

The Religion of the Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) in Northern Thailand: General Description with Preliminary Remarks

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The Religion of the Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) in Northern Thailand: General Description with Preliminary Remarks¹

Yoichi NISHIMOTO

1. Introduction

In this paper, I wish to present a general description of the “religion” of the Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu), a sub-division of the Lahu people, with some preliminary remarks. Although not a small portion of the Lahu population are Christians today, the majority of the Lahu Nyi are still followers of what is considered, both by outside observers and the people themselves, their “traditional religion.” This paper seeks to provide basic information required for a future study on the dynamics of the Lahu Nyi religion, which has been functioning for its followers as an important means of adaptation to social changes, increasing marginalization and the growing pressures from Christianity in the hills².

2. The Lahu People

The Lahu — known as *Mussur*³ by peoples of Tai⁴ language families, such as Shans and Northern Thais — are an ethnic minority mainly dwelling in the highlands of southwest China and upper mainland Southeast Asia (see Table 1). Most Lahu historically practiced swidden agriculture and for many generations lived and moved in areas under the politico-military, economic and cultural pressures of diverse lowland peoples. In recent decades, scarcity of cultivable land and the extension of stricter controls on the part of lowland governments to the hill areas have reduced the higher degree of autonomy they formerly enjoyed. Population pressure and governmental policies now put restrictions on their traditional swidden farming. Many Lahu in northern Thailand suffer poverty and disadvantages coming from their status as an ethnic minority.

¹ Fieldwork was conducted from December 1996 through September 1997 and from March 1999 through February 2001 with financial support from Kumamoto-shi Hitozukuri Kikin, Matsushita International Foundation, Heiwa Nakajima Foundation and a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. I would like to express my gratitude to these institutions. I am also thankful to the Thai government and the National Research Council of Thailand for their permission for the research.

² For more on Christian Lahu, see Nishimoto (2000a and 2000b).

³ Various written, such as *Muhsur*, *Mussuh*, *Musuh*, *Musur* and *Musso* in literature of Western languages.

⁴ By “Tai” I refer to any group speaking a language belonging to Southwestern Tai (Li 1977). The term “Thai” should denote citizen of Thailand or, as an adjective, something belonging to the modern Thai state.

Table 1 Estimated Lahu Population

| Country | Population (persons) | Source |
|----------|----------------------|---|
| China | 411,476 | Chinese government 1990 census |
| Burma | 150,000 | (Walker 1995 7) |
| Thailand | 85,845 | Thai government 1997 census (Prathet Thai 1998) |
| Laos | 16,000 | (Chazee 1999 133-134) |
| Vietnam | 5 400 | (Dang et al 2000 248) |
| U S A | more than 1,500 | (Cooper 1996 19) |
| Taiwan | 300 | (McCoy 1972 133) |
| Total | ca 670,521 | |

3. The Lahu Nyi People

The Lahu people boast a number of sub-divisions, and even sub-sub-divisions, under the general banner of “Lahu” Despite the complicated problem of identity, however, I use the simple classification by Lewis and Lewis (1984) and Lewis (1986) for the purpose of this descriptive report According to the classification, which is mainly based on the dialectical differences of the Lahu in Thailand, the major divide is between Lahu Na (Black Lahu) and Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu) The two dialects are linguistically very divergent⁶, which suggests a split of these two sub-groups at a relatively early date (Matisoff 1988 12)

The two groups among which I conducted fieldwork, namely Lahu Na (Black Lahu) and Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu), both belong to the large Lahu Na sub-group and people of the two groups can communicate with each other without difficulty Regarding religion, an early report shows that before their conversion to Christianity Lahu Na then living in Burma had similar ideologies and practices as those of the Lahu Nyi today (Telford 1937) However, nearly all Lahu Na in Thailand today — most of whom are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Burma — are Christians, predominantly of Baptist denominations On the other hand, the majority of the Lahu Nyi are followers of their own religious beliefs and practices although more Christian conversions are found among the group today

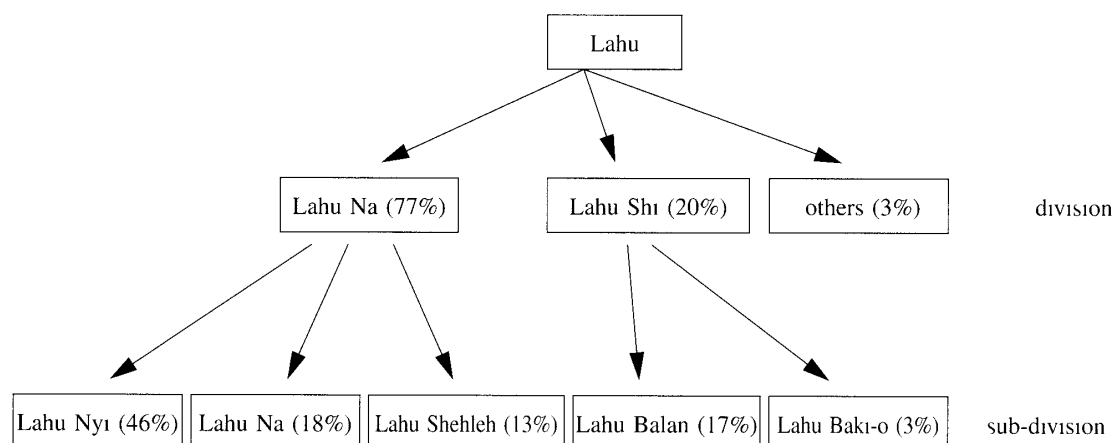
In the early 1980s, Lewis and Lewis (1984 172) asserted that 46 percent of the Thailand Lahu population belonged to the Lahu Nyi sub-division and constituted the largest Lahu sub-division

⁶ Walker (1970 36-40) collected 23 group names from informants in Thailand and Bradley (1979 39-41) lists over 40 Problems with identification become more complicated if we consider both identities constructed by the people themselves as well as by others The anthropological literature is full of reports on cases of situational use of ethnic labels and identity transformations taking place alongside social changes (cf Hanks 1965) See also Walker (1974) for an examination of the divisions of the Lahu

⁶ The Summer Institute for Linguistics in fact takes these two dialects as two different languages (http://www.ethnologue.com/language_index.asp?letter=L, accessed November 19 2002)

Many of the Lahu Nyi and Lahu Shehleleh people have long lived in the present territory of the Thai state (Lewis and Lewis 1984 172). In spite of the fact that more Lahu (mainly Lahu Na and Lahu Shi) have been moving from Burma in recent decades, Lahu Nyi is still considered the largest sub-division of the Thailand Lahu.

Table 2 Divisions of the Lahu in Thailand (Lewis 1986 7, modified)



4. The Lahu Nyi Religion

4.1 Can the Religion of the Lahu Nyi be Called a “Religion”?

The first problem we meet in discussing the Lahu Nyi “religion” is whether it can be called a “religion.” If we define the term “religion” by analogy with so-called world religions, such as Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, the Lahu Nyi “religion” studied here will not be categorized as a religion, for it lacks a set of metaphysical and philosophical teachings with a definite founder, scriptures, systematic dogmas and a institutionalized community of believers. In this report, I would like to use a sociological definition, stating that religion “is a set of beliefs, symbols, and practices (for example rituals), which is based on the idea of the sacred, and which unites believers into a socio-religious community” (Marshall ed. 1994 447). With such a definition we can avoid excluding so-called folk and popular religions, in which rituals and practices are far more central than doctrines.

The next problem is what to call this non-Christian religion followed by the Lahu Nyi. This problem is not solved by simply asking the people themselves about the name of the religion they follow, for there is no Lahu word for “religion.”⁷ Thai government officials categorize non-Christian highland minority peoples in a lump as “Buddhist” and, when we ask non-Christian

⁷ I once asked a Lahu Nyi man studying the second degree in a Thai university what they say *sasana* (Thai word for “religion”) in Lahu. He could not answer immediately, but, after consideration, gave “*bon li shi li*”, literally

Lahu Nyi if they are Buddhist, they often answer, “Yes, because they [Buddhist Thais] also burn candles⁸” (“*Yo, yaw hui ka peh haw tu ve law*”) However, this answer implies that they can be called Buddhist if one pleases only because of their common religious practice of burning candles. The practice of burning candles may, however, not be an essential part of Buddhism. Indeed, Lahu Nyi do not identify themselves as Buddhist unless being asked such an eliciting question as the above one⁹.

Lahu Nyi are very often considered by Thais and foreigners as “animist” but the term “animism” also has problems. Lahu Nyi worship the supreme divinity called *G’ui sha* in the last analysis, although many Lahu Nyi propitiate diverse spirits that are subordinates of *G’ui sha*. Moreover, reformist groups at least on the surface now “do not bow their heads to spirits” but worship only *g’ui sha*, or deities¹⁰. To say “religion of non-Christian Lahu Nyi” is too long and is a definition made in terms of Christianity, implying no essential features of the religion.

As many Lahu Nyi know central and/or northern Thai today, we can ask them by saying, “What is your *sasana* (Thai term for ‘religion’)?” To this question, they generally answer that they are “*peh tu pa*” or “beeswax [candle] burners”. Strictly speaking, however, this answer does not satisfy the question, since the term “beeswax [candle] burners” is not the name of the religion but rather denotes its practitioners.

Thus, the Lahu language does not have a word for “religion,” and neither does their religion have a name¹¹. When Lahu Nyi people inquired about my religion, they usually used words denoting religious practitioners. “Are you Christian/Buddhist/etc.?” If they did not ask this way, they said something like “What ‘customs’ do you use?” (“*Naw a ma aw li veh le*”) Matisoff (1988:215) translates “*aw li*” as “customs, traditions, habit, rule, law, method, way”. In fact, the Lahu word “*aw li*” is a general term and has wide coverage. For example, “country’s customs” (*mvuh mi ve aw li*) means “laws” or political system (e.g. “China uses communist ‘customs’”),

‘customs concerning merit and blessing’. This is, however, a literary and poetic expression only used in their religious prayers. As a Lahu term for ‘religion’, Christian Lahu with education usually gave ‘*o k’o pui ve aw li*’ a literal translation of which may be ‘customs concerning bowing head in respect or worshiping’. This term is not used in their casual conversations and is most probably a term invented during the translation of the Bible into Lahu.

⁸ The Lahu word *peh haw* must have originally denoted beeswax and candles made from beeswax. Traditionally Lahu Nyi used in their rites candles made from beeswax gathered in the forests, but now they use more candles bought at lowland markets. Thus, the term *peh haw* now means candles of industrial production too. Still now, however, Lahu Nyi people value beeswax candles more than industrial ones.

⁹ One of the other cases in which Lahu Nyi villagers identify themselves as Buddhist is when they apply for a Thai national identity card. In such a case, they are virtually told by government officials to choose between ‘Buddhist’ and ‘Christian’.

¹⁰ For the difference between *G’ui sha* and *g’ui sha* in my usage and for detailed discussion about one of the so-called reformist groups, please see following sections in this paper.

¹¹ I assume that it is for the same reason that anthropologists have used such terms as ‘Nuer religion’ to describe so-called tribal religions.

while “Lahu ‘customs’” (*Lahu [ve] aw li*) denotes “Lahu cultural customs.” Analytically, we may see that under the general term “*aw li*,” there exist smaller “*aw li*” in the areas of law, politics, culture, religion and so on. The question, “What customs do you use?” was intelligible, because we knew that it was about my religious “customs” from the context of our conversation.

The fact that Lahu language has no word for “religion,” and that their religion has no name, further implies that, unlike so-called world religions which have developed apologetics in the course of evangelism to other peoples and discussions with other religions, the religion of the Lahu Nyi has not been well objectified and has not undergone systematization through reflection. The religion of the Lahu Nyi is not a religion with sophisticated dogmas and rationalized organization of its followers; it is centered to practices. It is not more a theology than a set of customs that the people themselves usually behave in accordance with, without casting reflective eyes upon it. Violation of these customs is considered dangerous to their prosperity and well-being.

4.2 Structure and Features of the Lahu Nyi Religion

4.2.1 Teachings

Basic teachings of the Lahu Nyi religion may be summarized as a set of precepts¹²

- + do not kill people
- + do not hit or hurt people
- + do not steal
- + do not commit adultery
- + do not use narcotic drugs (opium, heroin and amphetamines)
- + do not lie
- + do not work in the field nor eat meats on Precept Day (*shu nyi*)¹³

Violation of these precepts is believed to eventually bring evil to the violator, his/her families and relatives, his/her livestock and produce, or his/her village community. Closely observing these precepts should result in peace, good health and prosperity. This may be summarized as do

¹² These precepts suggest the deep influence the Lahu Nyi have received from their Buddhist Tai neighbors.

¹³ Lahu Nyi people have *shu nyi* every 14-15 days, or on the new and full moon of the lunar calendar. For the Lahu Nyi term “*shu nyi*,” Matisoff (1988:1182) gives the translation “day of rest, animist day of worship,” Lewis (1986:305) “holy day,” and Walker (1981) “merit day.” Etymologically, *shu nyi* may have come from the Tai term “*wan shin*,” which is equivalent to the Thai term “*wan phra*” or Buddhist day of worship coming every 7 or 8 days in the lunar calendar. My Lahu Nyi informants explained “*shu*,” used as a single word, is something that *G’ui sha* grants for humans to be able to grow much from fewer seeds (“With *shu*, you will get 100 times of rice out of one, but without *shu*, you will only get 30-40 times of rice out of one”). However, it is still not clear if the *shu* of *shu nyi* denotes this meaning of seeds for prosperity. Younger Lahu Nyi informants who know Central and Northern Thai are inclined to translate “*shu nyi*” to “*wan shin*.” They seem to interpret the day as time to rest and refrain from several actions, including working in the field, eating meats, pounding rice, and having sexual intercourse in their houses. Note also that the Tai term “*shin*” means “a religious duty” (Hudak 2000:235).

good, then get good, do bad, then get bad. Lahu Nyi religion does not provide sophisticated explanations about existential questions, such as why and from where humans are born, why they must die and where they go after death. Lahu Nyi religion is, therefore, very much of this world, and its simple set of moral teachings tells followers how to be peaceful, healthy and prosperous.

The Lahu Nyi religion, which has no scriptures, is based on an oral tradition often called “teachings of elders/ancestors” (*chaw maw hkaw*). In a restricted sense, *chaw maw hkaw* means simple ethical precepts, cited above. In a wider meaning, it may denote customs, conventions and precedents according to which villagers should behave themselves (otherwise they will receive misfortunes).¹⁴ Lahu Nyi oral religious teachings are not systematized. Lahu Nyi people like to consider them as having been inherited from previous generations. However, these precepts are not more fixed teachings than general moral prohibitions, some of which may be dropped or added when circumstances change.¹⁵

4.2.2 Hierarchy of Supernatural Beings

Lahu Nyi religious ideology is characterized by belief in a Supreme Being called *G'ui sha*, various deities (*g'ui sha*) and a number of spirits (*ne*). These supernatural beings are recognized as either of *g'ui sha*'s side (*g'ui sha hpaw*) or the spirits' side (*ne hpaw*). Each side has its religious specialists and villagers rely usually, but not exclusively, on specialists of either side.

The Lahu Nyi concept of ‘*g'ui sha*’ is difficult to understand.¹⁶ I often met with apparently contradicting answers among villagers, such as that *g'ui sha* is only one, but there are many *Ai ma*, and *Ai ma* are *g'ui sha*. Such a statement may become less confusing if we see the term “*g'ui sha*” in two dimensions, *g'ui sha* used mainly as subject and possessive in a statement, means the Supreme Being, while *g'ui sha* used as predicate, often denotes lower deities that shares power and intention of *G'ui sha*. For example, the creation of heaven/sky and earth was the supreme *G'ui sha*'s will, but Lahu Nyi myths relate that many deities, that apparently share the Supreme Being's intention and power, took part in the creation. In answer to my questions as to who is the highest and greatest among their *g'ui sha*, some Lahu Nyi religious specialists referred to *G'ui sha* the Supreme Being as *G'ui lon* (“great *g'ui*”). The term is, however, not heard among ordinary villagers. Walker (1976: 379) understands that “*G'ui sha* is sometimes regarded

¹⁴ “*Chaw maw hkaw*” sometimes denotes what are equivalent to the terms ‘myth’, ‘old stories’, ‘proverbs’, ‘old prophetic oracles’ and ‘historical accounts’ as well.

¹⁵ For instance, a now often heard precept, “Do not use amphetamines” (*Ya ma shu ta te*) was hardly heard in 1996 when I began to live with the Lahu and when this drug did not yet much prevail.

¹⁶ Among Christian Lahu groups ‘*g'ui sha*’ is now reinterpreted as the Christian God and is always written with the capital letter, implying the true transcending and almighty Father God.

as a personified father divinity, sometimes as a diffused divine force encompassing several supernatural figures” An explanation among villagers that I met with several times is that it is similar to [the relationship between] Thailand’s prime minister, prefecture governors and district heads in that, although *G’ui sha* is only one, his subordinates are numerous I would like thus to use “*G’ui sha*,” with the capital letter, to refer to the supreme deity, while “*g’ui sha*” should denote diverse lower deities who partake in the divinity of the Supreme Being However, deciding which one a Lahu Nyi villager is referring to is not always easy

Table 3 The Lahu Nyi Cosmology

| |
|---|
| <i>G’ui sha</i> (Supreme Being) |
| <i>g’ui sha</i> (deities) |
| <i>Sha ca</i> |
| <i>Ai ma</i> |
| <i>Pi ya</i> |
| <i>Ne</i> (spirits) |
| Guardian spirits (mountain spirit, stream spirit, house spirit, etc) |
| Spirits of natural phenomena (rainbow spirit, lightening spirit, etc) |
| Spirits of deceased parent(s) (<i>chaw suh</i>) |
| Spirits originating in blood and “bad” death (<i>jaw, meh, mvuh ne, gu</i> ¹⁷) |
| Spirits of demoniacal possession (<i>tsuh tsuh, taw, taw-e</i>) |
| Monsters (<i>pi ta ngaw-e, shu gu kai, chaw hteun</i>) |
| <i>Chaw ya</i> (humans) |
| <i>aw ha</i> (soul) |
| <i>aw to</i> (body) |

G’ui sha, personified anthropomorphic deity, is the master of the universe *G’ui sha* and *g’ui sha* are living in the sky/heaven (*mvuh kaw ma*) and are wholly benign, although a violation of his teachings will eventually bring misfortunes to humans As often found in so-called tribal religions, *G’ui sha* as the eventual master of everything stands far from and is not very familiar to villagers in everyday life Lahu Nyi priests and shamans instead address their prayers to *A pa Sha ca* (Father *Sha ca*) and diverse *Ai ma*, lower deities, while spirit specialists talk to and try to

¹⁷ I wonder if this *gu* is a spirit, because *gu* seems like an instrument, while a spirit is usually a more or less personified being See also my descriptions in the following sections

persuade spirits (*ne*) which, villagers answered, if I asked, are subordinates and agents of *G'ui sha*

A pa Sha ca is one of the main figures in Lahu Nyi religious ideology today. Lahu Nyi myth relates that he was once a human, a hunter and lived on the earth. He could later enter heaven because he did not forget *G'ui sha*'s words. He is now sitting with *G'ui sha* in heaven, but in a lower position than *G'ui sha*. *Sha ca* is characterized by his loyalty to *G'ui sha*'s teachings.¹⁸

At ma are female deities. While *At ma* created earth, *g'ui sha* or male deities created sky/heaven. *At ma* are very numerous, but the priest and shaman in my study village usually address their prayers to *Na ca ma*, *Na k'u ma*, *Na kai ma*, *Na vi ti*, their host deities.

Pi ya seems located between deities and spirits. *Pi ya* is definitely not a *g'ui sha*, nor may it be a spirit. Lahu Nyi myth relates that *Pi ya* got strong by being fed with iron pieces. "*Pi ya*'s principal attribute is that of destructiveness, which may be harnessed by men either for good or for evil – we see *Pi ya* assisting the spirit-exorcist in removing the malicious *jaw* and *meh* spirits. But he may also be persuaded, through appropriate, ritual, to cause death" (Walker 1976: 382). Spirit doctors often seek *Pi ya*'s help, while priests and shamans never do.

Ne are numerous, but none of them partakes in *G'ui sha*'s divinity. They may be classified as 1) guardian spirits, 2) spirits of natural phenomena, 3) spirits originating in blood and 'bad' death, 4) spirits of demoniacal possession and 5) monsters (cf. Walker 1983b: 32). *Ne* are of an ambiguous nature. "Lahu spirits have diverse names and attributes. Some of these spirits have at least some potential for good, others are invariably malicious, and a few are neither good nor particularly malevolent. But even spirits with the potential for good are a capricious lot, quick to take offense, and so are never fully to be trusted" (Walker 1983b: 36-37).

Guardian spirits dwelling in mountains, streams, houses, etc. are "owners" (*aw sheh hpa*) of the respective locations. They become offensive and cause illness, insomnia and bad appetites to those who violate their territories and/or behave themselves improperly there. Those who offended these spirits, however, often do not know of the violation until they become sick. An attack of the spirits will be given as the reason by their retrospective tracing and/or divinations of spirit specialists and shamans.

¹⁸ As will be mentioned in the following sections, the Lahu Nyi religion has been in constant transformation. *A pa Sha ca* was not a main figure in the past. My Lahu Nyi informants said that when the people were fighting the Burmese army under the command of *Maw na Paw hku* – a great messianic leader – main deities they "sought" (*ca ve*) were *Cao ta shi* – the deity of war – and *Na kai ma*, one of *At ma*. Moreover, *A pa Sha ca* was a synonym for *A pa G'ui sha* in the past and, at the same time, *Sha ca* was used to address anchorites who lived in a hut outside the village and strictly observed ethico-religious precepts (personal communication with Sombat Boomkamyung; see also Solot 1989 for the description of *Ca nu Sha ca*). Walker (1983b: 35f) also wrote, "Among the Lahu Nyi I studied, *Sha ca* is used as a synonym for *G'ui sha*. This usage is confusing because *Sha ca* is also the name of a cultural-hero."

Spirits of natural phenomena can cause illness, insomnia and poor appetites, too. As in the case of offences to guardian spirits, spirits of natural phenomena must be properly propitiated by rites led by spirit specialists or their attacks must be “blocked” (*taw ve*) by rites led by priests and shamans.

One may have to occasionally perform a rite called “*chaw suh aw ca ve*” to feed the spirits of his/her deceased parent(s),¹⁹ otherwise *chaw suh* (“dead person(s)”) will trouble their living children. In *chaw suh aw ca ve* rite led by spirit specialists, the spirits of deceased parents are given food and perhaps a miniature house as well, and then are told to go back to the “land of the dead.” A *Chaw suh aw ca ve* rite is often performed together with a *bon te ve* (“merit making”) ritual, in which the host treats guests with a chicken or pig to gain merits. Villagers following priests and shamans, however, do not feed their deceased parent(s) but “block” them to keep the deceased away from the living.

Jaw or *yeh jaw* is said to have originated in blood shed when “a tiger ate the sun” (*mvuh nyi la ca ve*), denoting a solar eclipse in Lahu, and when “a frog ate the moon” (*ha pa pa ca ve*), or a lunar eclipse. *Jaw* spirits seem to congregate on the trees in the jungle because, they say, the spirits may be offended by people who cut the trees. *Jaw* spirits then cause illness to people or livestock.

Meh is a spirit of those who died “badly” (*chaw suh ma da ve*), or experienced a violent and early death accompanied by bleeding, such as by murder or accident. *Meh* is malicious and especially offensive to its relatives. Abnormal conditions, such as restlessness or a tendency to quarrel with others, must be mended by a *meh jaw ve* (striking *meh* spirit) rite by a spirit specialist or by a *meh taw ve* (blocking *meh* spirit) rite by a priest and shaman.

Mvuh ne or *mvuh* spirits also originated in “bad” death, yet are not harmful like *meh* spirits. Spirits of people who died a “bad” death will roar at their tombs every year on the same day of the same month as their death date. Spirits of women who died during delivery will come to tickle people. *Mvuh ne shi* or the fireballs of *mvuh* spirits are like will-o’-the-wisps.

Villagers sometimes compare *ne* or spirits to soldiers and policemen while likening *G’ui sha* to the prime minister of a state. This means that spirits keep watch on villagers for *G’ui sha* and punish those who violated the Lahu customs by bringing them or their family illness, insomnia and bad appetites. Any attack by a spirit must have a reason. Lahu Nyi villagers are afraid of

¹⁹ *Chaw suh* may not be called ancestral spirits, because *chaw suh* denote spirit(s) of one’s dead parent(s) and does not include the deceased of generations above that. Du (1999: 25) also reports “the form of parental worship — a particular form of ancestor worship that is oriented only toward one’s parents” of the Lahu of Lancang, south-west China.

spirits but say that they can at least talk and negotiate with them (*k'o da hpeh ve*) in order to be released from punishment

On the other hand, spirits of demoniacal possession (*tsuh tsuh*, *taw*, *taw-e*) cannot be partners for talk.²⁰ They are totally evil and lack reason. Lahu Nyi children are afraid to walk at night in the jungle for *tsuh tsuh* *G'a taw-e*, or chicken *taw-e*, prowls about at night and devours chickens.²¹ Some families are said to possess *tsuh tsuh*. If one member is a *tsuh tsuh* possessor (*tsuh tsuh caw pa*), the whole lineage must possess *tsuh tsuh*, too. When a new child is born, a *tsuh tsuh* of the child is born. Men must, it is said, be cautious before marriage because the lineage he is marrying into could be *tsuh tsuh* possessors.²² *Tsuh tsuh* possessors are very evil. They attack newborn children to eat their meat and cast sorcery to sicken or kill those whom they do not like. When a *tsuh tsuh* possessor is very angry, the *tsuh tsuh* may depart from the host's body to possess people who are in conflict with the host. There is no method or rite to protect people from *tsuh tsuh*.

Monsters (*pi ta ngaw-e*, *shi gu kat*, *chaw hteun*) are all living in the jungle and do not appear evil like *tsuh tsuh*. *Pi ta ngaw-e* is a humanlike beast in the jungle and comes to gouge out one's eye to lick. One cannot see the body of *shi gu kat*, but only hear noises which *shi gu kat* cause to frighten them. *Chaw hteun*²³ is a dwarf with long-hair.

Lahu Nyi people perceive that a human is comprised of his soul (*aw ha*) and body (*aw to*). In usual conversations, Lahu Nyi people seem to conceive of only a single soul for one person, however, when asked how many souls a man possesses, many usually answer that there are many, though they do not exactly know the number (cf. Walker 1983b 39-41). When a person is frightened, his soul may leave its body and wander, sometimes, into the "land of the dead" (*chaw suh mvuh mi*). Frequent dreaming may be interpreted as the sign of his soul wandering into or near the "land of the dead." It is necessary to perform a rite to call back the soul to its proper anchorage (*aw ha hku [hk'aw] ve*). Either a spirit specialist or priest/shaman may perform this rite.

²⁰ In this regard, *tsuh tsuh* is contrasted to *ne* or spirits. We may recognize *ne* both in general and restricted meanings. Generally, *ne* denotes all supernatural beings including *tsuh tsuh* that do not partake in *G'ui sha*'s divinity, while, restricted, it means spirits which serve as watchmen for *G'ui sha*.

²¹ Generally *tsuh tsuh* is a Lahu Nyi word, while Lahu Na people use *taw* and *taw-e* to denote the same things. However, Lahu Nyi villagers in my study village use *g'a taw-e* for chicken *tsuh tsuh* and *tsuh tsuh* for that possessed by a lineage and that dwells in the jungle.

²² Such a story is usually told as a case of a man going to marry a woman and live with her family. It is probably because many married Lahu men first live several years with their wife's family (then probably their wife will go to live a few years with her husband's family in exchange, yet for a shorter period) before the married couple finish their services and establish their own house. This is however, not a 'rule' of matrilocality because if the groom's parents can afford to pay payments at once to the bride's parents, the groom's family will buy a wife (*aw mi-a bvuh ve*) and the groom will not have to go to live with the bride's family.

²³ *Chaw hteun* is also a general term referring to monsters and men living in the jungle. The term *hteun* itself comes from a Tai word *thoen* meaning 'forest, wilderness, jungle' (Lewis 1986 343; Hudak 2000 274).

I may have presented too clear-cut a picture of supernatural beings in which Lahu Nyi believe. In reality, however, the picture is more ambiguous. Many Lahu terms, such as, *g'ui sha*, *ne*, *tsuh* and *chaw hteun*, have various ranges of meanings and their mutual boundaries are not clear. It is also often the case that different people give different explanations, although there are certainly common understandings and consistent logic in their cognitions.

4.2.3 Religious and Ritual Specialists

As mentioned above, Lahu Nyi supernatural ideology makes a distinction between *g'ui sha* (deities) and *ne* (spirits) and there are religious specialists of both sides, but few of them work full time, and these are usually farmers²⁴

Religious specialists dealing with spirits, called *maw pa*, propitiate and drive away spirits by speaking to them in poetic prayers. Spirit specialists are not hierarchically organized or ordained by other village members. They learn to become spirit specialists by attending rites performed by senior *maw pa*. Although only those who are talented in memorizing and reciting poetic chants can be spirit specialists and, although some other villagers regard their talents as a gift of *G'ui sha*, the spirit specialists usually do not claim themselves to have been chosen by *G'ui sha*. Their expertise differs from man to man. Some are expert both in divination²⁵ and performing diverse rites, while others are specialized in conducting only a few rites. Spirit specialists act at a request of individual clients, often beyond the boundary of their own villages. They receive lower esteem than religious priests and shamans. They do not have to observe religious prescripts and are not expected to behave ethically like priests and shamans. Many spirit specialists are, in fact, opium addicts (cf. Walker 1981: 671).

Religious specialists of the deity's side are associated with the worship of *g'ui sha*. Of these priests, the *To bo* plays the principal role. His house is usually built next to the village religious house (*haw yeh*) and he is its main caretaker. If a village has no *haw yeh*, the *To bo*'s house may instead be used for various religious activities. On such occasions as Precept Day (*shu nyi*), he represents the whole village and prays to *g'ui sha*. Under the *To bo*, there are *Sa la*, *A ca* and *La shaw*, however, I could not so far find clear divisions of roles among these three apart from the important role played by *La shaw ma* (*La shaw*'s wife) in the water-washing rite (*I ka li*

²⁴ In rare cases, however, we find full time religious specialists whose reputations can attract clients from remote villages and/or makes them able to tour extensively outside their own villages. However, unlike Christian Lahu religious specialists, none of the Lahu Nyi religious specialists enjoy regular and stable salaries paid by organizations or other village members.

²⁵ Some *maw pa* read messages by measuring lengths of folded cloth to determine the location of lost objects, the cause of one's sickness, etc. (*taw hte ve*).

shaw da ve, I ka tsuh da ve) on Precept Day (cf Walker 1981) People holding these four titles and their wives are, at least in my study village, expected to be observant of the religious pre-
scripts²⁶ The *To bo* has no direct authority over spirit specialist

Table 4 Lahu Nyi Religious Specialists

| g'u <i>u</i> sha's side | | Spirit's side |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| male | female | |
| Priests | | Maw pa ²⁵ |
| <i>To bo</i> | (<i>To bo ma</i>) ²⁷ | |
| <i>Sa la</i> | (<i>Sa la ma</i>) | |
| <i>A ca</i> | (<i>A ca ma</i>) | |
| <i>La shaw</i> | (<i>La shaw ma</i>) | |
| Shamans | | |
| <i>Ta la</i> | <i>Ka shaw ma</i> | |

On *g'ut sha's* side there also are shamans,²⁹ usually called *Ta la* (male) and *Ka shaw ma* (female) While *To bo*, *Sa la*, *A ca* and *La shaw* are titles that in principle every Lahu Nyi village should have persons to fill, shamans differ in that they are considered to have been chosen by *G'ut sha* Their ability to recite poetic prayers (*bon ku ve*) is considered evidence of divine choice Like spirit specialists, some villages may have no shaman, while others many Generally, there are more female than male shamans According to the stories told by shamans, they passed a common initiation path, One day *g'ut sha* came to make them “heart-weeping” (*nyi ma ha ve*), and to shiver, weep and recite prayers in poetic language that they did not know before Only after performing several rites (some say, many rites before they could wash away their sins completely), they recovered from the abnormal condition and became shamans Shamans are able to

²⁶ In my study village people holding these titles along with *A ga* and shamans and their wives call themselves ‘*bon te pa*’ (‘merit-making-people’ or probably, religious people) If these ‘religious people’ violate the precepts they will be fined twice the amount of money that ordinary villagers would pay for the same deed

²⁷ These four female ‘priest’ titles are informal They are rather considered as ‘the wife of’ *To bo*, *Sa la*, *A ca* and *La shaw* (female suffix *ma* often adds a meaning of ‘the wife of’) than persons holding these titles themselves

²⁸ Walker in his numerous articles about Lahu Nyi rites, refers to this specialist as *ne te sheh hpa* (literally person who is concerned with spirits), a term applicable both to male and female In my study village, however, spirit specialists are usually called *maw pa* or, much less frequently *maw*, apparently coming from Tai term for ‘specialist’ or ‘doctor’ (*mor*) Spirit specialists are almost always male, although my informants said that they knew one but only one female specialist in another village (cf Walker 1976 383)

²⁹ Walker prefers to use the term “oracle” to call *Ka shaw pa* (male *Ka shaw*) for there is no notion of ‘*ka shaw pa* sending his soul (*aw ha*) on a shamanistic ‘trip’ to the heavenly regions, nor is it believed that *G'ut sha* actually enters the *ka shaw pa*’s body (1981 688f)

speak to *Sha ca* and *Ai ma* and perform purifying and healing rites and some more proficient ones can perform divination by reading a picture on candle fires (*peh haw nyi ve*)³⁰ If the cause of one's disorder is diagnosed as an attack by offended spirits, shamans do not propitiate the spirits but try to "block" (*taw ve*) the attack with the help of their host deities They say, they "do not bow their head to spirits" (*ne hta o k'o ma pui ve*)

4.2.4 Rituals

Rituals are presided by *To bo*, *Ka shaw ma*, or spirit specialists and their prayers are addressed to *g'ui sha*, to spirits, or both Whether the rituals are of *g'ui sha*'s or the spirits' side, "they are concerned chiefly with health, economic prosperity and good relations among men and between men and their supernaturals" (Walker 1975a 120) Both individual and communal rituals stress social and religious harmony among villagers and between human and *g'ui sha*

4.2.4-1 Calendrical Rituals

In most calendrical rituals people pray to *g'ui sha* and/or spirits for their supernatural protection and for blessings for prosperity All the important annual rituals other than the New Year festival are associated with major agricultural stages

a) New Year Celebration

The New Year celebrations (*hk'aw ca ve*), starting on a day near the Chinese New Year in many Lahu Nyi villages and continuing for about 8-12 days, are comprised of female and male new years *To bo* and, in my study village, *Ka shaw ma*, play principal roles

b) Three "Great Precepts"

During the three Great Precepts ("*shu lon*"), Lahu Nyi villagers take a two-day rest instead of only one as on normal Precept Day The first Great Precept falls on the day of full moon in April On the day before this first Great Precept, villagers participate in *sheh kaw ve* rite³¹ to give away their sins of having killed insects when burning swidden fields and to pray to *g'ui sha* for merit and blessings (*aw bon aw shu*) for prosperity On the day after the first Great Precept, villagers build a *sha la*, a shelter or a small hut for travelers to rest, in order to "make merit" (*bon te ve*) and pray to spirits and *g'ui sha* for merit and blessings for prosperity After this first Great Precept, many villagers begin planting rice on their hill farms

The dates of the second and third Great Precept rites coincide with the beginning and the end

³⁰ Walker (1981 688f-689f) only refers to *Ka shaw ma*'s role of delivering *g'ui sha*'s messages In my study village, however, *Ka shaw ma* play an very important role in reciting prayers at *haw yeh* on Precept Day with *To bo*, performing divination and performing purifying and healing rites I am not sure if such an important role of *Ka shaw ma* in my study village is a result of religious innovations (see the following sections)

³¹ Descriptions and prayer texts of this rite can be found in Walker 1975b

of Buddhist lent in the Shan and Northern Thai calendars. Villagers make offerings of new corn and rice panicles to *g'ui sha*, respectively.

c) *Ca Suh Aw Ca Ve*

The *Ca suh aw ca ve* celebration, literally “eating the new rice,” is a rice harvest festival. People consume rice from the most recent harvest.

d) *Maw Le Ve*

The *Maw le ve* rite is a propitiation of the greatest hill and water spirit of a larger area in which a village is located. This rite is, in my study village, performed on several days after the second Great Precept, yet not every year. Many villagers — but not all — explained that this rite is to be performed for three successive years and then not for three more before it is performed again. Only male and non-reproductive female village members can participate. They climb to the top of a hill to make offerings, including the blood, head and feet of slaughtered chickens, and pray for merit and blessings for prosperity. This rite is unique in that participation is not expected of all village households, and also in that the rite is exclusively addressed to a spirit, for the latter of which *To bo* and *Ka shaw ma* — religious specialists of *g'ui sha*'s side in my study village — refused to take part in.

e) Precept Day

Apart from the above annual celebrations, Lahu Nyi have Precept Day (*shu nvi*) twice a month at the new and full moon. Villagers must refrain from agricultural work and rest in order to devote themselves to religious matters. However, not all villagers are strict in keeping with the precepts, saying that these are only for religious specialists of *g'ui sha*'s side. *To bo*, and *Ka shaw ma* in my study village, pray to *g'ui sha* at both their home and *haw yeh*. Villagers light candles at their home altars (*yeh bon pa*), dance at *haw yeh* in the evening and perform water-washing (*I ka li shaw da ve*, *I ka tsuh da ve*) rites in the morning and evening in the outside space next to *haw veh*. Precept Days are also good occasions to perform purification rites according to diagnoses made by shamans through their divinations.

4.2.4-2 Life-cycle Rituals

Life-cycle rituals are generally simple. There are rites of marriage and burial, but there is no rite to mark puberty. Also, “[b]irth occasions little ritual, unless difficulties arise, necessitating prayers to G'ui-sha or the spirits for assistance (Walker 1983a 236)”

4.2.4-3 Critical Rituals

Villagers are sure that there are many disorders that modern medicine cannot deal with or that some diseases will be cured only by resorting both medical and ritual methods. Moments in which villagers think themselves critical include 1) sickness and misfortune as a result of attack

by offended spirits or their omens, 2) sickness and misfortune as *g'ui sha*'s punishment of sins committed (violation of the Lahu customs) or their omens, 3) departure of the soul from the human body, 4) sickness and misfortune caused by sorcery and 5) omens (physically and mentally failed condition, bad dreams, etc.) of a condition called "weakened merits" (*bon nu ve*). Villagers usually try first to take medicines and/or go to see doctors. If modern medical care fails to cure them, villagers will start to think about alternatives.

Usually villagers, in consultation with other skilful villagers and elders, find a specific reason for their disorder. For example, frequent dreaming may be seen as a sign of one's soul departing and wandering near the "land of the dead." Or, they will try divinations by a shaman and/or a spirit specialist to diagnose their symptoms. They will then recall their sins committed in the past, or actions that might have offended a spirit. Specific rites should be performed according to the diagnosis.

For sickness and misfortune, or their omens, there are specialists and rites of both *g'ui sha*'s side and the spirit side. Table 5 shows various divination and curing rites used by the two sides. In principle, ritual specialists of *g'ui sha*'s side, at least *To bo* and *Ka shaw ma* in my study village, refuse to "bow their heads to spirits," but instead make direct contact with *g'ui sha*, superior beings to regular spirits, to cure the clients. However, ordinary villagers use eclecticism, resorting to methods of both *g'ui sha*'s and the spirit sides until they find the effects they seek. It is also frequently observed that villagers host several rites at the same time (yet, usually ones either of *g'ui sha* or the spirit side). Curing rites of *g'ui sha*'s side include burning candles, devoting offerings made from bamboo, stones and dirt (*hkaw tan*), prayers of priests and shamans for *g'ui sha*'s help to purify clients' sins or to "block" the attack of offended spirits, and tying white cotton string (*a mvuh hkehn*) around the wrists of the client and his family members. On the other hand, spirit specialists speak in poetic prayers to spirits and persuade or trick them to stop attacking the clients and go back to their places. Offended spirits and *gu* will receive offerings of chicken blood, heads and feet.

A sick villager and his family may host a "merit-making" feast (*bon te ve*) at their house, in which he seeks merits by treating other villagers to pork or chicken. The villagers in turn tie a white cotton string around the wrists of all family members wishing supernatural protection. Candles are burnt and prayers are recited. In my study village, however, merit-making feasts of this kind have become associated with rites not of *g'ui sha*'s side. *To bo* and *Ka shaw ma*, who are of *g'ui sha*'s side, prefer to preside over an allegedly new rite, *haw bon law ve* ("begging merits at village religious house"), in which the feast is held at *haw yeh*. As one must not bring any meat nor kill animals at *haw yeh*, this feast is vegetarian.

Table 5 Diagnoses and Curing of Disorder of *g'ui sha*'s and Spirit's Sides

| | <i>G'ui sha</i> 's side | Spirit's side |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| | Divination ¹² | |
| | Reading candle fires | Reading the length of folded cloth |
| Diagnoses | Rites to be performed | |
| Attack of offended spirits | | |
| - deceased parent(s) | "blocking" | "feeding" |
| - <i>Jaw</i> , or <i>yeh jaw</i> | "blocking" | <i>Yeh jaw te ve</i> |
| - <i>Meh</i> | "blocking" <i>meh</i> | 'striking" <i>meh</i> |
| - Guardian spirits | "blocking" | "propitiating" |
| Punishment by <i>g'ui sha</i> | "purifying" the sins | none ? |
| Sorcery | | |
| - <i>gu</i> | ? ¹³ | "returning" <i>gu</i> |
| - <i>ne pi pfuh ve</i> | ? | ? |
| Departure of soul from body | recalling the soul (home) | recalling the soul (<i>haw yeh</i>) |
| Weakened merit | merit-making feast (home) | merit-making feast (<i>haw yeh</i>) |

If a merit-making feast has failed to fully restore one's health, the villager in distress may then build a *sha la* (shelter) to gain more merits. This *sha la te ve* (building a shelter) rite is usually accompanied with a feast for villagers and a ceremony to recall the wandering soul (*aw ha hku hk'aw ve*). The *Sha la te ve* rite may not be presided over by priests or shamans, but a rite of recalling the wandering soul can be performed at home or outside by a spirit specialist, or at *haw yeh* by a priest and/or shaman. A rite of *g'ui sha*'s side equivalent to *sha la te ve* may be *hkaw tan te ve* or making offerings of bamboo, stones and dirt at *haw yeh* and having priests and shamans pray to *g'ui sha*. Rites to remedy the states of wandering soul and weakened merits of the two sides are essentially the same in logic, but differ in methodology.

¹² Not all but only capable religious specialists can use these divination methods. If a village lacks such capable specialists, villagers will either go to specialists of other villages or infer the cause of the disorder themselves and try available cures. It is observed that villagers who first go to spirit specialists are more eclectic and may try cures by specialists of *g'ui sha*'s side, too. Villagers who are oriented to the *g'ui sha*'s side are more exclusive to the cures of the other side. Some such people say that spirits were once *G'ui sha*'s followers but that *G'ui sha* has abandoned them.

¹³ *She* or *she pa* is a curer for this *gu* sorcery. He magically looks through the patient's body for things, such as small stones and bundles of short wires put in by the sorcery, and sucks them out. A *she* I met called himself *ta la* and claimed *g'ui sha*'s assistance in his curing, but villagers thought that this *she* knew and used spells (*sha*). *She* may differ from priests and shamans in that they are often thought of as unethical — not completely sucking out everything, which means that they can earn more money from the patient upon a relapse of the same condition.

4.2.5 Magic, Sorcery and Divination

On a client's request, a spirit specialist will send *gu* to kill or sicken the targeted person. This is an act of sorcery called *gu pi ve* or *gu hpeh pi ve* (giving or releasing *gu*) in Lahu. *Ne pi pfuh ve* is a kind of sorcery in which a spirit specialist persuades *ne*, probably *Pi ya*, to kill a whole lineage of a targeted persons.³⁴ By *hpeh ve* ("releasing [something]"), Lahu Nyi in older days are said to have been able to make things magically fly from one place to another. This *hpeh ve* can be used as sorcery by commanding things to fly and enter the enemy's body. The attacked will suffer severe pain.

Sha meu ve is the act of muttering and blowing spells over things for magical uses, both evil and beneficial. Thus *sha* (spells) are, for instance, used for love magic, curing the wound and sorcery. Many Lahu Nyi magical acts, such as, *she's* curing and *hpeh ve*, involve blowing a spell on some object.

There are several divination methods. In many Lahu Nyi rites involving feasts, villagers try to read divine messages on the upper leg bones of a chicken (*g'a pfuh tguh nyi ve*) and/or on a pig liver (*va sheh nyi ve*). Some villagers have more expertise in interpreting dreams (*zuh ma maw ve taw ve*) for predicting future events. Bad omens appearing in dreams may lead villagers to perform purifying rites (*pa keh ve*). Ordinary but skilful villagers can use these divination methods, while divination by reading candle fires (*peh haw nyi ve*) and measuring the length of folded cloth (*taw hte ve*) are professions of proficient shamans and spirit specialists, respectively. *La hk'a nyi ve* or reading one's palm is not limited within the Lahu society but is generally observed. I wanted to refer to these methods as divination rather than fortune-telling because they involve more or less a notion that people are reading messages that *g'ui sha* or spirits have put on these objects.

4.2.6 Religious Community

Religious community of the Lahu Nyi religion is based on the ethnic community — in this case, the community of Lahu Nyi sub-division — and evangelism is hardly observed outside the group. Lahu Nyi religion, which is almost the synonym of the Lahu Nyi customs and conventions (*Lahu aw li aw hk'a* or *aw hu aw kaw*), has relevance only to Lahu Nyi people. Villagers know clearly that different peoples have different customs and that if non-Lahu Nyi people vio-

³⁴ However, villagers have various understandings as to the details of *gu [hpeh] pi ve* and *ne pi pfuh ve*. Some explain that they are different in that *gu [hpeh] pi ve* targets only one specific person, while *ne pi pfuh ve* concentrates on the entire lineage of a targeted person. Others consider the two expressions as denoting generally the same action.

late Lahu Nyi customs, they will not have problems, while if Lahu Nyi people violate their customs, they will eventually meet with sickness and misfortune. Lahu must, they say, obey Lahu customs because they are born Lahu. The Lahu Nyi religious community coincides with their vital ethnic community, or “there is an identity of social and religious groupings” (Wach 1944: 57).

Ideally, each village should have a *haw veh* and persons to fill four titles: *To bo*, *Sa la*, *A ca* and *La shaw*, although some villages lack some or all of them. The *To bo* represents the whole village and prays to *G’ut sha* for health and prosperity. Many Lahu Nyi rites stress cooperation and harmony between villagers.

Beyond the village clusters, however, there is no rational organization, but charismatic priests and shamans can sometimes extend their power over large areas. They may be thought chosen by *G’ut sha* and some even a divine incarnate. Those who are thought to possess magical powers may initiate a new cult movement.

4.3 Religious Transformations

The term “traditional religion” or “*sasana dang du’m*” in Thai — which Thai and foreign observers often use to refer to Lahu Nyi religion — is misleading, for the adjective “traditional” implies changelessness. Although Lahu Nyi villagers themselves are declined to consider the religious beliefs and practices they follow today as authentic Lahu customs passed on from their ancestors, the Lahu Nyi “traditional” religion actually has undergone transformations many times (Walker 1970, Sombat 1997, 2002).

Transformations of the Lahu Nyi religions may be divided into periods according to eras of great religious innovators. In Lahu, *paw hku* is the term to refer to such influential politico-religious leaders who can exercise power over large areas. They, as divine incarnate, claim magical powers and often mount messianic movements to rebel against existing political powers. *Paw hku*’s movements are always accompanied by religious innovations, in the name of a return to the old and true Lahu customs, and strengthening of ethical precepts. Thus, as villagers consider, each *paw hku* era has different religious practices.

Although villagers say that there have been many *paw hku* in the past, the most recent and most influential *paw hku* was *Maw na Paw hku*.¹⁷ He was from Loi Kham Long in the Mong Hsat-Mong Ton area of southern Shan State. He gained a large number of followers and began to claim supernatural power in 1950s. He had been a commander of a *ka kwe ve* home guard force of the Burmese side and fought with the Shan rebel forces but later initiated a Lahu rebellion against the Burmese (cf. Lintner 1999: 515). During the time he mobilized Lahu powers and

¹⁷ Also called *Maw na To bo*, *Pu caw lon*, *Paw hku lon*, *To bo lon* to name a few.

fought against the Burmese, he carried out many social and religious reforms

4.3.1 Pre-Maw Na Paw Hku Era

Villagers say that before the *Maw na Paw hku*'s era, there were no *haw yeh* or priest titles, such as *Sa la*, *A ca* and *La shaw*. Instead, there was *hk'a u pa* in the forest uphill side of the village for villagers to worship and make offerings to. The term *hk'a u pa* seems to denote both the specific part of the forest and the altar built there. *Hk'a u pa* served as the guardian spirit of the village. *Hk'a u pa* is the part of the forest in which villagers are prohibited to open hill fields and have to pass slowly and quietly so as not to offend the mountain and water spirit governing the area. When villagers were sick and in disorder, they had to go up to *hk'a u pa* to make offerings to the spirit. Villagers now recall that people in the past were very afraid of *hk'a u pa*, for the spirit dwelling there were capricious and very easy to be offended. It was *Maw na Paw hku*, villagers say, who moved the altar from *hk'a u pa* to the *haw yeh*. Villagers now worship *g'ui sha* instead of the great mountain and water spirit.

4.3.2 Reforms of Maw Na Paw Hku

Lahu Nyi people believe that *G'ui sha* is the creator and the ultimate master of the universe. If Lahu Nyi people do not follow his teachings and violate the Lahu customs, they are charged with sins (*ven ba*), which eventually cause sickness and misfortune to them or their relatives. However, when Lahu Nyi are suffering and faced with predicaments, *G'ui sha* is said to come down from heaven/sky to earth in order to teach people to abstain from committing sins and help them. These fundamental beliefs of the Lahu Nyi people provided a basis for the *Maw na Paw hku*'s movement. In about 1949-1950 when Lahu Nyi people were suffering from the warfare between the Burmese, Shan and Koumintang armies in Burma and were faced with the spread of Christianity in the hills, *G'ui sha* came to incarnate himself in *Maw na Paw hku*. *Maw na Paw hku* then made a series of socio-religious reforms, get together people under the banner of "Lahu" and founded the Lahu army to initiate rebellion (Sombat 1997, 2002).

Maw na Paw hku's first reform was to spread diverse religious instruments or symbols, including *kaw mo ti*, *aw hpeu* and *li kaw* to put together the villagers under the consciousness of "Lahu". These ritual instruments are today widely observed in Lahu Nyi villages. *Maw na Paw hku* organized a mission group to tour extensively around Lahu Nyi villages in Burma and Thailand to teach people to follow *G'ui sha*'s words and lead an ethical life. This has established a

common identity of “brother Lahu” even if they are living in different countries (Sombat 1997, 2002)

Maw na Paw hku’s second reform was structural. *Maw na Paw hku*’s mission group ordained to villagers such titles as *To bo*, *Sa la*, *A ca* and *La shaw* and also performed ordination rites for *A daw* (political leader of a village) if they had not yet performed formal ordination rites yet. Before the ordination rites, every one had to go through purifying rites, make diverse ritual instruments to show customary and political leadership and receive a sacred bundle of beeswax candles (*peh daw*) from *Maw na Paw hku* or his representatives. Moreover, *Maw na Paw hku* established such titles as *Ti taw nyi* (supreme commander of the people), *Caw fa* (prefecture head), *Hpa va* (district head), *Shehn lon* (town head) and *A daw* (village leader) for the whole Lahu Nyi society.³⁶ Ordination rite for each title was accompanied with purifying rites which needed expenditure of large amounts of money (Sombat 1997, 2002).

Maw na Paw hku stressed that violating the Lahu customs and teachings of *G’ui sha* was sin, which was needed to be purified by *pa keh ve* rites. Funds procured by the purifying rites were then used to purchase arms for the Lahu army (Sombat 1997, 2002). *Maw na Paw hku*’s religious reforms were not more to sophisticate and systematize *G’ui sha*’s teachings than to stress and strengthen simple moral precepts. Although there are always tendencies for minor reforms, almost all non-Christian Lahu Nyi villages in Burma and Thailand today basically follow religious practices established by *Maw na Paw hku*.

4.3.3 A Current “Reformist” Movement

As I have mentioned above, all supernatural beings except for *Pi ya* are either associated with *g’ui sha*’s or the spirits’ side and there are religious specialists on both. Despite the practical eclecticism found among some, villagers have general orientations to either of the two sides, too.

Also in my study village, there are two groups following two different religious practices. Interestingly, the group that pays respect only to *g’ui sha* and condemns spirits often presents itself as reformist — engaged in revitalizing ancient Lahu customs of truth and/or introducing new religious practices recently taught by *G’ui sha*. Some followers of this group claim their reforms to be a return to the true Lahu customs that their ancestors once practiced but were lost. The other group continues the existing ways, which they claim have been always the same — and therefore “true” — from the time of their ancestors. Villagers of the later group rely on a spirit specialist

³⁶ These titles surely have origins in the Shan political system, as many of the titles were borrowed words from the Tai language.

to propitiate spirits in case of disorder, as they see spirits, though being capricious and evading human expectations, as *G'ui sha*'s agents. Villagers of the former group refuse to propitiate spirits as they consider them now opposed to *G'ui sha*. These people rely only on *Ta la* and *Ka shaw ma* who claim to make direct contact with *g'ui sha* or deities who are higher than spirits.³⁷ The contrast between *g'ui sha*'s and the spirits' sides leads to an ideological debate whether they should "bow their heads to spirits" or not.

On a larger level, the group of *g'ui sha*'s side in my study village belongs to a religious sect led by an influential *Ta la*, called *Ca heh Ta la* or *Ta la lon* ("great *ta la*"), in another village *Ca heh Ta la*, allegedly having worked as shaman for 14 years, now devotes himself to religious work without doing much farming. He is now touring 48 villages. Although an overview is difficult to make, this *Ta la*'s group seems to be the largest cult movement in present Lahu Nyi society. This *Ta la* first came to my study village 7-8 years ago. At that time, many villagers experienced shivering and weeping and began to recite prayers. The group explains that then *G'ui sha* came down to earth and taught new religious customs, according to which they stopped propitiating spirits in the forest and built a *haw yeh* in the village to worship *G'ui sha* there. This is a move of the religious locus from the forest into human territory.³⁸ *To bo* and *Ka shaw ma* in my study village are under the influence of this *Ta la* and perform curing and purifying rites for clients coming both from their own village and outside.

5. Preliminary Remarks

In this report, I used a sociological definition of the term "religion" in order to take into account not only so-called world religions but also so-called tribal religions that lack scriptures, sophisticated creeds and systematized organization of its believers. I referred to the religion of non-Christian Lahu Nyi people as the Lahu Nyi religion, because the term "animism" is only partially accurate, while "traditional" religion is misleading for its implication of unchangeableness. This religion is based on a community whose ethnic and religious lines are identical (Wach 1944: 55-58).

Gustav Mensching classifies religions in two general types, "ethnic religions" (*Volksreligionen*) and "universal religions" (*Universalreligionen*).³⁹ These are, of course, ideal types and in fact every religion has attributes of both these two types but in different degrees. Although the

³⁷ By this, they say, they reduced economic burdens accompanying rituals by sacrificing no livestock. In fact, however, clients have to devote money, which sometimes amounts to a large amount.

³⁸ Conversions to Christianity by the Lahu, which are accompanied by reinterpretation of *g'ui sha* as the Christian God and spirits as evil spirits or demons, involve the same kind of move of the religious locus from the forest to the village church, or from without to within greater human control (see Nishimoto 2000b: 69-70).

apparent difference between ethnic and universal religions lies in whether they are only for one group of people or extend across many peoples, this territorial difference comes from their variation in fundamental structure. The bearer of an ethnic religion is always a vital community, which constitutes also a religious community. Individuals are still embedded in the community and have not found themselves. Ethnic religions have relevance only to one people and their gods do not have universality. The good and bad are not absolute but relative, either valuable or harmful to the prosperity and continuity of the people. On the other hand, a universal religion has followers beyond one group or nation. Individuals who have become conscious about self and existential problems are now the subjects of universal religions. While both ethnic and universal religions aim to cope with human sufferings, the former is concerned more with communal sufferings and the latter more with individual ones (Mensching 1959 65-77).

The religion of the Lahu Nyi people shares many characteristics of such an “ethnic religion” as defined by Mensching. We should note that what Mensching calls “ethnic religion” is what we usually consider to be customs and conventions of small-scale societies of relatively simple technologies. Although the purpose of this report was to give a general ethnographical picture of the Lahu Nyi religion, the concepts of religious typologies and structures may be useful for a comparative study on the “traditional” and Christian religions among the Lahu. Indeed, they make an interesting contrast in the Lahu society. Lahu Christianity, though still based much on a vital and ethnic community, has been added many features and orientations of the world religion (Nishimoto 2000a and 2000b). On the other hand, the religion of the Lahu Nyi, which has been under incessant pressure to transform itself and adapt to changing conditions, remains fundamentally an “ethnic religion” in many aspects.

¹⁹ Mensching also uses the term “world religions” (*Weltreligionen*) in generally the same meanings as that the term “universal religions” denotes.

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