



Disturbed Souls and Angered Spirits

The Interpretation and Response to Sickness among the Lahu People of the Yunnan-Northern Southeast Asia Borderlands

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Abstract. – Among the Lahu people of the Yunnan-Northern Southeast Asia borderlands, the conjunction of material form and spiritual essence signifies normality, fine condition, safety and, in sentient beings, good health. The disjunction of matter and essence betokens abnormality, poor or broken condition, danger and, in sentient beings, sickness, possibly leading to death. Consequently, Lahu peoples traditionally have interpreted physical and mental sickness in human kind as the consequence of “spirit/soul” disturbance. Consequent upon self- or specialist interpretations of omens and/or dreams, particular instances of ill-health and, sometimes, death are attributed to the escape of spirit essence (*aw₁ ha*) from the physical body (*aw₁ to*), or else to an attack upon the *aw₁ ha* by one of a legion of spirit entities that Lahu term, generically, as *ne* (cognate with the Burmese word *nat*). This article explores some of the explanations Lahu people offer for human sickness, the precautions they undertake to protect themselves from it and, in the event that it strikes, those they take to counteract it. These involve, principally, spirit/soul strengthening, spirit/soul recall, and the propitiation or exorcism of angered, or else inherently malevolent spirit entities. [*South-east Asia, Lahu, conception of human beings, sickness, healing*]

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1 Introduction

This article may usefully be read in conjunction with two earlier contributions to *Anthropos*, which, like it, are revised versions of papers read at meetings of the South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Religion (SSEASR): the first “Water in Lahu Ritual and Symbolism” (Walker 2011q) was prepared for the 2009 meetings, whose theme was (appropriate for the conference venue: Bali, Indonesia) “Waters in South and Southeast Asia. Interaction of Culture and Religion”; the second “... Mountains and Their Spirits in Traditional Lahu Cosmography, Belief, and Ritual Practice” (Walker 2015), was read at the 2011 meetings, this time in mountainous Bhutan, with the theme “Mountains in the Religions of South and Southeast Asia. Place, Culture, and Power.” I read a version of this third paper, dealing with Lahu concepts of, and response to sickness, at the 2013 SSEASR meetings held at Santo Tomas University in Manila, Philippines, whose theme was “Healing, Belief Systems, Cultures, and Religions of South and Southeast Asia.”

The first of these three articles, which appeared in *Anthropos* 106 contains, *inter alia*, a reasonably detailed “ethnographic background” (Walker 2011q: 359–361) to the Tibeto-Burman-speaking Lahu peoples of the Yunnan-Northern Southeast Asia borderlands; the second article, in *Anthropos* 110, provides (Walker 2015: 28–30) essential materials on the worldview of the Lahu peoples, includ-

ing subsections on Lahu animism (29) and Lahu theism (29f.). To avoid undue repetition within the pages of the same journal, these data are not repeated here; they are, however, indispensable for a thorough appreciation of the present contribution.

2 The Animistic Premises of Health and Sickness, Life and Death among the Lahu-speaking Peoples

Among Lahu traditionalists,¹ “ill health” – physical or mental – when not attributed to purely mundane and readily explicable causes such as, for example, pregnancy pains, consumption of inappropriate food or drink, inclement climate, excessive hard labour, imbecility from birth, old age, etc., is most likely to be attributed to soul disturbance. Sometimes, Lahu say, the normal – therefore healthy – relationship between the physical body and its soul or spiritual essence is upset because the *aw ha* (soul/spirit) – at least one of them – has left its anchor, the physical body, and has wandered away.

Sometimes, my Lahu teachers suggested, a soul wanders off of its own accord, usually due to the attraction of some pleasurable object or person – quite possibly a masquerading malicious spirit, tempting the unsuspecting *aw ha* from its bodily anchor. Sometimes, it is said, an *aw ha* proactively seeks to follow a much-loved relative or friend who has died. In this event, Lahu believe, the *aw ha* must speedily be coaxed back to its proper human abode, lest it join the deceased in the land of the dead, thus bringing about the physical death of the person from whose body it has escaped.

On occasion, Lahu say, a soul may be frightened away from its bodily anchor due to its owner having suffered some terrifying experience, for example, by unexpectedly encountering a dangerous animal or strange person in the forest, by experiencing a close brush with death, etc. Alternatively, Lahu maintain, a less-than-fully-robust soul may be enticed to leave its proper abode through the machinations of a malevolent spirit.

In this connection I can do no better than quote from the writings of the late Harold Mason Young, who was born among the Lahu and spoke their language as a native; his father was William Marcus Young, the pioneer American Baptist missionary among these people in Kengtung, Burma, as well

as in Lancang, Yunnan Province, China.² Harold Young (2013: 199) writes:

When a person is badly frightened, shocked from an attack by some wild beast, beaten, or has suffered some terrible physical ordeal, his spirit is believed to leave the body and to commune with the spirits of the forest. Once the spirit has tasted of the freedom and pleasure enjoyed by other spirits, the [Lahu] belief is that it is reluctant again to be confined to a human body with all [the] restrictions and limitations the physical being imposes. Unless the wandering or departed spirit is called back to again take up abode in the body, the person will die.

A soul wandering of its own accord is probably the most frequent “super-mundane” explanation of sickness among the Lahu people. But an alternative diagnosis – also common – is soul capture. In this case, Lahu say, the *aw ha* has not proactively left its owner’s body; rather it has been taken away by a malicious spirit. In everyday speech, Lahu refer to this situation as *ne che ve*, “spirit bites,” but in the propitiatory prayers directed towards such a “biting spirit,” as often as not, there will appear the phrase “if you have set this person’s soul in your iron prison, if you have put it into your copper prison [in this case, “iron and copper” constitute a poetic couplet signifying “strong”], please now release this soul; do not punish this poor and unworthy person.”³

Certain “biting” spirits are said to inflict specific ailments on their victims. Members of my Lahu Nyi study community in North Thailand, for example, would sometimes attribute swelling of hands and feet and itchiness of skin to an attack by the *mvuh hteh ne* or lightning spirit (an association apparently widespread among Lahu elsewhere [cf. Telford 1937: 115; Xu 1993b: 79]), bouts of fever (akin to malaria) to the *a la mi shi jaw ne* or rainbow spirit, and a sharp pain in the crown of the head to the *mvuh nyi ne* or sun spirit. Some Lahu in Yunnan’s Lancang County (as reported by Chinese ethnographers Xu et al. [1990: 46, 353]) attribute red eyes to an attack by the *ha pa ne* or moon spirit, headache, dizziness, and stomach pains to an as-

1 By “Lahu traditionalist” I mean a Lahu who has not accepted, exclusively, an alien worldview, be it Buddhism, Christianity, or Marxist atheism.

2 For the story of William Young’s missionary work in Burma and China, see Walker (2003: 577–588; 593–613; also thirteen illustrated page spreads in the *Borneo Bulletin*, published in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam (Walker 2010a, b; 2011a–g, k–n).

3 *Chaw ya ho ti, ma pfuh leh ka ti, ma pfuh, naw sho hk’aw keu g’a k’o, sho hk’aw geu la she; kui hk’aw keu g’a k’o, kui hk’aw geu la she; a ci paweh la va la she meh!* Literally: the person carries no wisdom, carries no truth; if you have put [his/her soul] inside your iron prison, open up your iron prison; if you have put [his/her soul] inside your copper prison, open up your copper prison, please release [his/her soul]!

sault by the *hk'aw ne* or mountain spirit, and bodily swellings to spite of the *i'ka'ne* or water spirit.

Apart from attributing specific ailments to particular spirits, Lahu frequently name a single spirit as potentially the cause of a wide range of sicknesses. For example, ritual specialists (see below) in my Lahu Nyi study community would commonly attribute any kind of sickness that struck a person who had intentionally or unintentionally entered the domain of a hill, stream, or tree spirit (more-or-less a daily occurrence among these people) as the spirit's punishment for infringement upon its territory. Unless the offended spirit is sufficiently appeased to be willing to release the victim's soul, it is said, his or her body will not quickly recover from the sickness that has struck; indeed, he or she may even die.

Wandering and captured souls doubtless constitute the most common animistic diagnoses of sickness among Lahu peoples, but they by no means exhaust the number of possible attributions. Among these, too important to be ignored are spirit invasion, human sorcery, and witchcraft.

Lahu believe certain spirits, rather than enticing human souls to escape from their rightful abode inside a human body, prefer to join them there. In effect, the malicious spirit usurps the *aw ha*'s role by seizing control of its victim's physical body. Since Lahu refer to this phenomenon as *ne' geh ve*, "spirit entering," we may usefully talk of these invaders as "spirits of demoniacal possession." Later, we will observe how this kind of "spirit invasion" is also one of the modes of attack utilised by a *ne' chaw pa/ma*, a witch, literally a "man/woman harbouring a spirit." But not all spirits of demoniacal possession are those harboured by witches.

In his book-length article "Animism in Kengtung State," James Telford (1937), the Scots-American who succeeded William Young as head of the American Baptists' Lahu work,⁴ names (161) these demoniacal spirits as *ya k'a*. (This word is derived – through Pali *rakkha* – from Sanskrit *rākṣasa*, Lahu likely acquiring it from Tai Buddhist neighbours to whom it was probably transmitted, centuries ago, by Sinhalese Buddhist monks, either directly or through Mon intermediaries.)

Following N. M. Kansara (2011), in classical Indian belief a *rākṣasa* is a person with a "demoniacal nature," a "fiend" or an evil spirit. There are, Kansara informs us, three classes of *rākṣasa*, one

of which comprises "nocturnal demons," "fiends," and the like, a conception close to that of the Lahu. To Kansara's explanation we may add Margaret and James Stutley's (1977: 245) observation that *rākṣasa* "wander about at night ... and can assume various forms, often those of dogs, eagles, vultures, owls, cuckoos, dwarfs, and of husbands and lovers." Again, these are ideas very close to those of Lahu on the subject.

Telford writes (1937: 161–163) that Lahu identify two classes of *ya k'a*: *ya k'a na* (black) and *ya k'a hpu* (white). Kengtung Lahu told Telford that *ya k'a na* are much more vicious and dangerous than are *ya k'a hpu*. A black *ya k'a* enters a victim's body and, establishing itself in the abdominal region, its presence there frequently proves fatal to its human host; by contrast, a white *ya k'a* "usually confines its activities within the mouth of the possessed person," who "seldom if ever die[s] as a direct result of its action" (Telford 1937: 161).

Personally, I never encountered the word *ya ka* among the Lahu Nyi I studied in North Thailand; certainly I failed to discover any form of classification of the spirits of demoniacal possession into more- and less-harmful entities. But I feel certain my Lahu Nyi friends would have recognised immediately Telford's description of the black *ya k'a* as the fearful spirits they believe to take possession of human bodies, causing their victims to suffer insanity and, frequently, death.

Another category of spirit that may enter a human body, thereby causing serious disturbance to the body-soul relationship, is that malevolently released by a sorcerer, usually working on behalf of a client who intends to harm and, frequently, to kill an enemy. In Lahu terms, sorcery means "releasing a harmful spirit/s against another person," for which they use the phrase *ne' pi pfuh ve*.⁵ (The individual components of this phrase I am still unable fully to comprehend.) In his "Lahu–English–Thai Dictionary," scholar-missionary Paul Lewis (Telford's successor in Kengtung⁶) glosses the phrase as "for a spirit to put a curse on someone" (Lewis 1986: 246). But this no more than partially covers an activity that, most importantly, involves sending malicious spirits against an enemy (or a client's enemy). In his "The Dictionary of Lahu," American linguist and foremost Western authority on the Lahu language, James A. Matisoff, renders the phrase as

4 For Telford's missionary career among the Lahu in Kengtung, Burma, see Hunter (1946) and Walker (2003: 654–665); also four illustrated page spreads in the Borneo Bulletin (Walker 2011h–j, o).

5 My Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) informants in North Thailand used the phrase *ne' pi pfuh da ve*, a usage confirmed also by Telford (1937: 140f.) and one that I have used in my own publications, viz. Walker (1983b; 2003: 290).

6 For further information on Paul Lewis's career as a Baptist missionary in Kengtung, see Walker (2003: 665ff.; 2011p).

nẽ pi pfuh_ ve (his *nê pi pū ve*), which he translates as “kill[ing] someone by using black magic with spirits” (1988: 777). In ethnographic terms, this is the sounder translation, but one that likewise fails to offer a comprehensive understanding of the Lahu original. *Nẽ*, of course, means “spirit/spirits”, *pi ve* is given elsewhere in Matisoff’s dictionary (1988: 815, s. v. *pi* [V], 3rd entry) as “exert divine power (either creative or destructive, but always efficacious)” and one of the meanings of *pfuh_ ve* is “to carry on the back.” It is possible – I am far from certain – that the phrase means something like “exerting supernatural power to cause somebody to have to bear the burden of malicious spirits.” Etymological considerations aside, the general meaning of *nẽ pfuh_ ve* is clear enough: “causing another person’s body to be invaded by death-provoking malicious spirits.”

Elders of my Lahu Nyi study community in North Thailand related that the spirits a sorcerer releases against his victim are called *gũ* and, if not swiftly exorcised through a rite of counter-sorcery (cf. Walker 1983b), certainly will kill the person whose body they have entered. (Some account of this counter-sorcery rite, called *gũ g’a_ ve* “driving away the *g’ũ* spirits, will be given in Sect. 4.5 of this article, which deals with rites of spirit exorcism more generally.)

The dispatch of evil spirits so that they may enter the body of a sorcerer’s victim is well documented among Lahu communities over most of the area of the Yunnan-northern Southeast Asia borderlands in which these people live. The following are some examples from Kengtung in eastern Burma and Yunnan in southwestern China.

From Kengtung comes missionary-scholar Telford’s report (1937: 140) that:

... with regard to deep-rooted and bitter personal hatreds[,] the counsel of the chiefs and elders is frequently disregarded and the art of black magic is resorted to as a means of obtaining revenge. This practice of black magic is not performed except in circumstances where an individual feels *and feels most keenly* [emphasis added] that he has been terribly wronged ...

Telford’s remarks, incidentally, correspond closely to what I learned from my Lahu Nyi informants in North Thailand, who told me, it is only “when a Lahu person is so angry with somebody that tears come out of his eyes three times,” that he or she will seek revenge through releasing spirits against the one he or she hates.

For Lahu in Yunnan, let me first cite a 1987 work written by Yang Zhu 杨铸 for “Gengma County Records,” in which he talks (Yang 1987: 21 f.) about

the “many reports” of “Lahu cursing magic” he encountered while researching the socio-cultural and economic situation of the County’s Lahu people, and how Lahu informants told him that “such magic is very effective.” Yang does not specify that he writes of dispatching evil spirits, but the details of his “cursing rite” match very closely those recorded by other authors for *nẽ pfuh_ ve*. A second Chinese-language article worth mentioning here concerns Lancang Lahu. The principal investigator, Wang Zhati 王扎体 (himself of Lahu ethnicity) and his co-author Yü Lijin 余丽嘉, specifically mention Lahu sorcerers releasing “*wu*” (Wang and Yü 1986: 21 f.). I assume *wu* is the rendition as a Chinese character (viz. 吾) of the Lahu word *gũ*.

Gũ spirits are certainly much feared supermundane entities, but even more frightening are the witch-familiars. Lahu commonly know these spirit entities as *taw_*, but among the Lahu I studied in North Thailand they were called *tsuh_ tsuh_*. (In the Lahu Na dialect of Lahu, the second syllable, *tsuh_*, when coupled with *taw_* carries the meaning of “vicious/evil spirit” generically [cf. Matisoff 1988: 667, s. v. *tɔʔ-chĩ*].) In the Lahu Nyi village where I lived, I learned that *tsuh_ tsuh_ caw_ ve chaw* “people who have a *tsuh_ tsuh_*” may either have inherited the demon from a parent, or accidentally acquired it when picking up some very beautiful objects that happened to strike their fancy (this being a favourite ploy these demons use, my informants said, to gain a human host). In either case, a person who hosts a *tsuh_ tsuh_* – through no personal fault – is unable to do anything about it. Without, I believe, intending a moral judgment, Lahu Nyi fear those who harbour a *tsuh_ tsuh_* as inherently evil people.

Among the Lahu I studied, people believed that a witch’s *tsuh_ tsuh_*, with intent to cause injury to a victim, would periodically leave its host’s body, either as an immaterial spirit, or in the physical form of a cat or some other animal familiar. A *tsuh_ tsuh_*, my informants explained, might either bite its victim, or else enter the latter’s body, thereby disturbing the body-soul balance we have discussed earlier. If the demon chooses to bite its victim, not only is death believed swiftly to follow, but the “biting” is not necessarily metaphorical, as is its use to describe many other kinds of spirit attack. On the contrary, it may be very real indeed; my informants maintained that the *tsuh_ tsuh_* frequently leaves its fang marks on the body of the person it molests. But apart from the victim, who sees the evil spirit in the form of its host’s body, nobody is able observe the *tsuh_ tsuh_* actually attacking its victim. It happens sometimes, I was told, that a dying person claims to have been attacked by a *tsuh_ tsuh_* and, before ex-

piring, names the supposed host. In such an event, informants maintained, the host will be banished from the village, but not executed. This is because, they said, people know that it is not the host's personal fault that he or she possesses such evil. (Evidence from Yunnan [*infra*], however, suggests that many a Lahu has lost his or her life for supposedly hosting a *taw*.)

When a *tsuh* *tsuh* enters the body of its victim, the situation is serious but not as dangerous as when it bites. (This is precisely the opposite to other forms of spirit molestation, where, as we have seen, "invasion" is more dangerous than "biting.") Death is not inevitable, but an exorcist must be engaged to combat the spirit.

Tsuh *tsuh*, Lahu Nyi informants said, are particularly fond of blood and, sometimes, will lurk around the house of a woman who is about to deliver a child. They related to me an incident in which, during a woman's labour, her household members suddenly heard strange noises coming from underneath their home. One of them went to investigate, taking with him, in typical male Lahu fashion, his loaded gun. He saw a cat and, suspecting it to be a *tsuh* *tsuh*, fired several shots at the animal. The cat vanished immediately, but next morning a man in a neighbouring village was discovered dead in his house, his body riddled with bullet wounds. Of course, everybody believed the dead man was the *tsuh* *tsuh*'s host.

Lest my data on Lahu witchcraft beliefs be considered overly fanciful and my informants suspected of "pulling the proverbial anthropologist's leg," I will cite some similar reports from Burma and Yunnan (mostly concerning Lahu Na; at any rate, not Lahu Nyi).

For Kengtung, Burma, we have Telford's account, particularly interesting in that it suggests (note emphasis added in the quote just below) that, among these Lahu at least, the possession of a *taw* is not necessarily believed to be involuntary. Telford (1937: 159 f.) writes:

Certain persons are believed to be in possession of Taws [*taw*] and those individuals *who choose to bring themselves under their demoniacal control and power* [emphasis added] are able to transform their human bodies, at their convenience, into all kinds of animal forms, such as pigs, cows, buffaloes, cats, dogs and squirrels. Thus disguised the ... Taw goes forth in the night to perform his [or her] foul and fearful acts upon both animals and human beings. ...

A Taw is more frequently heard than seen ... [being] seldom observed except by the person who is attacked. The Taw grapples and wrestles with man [*sic*] and attempts to choke his victim with a death-like grip of the

throat. This ... Taw invades houses and violently assaults people when asleep, and he also contests with wakeful man in the dark and dreadful jungle. His custom is to bite the throat of man and it becomes perfectly evident to the victim's friends and neighbours that a man has been bitten by this demon in animal form, for there is inflicted upon the victim a big neck wound which immediately swells. His speech is also affected, his words being uttered slowly and confusedly, so that the listener does not understand. ...

When a man enters into actual combat with a Taw, it is impossible to kill it on the spot. He may shoot it with his gun and slash it with his sword and draw its blood but the Taw gets away and returns to its village and there may be found a man, from whom the Taw has gone out, lying in his house dying of gun-shot wounds or from bleeding gashes inflicted by the gun or dah [machete] of the person whom the ... Taw had attacked.

Modern Chinese-language works on Lahu socio-cultural institutions also provide a relatively large body of corroborative data on *taw* beliefs in Yunnan. A couple of examples must suffice for this article. Writing of Lahu living in Lincang Prefecture, Lahu author Luo Zonghe 罗忠和 (1992: 119) mentions the *duci* 杜此 (probably a rendition into Chinese characters of *taw* *tsuh*) as a spirit that inhabits the bodies of living people and which is "able to transform itself at night into various kinds of animals and plants [*sic*; probably "plant" is added here to form a couplet – for literary, not ethnographic purposes!] in order to scare people." Similarly, The anonymously authored book "Lie Hu de Minzu" 猎虎的民族 [The Tiger Hunting Nationality] (n. d. [ca. 1984]: 90–99) tells how a *taw* may take multiple forms: a woman, a cat, a big white horse, so as to harm or frighten its victims. The book mentions also that "in the dark old society ... if a village headman came to know that a particular person was harbouring ... [such a demon], he would mobilise his villagers to seize that person and burn him or her alive," while all the witch's "family members were banished from the village and his or her house was burned down." The book then adds: "many innocent people were tragically killed" – a clear-cut contradiction of what my Lahu Nyi informants in North Thailand told me.

3 Specialists in Animistic Practices: *Maw* *pa* and *She* *pa*

To deal with spirits, to recall the wandering souls of the sick, or otherwise endangered, and occasionally to practice or to nullify sorcery, a traditionalist Lahu community usually may count on the services

of one or more *maw⁻pa₋* (a loan from Tai,⁷ loosely translatable into English as “doctor,” in this case “of the occult”) and, much less frequently, on a *she₋pa* (etymology still obscure to me) or extractor of foreign objects inserted into a victim’s body by a malicious spirit or by a sorcerer. I shall begin with the *maw⁻pa₋*.

3.1 The *maw⁻pa₋*: Master of the Occult and Custodian of Tradition

Maw⁻pa₋ are people (more-or-less exclusively men) who have special expertise in one or several occult arts. Beyond this – perhaps more commonly in the Yunnan heartlands than on the Northern Thailand periphery – they are the principal custodians of Lahu tradition and oral history. And this is not all. Many are reported also to be exceptionally-skilled herbalists.

The anonymously published book “Lie Hu de Minzu” 猎虎的民族 [The Tiger Hunting Nationality] well summarizes (n. d.: 93) the *maw⁻pa₋*’s role among Lahu in Yunnan:

[He] knows more than ordinary people about the rules of the Lahu people; he is able to chant the [monumentally-long⁸] Lahu creation myth as well as the ancient history of Lahu migrations. He knows about the people’s customs and traditions ...

To these words we may add those of Liang Kesheng 梁克生 and others (1992: ch. 9; p. 24)⁹ in their work “*Lahu Zu Shi*” 拉祜族史 [History of the Lahu Nationality]:

Moba 摩八 [*Maw⁻pa₋*] have to know about the customs and habits of their people, as well as to know the legends and tales that relate the origins of such social customs. They must also know the history and culture of their people. A ... *moba* should be able to recite the traditional songs that tell of historical events. But, more importantly, the *moba* must memorise the different prayers, chants, and spells used in the offering rites for the spirits ... He must also know the different techniques for divination and how to interpret omens. In addition, the *moba* must have some medical knowledge.

In other words, although the *maw⁻pa₋* is only a part-time specialist – in everyday life a farmer like everybody else – in a very real sense, he is also the

intellectual in traditional Lahu village society. In Chinese, Liang et al. (1992: ch. 9; p. 24) characterise him, most appropriately, as a *neng ren* 能人 (capable person) and comment that “it is no exaggeration to say the Lahu *moba* are among the most capable of people.”

Of the various roles a Lahu *maw⁻pa₋* assumes, one of the most common is that of spirit propitiator and exorcist. Frequently, therefore, Lahu describe their *maw⁻pa₋* as *ne⁻te sheh₋hpa⁻*, or “masters in dealing with spirits.” The late Harold Young (2013: 196), formerly (as noted earlier) of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, rightly portrays the Lahu *maw⁻pa₋* as representing “the only link between the molesting evil spirits and the people ... without whose assistance no one can prosper since there is always a time when everyone will need the intermediary’s help.”

Another of the *maw⁻pa₋*’s oft-performed activities involves the recalling of souls, frequently (as noted earlier) believed to have been seized by evil spirits. In this role, *maw⁻pa₋* may be termed *ha hku pa₋*, “men who call on souls” (“call back” might be the better, though linguistically less accurate, gloss). Yet another function of *maw⁻pa₋* is to divine the cause of sickness or other misfortune (see below). As such they are *taw⁻hte₋pa₋*, “men who divine.”

In addition to these essentially ritual services that *maw⁻pa₋* provide for the village community, many of them are reputed to be expert herbalists (*na⁻tsuh⁻* “medicine,” *shi₋pa₋* “knowing men”). I must confess, I did not observe the Lahu Nyi *maw⁻pa₋* I knew in North Thailand to be more knowledgeable herbalists than several other elders, male and female, in my study villages. But then, regrettably, I failed to study this subject with the thoroughness it undoubtedly deserves.¹⁰ Anyway, I have little doubt

10 Valuable data may be gleaned from Edward F. Anderson’s, “Plants and People of the Golden Triangle” (1993), wherein the author records Lahu boiling together *Brassaiopsis ficifolia* and *Pteris biauaria* and having the patient breathe the vapours, as a treatment for malaria (134); boiling together the leaves and stems of *Blumea membranacea* (Asteraceae) and drinking the liquid for relief from aching bones (135); mixing together *Crateva magna* (Capparidaceae) with other herbs (not specified) to make a poultice for broken bones (135); mixing together and pounding into a poultice *Croton oblongifolius* (Euphorbiaceae) and the leaves of *Cymbopogon citratus* (Poaceae) (lemon grass), pine needles and salt, then applying the mixture to the area of a broken bone and securing it with a piece of cloth (135); boiling the bark of *Erythrina variegata* (Fabaceae) and applying the liquid to the area of a broken bone so as to facilitate subsequent manipulation into its correct position (136); mixing together fresh and fire-roasted parts of *Gynostemma pedatum* (Cucurbitaceae) and applying the mixture as a poultice to treat a broken bone, sprain or sore muscle; making a poultice from *Litsea glut-*

7 Tai (Pinyin transcription, “Dai” [傣]) is employed here to refer to Tai-speaking people in general, not exclusively to the “Thai” of Thailand.

8 For a much abbreviated text, see Walker (1995).

9 Every chapter in this provisional work is separately paginated.

that Liang et al. (1992: ch. 8; pp. 75 f.) are perfectly correct when they write:

... while every adult Lahu knows about a few kinds of medicinal herbs, the *moba* 摩八 are the most experienced people among the Lahu in such matters. A *moba* pays particular attention to the study of medicinal herbs so as to supplement his ritual activity as he seeks to heal a patient. ... Consequently *moba* are sometimes called *naci mo* 那此摩 (*na^ˈ tsuh^ˈ* [medicine] *maw^ˈ*) ... in other words, “people who can heal.”

In his “Lahu–English–Thai Dictionary,” Paul Lewis (1986: 218) glosses *maw^ˈ pa^ˈ* as “shaman.” If we use this term to mean, *sensu stricto*, a religious functionary credited with the ability to dispatch his or her “soul” or “spiritual counterpart” from the body, so as to communicate with helper-spirits and/or do battle with evil ones (cf. Kehoe 2000: 11; Walker 2003: 488–499), then it may be applied to some but by not all Lahu *maw^ˈ pa^ˈ*. A *maw^ˈ pa^ˈ* whose spirit is said to “show the way” to the soul of a dead person by accompanying it to the very threshold of the land of the dead, before returning to the *maw^ˈ pa^ˈ*’s own body, is clearly performing a “shamanistic journey.” But a *maw^ˈ pa^ˈ* who engages in spirit propitiation and exorcism, or functions as a counter-sorcerer – even as a sorcerer – employing liturgical prayer and gesture, along with ritual artefacts, seems hardly to fit the category of “shaman.”¹¹

nosa (Lauraceae), also from the bark of *Saurauia roxburghii* (Actinidiaceae), to treat a broken bone (136 f.), boiling the leaves of the same *Litsea glutinosa* to produce a shampoo to control dandruff and kill head lice (138); and boiling the leaves of *Ficus semicordata* and drinking the infusion as a tonic for general body weakness (139). This, of course, is no more than a small sample of the herbal cures known to Lahu. For those who command Chinese, the most comprehensive studies of Lahu herbal medicines are the anonymously written 1987 book “Lahu Zu Chang Yong Yao” 拉伧族常用药 [Common Herbal Medicines of the Lahu Nationality], Kunming (1987) and that on the traditional medical system of the Lahu-related Kucong people, edited by Zhang Shaoyun (1994) under the title *Lahu Zu Changtong Yiyao Yanjiu* 拉伧族传统医药研究 [A Study of Traditional Lahu Medicine]. There is also a relatively recent booklet in English, published from Germany, viz. Birkenberg et al. (2009), entitled *Medical Plant Knowledge among Black Lahu People in Huai Hia Village, Pang Ma Pha District, Mae Hong Song Province, Thailand*.

- 11 There are ritual specialists called *ta^ˈ la^ˈ pa^ˈ* (male) or *ta^ˈ la^ˈ ma* (female), who among Lahu Nyi are also known as *ka^ˈ shaw^ˈ pa^ˈ* and *ka^ˈ shaw^ˈ ma*. These people practise shamanistic techniques, but belong irrefutably to the “side of divinity” (*G^ˈ ui^ˈ sha ve hpaw^ˈ*), being, as my Lahu Nyi informants told me, “joined by a rope to Divinity (*G^ˈ ui^ˈ sha aw^ˈ ca^ˈ ceh da^ˈ ve*).” As such, although these people are believed capable of identifying particular malicious spirits, they are hardly “people who deal with spirits” in the manner of the *maw^ˈ pa^ˈ*.

3.2 The *She^ˈ pa^ˈ*: Extractor of Foreign Matter from People’s Bodies

She^ˈ pa^ˈ are ritual healers credited with the ability to extract foreign objects – especially small pieces of leather, cloth, paper and pebbles – from the bodies of their patients. Such materials, people believe, are planted by sorcerers, or else directly by evil spirits. Personally, I never came across a *she^ˈ pa^ˈ* among the Lahu Nyi I studied in North Thailand, but one of my esteemed successors in Lahu Nyi field studies in that country, the Japanese anthropologist Nishimoto Yoichi, had the opportunity both to meet and to photograph in action a Lahu Nyi *she^ˈ pa^ˈ*.¹²

The aforementioned Harold Young (writing of his memories of Lahu in Lancang and Burma in the 1920s and ’30s) reports (2013: 192) the presence of *she^ˈ pa^ˈ* in Lahu villages as being “not too common” and he adds, “[o]ftentimes, there will be only one She Pa in a large area.” Nonetheless, their services seem to have been much in demand, Young writing that they were “kept on the steady go answering calls in all surrounding villages” (2013: 192).

Contrary to reports on the paucity of Lahu *she^ˈ pa^ˈ* is the much more recent declaration by Chinese ethnographer Xu Yong-an 徐永安 (1993a: 18), that he had discovered as many as six of them in a single Lahu village in Lancang. But Xu also tells us that “the villagers do not like to have so many *xieba* 邪巴 (*she^ˈ pa^ˈ*) living in a single village ... [believing] that this will lead to having too many sick people” (1993a: 18).

In the light of the reports by Telford in the 1930s and by Xu, sixty years later, Lahu seem to believe that *she^ˈ pa^ˈ* have a super-mundane ability to see right into their patients’ bodies and thus to determine whether or not a foreign body is imbedded in them. Telford (1937: 196) specifically mentions “the abdominal region or the chest cavity” as the places where such foreign matter is lodged and talks of the *she^ˈ pa^ˈ*’s “piercing vision,” while Xu (1993a: 18) is much more specific, giving us a verbatim account by one of the practising *she^ˈ pa^ˈ* in his Lancang study village.

Previously [Xu has the *she^ˈ pa^ˈ* telling him] I was quite incapable of performing the activities of a *xieba*. Then, in

and *she^ˈ pa^ˈ*. (I should note also that Nishimoto Yoichi (2003: 130), in his “The Religion of the Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) in Northern Thailand. General Description with Preliminary Remarks”, has *ka^ˈ shaw^ˈ ma* as female counterpart to the *ta^ˈ la^ˈ*.)

- 12 Dr. Nishimoto Yoichi kindly gave permission for me to reproduce some of his photographs, which appear in monochrome in my book *Merit and the Millennium* (Walker 2003 (Plate 26, following p. 208) and in colour in my article “Exorcists and Extractors” (Walker 2004) for the *Borneo Bulletin*.

1983, I was sick for a long period of time and even when I recovered, my health was not fully restored. I even had problems with my vision so that I would see people and objects in double. Then, sometimes I was able to see right through a person's body; through the clothing I was able to see a person's genitals, and even intestines, stomach, heart, lungs and liver.

4 Animism in Practice

Divination, calling back souls, propitiating and exorcising spirits, and performing and counteracting sorcery constitute the principal manifestations of Lahu animism in practice. Unfortunately it will not be possible in this already lengthy article to do full justice to the many different rituals that Lahu perform in connection with their spirit world. Some relatively brief notes on a few of them will have to suffice.¹³

4.1 Divination

Much of ritual activity my Lahu Nyi study community sponsored in connection with spirits was either related to calendrical events and life cycle rites (cf. Walker 2003: 414–504), or else was the consequence of sickness immediately attributable to a particular spirit entity (e.g., somebody fells a tree for firewood and soon after falls sick; everybody knows that a propitiation of the likely-to-have-been-offended tree spirit is in order). But there are occasions when the appropriate ritual response is not immediately apparent; moreover, there are always occasions when the ritual action that has been taken does not achieve the desired end and another cause of the sickness must be sought. At times such as these, Lahu traditionally would call on the expertise of a diviner. (I have never encountered divination as an individual's sole ritual specialty, but rather as one of several services that a *maw⁻pa₋* provides.)

Some forms of divinatory practice Lahu use to identify particular spirit entities generate a simple affirmative or negative response to the diviner's question. For example: "Has this person fallen victim to the Rainbow Spirit?" If divination produces an affirmative reply, the propitiatory rite for the Rainbow Spirit will follow. If the response is negative, the diviner will name another spirit, and so on. Procedures Lahu adopt for such simple divination include measuring a length of cloth, throwing ora-

cle sticks, counting rice grains, and noting whether rice seeds buried in the earth have moved or disappeared altogether by the time the diviner digs them up, usually the following day.¹⁴

A more complicated, but very common form of Lahu divinatory practice is called *g'a⁻pfuh₋tcuh⁻* (chicken femur bones) *nyi ve* (looking at). The diviner removes the *femora* (femur bones) of a sacrificed fowl and, using a sharp knife, carefully scrapes them clean to reveal the tiny holes (*foramina*). Usually, there will be a hole at both top and bottom of the bone, into which the diviner inserts a sliver of bamboo, about the size of a toothpick. Because the angles of the *foramina* vary, so the bamboo slivers will rest at different angles. The diviner holds the two bones side-by-side with their tops facing him. The bone to the left is designated as "the people's-side bone" and that to the right as "the spirits'-side bone." The diviner carefully examines the relative angles of the bamboo slivers on each side (the sharper the angle the better) to determine whether it is the people's side that dominates – obviously a good omen – or the spirits' side – the opposite.

Apart from his use of such "manipulative" strategies, divination may also be based on the occurrence of unusual phenomena. For example, a green Pit viper (*Trimeresurus* spp.) climbing on any part of a house, one of the house dogs attempting to copulate with a pig, or one of the sows bearing a single-sex litter are taken as indicators that malicious *jaw* spirits (associated with houses) are intent on harming the household members. If a buffalo and an ox attempt to copulate, or if one of them breaks a horn, these too are taken as harbingers of ill fortune for their owners, who must swiftly rid themselves of these inauspicious beasts. The interpretation of dream experiences, especially those of a *maw⁻pa₋*, is another method of divination. Li Faming 李发明, a schoolmaster and ethnographer of the Nanmei Lahu of Lincang County in Yunnan writes (1991: 83) that "people suffering sickness or some other misfortune will 'bring a bowl of rice and a chunk of salt as gifts for their *moba* and request him to examine his dreams' [in Lahu, *zuh₋ma⁻ma⁻nyi ve*, "to dream and to look"] and then inform them of what they wish to know."

4.2 Calling Back Souls

When it has been determined – through personal judgement or through divination – that a sick per-

¹³ Although it too is no more than an adumbration, a much fuller treatment appears in my book "Merit and the Millennium" (2003: 179–309).

¹⁴ Details of each of these procedures are recorded in Walker (2003: 181 f.).



Fig. 1: Lahu Ta bo spirit master (left) and assistant in Menghai County, Yunnan, preparing paraphernalia for soul recall rite. (Photo: A. R. Walker)

son's soul has (or has possibly – there is much hedging of bets in Lahu ritual practice) wandered from the patient's body, a performance of the soul-recall ritual is called for. Among the Lahu with whom I lived, this rite invariably was conducted at night, because, it was said, the absconding soul would be too embarrassed to return in daylight. With lighted beeswax candles in his hand and a basket of clothes and jewelry to tempt the soul back, the spirit specialist would chant words like these:

Tonight, this good night, this is not the time for you to tarry in the land of the dead, this is not the time for you to tarry in the land of sickness! This night come back; by tomorrow morning be back in this house.

In the land of the dead, the rice is the rice of death; in the land of sickness, there is no happy place; come back now to the household head's side, come back to the side of the mistress of this house.

and so on.¹⁵

4.3 Spirit Propitiation

If soul recall is the most common ritual therapy for sickness among the Lahu peoples, *ne' cai ve*, or

¹⁵ This is a very brief sketch of the soul recall rite, with several important details omitted. For a fuller rendition, see Walker (2003: 186–196); the original Lahu prayer texts, from which the extract above is taken, are recorded in *Aw ha Hku ve*: The Lahu Nyi Rite for the Recall of a Wandering Soul (Walker (1972a: 21–29).

“compensating spirits” as it is known among Lahu Nyi, must come a close second. There are, for example, rites to pacify the spirits of deceased relatives (Walker 1972b, 1984a), those to gain the permission of “owner-spirits” before infringing on their territory (for example, to build a new village or house,¹⁶ or to fell a new rice field [Walker 1978], etc.), and a great many that are designed to placate those spirits that are believed to have inflicted people with sickness of one kind or another. Limitations of space preclude any comprehensive treatment of these rites of spirit propitiation¹⁷; I shall limit myself to just one example: the propitiation of the *mvuh hteh ne'* or lightning spirit, a major super-mundane force said to be responsible, inter alia, for inflicting deserved retribution on human beings who defy sociocultural norms.¹⁸

¹⁶ See Walker (1983a); the data on spirit-propitiation before house-building are recorded between pages 182 and 188.

¹⁷ I have over the past several decades published more than 300 print pages on propitiatory rites that I investigated in a single Lahu Nyi village in North Thailand. Apart from the articles mentioned in footnotes 16–18 just above, these include (in chronological order): Walker (1976a–d; 1977a–e; 1979; 1980a; 1981a; and 1982).

¹⁸ In his article on religion among Lincang Lahu, Lahu author Luo Zonghe 罗忠和 (1992: 118f.), reports that the lightning spirit is believed to “inspect all corners of the earth, punishing evil and rewarding good. This spirit's eyes are so sharp that nothing can block their view and nobody can escape them ... [W]hen somebody is struck by lightning, it is because they have committed some fault and so deserve to be punished.”

As mentioned earlier in this article, among the Lahu Nyi people I studied in North Thailand – as also among Lahu of other ethnic sub-identities elsewhere – the lightning spirit is thought sometimes to be responsible for swelling of hands and feet, as well as itchiness of skin. The Lahu Nyi of my study communities had two propitiatory rites to deal with this spirit: “*mvuh˘ hteh˘ ne˘ cai˘ ve*” and “*mvuh˘ hteh˘ ne˘ shaw˘ ve*” (*cai˘* means “to recompense”; *shaw˘ ve*, so I was told, carries the meaning of making *elaborate* offerings to a spirit¹⁹). *Ne˘ cai˘ ve*, therefore, is an initial recompense to the offended spirit, *ne˘ shaw˘ ve*, a more elaborate procedure should the first fail to procure the desired result.

The first, simpler, propitiatory rite may be performed in the vicinity of the village, but the specific location has to be the foot of an *a yaw* tree (*Lagerstroemia macrocarpa*, Wall.), preferably one with its trunk bearing the marks of a lightning strike. Characteristically a tall and straight species of tree, the *a yaw* is highly susceptible to lightning strikes and its association in Lahu minds with the lightning spirit ensures that they never use its otherwise attractively-hard wood for house-building purposes.

The officiating spirit-master begins by fashioning four bamboo sticks, each about 10 cm long and sharpened to a point at one end; he then ties a strip of coloured cloth or paper (usually red, black, white, and blue/green) to the blunt end of each stick. These are said to be “gifts for the spirit.” The specialist inserts the sharp ends of the four, flag-like, offering sticks into the tree trunk, attaching to them a leaf cup containing unlighted beeswax candles, puffed rice, and three lengths of cotton cord (red, white, and black). He then begins to chant the propitiatory prayer. Some extracts follow:²⁰

Possessor of great wealth, you shoot at the hills and the hills split into two; you shoot at the rivers and the rivers split into two; you shoot at rocks and those rocks split into two, you shoot at trees and those trees split into two.

Ruler up there, today take back your iron and your copper, take them back and keep them in your iron well,

your copper well, lord, carefully remove this sickness, unload this sickness, protect this person from the ninety-nine kinds of misfortune.

The references in the propitiatory prayer to iron and copper arise from the association of the lightning spirit with these metals. One of my Lahu Nyi informants referred to this spirit as *ca li˘ lon˘*, “the great blacksmith,” while another said the lightning spirit and the *sho ne˘ kui ne˘*, “iron spirit-copper spirit” are one and the same entity. James Telford (1937: 155) mentions the Kengtung Lahu’s belief in a *sho ne˘ kui ne˘*, “iron spirit-copper spirit,” which, so he claims, is “closely related to the lightning spirit.” Harold Young (2013: 209) too mentions this close relationship between the lightning spirit and metal, writing that “the Lahu believe that the lightning spirits have a type of metal axe they hurl to earth when playing in the heavens.” Actually, Young tells us, these “lightning irons” (as the Lahu call them) are bronze-age relics, highly valued for their “supernatural powers” (2013: 209).

If this initial propitiatory rite fails to alleviate a patient’s symptoms, it is likely that the spirit specialist will prescribe the performance of the more complex *mvuh˘ hteh˘ ne˘ shaw˘ ve* rituals. These too must be conducted, preferably at the foot of an *a yaw*, or at least a tree that has been struck by lightning. Here the spirit-master supervises the construction of a small bamboo altar (sometimes two altars are put up), on which are set beeswax candles, a chicken egg, two miniature bamboo tubes (one holding uncooked rice grains and the other, water) and, symbolising the lightning spirit’s close association with metals and blacksmithery, a miniature set of a blacksmith’s tools of trade, all of them crafted from bamboo and wild banana root. Finally, having secured a sacrificial cock and hen from his patient’s home, the spirit-master squats before the altar. With a fowl in each hand, he chants the propitiatory prayer. Again, to preserve space for what still must come, I shall present only extracts here:²¹

This time I pray like this: you who strike with your lightning and separate the sky from the earth, you who strike with your lightning and separate the mountains from the valleys, you have [still] not finished taking back the lightning you have dispatched, you have [still] not finished taking off the lightning you have sent.^[22]

Now you have struck this man between his feet, so that when he is coming and going his feet suffer from a

19 Paul Lewis (1986: 88; s. v. *cai˘ ve*) glosses *shaw˘ ve* (from Tai) as the Lahu Nyi equivalent to the Lahu word *cai˘ ve*. Unfortunately, this gloss fails to explain why my Lahu Nyi informants used the two words to distinguish two contrasting and hierarchically-ordered propitiatory rites.

20 The original, unabbreviated Lahu language texts, with English translations may be found in my article (Walker 1977e: 215–220), but note that the verb *le˘ ve* is mistranslated there as “roll up” (see note 10 there); its meaning is “give up,” “unburden,” “take off,” or “relinquish.” This 1977 article also offers a fuller ethnographic description of the proceedings than there is space for in the present contribution.

21 For a fuller ethnographic treatment, with unabbreviated Lahu language texts and English translations, see my article (Walker 1977e: 220–228).

22 In other words, the first propitiatory rite has proved unsuccessful.

biting sickness, from a death sickness; you have struck this man and his hands suffer from a hot sickness, from a burning sickness.

With his own hand this man has brought for you a three-year old fowl, the whole fowl he gives to you to eat! With his own hand, this man brings everything you can see [on this altar], these many different kinds of offerings he presents to you ...

Today, at the foot of this *a yaw* tree, I have made for you a silver altar; a golden altar I have made for you ...; if the offence was committed at the top of your feet, at the top of your feet I beg your forgiveness and bring offerings for you; if the offence was committed at the top of your hands, at the top of your hands I beg your forgiveness and bring offerings for you.

This man cannot sleep soundly, so take back your iron vapours and your copper vapours; once more take back your dagger vapours and your gun vapours; take back everything you have put inside this man. ...

Do not destroy this man, do not bring him trouble; see the new food and drink this man has brought for you ... he begs your forgiveness and brings for you these offerings made by his own hands ...

During the course of the propitiatory ritual, the spirit-master sacrifices the cock by slitting its throat with his machete; he then butchers and cooks it. This is for the spirit to eat. Meanwhile, he releases the hen into the wild. This bird is for the spirit to tend. If both propitiatory rites fail, it is incumbent on the patient or his family members to consult an alternative diviner to determine the identity of another type of spirit that surely must be the cause of his sickness.

Among Lahu traditionalists, to deal with spirits, in large part, is a matter of propitiation – in Lahu terms, of “humbling oneself” (or pretending to humble oneself, as my Lahu Nyi friends candidly would remark) before a spirit or spirits. In this manner, Lahu believe, they may be able to thwart future misfortune (prophylactic ritual we may call it), or else alleviate current distress (curative ritual). The propitiatory rituals are, by and large, quite simple; nevertheless, they must be performed by a specialist, whose major qualification is his command of the appropriate ritual language for addressing these supernatural entities. (From my observations much greater flexibility occurs in the manual aspects of the rituals than in the spoken or chanted words that must accompany them.)

There are some occasions when propitiation, so Lahu traditionalists believe, is insufficient to counter the machinations of the more malicious of the *ne*. In this event, the offending spirits must be “driven away” (*ne g’a ve*) or “beaten” (*ne jaw ve*). And with this we leave the realm of spirit propitiation, to enter into that of spirit exorcism.

4.4 Spirit Exorcism

We may identify (but this is not an indigenous exegesis) two genres of spirit exorcism among the Lahu peoples. The first involves the expulsion of free (materially-unbounded) malicious spirits that are thought to be intent on causing people to meet violent and/or bloody ends. The second entails the exorcism of spirits of various kinds – some free, others, as is the case with witch familiars, associated with a human anchor – that have forced entry into a victim’s body: in other words, the “spirits of demoniacal possession” mentioned earlier in this article.

Among the Lahu Nyi with whom I lived in North Thailand, the principal recurrent occasions for spirit exorcism were those involving the expulsion of *jaw* spirits that are closely related to domestic dwellings and of *meh* and *mvuh*, the spirits of people who had died “bad deaths.”²³ As with propitiatory ritual, it is quite beyond the limits of an article of this nature for me to discuss more than a single example of Lahu Nyi exorcistic rites.²⁴ I offer here a basic sketch of the *jaw te ve* (dealing with the *jaw* spirits) sequence, but I must emphasise that this ritual sequence is usually held in conjunction with that for sending away the *meh* spirits, which I am compelled to omit from this article.²⁵

Preparations for a *jaw* exorcism involve fashioning a number of ritual artefacts:

23 I was particularly fascinated to learn from Nishimoto Yoichi’s article (2003: 123), that the community he studied in the Chiang Rai area made a relatively clear-cut distinction between *meh* and *mvuh* spirits. They identified both as “spirits of the bad dead,” but *meh*, Nishimoto writes, are believed to be “malicious and especially offensive to ... [their] relatives,” whereas *mvuh* “are not harmful like *meh* ... they roar at their tombs [graves?] every year on the same day of the month as their death date ...”. I heard nothing of this distinction in my study villages, but it is supported by Harold Young (2013: 216f.), who identifies *mvuh ne* as “moaning spirits” and, like Nishimoto, maintains they are associated with women who die in childbirth.

24 Several decades back I published a 46-page article in *Anthropos* on the combined *jaw* and *meh* spirit exorcism (Walker 1976a). These data I managed to condense into 23 pages for a book (Walker 2003: 249–272). For a recent popular series of newspaper articles on the Lahu, I was obliged to engage in further condensation, covering the *jaw* and *meh* spirit exorcism in just five full-page spreads for *The Borneo Bulletin* (Walker 2005a–e). Alas, even that brief treatment is too long for the present article!

25 See additional articles that I have written on Lahu Nyi spirit exorcism: Walker (1980b; 1981b), a further article on *jaw* exorcism to introduce a single Lahu text (1984b), and another, on the combined *Jaw te Meh Jaw ve* that presents three additional and previously unpublished texts (1988, republ. 1992).

- (a) effigies of a horse and an elephant, roughly carved from the root of a wild banana tree (*Musa acuminata* Colla), are for the *jaw* spirits to transport themselves far away from people's homes;
- (b) spirit guards, woven from strips of split bamboo, are to prevent the spirits from returning;
- (c) effigies of a green Pit viper (*Trimeresurus* spp.), and
- (d) of a human corpse, woven from strands of fresh cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*), are gifts for the spirits;
- (e) head rings, made from lengths of split bamboo, are worn during the exorcism by the household members to entrap any spirit that might have attached itself to their body;
- (f) a *jaw yeh* (literally "jaw spirits' house," but resembling a broom), made from materials (wood, bamboo, grass, banana leaves, etc.) that the spirits need to build a new house (hence the artefact's name) to substitute for the human abode they must now vacate;
- (g) a winnowing tray containing puffed millet and sand, which will be thrown at the house roof during the exorcism, and a single chicken egg, to be used for divinatory purposes; and, finally,
- (h) a basket containing items of family jewelry and a single length of white cloth, as gifts for the *jaw*, and beeswax candles, a necessary component of almost all Lahu Nyi ritual activity, which is why they sometimes call themselves *peh* (from *peh* *haw* "beeswax candles") *tu* *pa* "beeswax candle burning people."

The officiating spirit-master must fortify himself by invoking the aid of the village's tutelary spirit, those of his client's house and, especially, of his special patron, a supernatural entity called Pi ya. A few extracts from the invocatory chants must substitute here for detailed descriptions of the liturgical actions.²⁶

To the village tutelary spirit, the spirit-master prays:²⁷

Oh you who watch over the four corners of this village, today, at this place within the four corners of this village, I will use these lips of mine to drive away these male and these female *jaw* spirits.

I am able to command these spirits but a single time; you, oh guardian of the village, on my behalf command them ten times.

I shall not drive away the souls of these people; I shall not drive away the souls of these animals; carefully watch over me as I drive away these male and female *jaw* spirits, carefully command these spirits to depart.

To the tutelary spirits of his clients' house, the spirit-master prays:²⁸

Oh today, here within the four corners of this house of grass and bamboo, there are death-dealing *jaw* spirits, sickness-bearing *jaw* spirits, there are omens of death, omens of sickness.

House blesser/s within the four corners of this house, today command these death-dealing spirits, these sickness-bearing spirits to depart!

I am able to order these spirits but a single time, but you, all-wise, all-true blesser/s of the four corners of this house, carefully aid and assist me to remove them ...!

Now at this very moment, order them to leave your house!

To his super-mundane patron, the great Pi ya, the spirit-master prays:²⁹

Oh Pi ya up there, lord of the moon, lord of the sun; today I bring for you this silver [jewelry] and this white cloth, I bring for you copper and gold.

Today these death-dealing *jaw* spirits, these sickness-bearing *jaw* spirits are giving much trouble to the people of this house, so that their food does not taste good to their lips, they are unable to enjoy sound sleep.

Today, take in your hands your iron cannon, your copper cannon; sit down on this white cloth ... and upon this silver ...

I am able to drive away these death-dealing, these sickness-bearing *jaw* spirits no more than a single time, oh divine Pi ya help me to drive away these spirits.

Fortified by his appeals to superior powers, the spirit-master is ready to combat the *jaw*. The household members will have gathered by now to sit underneath their home, bamboo rings on their heads. The house itself must have been vacated by people and animals alike, its fire extinguished, and its door firmly closed. The spirit-master sets the broom-like *jaw yeh* against the wall of the house, positioning the replica horse and elephant close to it. With the winnowing tray holding puffed millet, sand, and the single chicken egg in front of him,³⁰ the exor-

26 For the details, see Walker (1976a: 385–406; 2003: 249–265).

27 For the full Lahu text with English translation, see Walker (1976a: 387f.).

28 Walker (1976a: 389–391) for the full Lahu text with English translation.

29 Walker (1976a: 392–394) for the full Lahu text with English translation.

30 For Nishimoto Yoichi's photographic record of a *jaw* spirit's exorcism in his Lahu Nyi study village, it is clear that the spirit-master there additionally set up a leaf offering-cup atop a post; this ritual artefact was not used by spirit-masters for the several exorcisms I witnessed in my study village.

cist squats on his haunches facing the “*jaw* house” and begins to chant the exorcistic prayer, in which he variously begs, bribes, cajoles and threatens the spirits to exit from his clients’ home. As he begins to address the spirits, he throws a handful of puffed millet and sand at the roof of the house, an action he will repeat several times during the course of his chant. Lahu Nyi informants gave me a couple of reasons for the spirit-master’s action, the one more subtle than the other. The first explanation was that the puffed millet was for the spirits to eat, while the sand was to drive them away. The more subtle explanation was that the two substances symbolised the people’s wish that the spirits not return to their house “until the puffed millet germinates and the sand rots”. (In the absence of written dogma, we may remark, these Lahu villagers are free to accept whatever exegesis they find most reasonable; doubtless, also, interpretations of ritual activity differ from community to community, as they do from person to person; moreover, they probably change – and change quite drastically – over time.)

Here again are just a few extracts from the spirit-master’s prayer:³¹

Today, on this good day, if there are death-dealing, sickness-bearing *jaw* spirits in these people’s house, I order now that you stand up on your spirit feet and depart!

Male and female *jaw* spirits, unburden this house of the trouble you have brought here and be gone!

...
Do not forget my Pi ya’s great strength ... although I can drive you spirits out but a single time, do not forget that the divine Pi ya can drive you away nine times!

Away with you!

On completion of his exorcistic chant, the spirit-master stands up, takes the egg from the winnowing basket in front of him and, chanting a brief prayer³², hurls it right over the roof of his clients’ home. If, on impacting the ground, the egg shell shatters, the exorcist reads this as an indication that the spirits have obeyed his command and have left his clients’ house. But should the egg land on thick scrub grass – not at all impossible – the shell may fail to break; in such an event, the spirit-master must repeat the entire exorcistic chant from start to finish; and he must repeat this procedure until he receives a favourable omen.

Once he has received affirmation that the spirits have departed, the spirit-master may begin the next stage of the ritual sequence: offering the broom-like *jaw yeh* to these unwanted spirits. While chanting the offertory prayer, the spirit-master gently brushes the wall of his client’s house with the *jaw yeh*, an action easily confused as “brushing away the spirits” but, as the text of his prayer makes evident, this is a presentation to the departing spirits of the wherewithal for building a new home.

Extracts from the offertory chant are as follows:³³

Today, on this good day, I have brought for you nine *jaw* houses, nine *jaw* houses are sufficient for you male and you female *jaw* spirits!

I have brought for you a white horse and a white elephant, so now you death-dealing, sickness-bearing *jaw* spirits, sit down on the back of this white horse, sit down on the back of this white elephant and ride happily away ...

When his offertory chant is over, the spirit-master has to determine whether or not the spirits have accepted the “*jaw* house.” To do this, he uses the artefact itself as an oracle, hurling it – bottom end first – right over the top of the house roof. If the broom-like *jaw yeh* flips over in flight, so that its bottom end faces towards, rather than opposite to, the house, the spirit-master knows that the spirits have accepted his offering. But if the *jaw yeh* fails to turn (a quite likely scenario), he reads this to mean that his offering has been rejected and that he must begin this segment of the exorcism all over again.

After he has received a favourable reading, the spirit-master winds up the ritual sequence by invoking his patron Pi ya to return to his own abode, saying,³⁴ *inter alia*,

You have helped me to command and to send away these *jaw* spirits, so now, sitting on this white cloth and on this silver jewelry, return to your own place, take your seat at the place up yonder.

The spirit-master now enters his client’s house and, to fool the *jaw* spirits, feigns grief at spotting the replica corpse that he had previously set beside the hearth.³⁵ Next he must ensure that these spirits do not return, which he does by positioning spirit guards at various places around the interior of the house. Finally, he sets a large metal pan of water

31 The full text in Lahu, with English translation and detailed explanations in footnotes, may be found in Walker (1976a: 395–401).

32 For the full text in Lahu, with English translation, see Walker (1976a: 401 f.).

33 Walker (1976a: 402 f.) for the Lahu text and English translation.

34 Walker (1976a: 404, 418 f.) for the Lahu text and English translation.

35 See Walker (1976a: 404) for his words in Lahu (with English translation).

on the house veranda so that the returning household members may wash their hands and feet before reentering their home. Before they enter they will also discard their head rings, to prevent any lingering spirit from coming inside with them. People and animals return to the house. The exorcism is over. It has consumed the best part of three hours.

4.5 The Rites of Sorcery and Counter Sorcery

At my study village in North Thailand I was able to procure a body of data on Lahu sorcery – even texts (although admittedly in very abbreviated form) of prayers chanted by a sorcerer. But it was made clear to me (whether truthfully or not, I am unable to judge) that such activity had been entirely abandoned by these particular Lahu, at the command of their then most honoured prophet and priest.³⁶

I learned from some of the Lahu elders among whom I lived that when a spirit-master agreed to release *gu* spirits against a client's enemy, he required rice grains, beeswax candles, a basket containing silver ornaments and a length of white cloth (as we have just seen used for the *jaw* exorcism) and, finally, a cock and a black cat. Taking all these things with him, the spirit-master would repair to a waterfall some distance from the village, here to seek the assistance of the resident mountain and water spirits³⁷, as well as of his special patron, Pi ya³⁸ (whom we encountered in connection with *jaw* spirit exorcism).

I could obtain no more than snippets of the spirit-master's prayers for assistance, as follows:

(a) to the resident mountain spirit (*hk'aw ne*)³⁸:

Oh lord of this place, today this person has stolen this man's property, made off with his wife and children. He is no good!

Here at this place, oh lord of the place, help me, look upon me. This person has done wrong, so may he become a *meh* spirit, may he become a *gu* spirit; I shall curse him but a single time, so please carefully place my curse upon him!

(b) to the water spirit³⁹:

Oh spirit of the waters, spirit of the rocks here at this place; here at this place, come carefully to look upon me.

Today [I declare] this person is no good; he has stolen [another man's] property, made off with [his] wife and children; oh spirit of the waters, spirit of the rocks, help me to curse him that he may become a *meh* spirit, that he may become a *gu* spirit!

(c) to Pi ya⁴⁰:

Pi ya⁴¹ up yonder, I shall curse [this man] but a single time, so carefully look upon [assist] me.

I shall smite this man so that his legs break, so that he is blinded, so that he dies violently; let thirty-three *gu* spirits be at his side!

Fortified by these appeals to super-mundane powers, the spirit-master prepares to execute his sorcery. For this he has manufactured an artefact comprising two pieces of wood (approx. 30 cm long), sharpened to a point at both ends and one of them placed over the other at an approximately 45 degree angle. To these sharpened sticks, the spirit-master has fastened a circle of split bamboo (about 30 cm in diameter), with smaller pieces of split bamboo attached to it to resemble thorns. Known as a *pi go*, informants said this artefact symbolizes Pi ya's weaponry, but a more precise exegesis eluded me. Finally, the sorcerer would sew up the cat's eyes, tie a rock to its neck, and throw the animal, still alive, into the whirlpool at the foot of the waterfall. Informants told me the cat had to be tossed into a whirlpool because its turning around and around generated the power not merely to kill the immediate object of the sorcery, but also his or her "children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren." Finally, the spirit-master would slit the cock's throat and, as he did so, toss its body into the water at the bottom of the fall, reciting a curse (cf. Walker 1983b: 46) like:

May this man carry with him red death and black death.^[41]

My Pi ya⁴¹ up yonder, carefully utter this curse upon him; he has stolen somebody's property, stolen somebody's wife, stolen somebody's children; he has raised his head without thought of G'ui sha's [Divinity's] words, he has raised his head without heeding G'ui's words.

Now at this very moment he is stealing somebody's property! Let him die a crooked death, a black death [bad death]; let him and let his descendants become *gu* spirits.

36 This was Maw, na⁴² To bo "The Gibbon Priest," also called Paw hku⁴³ Lon⁴⁴ "The Great Priest," for whom see Walker (2003: 525–533).

37 For detailed treatments of these two spirits, see Walker (1976a); for hill spirit/s, see Walker (2015), and for water spirit/s Walker (2011p).

38 For the original Lahu text, see Walker (1983b: 44). Note that the Lahu text has "my property" and "my wife and children," but the spirit-master who recorded this text for me maintained, nonetheless, that the references are to the wronged man.

39 For the original Lahu text, see Walker (1983b: 45), with the same caveat as mentioned in the previous note.

40 For a slightly longer, yet still fragmentary, Lahu text, see Walker (1983b: 45).

41 This means "die a bad death and so turn into a *meh* spirit."

its, may bad things be at his side, let him take hold of red death and black death.

The cursing now complete, the spirit-master would return home, there, so I was told, to quietly await the results of his sorcery.

Though I have no space left to reproduce the details that James Telford (1937: 140–142), Harold Young (2013: 200 f.), and a bevy of Chinese (including Lahu) writers⁴² have recorded, I should note that, in general, their observations corroborate what I was able to learn from my Lahu Nyi informants in North Thailand. The details vary (Telford alone reports the sewing up of a cat's eyes), but the cursing rituals clearly are (or were once) widespread throughout the Lahu settlement areas.

All the accounts of Lahu sorcery mention the possibility of saving a victim through the practice of counter-sorcery; it is with this topic that I shall end my foray into “Lahu animism in practice,” as also, this entire article on “Disturbed souls and angered spirits” among the Lahu peoples.

Informants in my study village were adamant that a spirit-master's sorcery releases malicious *gu* on the victim of his cursing. These spirits must quickly be exorcised, they said, if the victim is not to die immanently. Whenever a sick person is diagnosed as a victim of sorcery he or she must urgently seek the service of a counter-sorcerer to perform the rite called *gu* *g'a ve* “driving away the *gu* spirits.”

As in the original rite of sorcery, the spirit-master – now functioning as counter-sorcerer – must seek super-mundane assistance, in this case (as I was informed) from his own guardian house spirit/s, from the local mountain spirit and from the great patron of spirit-masters, Pi ya. (The prayers are very similar to those already mentioned for the *jaw* exorcism and for the sorcery rite; I will not repeat them here.) Now, sufficiently fortified by super-mundane protection, he is ready to drive away the sickness-bearing *gu* spirits the sorcerer has inflicted upon his client. Squatting in front of the *pi go* he has made, he chants like this (again extracts only):

Oh you thirty-three male *gu* spirits and you thirty-three female *gu* spirits, return now to your home over there at the extremity of the sky, go over there to the extremity of the earth.

Today do not forget Pi ya's commands; remove your *gu* feet from the wooden frame around the hearth; remove the soles of your feet from the wooden frame around the hearth and be gone!

Remove your dwelling place over there, at the extremity of the sky, where the moon cannot shine.

If two moons do not rise together, do not turn around; if two suns do not rise together, do not turn back!

I speak to you only one time, but Pi ya speaks to you ten times and sends you away.

Today, eat and go away to the extremity of the sky, to the extremity of the earth; heed Pi ya's orders and be gone.

If you fail to heed Pi ya's command, you will find no safe place, no happy place to live.

The people of this household carry death and sickness; my Pi ya, you once again command and once again expel these spirits to the four corners of the earth.

Today, you *gu* spirits, get away with your black death, your black sickness!

On completing his exorcistic chant, the spirit-master slaughters the cock by slitting its throat with his knife and letting its blood spill onto the *pi go*. Next he fires his gun into the air. The sacrificed cock, my informants explained, was a gift for the *gu* spirits who, apparently, are enticed to leave the patient's body and to enter the *pi go* instead. The firing of the gun into the air, they said, was to drive these demons away. The cock's head, along with the *pi go*, is left at the site where the exorcistic rite took place. But the spirit-master claims the rest of the cock's body for divination and as part of his fee. After cooking it and retrieving the femur bones, cleaning them and piercing the *foramina* with toothpick-like slivers of bamboo, the spirit-master reads these omens (in the manner described earlier in this paper) to determine the success or otherwise of his exorcistic efforts. If the bone reading indicates failure, the patient still has several options open to him or her. One is to ask the same spirit-master to repeat the exorcistic rite; another is to engage a new spirit-master; a third is to resign oneself to one's fate.

5 Concluding Remarks

In this article I have endeavoured to provide a picture of Lahu animism: its theory and its practice among these mountain folk. I have focused particularly on Lahu ideas concerning souls and spirits, noting the intimate and, sometimes, inseparable relationship between these two entities.

The comparisons I have made in this article, though far too few in number, between the data I obtained from my particular Lahu Nyi study communities in North Thailand and those for Lahu of other sub-ethnic affiliations and living in other places and at other times are instructive. Certainly, they suggest that any comprehensive understanding of a par-

42 Anonymous (n. d.: 91 f.); Wang and Yü (1986: 21 f.); Yang (1987: 92 f.); Liang et al. (1992: ch. 9; 16 f.).

ticular fieldwork situation is best obtained by comparing it with parallel cases elsewhere. Put another way, however important the people's own ("emic") interpretations of what they happen to be doing (or believing) and however important the observer's own "etic" (in this case, sociological) interpretations, there can be no denying the crucial import of sociocultural comparison across space and time.

Chinese social scientist Ma Jianxiong 马健雄, in his exciting new book (2012) on the Lahu Na of Muga in Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, Yunnan, although admittedly not mentioning my name, seems nonetheless to be taking me to task when he writes: "[t]he case of the Lahu in Thailand should be very carefully checked if we want to discuss the overall issue of Lahu cultural history based on small groups such as the Red Lahu in Thailand" (2012: 11).

Alas, if it is indeed my work to which Dr. Ma refers, he has succeeded in turning the purpose of my research project right upside down! Mine is certainly not an attempt to comprehend Lahu cultural history from the perspective of one particular sub-ethnic division of the Lahu; rather, over the past forty years, it has been my long-term strategy – successful or not is for others to judge – to comprehend the sociocultural institutions of the sub-ethnic division of the Lahu-speaking peoples I know best, viz. the Lahu Nyi in North Thailand, against the backdrop of the broader historical and ethnographic background of the Lahu-speaking peoples. This, I submit, is a very different proposition from the one Ma suggests.

Ma is quite right to say that "the case of the Lahu in Thailand needs to be carefully checked," but not for the purpose of generalising from it about Lahu history and sociocultural institutions more widely, for this will never be possible. Rather, we must look at the particulars of the Lahu in North Thailand for evidence of and, more importantly, explanations for sociocultural institutions that may be widespread (or perhaps absent) among other Lahu sub-ethnic categories living in different parts of the Yunnan-Northern Southeast Asian borderlands, as well as in varying historical periods. In this manner, the data from the Lahu Nyi (and other Lahu subdivisions in North Thailand) that have been gathered through intensive ethnographic fieldwork will help to build that overall picture of the Lahu-speaking peoples for which, I presume, many – if not all – of us yearn. And with that picture very much more complete than it is just now, we will, I submit, be in a far better position to understand each of the individual parts with which, as anthropologists, our commitment to intensive fieldwork dictates, we must begin.

Unfortunately, considerations of space do not permit me to engage in comparison beyond the Lahu-speaking peoples. This is a pity, for there are many parallels between Lahu belief and practice and those of other ethnic groups spread right across mainland and island Southeast Asia, whether highlanders or lowlanders, majority peoples, who formally subscribe to a major "world religion," or minorities, whose world view is much more exclusively animist.

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