



From Spirits of the Wilderness to Lords of the Place and Guardians of the Village and Farmlands

Mountains and Their Spirits in Traditional Lahu Cosmography, Belief, and Ritual Practice*

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Abstract. – Quintessentially, a mountain-dwelling folk with an all-pervading sense of animism, spirit-inhabited natural phenomena, not surprisingly Lahu accord special importance to the spirits of the mountains and dales, where they live and farm. This may be untamed “wilderness”; alternatively, it may be the location of Lahu villages and farming lands. In either situation, Lahu regard the spirits believed to own these mountains as powerful supernatural entities. In the first situation, they are essentially undifferentiated “spirits of the wild,” fearsome powers to be treated with respect and circumspection. In the second, after appropriate demonstration of reverence through ritual propitiation, they may be persuaded to become the specific guardian spirits, the “lords of the place” of the Lahu’s settlements and swiddens. [*Thailand, Lahu, indigenous religion, cosmography, ritual*]

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1 Introduction

The Tibeto-Burman speaking Lahu peoples¹ are quintessentially a mountain folk, for whom, as they tell it, mountains have been an integral part of their

cosmography since the act of creation itself. As the Lahu’s great epic myth of creation *Mvuh² Hpa₁ Mi₁ Hpa₂*² (Creating the Heavens, Creating the Earth) (Walker, ed. 1995) goes:

When the sky and the earth were created,
G’ui₁ sha [the creator-divinity] had two assistants.
The male was named Ca₁ Law³ [Mr. Dragon, because he
was born on “dragon day”].

The female was named Na Law⁴ [Ms. Dragon].

G’ui₁ sha commanded Ca₁ Law⁵ to create the sky,
G’ui₁ sha commanded Na Law⁶ to create the earth.
Ca₁ Law⁷ was very playful; after waking up, he begun to
drink tea.

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1 For a brief ethnographic summary of the Lahu people, see “Section 1” of my previous *Anthropos* article (Walker 2011) “Water in Lahu Ritual and Symbolism” (106.2011: 359–361).

2 Lahu is a monosyllabic tonal language with seven “pitch contours” (tones) that are indicated, following each syllable, in the orthography for Lahu used in this paper, as follows: mid-level tone, unmarked; high-rising tone, superscript straight line (ca^ˀ); high-falling tone, superscript hacek (ca^{ˀˀ}); low-falling tone, subscript hacek (ca_ˀ); very-low tone, subscript straight line (ca_{ˀˀ}); high checked tone, superscript circumflex (ca^ˆ); low checked tone, subscript circumflex (ca_ˆ). For further details, see Walker 2003: xxviii–xxxi.



Fig. 1: The author's principal study village and place of residence during fieldwork among Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) in North Thailand during 1966–1970; the environment is typically mountainous and the elevation of the settlement 1,200 m above sea level and 900 m above the Phrao Valley, occupied by Northern Thai (Khon Müang) irrigated rice farmers; the Lahu's own rice swiddens show up as light patches on the slopes beyond the village.

Na Law[~] was very diligent; she worked all day and all night.

The sky was created,
the earth was created.

Comparing the sky and the earth,
the sky was a little small,
the earth was rather big.
Sky and earth would not fit together.
The sky would have to be expanded,
the earth would have to be contracted.

When the sky was expanded,
it became like a big curved frying pan.
When the earth was contracted,
it acquired some wrinkles.
The surface that stood up became the mountain ridges,
the surface that sank down became the riverbeds.

The coupling of mountains and rivers (in the last quoted stanza above as “mountain ridges” and “river beds”) is a ubiquitous characteristic of Lahu prayer, wherein we find constant repetition of the couplets *hk'aw ne[~] law[~] ne[~]*, “spirits of the mountains and the waterways” and *hh'aw ya[~] law[~] ya[~]*, “peoples of the mountains and the dales” (through which the waterways flow).

2 The Worldview of the Lahu Peoples

The Lahu peoples' traditional worldview is one that embraces both animism and theism; it is also one in which the mundane and the extramundane are

merged into a seamless whole, such that any attempt to identify a category “religion” as distinct from “nonreligion,” or to distinguish “religious life” from “secular life” is fraught with difficulty.

For Lahu traditionalists, to know, for example, how to use a gun, how to propitiate the spirit keeper of the game animals, how to track a barking deer and, if necessary, how to have the soul of one's gun recalled to its proper place within the weapon, are all integral and inseparable parts of the ordinary (i.e., “natural”) hunting experience – just as seeking the permission of the spirit owner of the land to fell a new swidden and propitiating malicious spirits before beginning the most dangerous tasks of felling trees and firing the debris, along with the regular work of planting seeds and tending, guarding, harvesting, and storing crops, are all integral and inseparable aspects of the normal farming enterprise. For a Lahu to think otherwise is to have been acculturated – in part at least – into an alien worldview, be it the Christianity of the men from the West, or the scientific atheism of the Chinese Communist Party ideologues.

It is extremely difficult, moreover, to find any word in the Lahu language that may confidently be glossed as “religion.” For his “Lahu–English Dictionary,” missionary-scholar Paul Lewis (1986: 483) chooses the terms “*hpa_~ sha_~*,” “*bon li[~]*” (along with the associated couplet “*bon li[~] shi[~] li[~]*”), and “*o[~] k[~] o[~] pui ve[~]*.” But the Shan-derived term *hpa_~ sha_~* (ultimately from Sanskrit *bhasa*, “language”) refers to “teachings” rather than to religion per se, while for

Lahu traditionalists (Christians may have been instructed otherwise) *bon li* and the couplet “*bon li shi li*” mean “meritorious customs.” *Bon* is from *aw bon* and comes from Tai *bun*, “merit”; *shi* is from *aw shi* and is derived from Tai *sin*, “precepts” or “morality.” These terms, in their turn, come – through Theravāda Buddhism – from Pali, *punna* (Sanskrit, *punya*) and Pali/Sanskrit, *sila*; the syllable *li* is from *aw li*, “customs” and is probably derived from Chinese *li*, “custom, etiquette.” As for “*o-k’o-pui ve*,” it means, “to bow the head,” not an entirely satisfactory gloss for “religion.”

For Lahu traditionalists the notion of *bon li shi li*, as the words suggest, is intimately bound up with the acquisition of “merit” or “blessings,” terms which, among Lahu it seems to me, are more readily interchangeable than some scholars (cf. Lehman 1996) would allow. *Aw bon* may be derived from a variety of different sources and through the performance of several different ritual practices – from the offering of formal worship to the creator-divinity G’ui sha (see section 2.2) in a temple (among some Lahu communities only), to presenting the village blacksmith with rice cakes at New Year’s time, slaughtering a pig so one’s fellow villagers may savour meat without monetary charge, to building a hut along a path for weary travellers. In each case, the underlying idea is that the recipient of favours has the ability to invest the donor with the means of acquiring fortune and evading misfortune. Moreover, the more obviously fortunate (wise, important, rich, healthy, etc.) the recipient of one’s favours, the greater the potency of the blessings he or she is thought to be capable of bestowing. *Bon li shi li* is not, however, an expression that traditionalists use in connection with their myriad beliefs and ritual practices associated with spirits and souls, all of which must, at least in any useful anthropological sense of the word, also be embraced by the term “religion.”

2.1 Lahu Animism

Lahu traditionalists maintain that all phenomena in the world (or, minimally, all significant phenomena) that human beings experience through their senses comprise two, mostly conjoined parts: material form and nonmaterial “spiritual” essence, to which may or may not be attributed a special name and singular attributes. This, of course, is prototypical animism (not “primitive” religion, but a particular worldview, no less valid, I would argue, than one that posits the existence of an intervening deity, capable of manipulating natural events to human advantage or disadvantage). Following from this an-

imistic perception, human beings possess both a material body (*aw to*) and a spiritual essence (*aw ha*). The two are intimately related to one another, such that any attack on, or displacement of the *aw ha* causes the *aw to* to sicken. The human *aw ha* – the nonphysical image or counterpart of the physical body – is conceived at once as a unitary “spiritual essence” and as a multiplicity of “souls”.

Just as *aw ha* is the word for “soul” or “spiritual essence,” so the generic term for a “spirit” is *ne*. Lahu do not confuse the two, either in language or, I think, in thought. The two concepts, nonetheless, are clearly related, as evidenced by the notion of a human *aw ha* becoming a malicious *ne* when a person dies a “bad death” (one in which life ends violently, often with bloodshed; the concept includes also the death of a woman during childbirth). A *ne* is either a free spirit, unbounded by matter, or else it is the owner-guardian of a significant material object: mountain, stream, rock, tree, etc.

To deal with spirits, to recall the wandering souls of the sick, and, occasionally, to deliver supernatural retribution to an enemy, a Lahu community may usually count on the services of one or more *maw pa*. These people are almost always men, and they function as diviners, shamans, soul-recallers, spirit masters, herbalists and, perhaps, also as sorcerers. Whether or not a *maw pa* utilizes shamanistic techniques, or depends solely on the power of incantation and ritual offerings, among his most important rôles is that of *ne te sheh hpa*, “master of spirits” or, better, “master of the affairs of spirits.” His principal ritual activities are soul-recall, spirit propitiation, and spirit exorcism.

2.2 Lahu Theism

Accounts of Lahu metaphysics often begin with their theistic rather than their animist dimension. There is good reason for this. A great many Lahu do seem to place greater emphasis on “divinity” – particularly “high divinity” – than is the norm among neighboring peoples belonging to different ethnolinguistic affiliations. It is not that theistic beliefs are absent among other peoples. As a matter of fact, the concept of a god creator is a characteristic feature of indigenous belief systems throughout the Southeast Asian world, both mainland and archipelago. On the other hand, this creator god is usually considered a remote figure, entirely unconcerned with human kind – its creation. For their part, humans see no useful purpose in worshipping or propitiating a creator divinity that, unlike the spirits, has no impact upon their lives.

The Lahu perception is often – but not among all Lahu – very different. G'ui_u sha³ is the principal object of the people's worship and a name frequently on their lips. Temples often are set up in their villages, in which this High God receives regular worship, led by a hierarchy of part-time ritual practitioners, or priests, who are quite distinct from the spirit specialists already mentioned.

This ideological and ritual predominance of G'ui_u sha in the lives of many Lahu communities (including the one in North Thailand that was the object of my long-term field research) is a relatively recent phenomenon and I have argued elsewhere (Walker 2003: 507–514; 2014), that it may be traced to a powerful Mahāyāna Buddhist movement that swept through the Lahu Mountains of southwestern Yunnan in the late 1700s. This movement was able to conflate traditional Lahu notions of G'ui_u sha, the remote god creator, with Mahāyāna notions of transcendental Buddhahood and thus to provide a great many Lahu with a powerful sense of imminent divinity, a notion very different from that their forebears were likely to have entertained.

3 “Mountain Spirits” as Perceived by a “People of the Mountains”

As quintessentially a mountain-dwelling folk and one with an all-pervading sense of animism, that is of spirit-inhabited natural phenomena, it will come as no great surprise that Lahu – the majority at least – accord special importance to the *hk'aw ne' law ne'*, the spirits of the mountains and dales.

The forest-clad hills and mountains on and amongst which they live may be untamed “wilderness” (*heh pui' hk'aw*, “forest,” “jungle”); but, equally, they may be the location of their villages and farming lands. In either situation, Lahu regard the spirits that “own” these mountains, *hk'aw sheh hpa'*, literally the “masters of the mountains” as powerful superhuman entities. But in the first case, they are essentially undifferentiated “spirits of the wild,” fearsome powers that must be treated with respect and circumspection, while in the second, with an appropriate demonstration of reverence by means of ritual propitiation, they may be coerced into becoming the specific guardian spirits – the “lords of the place” (Lahu use the Tai-term *cao ti*) – of the Lahu's villages and swiddens. Lahu perceive the re-

lationship between “mountain spirits” as a genre of superhuman entity and the particular “spirit-owner” of the mountainside on which their village or field is located in much the same manner as British social anthropologist Andrew Turton (1972: 245) describes for the Khon Müang or Northern Thai people, of whom he writes, “when forest is cut down, say to make a space for domestic use or cultivation, *non-specific* [my emphasis] forest spirits become single specific locality spirits,” in other words, the *cao ti* or the “lords of the place.”

3.1 Mountain Spirits as “Keepers of the Wild”

Lahu specifically associate mountain spirits with summits and with cliffs and regard them as quite fearsome entities. When passing through their domain, therefore, people speak softly to one another to avoid inviting the spirits' wrath.

In his work on the Lahu people (at long last, published in 2013),⁴ Harold Young (1901–1975), elder son of pioneer American Baptist missionary, William Marcus Young (1861–1936), writes (2013: 208) of these *hk'aw ne'* that “some are regarded as especially malicious and will take offence at anyone laughing or whistling. Some people are said to have [had] their faces permanently disfigured when these spirits wreak their vengeance on them.”

Chinese ethnographer Xu Yong-an (1993: 78) has much the same to say for the Lahu of Pake village in Ximeng County on the Yunnan-Burma border, namely “when the people go up into the mountains to gather firewood, they must not talk loudly, nor must they fell any trees near a cliff side ... or else they will be attacked by the *ke ni* [科你 = *hk'aw ne'*].”

James Haxton Telford (1886–1949), successor to William Young as head of the Baptists' Lahu work in Kengtung State, Burma, writes in his celebrated 1937 treatise “Animism in Kengtung State” (158) of an incident that occurred within his missionary area in 1932, in which a British surveyor “while camped on a mountain top ... contracted pneumonia from which he died after a few days illness.” The local Lahu interpreted this event, Telford tells us, as the consequence of the surveyor having been “bitten by the spirit of the mountain [Lahu invariably

3 G'ui_u is probably from an ancient Tibeto-Burman root **ray* meaning “being,” in the sense of “self-existing first cause” (Matisoff 1985), while *sha* is a generic word for “deity” (Matisoff 1988: 1115, s.v. *ša*).

4 The undated typescript of this invaluable record of Lahu in Burma and Yunnan during the 1930s and 1940s must have been written in the 1960s or very early 1970s. I obtained my copy from the Library of Congress in 1973. All Lahu specialists must be grateful to Debbie Young Chase, Harold Young's granddaughter (eldest son's daughter) for her hard work in ensuring that this precious document has now been published as a book (under the same title as the original typescript).

talk of spirits “biting”, *nẽ che ve*] and since there is no medicine that can cure the disease the Hkaw Ne [*hk’aw nẽ*] inflicts, to secure the healing of the patient it is necessary to make offerings to the angry demon.” “The Lahus say,” Telford adds, “that if sacrifice had been made to the mountain spirit ..., [the surveyor] would surely not have died.”

Among the Lahu Nyi or Red Lahu people of the northern Thai hills, who were the special focus of my most intensive and extended fieldwork among Lahu-speaking peoples, the propitiation of a supposedly-offended mountain spirit was a common enough occurrence. On the other hand, it was most often prescribed, not because somebody’s behavior on a mountain summit was deemed to have been inappropriate, but because the sufferer of some form of physical disorder was thought to have offended the *hk’aw nẽ* in its (or their) capacity as spirit(s) of the mountain forests (in this rôle also known as *heh puĩ hk’aw nẽ*, “forest spirit(s).”⁵

If somebody had gone into the forest to hunt, gather, collect firewood, etc., and, on returning home, has fallen sick, that person would probably conclude that he or she had somehow offended the *heh puĩ hk’aw nẽ*. Alternatively, it sometimes happened that a sick person, on consulting a diviner, would be told that he or she had offended the mountain spirit for this or that reason. Since upland-dwelling Lahu can never distance themselves from the forest, it is seldom difficult for them to recollect some activity that might have offended these spirits. At any rate, once the agent of the sickness had been identified as the *hk’aw nẽ*, the victim would call upon the services of a *nẽ te sheh hpã* or “spirit master” to “recompense” (*cai ve*) the mountain spirit by means of a ritual of expiation, appropriately termed *hk’aw nẽ cai ve*, “recompensing the mountain spirit.”

The spirit master’s object is to have the spirit(s) – in return for the offerings made to it (them) – release his patient’s *aw ha* or “soul” (better, “spiritual counterpart” to the material *aw to*, or body). The great majority of ailments that Lahu attribute to non-mundane causes are interpreted in terms of a spirit or spirits seizing the patient’s *aw ha*. If this rite fails to relieve the symptoms, then a more complex offering called *hk’aw nẽ shaw ve* is called for. (The word *shaw ve*, so I was told, carries the general meaning of “making offerings” to a spirit, but implies also that such offerings are somewhat elaborate.)⁶

5 When Lahu talk of *nẽ*, spirits it is often difficult to determine whether the plural or singular is applicable; this does not appear to be a concern of the people themselves.

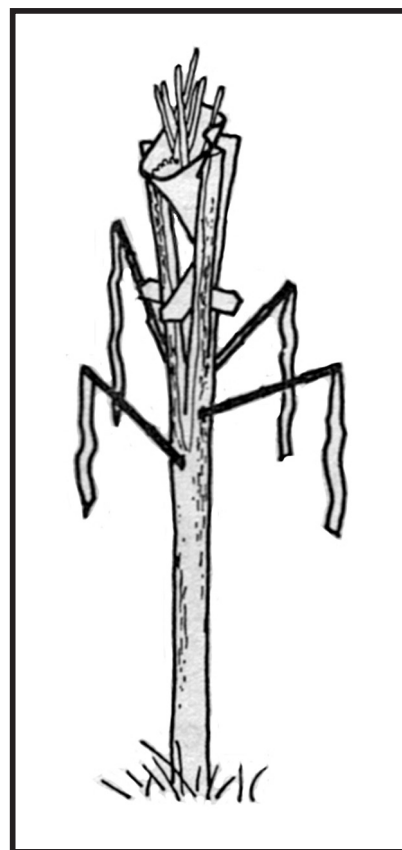


Fig. 2: *Shõ lõ* offering post with leaf cup (*ũ cu lũ*) at top and decorated with small flags (*ca ca*).

The first, and simpler, rite would be conducted somewhere in the forest. If the patient had been working at some specific location – felling a tree or collecting honey, for example – just before falling sick, then the rite would be held at that very place. But if the sick person had simply been roaming far and wide, then the propitiatory rite would be held just a little outside of the village, in the direction the patient had travelled.

At the appropriate location, the spirit master would set up a small offering post (*shõ lõ*) with leaf cup (*ũ cu lũ*) containing beeswax candles and rice grains, and often decorated with *ca ca* (flag-like artefacts comprising pieces of bamboo with strips of cloth attached to them, Fig. 2) and with two small *na g’aw na ju*, or “earring pen-

6 In his “Lahu–English–Thai Dictionary” (1986: 88, s.v. *cai ve*), Lewis gives *shaw ve* as the Lahu Na equivalent of Lahu Nyi *cai ve*; Ca Taw̃’s Lahu Nyi, however, used both verbs, designating different kinds of spirit offerings. The entry in Matisoff’s “The Dictionary of Lahu” (1988: 1225, s.v. *šə*) is taken from my own fieldwork notes and, as such, cannot be used to confirm my translation.

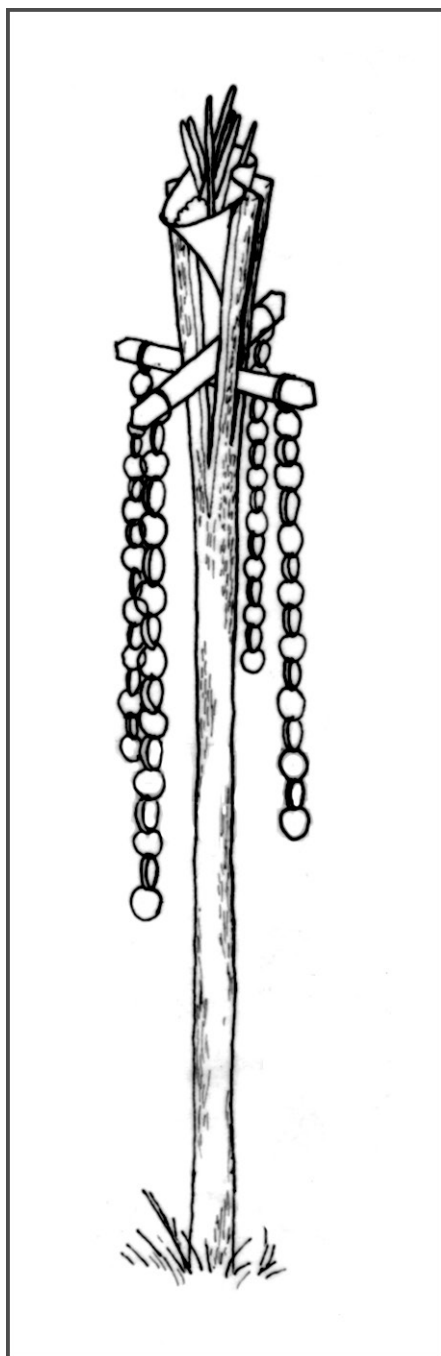


Fig. 3: *Sho' lo' offering post* with leaf cup (*u' cu_ lu'*) at top and with earring pendants (*na_ g'aw' na_ ju_*).

dants" (Fig. 3). Finally, the officiating specialist would wind a length of white cotton cord (*a' mo hkeh*) around the *ca_ ca_*. Unlike all the other paraphernalia, this was not an offering to the spirit but rather a "conductor" through which the sick person's *aw_ ha*, believed to have been "captured" by

the spirit, might return to its rightful owner. At the conclusion of the rite, this cord would be tied to the patient's wrist.

Preparations completed, the spirit master called upon the *hk'aw ne'* to forgive his client's transgression and release the captured *aw_ ha*, so that the sick person might speedily recover his or her health. An example of such a prayer is as follows (for the Lahu language text see Walker 1977a: 67):

Oh lord, great lord, powerful lord of this place, you who sit upon the hills and upon the streams, oh here at this place this person was cutting trees; if, here at this place, you have put this person's soul into your iron prison, into your copper prison, if you have caught this soul in your silver chains, your golden chains, please release it!

This person has no knowledge, no truth, so do not punish this person; today I have brought for you this silver altar, this golden altar [poetic hyperbole for the single offering post]; oh lord of this place, who sits upon the hills, who sits upon the streams, gather up all these offerings [I have brought for you] into your feet, into your hands.

Today, please release this person's soul; I have brought for you four pairs of beeswax candles and four flags [the number "four" is only for poetic effect] that I have prepared with my own hands; you who sit on the hills, all-knowing lord, all-true lord, once again gather up all these offerings into your feet and into your hands and please release this soul!

Do not punish this person; oh this person has no knowledge, no truth, so please release his soul.

This prayer concludes the rite. The spirit master leaves all the offerings in place, with the exception of the length of white cord, which he brings back to the village, using it to bind his client's wrists so that the latter's soul will not leave his body.

The more complex *hk'aw ne' shaw_ ve* rite is performed only when *hk'aw ne' cai_ ve* fails to alleviate a person's suffering. As with the minor rite, this second propitiation takes place in the forest, either at a designated spot or else in a particular direction from the village. But the requisite ritual paraphernalia is more elaborate. In place of the offering post, two altars must be set up, along with large centipede and earring pendants (Fig. 4). On the higher of the two altars the spirit master sets in place the usual offerings: beeswax candles, raw rice grains, chilli peppers, salt, and tobacco. But on the lower altar he places some cooked rice (the uncooked rice of the first rite has not satisfied the spirit, informants maintained), imitation money (scraps of metal covered with lime to suggest silver, or burnished to resemble gold) with which to redeem the captured soul, a length of white cotton cord to "conduct" the soul back, and the meat of a slaughtered cock. This bird

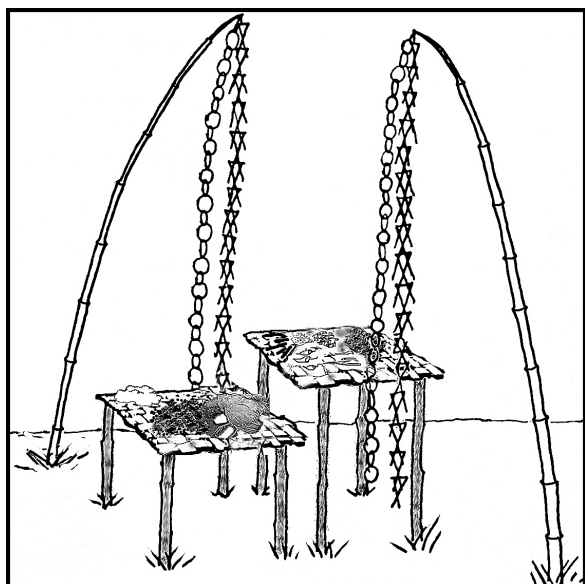


Fig. 4: Two altars (*hti_*) with offerings to propitiate mountain spirit.

was one of two (the second a hen) that had to be provided by the spirit specialist's client. At the offering site, before beginning the ceremony, the spirit master kills the cock; at its conclusion, he releases the hen into the forest. Both birds are said to be for the *hk'aw ne*, one for it to eat and the other to raise. All being ready, the spirit master chants the propitiatory prayer. This is an example (for the Lahu language text, see Walker 1977a: 73 f.):

Oh today this man brings for you, oh spirit of Meh Hpa, mountain [on which the study village was located], these beeswax candles; he brings for you a pair of fowl, he brings for you a thousand silver pieces, he brings for you this silver altar, this golden altar, and he reaches to you; he reaches to you, lord of this place, he begs the lord's forgiveness and reaches into your feet, he begs forgiveness and reaches into your hands.

If you have punished him by imprisoning his soul, with these thousand silver pieces he redeems his soul, he exchanges this silver for his soul, he begs your forgiveness and brings for you these lime-covered pieces.

Oh this man has no knowledge, he has no truth; he has sent me on his behalf to beg for your forgiveness; I have no knowledge, but I beg you to return his soul, please look into my face and release his soul.

If you have put this man's soul into an iron prison, open up that iron prison and release it; if you have put it into a golden prison, release it from that golden prison.

If you have pierced this soul with an iron point, remove that iron point and release it; if you have pierced it with a silver point, remove that silver point and release it.

Oh do not punish this man's soul; send it back along this white cotton string, do not send it into the sky or into the earth; I beg your forgiveness.

I beg your forgiveness and reach into your feet, I beg your forgiveness and reach into your hands; oh you, who are both father and mother, look into my face, oh release this man's soul; I beg your forgiveness and reach into your feet, I beg your forgiveness and reach into your hands.

The prayer ended, the spirit master releases the hen (if the rite has been held near the village it will likely find its way home; otherwise it will probably fall prey to a forest predator). From the lower altar he removes all the cock's flesh, except the head, feet and entrails, and also takes away the "soul cord." Returning to his client's house, he binds the cord around the latter's wrist and returns to him a half of the sacrificed chicken's carcass; the other half constitutes a part (or all) of his fee. If the patient still does not recover, a second performance of the rite, this time with a sacrificial pig in place of the two fowl, may well be recommended.

On occasion, my Lahu Nyi informants in North Thailand said, the mountain spirit does not directly inflict punishment on an offender, but acts instead by dispatching an intermediary, a spirit helper called *g'u ne*, "spirit of madness" (because it inflicts inanity on its victim). Consequently, these Lahu Nyi would sometimes declare, "he has gone mad because a spirit of madness has entered him."⁷

When a person becomes insane and his or her family members have determined for themselves – or else through the services of a diviner – that the likely cause is a mountain spirit's dispatch of a *g'u*, they will quickly organize a propitiatory rite called *chaw g'u k'ai leh hh'aw ne cai ve* (freely translated, "propitiating the mountain spirit when a person has become insane"). A spirit master performs the required rite at a location somewhat outside of the village boundary, facing the particular hill whose spirit owner is believed to be the one responsible for dispatching the *g'u*. The ritual paraphernalia consists of an offering post with small flags attached, exactly as described above for the minor propitiatory rite (*hk'aw ne cai ve*). Of greater difference is the propitiatory chant itself, which mentions specifically the actions of the *g'u* spirit and the unwanted consequences thereof. An example is as

⁷ We should note that the "master" of the *g'u* may be other than the mountain spirit; even *Gui sha*, the highest divinity recognized by Lahu, is thought sometimes – in rightful anger – to send its *g'u* servants against an offender. But for this article, for greater detail see Walker (1977b), I am concerned only with *g'u* believed to have been dispatched by a mountain spirit, or spirits.

follows (Walker 1977b: 140–142, for the Lahu language text):

Lord officer of this place, spirit of the hills and the dales, this man came to your place, but without any intention to disrespect you, oh officer.

You have visited madness upon him, you have put this *g'u* spirit into him, oh lord officer of this place.

Some time ago, your spirit did thus to this man, so if you have taken [this man's soul], I now once again bring you these gifts, these offerings; I bring for you this offering post of silver, this offering post of gold, and this centipede pendant also.

His relatives beseech you, his grandfather and grandmother beseech you, not to permit this man to carry on his back the custom [burden] of your *g'u* spirit.

Today and hereafter, with all these gifts, these offerings, this man's relatives once again redeem [his soul]; so please once again return [his soul to them] and take back your madness-causing spirit.

Oh [on behalf of this man's relatives] I beg your forgiveness and reach into your hands; on behalf of his wife and children also [I beg your forgiveness].

Now, from today and hereafter, you have tied your *g'u* spirit onto this man's back, so that he does not listen to the voice of his wife, he does not listen to the voices of his relatives, so send away your *g'u* spirit, put it back into the forest.

Now this man's relatives and his wife bring all these gifts for you, these offerings, to redeem from you [this man's soul], they beseech you to take back your custom [of visiting a *g'u* spirit on this man]; they beg your forgiveness and reach into your feet; they beg your forgiveness and reach into your hands; they beseech you to release [this man's soul].

They say he has become useless, so today and hereafter, if you have not yet taken back [your *g'u* spirit], they reach into your feet and beg your forgiveness, reach into your hands and beg your forgiveness; they beseech you to release [this man's soul].

Today and hereafter they beseech that you take back your *g'u* spirit, they beseech you quickly to remove your custom [of sending the spirit to this man].

His wife and his children say that they beg your forgiveness and reach into your feet; they say that they beg your forgiveness and reach into his hands.

[His wife] beseeches you not to do like this to her husband, oh, she begs your forgiveness.

3.2 Mountain Spirits as Keepers of Wild Animals

Lahu highlanders believe that the mountain spirits, as spirits of the wilderness, are the owners and protectors of all the animals that dwell in the upland

forests. In this rôle, the mountain spirit is called *sha_hu sheh_hpa*, “master keeper of the wild animals” or, simply, *sha_ne*, “game spirit”. As such, the spirit is the special object of propitiation for Lahu hunters, a rôle to which more-or-less every Lahu male aspires. It is not without reason that the Lahu's Tai-speaking neighbors call them “Mussur,” “the hunters.”

Discussing Lahu Na (Black Lahu) in Yunnan's Pu-er (formerly Simao) Prefecture, Chinese ethnographers Xu Yong-an 徐永安 et al. (1990: 343) write of the *sha_ne* (which they call *le shen* 猎伸 or “hunting deity”) as “the most frequently propitiated *shen*.” They say the spirit is propitiated both on a village-wide and on an individual basis and that, for the former, there is a special person in charge, who must be both an elder and a still-active hunter. This man is responsible for maintaining a shrine to the spirit of the game on the house pillar, or against the wall above his sleeping place (Fig. 5). Outsiders, Xu Yong-an et al. (1990: 344) report, must not be permitted to view this shrine. Each time an animal is hunted “a piece of its bone, or else, if a bird is shot, one of its feathers, must be hung up at the *le shen*'s shrine” (1990: 343).

In many Lahu communities, Xu Yong-an et al. (1990: 344) write, the spirit keeper of the game is propitiated whenever the villagers participate in a communal hunt. Before the hunters set out, the shrine master must sacrifice a chicken to the *sha_ne* and perform divination (presumably, although it is not mentioned, by “reading” the bird's thigh bones⁸). At the conclusion of the hunt, offerings of game meat must be made to the spirit keeper.

As for an individual hunter's propitiation of the *sha_ne*, Xu Yong-an et al. (1990: 344) report that “some enthusiastic hunters” maintain their own personal *sha_ne* shrine; “before they set out to hunt, they offer a chicken egg and recite prayers” to the spirit and when they return “they boil some of the flesh they have obtained and again make offerings to the *sha_ne*.”

Among the Lahu Na Shehle in North Thailand, according to French ethnographer Jean-Claude Ne-

8 The diviner removes the bird's femur bones (*femora*) and then, using a knife, carefully scrapes them clean so as to reveal the tiny holes (*foramina*), into each of which he inserts, as firmly as possible, a sliver of bamboo about the size of a toothpick. The diviner holds the two bones, side by side, in his left hand with their top ends facing him. The bone to his left is said to represent the “peoples' side” and that to the right the “spirits' side.” The diviner compares the angles at which the slivers of bamboo rest in the *foramina* in order to determine whether the spirits' side dominates over the peoples' side (a bad omen) or vice versa (for more detail see Walker 2003: 184).

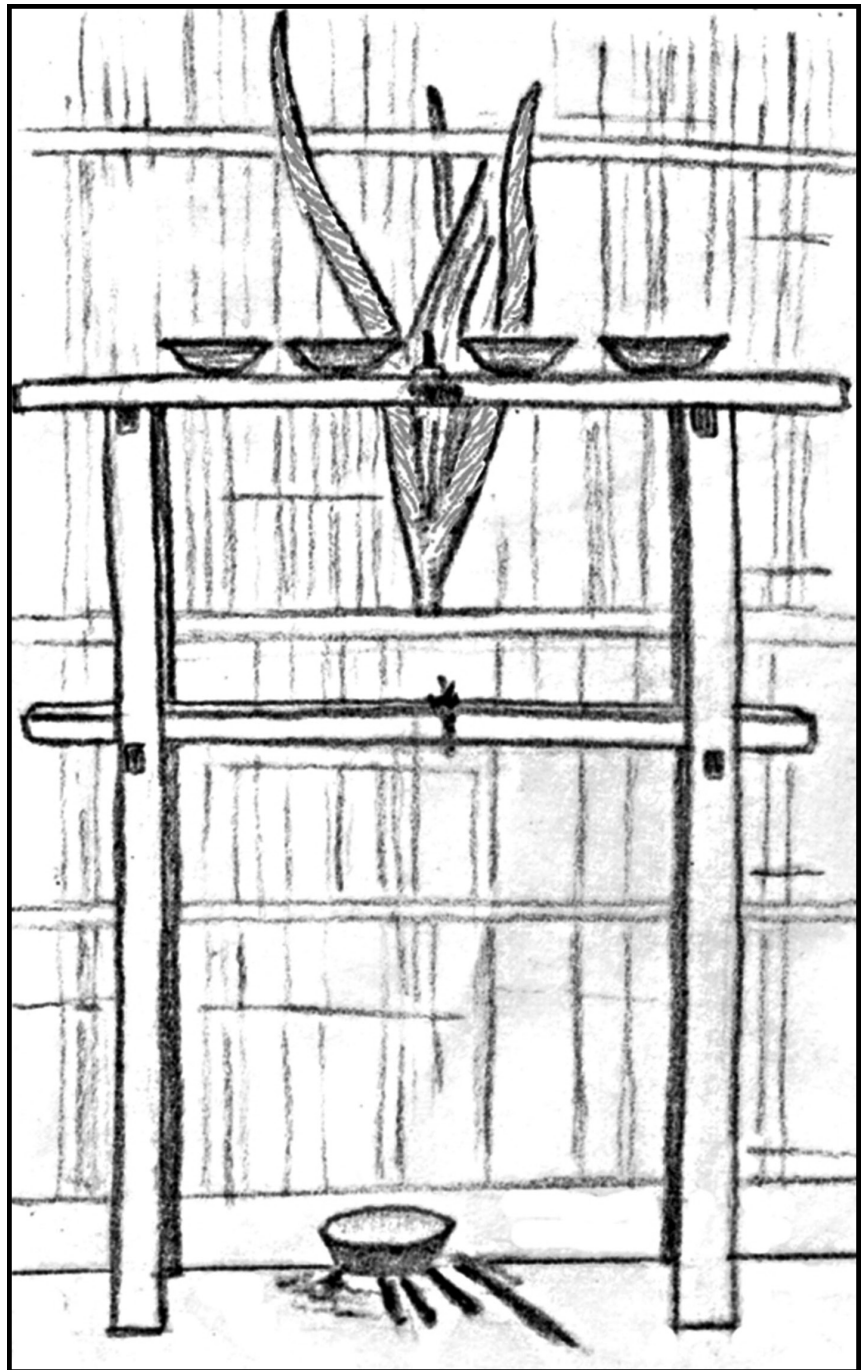


Fig. 5: Shrine to spirit guardian of the game (Lancang Lahu).

veu (1993: 56f.), whenever the men participate in a hunt that is to last several days, and during which they hope to shoot large game animals, they perform a rite at a location between two hills where the hunt is to begin. Here, Neveu writes (my translation):

Their weapons are placed against a tree, at the side of which, on a small shelf made of bamboo, or on a big leaf set upon the ground, are put an egg, a handful of rice,

eight pairs of beeswax candles, and one or two cigarettes or a little betel nut. One of the hunters invokes the spirit of the forest, the *heh pui~hk'aw ne~*, owner of the place and of the animals. He asks [the spirit] for permission to kill in order to have food to eat and for assistance in confusing the sight, hearing, and smell of the animals that they will try to kill. Following the rite, the offerings are left at the place. When the first animal is killed (and only that one) a small piece of its ear and lip are set on a leaf

to the side of the place where the beast fell and are offered to the forest spirit. In this manner, one thanks it and invokes it to share in the flesh and asks also that good fortune will follow.

I did not hear of the Lahu Nyi villagers with whom I lived in North Thailand propitiating the spirit of the game animals in as regular manner as Xu Yong-an et al. (1990) describe for Lahu Na in Yunnan, or as Neveu reports for Lahu Shehleh (close neighbors of the Lahu Nyi in the northern Thai mountains). Certainly, I discovered no ritual game master, nor any permanent shrine to the *sha_ne* in anybody's house. Nonetheless, the spirit did receive occasional propitiation, usually by an individual hunter, following a period of failure to bag any wild animal. In this case, the disappointed hunter would prepare offerings for the *sha_ne* in the forest at a spot where he happened across the tracks of a game animal or animals. It seems that the style of the offerings differs according to the whim of the hunter. Some men prefer to set up a simple offering post, others to erect a more elaborate double altar.

When the hunter puts up a simple offering post, he affixes a leaf cup atop it, in which he sets – as offerings to the spirit(s) – some unmilled rice grains, a little salt, and a few chilli peppers. When he sets up two altars, called *hti*, one above the other (Fig. 6), he puts on the upper altar some grains of cooked rice (not raw as with the simple offering post), beeswax candles, a little salt, a few chilli peppers, a clove of garlic, some tobacco, a small quantity of opium, a chicken egg, the “male” member of a set of Jew’s harps and, finally a crossbow. He furnishes the lower altar with the same offerings, without the crossbow but with the “female” member if the Jew’s harps pair (Fig. 7). On either side of the altar, the hunter sets into the ground a tall bamboo, from which he hangs the two types of split bamboo pendant already described: one a stylized centipede and the other a stylized chain earring. The spirit(s) is/are variously conceived as having both male and female characteristics, or else as being a husband-and-wife pair.

I was told that all the offerings that are edible or smokable were for the pleasure of the spirit or spirits that control the game animals. The pendants, too, are offerings for the spirit(s). The centipede, due to its horrific (sometimes deadly) sting is appropriately associated with the “biting” spirits; the earring is said to symbolize the feminine aspect of the spirit. The crossbow, I was told, symbolizes the hunter’s wish for success in the hunt. As for the Jew’s harp set, apart from the obvious connection

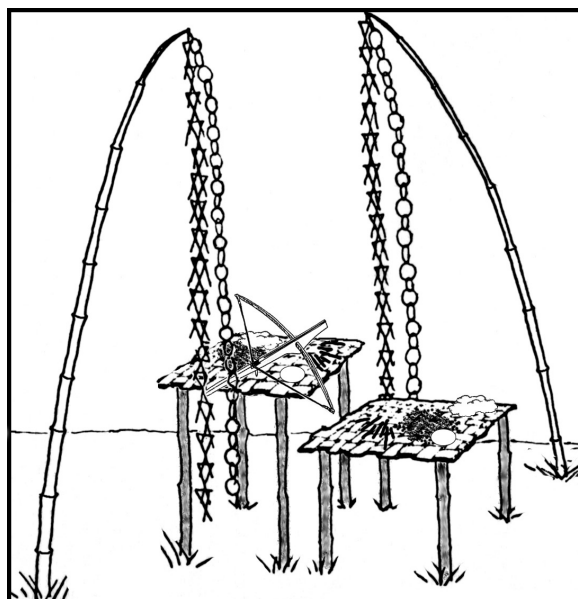


Fig. 6: Altars (*hti*) to the mountain spirit as “spirit keeper of the game.”

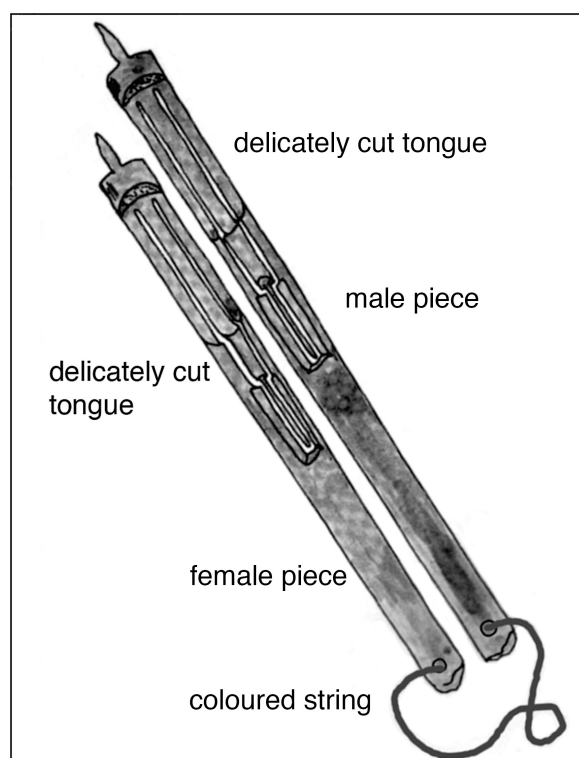


Fig. 7: Female (shorter) and male (longer) pair of Jew’s harps.

between its male and female members and the androgynous character of spirits, informants said that the spirits would want to play these instruments and this would distract them from guarding the game

animals, thereby increasing the hunter's chances of success.⁹

Once the hunter has put together all the necessary ritual paraphernalia, he addresses the spirit keeper or keepers of the game (for the Lahu language text see Walker 1976: 219–222) like this:

Oh today, at this place, I offer you this silver altar, this golden altar, you who watch over the thousand male wild pigs and female wild pigs on the right hand side, you who watch over the million male wild pigs and female wild pigs on the left hand side, great lord of this place.

Oh I ask for male wild pigs and female wild pigs, I ask for male barking deer and female barking deer, so today I bring for you these offerings, which I place under your feet and under your hands.

Do not make it difficult for me, but make it easy for me to shoot these animals; catch these animals in your iron chain, your copper chain; when I am walking around the summit of the hill, take these animals and put them on the summit of the hill, and when I am walking around the foot of the hill, take these animals and put them at the foot of the hill; cover up their eyes with leaves.

Oh, with one half of the flesh I obtain I wish to follow the custom of the elders, I wish to follow the custom of the menfolk and the womenfolk [reference to traditional manner of dividing the flesh of a game animal, see Walker 2003: 236 n. 166]; one half of the flesh I desire for my wife, my children and my kinsfolk.

I pray to you that I will have no difficulty in obtaining game; please give it to me; today, before the setting of the sun, grant me success, and when I am walking around the summit of the hill, take and put the animals on the summit of the hill, and when I am walking around the foot of the hill, take the animals and put them at the foot of the hill.

We people have no truth, no honesty; into your feet and into your hands I place my request that I may have no difficulty in obtaining game; today, before the setting of the sun, let me have flesh to eat.

Oh put the animals over there at the summit of the hill, cover their eyes with leaves, catch them in your iron chain, your copper chain; put them in front of me and lead them towards my iron gun, my copper gun; you who are all-true, all-honest, I myself have no truth, no honesty, but I put my request under your feet, under your hands.

Oh today I offer you this silver altar, this golden altar; I offer you this silver pendant, this golden pendant, I offer you this food and drink, and I put my request under your feet and under your hands.

Oh give me flesh to eat; one half I desire for my wife and children, with one half I wish to follow the custom of the elders, I wish to follow the custom of the menfolk and of the womenfolk.

⁹ All these were interpretations offered by people of my study village; doubtless other Lahu will have different exegeses.

I put my request under your feet and under your hands, let me have male wild pigs and female wild pigs, male barking deer and female barking deer, give me flesh that I can divide up [game animals sufficiently large to be able to share out their flesh]; give me flesh to eat; today, before the setting of the sun, give me flesh to eat, and receive these offerings.

3.3 Mountain Spirits as Owners of the Village and House Sites

As “spirits of the wild”, the “untamed” mountain spirits are not only the “keepers” and “masters” of the wilderness and protectors of all the animals that live within their domain. They are also the “spirits of the place.” Consequently, just as it is necessary for Lahu hunters to propitiate these spirits as keepers of the game, it is particularly important for them, as upland-dwelling people, to propitiate these mountain spirits as “lords of the place,” when they seek to establish a new village, or put up a new house.

In the case of land chosen for setting up a village, Lahu propitiate the spirits of the place by means of a simple rite in which they erect an offering post in identical manner as already described for other mountain-spirit propitiatory rites, but with the village headman now taking the lead rôle. When the necessary ritual accoutrements have been prepared and set in place, the headman chants the propitiatory prayer that at once informs the locality spirit (or spirits; number is not specified by Lahu) of his villagers' intention to establish a village at this spot, requests its (or their) permission to do so, and requests the spirit(s) to vacate that particular piece of its territory so that the work of village construction may begin. An example of a headman's prayer on this occasion is as follows (Walker 1983: 175 f. for the Lahu language text):

Ah ho, we people of this community bring for you, here at this place, beautiful beeswax candles and beautiful rice that we have prepared with our own hands; here at this place, we buy, we barter this hill so that we may live here.

Here at this place, under your feet and under your hands, we buy and we barter [this hill]; oh prince, great prince, pure prince, if your dwelling place is here, please move to the bottom or to the top [of this place].

Omniscient prince, the all-true one, we mortals cannot know all things, cannot be all-truthful; oh we of this community bring for you these beautiful beeswax candles and this beautiful rice we have prepared with our own hands; oh prince of this place, you who sit upon the bends in the mountains, we reach under your feet and under your hands.

If you have your residence here at this place, please move to the bottom or to the top of this place, move to the top of the mountain or to the bottom of the mountain.

Oh, we buy and we barter [this place]; we of this community buy and barter [this place].

Three times in one day, three times in one night, shield and protect each one of us from points of iron and points of copper [knives and axes used to clear the site]; shield and protect us from points of wood [sharp and jagged pieces of wood and bamboo felled to clear the site]; shield, protect and save us from sickness or death caused by sharp points.

Oh do not break the hands of any one of us, do not break the legs of any one of us; we do you no wrong, you who are omniscient; we bring you beautiful beeswax candles and beautiful rice and we reach under your feet and under your hands.

We of this community, today, here at this place, buy and barter this mountain; the entire village community will live here, the *hpa˘ ya˘* [senior area headman under traditional Shan political system] will live here; oh, if you have your residence here, please move away.

Oh, oh, please move to the bottom or to the top [of this mountain], oh prince, pure Prince of this place.

The household head's prayer to the locality spirit requesting permission to use the house site is identical in style and very similar in content to the village headman's prayer just recorded. Here are a few extracts (for the full version, including the Lahu language text, see Walker 1983: 183–185):

Oh, oh, spirit of this house site, this morning my whole household will clear this site; we will build a house in which to live.

Oh spirit, if you have kept your property at this place, you who are omniscient and omnipotent, please take away [your property].

Oh spirit, if you will not give me [this site] reveal this to me in my dreams; if you give it to me, my whole household will build a house in which to dwell.

From this evening, tomorrow and hereafter, I beg that I may build a house on this earth, here at this place; my wife and my children will build a house in which to live; this evening I have come to inform you of this.

If you grant us this place, let it not be a troubled place; let no misfortune befall the children and the grandchildren [= the entire household].

3.4 Mountain Spirits as Owners of the Swidden Lands

Turning now to the mountain spirit as master of the land on which a Lahu farmer wants to clear a new

swidden, he must first, so he firmly believes, obtain the spirit's permission before doing so. These Lahu Nyi call the propitiatory rite performed for this purpose – if the land is to be used for rice – *heh mo˘ ca˘ ve*, literally “purchasing (with prayers and offerings) a forest clearing”; if it is for chilli cultivation, it is called *a˘ hpe˘* (chilli pepper) *mi˘* (field) *ca˘ ve*; and if for a poppy field, *fi˘* (opium poppy) *mi˘ ca˘ ve*.

a) Seeking Permission to Clear a Field for Rice

The household head is the man responsible for conducting the rite, for which precisely the same kind of offering post (*sho˘ lo˘*) and related artefacts as those detailed above are required. But in this case, the beeswax candles and grains of rice, these Lahu say, are offered as payment for the land. The offerings are accompanied by a prayer that beseeches the spirit's permission, requests that it move from the area if it is residing there, and begs that it protects from harm the household members who are to work this piece of land. The prayer goes as follows (Walker 1978: 720–722 for Lahu language text):

Oh spirit of the mountain and of the streams here at this place¹⁰, I have brought for you uncooked rice and beeswax candles; I have come to inform you [of my intention to prepare] a new rice field for which I request your permission; you spirit of this place, receive these offerings that I have prepared with my own hands.

Today and hereafter the people of my household will prepare a field, so help to protect [us all] from every point of iron and copper [the sharp farming tools]; do not kill or punish any of the people [adults], or any of the children of my household.

Oh do not cut us with wooden points, with iron or copper points; do not cut us with wooden teeth [jagged pieces of wood].

Oh, from this field that we prepare, let us realize an abundant yield and great wealth; let the plants prosper; carefully order [this blessing upon us]; let the fields be fertile, order [this blessing upon us].

Do not permit [the people of my household] to separate [“let us work together in harmony”]; do not allow the children to be cut; I give you these offerings, these two pairs of beeswax candles I bring for you.

Oh, when we fell the trees, if the tree stumps at the top of the field do not move to the bottom of the field, I will not cease to work on this land; if the tree trunks split in a

10 The local mountain spirit is here addressed in grand fashion as “Lord of the mountain and of the waterways,” even though these Lahu conceive each stream to be the seat of another spirit, the *i˘ ka˘ ne˘* or water spirit (cf. Walker 2011).

multitude of different ways [as they will surely do], then I shall not cease to work [on this land].

When we are preparing this field, do not permit misfortune to fall upon the children; let us have happiness, let us obtain great wealth from our work in this field; let us realize a barn full of padi.^[11]

When we plant chillies, let other people talk of our great yield; if we plant padi, let other people talk of our great yield; let them discuss our good fortune.

Let all the great headmen, all the *hpa^ˈ ya^ˈ* happily talk of our good fortune.

Oh, let the people of heaven and the people of earth, and all the headmen, have the same thoughts, let the divine headman [prototype of all human headmen], yes all of these, cover [my field with their blessings].

We need not tarry over the rites deemed necessary before opening up chilli pepper and opium poppy fields, because they differ not at all (except in some specific words of the accompanying prayer; e.g., Walker 1978: 724–732) from what I have just described for a field of rice. However, before leaving this particular propitiatory rite, recorded among Lahu in North Thailand (the most southerly area of Lahu settlement), we may note its remarkable similarity to one obtained by Chinese folklorist Liu Huihao from Lahu (of what sub-ethnic division he does not say, but certainly not Lahu Nyi) far to the north, in Shuangjiang County of Lincang Prefecture in China's Yunnan Province. This is Liu Huihao's (1994: 53 f.) text (translated into English from Chinese):

Oh spirits of the mountains, spirits of the waters, spirits of the rivers and spirits of the rocks, I offer you rice and beeswax candles.

Please permit me to open up this piece of mountain land; oh spirits of this place, accept these offerings that I present to you with my own hands.

From this time on, my family will cultivate this piece of land; oh bless the old and the young of my family, protect us from being harmed by our knives and axes; do not kill us, do not punish us.

If we plant chilli peppers, let other people see how the bushes are covered with chillies; if we plant rice, let other people see the panicles heavy with grain; let them see how lucky I am; let all the headmen celebrate my good fortune!

b) Praying for a Good Rice Yield

Turning now to the rite for the mountain spirit(s) that must be held *following* the planting of the swidden with padi seed, this is known among the Lahu Nyi farmers I studied in North Thailand as *heh hk'a^ˈ u^ˈ mui^ˈ ve*, literally “cultivating anew the way of the fields.” The rite takes place in the morning, usually as soon as the farmers arrive in the field. They set up two small woven bamboo altars atop wooden or bamboo posts, between which they sink two small bamboo cups into the ground. On one altar they place grains of milled, but uncooked, rice, together with beeswax candles. On the second altar they set some salt, chilli peppers, and tobacco, as well as more beeswax candles. To each altar they attach a *ca^ˈ ca^ˈ*, the flag-like artefacts I have already described. They fill one of the sunken cups with water and the other with sand.

Explaining the purpose of these offerings to the mountain spirit to me, Lahu Nyi informants said that it was necessary to have two altars because, just as at home, rice and relishes are set on separate plates, so rice and the other offerings should be set on different altars for the mountain spirit. Beeswax candles are frequent offerings that these Lahu Nyi make to spirits: the rice as food and the beeswax candles “to light the spirit's or spirits' way” when they come to receive the gifts that have been prepared for them. The water and sand, I was informed, symbolize the farmers' wish that the grains of padi be as numerous as drops of water and grains of sand.¹² Informants said that the small flags were given to “please the spirit” and, although on other occasions they may be red, black, or of some other color, informants were generally agreed that, for this particular rite, white cloth was required. When asked the reason for this stipulation, most gave the usual “ancestral custom” response, but one opined that red was certainly a most inappropriate color, because it might scare the rice plants, causing them to turn brown and rot.

An example of the propitiatory prayer that accompanies these offerings is as follows (Walker 1979: 702 f. for Lahu language text):

Oh great ruler of this place, I have prepared this silver altar and this golden altar and I reach under your feet.

Ruler of the rodents, ruler of the birds, three times in one day, three times in one night, carefully look after us as we work in this field.

12 This, of course, may be a spur-of-the moment response, rather than ancient exegesis; for Lahu themselves, “ancestral custom” is quite sufficient justification for liturgical action.

11 Padi refers to unhusked grain of rice.

Oh let this field be fertile; half the yield I shall offer to you [Lahu call this “lying to the spirits”]; with half the yield I shall feed my kinsmen, my father and my mother.

We shall work on this land; let it be fertile so that if we work for one day in the field, the food will be sufficient for ten days; if we work for one year in the field, the food may be sufficient for tens years; oh, this boon bestow upon us, with this boon enwrap us.

c) Praying for a Good Opium Yield

The Lahu with whom I lived in North Thailand had a special propitiatory rite for the mountain spirit as guardian of the opium poppy crop, which they hoped would guarantee them a good opium harvest.¹³ This rite in the opium field is known as *f_l ne[~] leu[~] ve*, literally “humbly to make offerings of food to the opium spirit.” But despite the name, my informants denied that this “opium spirit” was any other than the mountain spirit. “The opium spirit and the mountain spirit are one only,” they declared.

The propitiatory rite is performed, preferably in the morning, by the household head, just prior to the start of the opium harvest. As for several of the other rites thus far described, most commonly the farmer sets up an offering post in his poppy swidden, with precisely the same array of offerings and decorations as hitherto described (for variants see Walker 1979: 704), but with one important addition. He must present the spirit with a chicken egg and, moreover, before he sets it into the leaf cup atop the offering post, he must pierce its shell, so that its contents slowly drip out. This action symbolizes the farmer’s wish that the opium sap flow abundantly from the poppy heads he taps. An example of the farmer’s offertory prayer is as follows (Walker 1979: 204 f. for the Lahu language text):

Oh, oh, here at this place I have made an opium-poppy field; oh today, owner of this mountain, I look for you here at this place and I reach to your side; oh, carefully create and bestow blessings on my field.

I reach to your side, prince of this place, divinity of this place¹⁴, oh, bestow upon me nine caweh [a joy of opium

weighs 1.6 kg] nine *pa[~]* [a traditional Shan measurement equivalent to one-fifteenth the weight of a basket of padi] of opium, you who are omniscient, you who never break your promises, carefully bestow [this boon upon us].¹⁵

Today I once more offer you this chicken’s egg; please [grant that] the opium sap will flow out, just like the content of this [pierced] egg.

Today [I pray that] the food and drink may not be exhausted; that I may obtain a box of silver, a box of gold, a barn full of silver and a barn full of gold; that I may obtain a barn full of clothing, oh prince of this place, carefully order and bestow [this boon upon me].

d) Praying for Relief from Crop Damage

Finally, the Lahu Nyi farmers propitiate the mountain spirit whenever their growing crops are attacked by disease or fall pray to marauding animals and birds. Habitually, they refer to such propitiatory rites as *sho[~]lo[~] te ve hk[~]aw ne[~] hta[~] hkaw[~] ve*, meaning “making an offering post and begging the forgiveness of the mountain spirit.” As the name of the rite suggests, these Lahu believe crop damage – whether by disease or by pest attack – to be the mountain spirit’s punishment for some perceived offence committed against it. There are separate rites appropriate for rice, opium, and chilli crops (see Walker 1979: 710–715), but since they are more-or-less identical, we may confine ourselves to the one for a damaged rice crop. The preparation of the offering post for this propitiatory rite does not differ at all from those rites for which its use has already been described. It is the propitiatory prayer that is the true indicator of the particular purpose of the ritual activity. An example follows just below. As may be seen, in this instance the prayer refers to crop damage caused by marauding fauna; it goes as follows (Walker 1979: 706–708 for the Lahu language text):

Ha! Oh! Great ruler, ruler of this place, omniscient ruler, divider of the summit of the mountain from the base of the mountain here at this place, today, here at this place, I have brought for you food and drink; offerings that I have made with my own hands I have brought for you; I reach out to you.

Please do not release this kind of animal into this padi [field].

13 Interestingly, there was no parallel rite for the chilli fields, perhaps because they saw this crop – despite their renowned love for chilli peppers – as less important than their subsistence rice and cash-yielding opium harvests.

14 “Divinity of this place,” it has to be admitted, is an unusual usage in this context. It refers to *Gui[~] sha*, the High God of the Lahu, and those other superhuman entities associated with this divine power. The *ne[~]*, or spirits, are almost always clearly distinguished from “divinity.” The probable explanation for this aberrant usage is that the one who prayed thus was attempting to produce, without regard to theological ac-

curacy, a fine couplet, viz. “owner of this place // divinity of this place.”

15 In hyperbole typical of Lahu prayers, the farmer asks for an impossibly large quantity of opium. At my study village, a yield of 2.8 kg per household was the mean.

A part [of the crop] I require for my wife and children; a part I want to give to you, and a part I want to offer to G'ui sha [the creator divinity]; these three divisions I wish to make and I put [my request] under your feet and under your hands.

A part [of the crop] I require for my wife and my children, for the white haired and the black haired ones [elders and young people]; I wish to perform the custom of the men-folk, the custom of the womenfolk [poetic reference to Lahu custom of supporting one's family and relatives].

From our work in the field [I wish for a good yield]; oh, a part [of this yield] I shall give to all you spirits, a part I want to give to the people who live at the top of the mountain and the people who live at the bottom of the mountain [kinsmen living in neighboring villages]; I shall not eat the fruits of my labor by myself alone.

Today, once again take away [these marauding animals] and release them on top of the fruit trees in the forest, on the leaves of the trees; once again release them on the fruit trees, please move them a little to the top and a little to the bottom [of my field].

You who are omniscient, you who always keep your promises, we mortals cannot know everything, we have no honesty; oh today we beg your forgiveness, oh today please separate [these animals] just a little [from my field].

Ruler of this place, great ruler of this place, I have brought for you these offerings that I have prepared with my own hands and I place them under your feet, under your hands, so please do not release these animals [on my field]!

Today, take [these animals], move them and release them on the fruit trees at the top of my field and at the bottom of my field; release them on the leaves of the trees!

4 Finale: Mountain Spirits as Tutelary Spirits of Village and Fields

For Lahu Nyi, as for Lahu of differing sub-ethnic identities living in different places, it is not simply a matter of gaining the mountain spirit's or spirits' permission to use a piece of land as a village or field site, but having it (or them) become the tutelary spirit of the village or field. This has already become obvious from the texts of the various prayers relating to agricultural activities, in which the spirit is beseeched not only to acquiesce to the farmers' request for land, but also to protect the farmers and to guard their crops.

Among Lahu all the way from their northernmost settlements in Lincang Prefecture to those in North Thailand, far to the south, we find special veneration for the local mountain spirit. As Liang Kesheng 梁克生 et al. (1992: ch. 9, p. 6)¹⁶ point out

in the provisional edition of their *Lahu Zu Shi* 拉祜族史 (Lahu Nationality History):

The village deity [the Chinese has *shen* 神, but the more appropriate English translation of the Lahu word *ne* is "spirit"] is the mountain deity for the area in which the village is situated. Thus the mountain deity becomes a guardian deity. Usually a simple deity house [spirit shrine] is built in the forest, high above the village and the deity is propitiated in order to ensure the protection and safety of the people and of the animals in the village.

In many Lahu villages there will be a shrine – sometimes no more than a roughly-made altar for offerings – set at the base of a particularly large tree located somewhere in the forest at the head (i.e. uphill) of the village. The author of the chapter on the Gengma Lahu in the 1987 manuscript volume *Gengma Dai Zu Wa Zu Zizhi Xian Zhi* 耿马傣族佤族自治县志 provides us with this description of the mountain spirit of the Lahu in Gengma County of Lincang Prefecture (Yang Zhu 1987: 91):

The Lahu believe the mountain spirit to be the most powerful spirit in the human world, the leader of all other spirits on earth. The mountain spirit guards the safety of the villagers, expels devils and other evil forces, protects the well-being of the people and their animals, controls the wind, rain, and thunder ... [etc.]. Because the mountain spirit is so closely related to the daily lives and economic activities of the Lahu people, they set up a sacred shrine to their mountain spirit in the sacred forest behind their village. The altar is set up at the foot of an age-old big tree.

Through periodic propitiatory rites led by a ritual expert, usually one of the village's spirit masters (*maw pa* or *ne te sheh hpa*), the spirit has, in a sense, been "tamed," so as to become the community's superhuman guardian, its *hk'a ha sheh hpa* or "master who takes care of the village": "from spirit of the wild, to lord of the place."

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¹⁶ Each chapter in this preliminary work is separately paginated.

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