha 澜沧县南段村龙竹棚寨拉怙族传统文化调查" (An Investigative Report on the Traditional Culture of the Lahu Nationality at Longzhupeng Village, Nanduan Administrative Village, Lancang County):

> If anybody should fall sick … that person should go to the *fotang* 佛堂, ("Buddha hall") to light candles and burn incense sticks and request the *foxiepa* 佛协帕 (from Lahu *fu_ sheh_ hpa˘*, "master of the *fo* or Buddha temple"), or "Master of the *fo*", who is the manager of the temple, to chant prayers and to fetch a bowl of water from the fish water container for the sick person to drink. It is believed that drinking this water restores a person's health. But if the one who is sick wishes the *foxiepa* to chant prayers, he must first swear before the *fo* that he will tell the truth. Then he must repent of all wrongdoing … According to tradition, should anybody lie and then drink the water from this fish container, not only will he fail to recover, but his sufferings will increase and, perhaps, he will die.

There was no such elaborate ritual water container inside the temple at Ca˘ Taw¯'s village.[9] On the other hand, to the left of the main altar (as one faced it) there was a single-noded bamboo vessel known as a *li˘ kaw^* or "custom cup," containing water, which was set on a small wooden bench called *keh˘ teh*, or "purification bench." The senior temple priest would

Fig. 10: The *la shaw_ ma* (a grade of priestess associated with a Lahu Nyi [Red Lahu] temple) leading the ritual exchange of purificatory waters on the eve of a lunar "merit day."

replenish this custom cup on the days of the new and full moon. I never witnessed this water being drunk or otherwise used for purificatory purposes, but the name of the wooden stand on which it rested is certainly suggestive of the latter.

(b) At Ca˘ Taw¯'s village, by far the most conspicuous temple-related use of water was the ritual sequence known as *i¯ ka^ li˘ yu˘ da^ ve* or "water custom exchange." This was led by a "mistress of ceremonies," who was herself a priestess with the title of *la shaw_ ma,* the wife of the *la shaw_ pa_*. (The principal ritual functions of this pair seem to have been as exorcisers of malevolent forces from the village community.)[10] Around dusk, a female representative from every household in the village would collect fresh water in a bamboo tube or aluminium kettle from the village water source and subsequently congregate outside of the village headman's house. Here the *la shaw_ ma* would have set out about half a dozen (a precise number was not mandated) empty bamboo tubes on the headman's veranda, subsequently pouring a little water that she had obtained from the village source, into each of these tubes. Next all the women (and girls) participating in the ritual sequence would do likewise, so that each bamboo tube now contained water donated by every household in the village. The *la shaw_ ma* then took one of these bamboo tubes of "mixed waters" inside the headman's house and poured some of the liquid into the headman's personal "custom cup" (*li˘ kaw^*) and over the small wooden bench on which it stood, as well as on a number of ritual offerings that, like cup and bench, mirrored those to be found in the village temple. (Apart from his secular

9 I have published the details of this temple in many different places, notable in Walker (2003: 363–372; 2006: 116–120); that description need not be repeated in this article.

10 For details of this conjugal office, see Walker (2003: 391 f.); also Walker (1982: 119 f.).

functions, it may be noted, the village headman had certain priest-like characteristics.)[11] Finally, the *la shaw¯ ma* poured a little water over the headman's hands. These actions were said to symbolize the entire village community cleansing both the ritual artefacts and the headman himself.

Exiting the headman's house, the *la shaw_ ma* immediately refilled her container from one of those with "mixed waters." She was now ready for the next stage of the water-exchange rite: reciprocal hand washing by the female representatives from each house. For this the *la shaw_ ma*, as leader, used water mixed from all the households, while the other women (or girls) poured water from their own containers. First, the youngest girl or woman participant poured her water over the *la shaw_ ma*'s hands, with the latter reciprocating with the "mixed waters." This ritual action was now repeated between the *la shaw_ ma* and all the other women, in roughly ascending order of age, culminating in reciprocal hand washing by the *la shaw_ ma* and the *hk'aˆ sheh_ ma*, "mistress of the village," the headman's wife. This exchange completed, the women and girls – without further ritual action – refilled their respective containers at the village water source, after which they proceeded to the temple. Here every participant poured a little water at the base of each of the flag poles that surrounded the temple, at the foot of the sacred poles in front of the temple and, finally, inside the temple, on all the ritual artefacts at either side of the main altar.[12] This done, the participants reassembled outside the temple door, where the *la shaw_ ma* had set out a row of tubes just as she had previously done on the headman's veranda. Their followed an identical rite of reciprocal hand washing, except that, this time, it culminated in an exchange of water between the *la shaw_ ma* and the chief priestess or *to bo ma* (wife of the *to bo pa_* or senior priest).

The basic symbolism of this water-exchange rite was well understood by Ca˘ Taw¯'s folk. Water is a potent cleansing agent; pouring it onto ritual artefacts was said to make them acceptable to their divine recipients, and washing hands with it purified the womenfolk of their accumulated demerit. The mixing of water brought by a representative of every household symbolized the unity of the village community and the pouring of this special water by the *la shaw_ ma* indicated that her participation represented the whole community, not simply her own household. The youngest female participant was the first to wash the *la shaw_ ma*'s hands, because her age assured her of the least accumulation of demerit; but this pure-impure symbolism changed during the course of the rite to a junior-senior continuum, first in terms of age, then status. Thus, the reciprocal hand washing at the headman's house culminated in an exchange of water between the *la shaw_ ma* and the village headman's wife, as "mistress of the village", and at the temple between the *la shaw_ ma* and the *to bo ma*, the latter as "mistress of the temple."

(c) Another set of ritual uses for water, differing from the previous two examples, is to be seen in Lahu villages in the Bulang Mountains 布朗山 of Menghai County 勐海县. These are Lahu people who claim that they "closely follow the customs of their Buddhist Dai (Tai) neigbours" in the plains. As at Ca˘ Taw¯'s village, their temples were not overtly Buddhist establishments, although one modern Chinese ethnographer certainly identifies the man in charge of the rituals in the village temple as "the Buddhist head of the Lahu of Menghai" (Wang 1981: 462).

Again, I shall not describe all the architectural details.[13] Suffice it to report here that, on a low shelf immediately in front of the main altar, are set black earthen pots (of Dai [Tai] provenance) for holding water, together with several Lahu-carved wooden bowls containing rice. There are also six smaller offering shelves at the foot of the building's two central and four corner pillars. Chinese ethnographers Gong Pei Hua 龚佩华 and Wang Shuwu 王树五 report (1981: 62) that the water (and rice) set on these offering shelves are for the community's ancestral spirits rather than for the *fo* (Buddha) or for G'ui˘ sha. They write (1981: 62): "the water is for the dead to wash their feet." But this probably represents a Lahu reinterpretation of a borrowed Buddhist custom.

Beneath and in front of each offering bench there is a small pit, some 25 cm deep and 25–30 cm in diameter, dug into the temple's packed-earth floor. These pits are for a water-pouring rite and, rather obviously, parallel the sunken holes in the floor of neighbouring Dai Buddhist temples, where, as Qiu Xuanchong 邱宣充 (1979: 75) describes, "in front of each pillar in the hall is a small hole in the ground. People salute with their left hand, while pouring water [into the hole] with their right, murmuring their wishes, while a monk stands by chanting scriptures."

11 For a discussion of these, see Walker (1978; 1979a/b; 1982: 111–113).

12 For details of all these artefacts, outside and inside the temple, again cf. Walker (2003: 363–372; 2006: 116–120).

13 These may be found in Walker (2003: 382–385).

In these Menghai Lahu temples, offerings of water (along with rice) are made on a daily basis, not simply during the new- and full-moon observances, as at Caˬ Taw¯'s village. Each household, in turn, takes responsibility for presenting the appropriate offerings (Wang 1981: 121).

(d) In summarizing what we have learned about the ritual and symbolic use of water in three different Lahu temple situations, there appear to be at least four principal ideas involved: (1) the notion that temple water has healing properties, as is evident from the Longzhupeng data; (2) the idea that water (along with other materials, among which rice is especially significant) is an appropriate offering for whatever supernatural entities are honoured in the temple; (3) the notion of water as a powerful purificatory agent, compellingly articulated in the water-exchange rituals at Caˬ Taw¯'s village; (4) the idea that the act of pouring water is significant in itself, a discussion of which appears in Section 3.2.3 below.

The concepts of water as an appropriate offering to spirit entities and as a potent purificatory agent appear, as we have already seen, to fall squarely in the Lahu's pre-Buddhist animistic domain; but now we have seen them also in the Buddhist domain. Notions of "charmed water" having the potential to heal sickness, and of water-pouring as a means for transferring merit to the dead, appear in other contexts of Lahu religious life, which we need now to explore.

3.2.2 Charmed Water and Lahu Holy Men

The Lahu people have a long history of following "holy men," some of them undoubtedly Mahāyāna Buddhist monks, who have claimed to participate in the divinity of G'uiˬ sha and, ipso facto, to have possessed powers unavailable to ordinary folk. The ability to heal sickness in superordinary ways, especially through the use of charmed water, is one of the principal characteristics of such Lahu holy men, who combine in themselves the characteristics of prophet, messiah, healer, and political revolutionary. This is not the occasion on which to discuss Lahu messianism, even in adumbrated form;[14] it is, however, entirely appropriate to examine these messiahs' use of charmed water.

A Baptist Karen Missionary (and former layer) Rev. Ba Te (see Walker 2003: 651, n. 76, and the literature cited there) reported to his mission director, William Young (1861–1936), on one such Lahu holy man, whom he met to the north of Kengtung during the first decade of the 20th century. This man, according to Ba Te, "took some water and washed his hands and feet in it and sprinkled it over the people, then they washed their hands and feet in the water that was left, to drive out the evil spirits and they also drank some of the water" (Young 1905).

In the 1940s, according to Chinese ethnographer Yang Yuxiang 扬毓骧, a young Lahu messiah in Lancang established a cult in which, inter alia, "whenever a believer fell sick, he would go to the *fotang* and request 'fairy water' [charmed/magic water] in order to cure the sickness."

In the 1980s, a Lahu prophet emerged among Lahu Nyi in North Thailand; part of his fame rested on his reputation for curing opium addiction. Thai social scientist Sorot Sirisai (1989: 91 f.) records a healing session as follows:

> The treatment procedure involved first the patient pouring water over Caˬ Nuˇ's hands, apparently as if to show respect to God. Next, the patient would turn to face the door, it being the belief that the malicious spirit(s) would depart from the patient in that direction. Then Caˬ Nuˇ would light a candle and attach it to a prong of what was said to be "God's weapon" and then he would pray for about fifteen minutes in order to drive away the spirit(s). Following this he would ask the patient to drink charmed water [Thai, *nammon*], and with this the ritual was complete. The patient had then to carry a bowl of charmed water back to the *haw¯ yehˬ* and there await the result. The most common symptoms during this [waiting] period were, during the first day, bloody diarrhoea and intense muscular pain. Caˬ Nuˇ never left his patients, but massaged them and offered them constant psychological support. … After three days, those patients who were no longer suffering from many side effects [withdrawal symptoms] continued to drink charmed water and rested.

3.2.3 Pouring Water to Transfer Merit: From Brahmanical Rite to Lahu Custom (via Buddhism)

Given the marked similarity, and more-or-less identical positioning of the sunken holes into which water is poured in the Bulang Shan Lahu temples and those, used for the same purpose, in neighbouring Theravāda Buddhist Dai temples, we are surely on sound ground in postulating a Theravāda Buddhist, rather than indigenous animist origin for the Lahu practice. Following the same line of argument, when a spirit master at Caˬ Taw¯'s village pours wa-

14 See Walker (2003: 505–547) for a relatively succinct introduction.

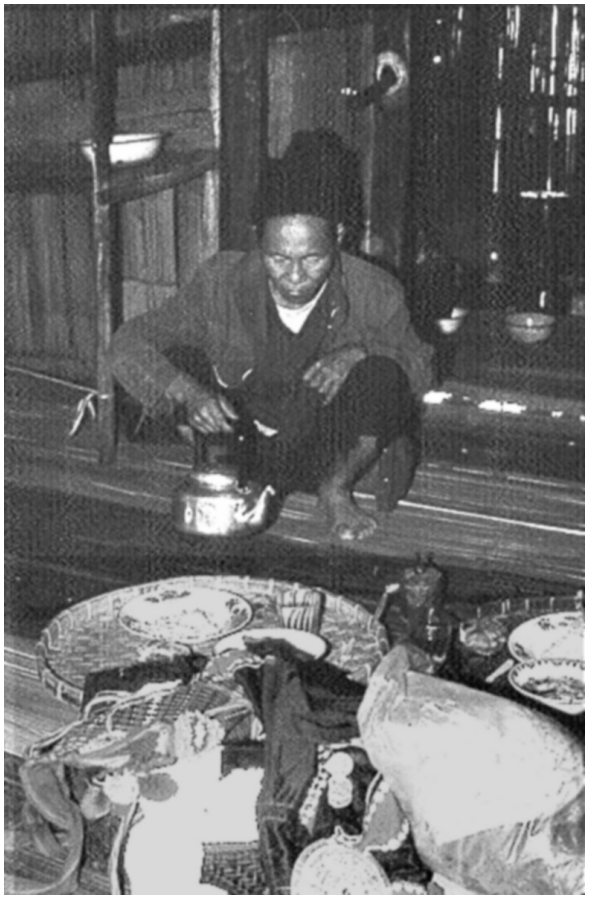


Fig. 11: Village elder pouring water from kettle onto the bamboo slats of a Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) house, as he offers clothing and ornaments to the household's ancestral spirits.

ter from a bamboo container (or aluminium kettle) onto the ground, as he presents food offerings to his clients' ancestral spirits, rather than accepting the contemporary Lahu interpretation at Ca˘ Taw¯'s village in terms of "washing the spirits' hands before they eat," it seems altogether more reasonable to suspect a borrowing from Tai ritual practice. Among these Theravāda Buddhist lowlanders, pouring water onto the ground (*jatnam* in Kam Müang, the language of the Yuan or Northern Thai people) – following brahmanical ritual precedent – is the means by which the living may transfer merit to the dead (cf. Rajadhon 1961: 79, 90).

3.3 Water in the Christian Domain

As I noted in my introduction, I shall quickly skip over the topic of water in Lahu Christian (perhaps by now a third of the entire ethnic group) rites and symbols. This is because the principal purpose of my article is to demonstrate how indigenous animistic and – through Buddhism – Indic beliefs and liturgical practices have meshed with one another. I cannot resist mentioning, however, the huge significance that the Christian rite of baptism has had for Christian Lahu, probably since the time that their forefathers learned that it was only by participation in it that they could become members of this new religious tradition.

4 Concluding Remarks

This article, as noted above, began as a paper for a conference on "Waters in South and Southeast Asia: Interaction of Culture and Religion."[15] It is doubtful indeed whether I would have written it without that original stimulus. But it has proven to be a rewarding topic on which to write, because it has given me another opportunity to highlight a number of themes that have been central to my writings on the Lahu peoples over the past forty years. One of them concerns the manner in which these highland peoples of the Yunnan-Indo-China borderlands have integrated indigenous and extraneous metaphysical ideas and ritual practices into a single, coherent worldview and liturgical system. Another concern is the centuries-old links that upland-dwelling minority peoples, like the Lahu, have maintained with their politically dominant lowland neighbours, representatives of the great civilizations of this region. Finally, writing this article has allowed me, as one who has lived, studied, and researched in India over many years, to touch on a favourite topic: the great depths to which the heritage of "Mother India" has sunk into the fabric of Southeast Asian cultural traditions – including even those, like Lahu mountain peoples, seldom recognized as being among the "Indianized" peoples of this region.

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15 The Third International Conference of the South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Culture and Religion was held in Denpasar, Bali, in June 2009. The topic was dictated by that year's conference theme "Waters in South and Southeast Asia: Interaction of Culture and Religion." The author gratefully acknowledges the stimulus provided by the conference organizers' choice of this theme and Universiti Brunei Darussalam for sponsoring his attendance at the meetings.

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