

Emergence of Lahu Pop and the Formation of Christian Lahu Identity: Ethnic Music as a Cultural Resource

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the musical situations and the development of popular music among an ethnic minority. It claims that a new genre of songs, which are sung in Lahu language and with Western melodies, serves for Christian Lahu as a cultural resource for providing a basis to claim an ethno-religious identity.

The Lahu people, a highland dwelling ethnic minority, do not possess a term that is equivalent to the English word “music.”² However, this does not mean that the Lahu are not involved in any musical activities. In fact, like other peoples, the Lahu have been enjoying singing songs and playing musical instruments for many centuries.

In terms of religion, the Lahu are generally divided into two groups, Traditionalist Lahu and Christian Lahu. The former claim themselves as being the followers of the teachings of their ancestors or “Lahu customs” (*La Hu aw li*), while the latter are believers of Protestant Christianity that was introduced by foreign missionaries since the turn of the twentieth century. Today, musical situations among Traditionalist and Christian Lahu make an interesting contrast.

The paper first describes different musical situations among Traditionalist and Christian Lahu, then focuses on “Lahu pop,” a genre of songs that incorporates Lahu lyrics with Western melodies that is only found among Christian Lahu groups, and explains the development of popular music among Christian Lahu by referring to Walter Benjamin’s concept of “mechanical reproduction” (1968). The paper finally examines the new genre of songs found among Christian Lahu in terms of being a cultural resource that can be utilized as a basis for a new ethnic-cum-religious identity as Christian Lahu.

However, I need to note before proceeding to examine the musical situations

² General understanding of “music” is one of the arts. Thus, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1976) states: Music n. 1. Art of combining sounds of voice(s) or instrument(s) to achieve beauty of form and expression of emotion; sounds so produced; pleasant sound, e.g. song of bird, murmur of brook, cry of hounds. 2. Musical compositions; written or printed score of musical composition.

among the Lahu people that my descriptions of musical situations among Traditionalist and Christian Lahu here are based on my fieldwork in 1996-97 and 1999-2001, when cassette tapes were the dominant music medium and video CDs (VCDs) were not popular yet. DVDs are still hardly found among the Lahu people.

2. Musical Situations among Traditionalist and Christian Lahu

The Lahu people are a highland dwelling ethnic minority living in the mountainous areas of southwest China, eastern Shan State of Myanmar, and north Thailand. Their total population is estimated to be over 700,000, but in each of the countries they live in, they are not a majority people but an ethnic minority living at a geographical and social periphery. The Lahu language and culture are different from those of the majority peoples of the region, which are the Han, the Burmese, and the Thai.

Another feature of the Lahu people is the fact that, in terms of religion, they are generally divided into Traditionalist and Christian groups. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a part of the Lahu has been converted to Christianity and it is estimated that one fifth to one fourth of the Thailand Lahu population are Christians. On the other hand, the other part of the Thailand Lahu population are followers of their traditional ways, whom I refer to as “Traditionalist Lahu.” Music among the Lahu people is related to their religion. Quite different musical situations are observed among the Traditionalist and Christian Lahu groups.

Music among the Lahu comprises of playing musical instruments and singing songs. I will explain the musical situations of Traditionalist and Christian Lahu groups according to these two categories.

2.1 Playing Musical Instruments

A bamboo flute (*leh tu k'a, leh k'a chu*) is simply made of soft bamboo carved with a knife. Lahu play a bamboo flute on such occasions as on the way back home from work and when staying overnight alone in a field hut. Lahu can make this bamboo flute without difficulty and throw it away after use. A bamboo flute can convey messages, too.

Bamboo mouth harps (*a hta, a hta a hteh*) are made of bamboo and played mainly by females. Traditionally, the Lahu used the mouth harp when on a date with a lover and sometimes as a communication tool (Lewis, n.d.). It is used in courting and it can also convey messages.

The gourd pipe (*naw*) has a central place among all the Lahu musical instruments, and is made by skillful craftsmen. A gourd is dried, five small pieces of bamboo are

inserted, and holes are made to adjust the sound (Schwörer, 1982). In 1999, a small type of gourd pipe was traded at about 100 - 150 Baht or 2.5 - 3.75 USD. Like the bamboo mouth harp, it is also used as a communication tool. The Lahu play gourd pipes and dance in the New Year celebration, the most important annual festival. The performers, who are often males, lead the dancing and play the gourd pipe around a circle of spectators. Excellent gourd pipe players are called “*sa la*” or “teachers.” They are sometimes invited to New Year’s festivals in other villages and receive a gift or money in return. During the New Year’s dance, the dancers also take turns playing drums and cymbals.

The Lahu play long wooden drums (*cehn k’o*, *ca k’o*) on such occasions as the New Year and the eves of traditional Lahu Sabbath days on which people dance in the religious hall dedicated to the Lahu god. On these occasions, the Lahu play cymbals (*shehn*) along with long wooden drums.

The gong (*bon lo k’o*) that the Lahu use is the same one used in Shan and northern Thai Buddhist temples. Traditionalist Lahu dance accompanied by gourd pipes, drums, cymbals, and gongs, at their temple on their Sabbath days. Priests and shamans then recite religious prayers.

Stringed musical instruments are called “*tin*” in Lahu language, which include both traditional ones and Western guitars. Traditional stringed instruments are not popular today, though we found many guitars in Christian Lahu villages. There were only a few guitars among Traditionalist Lahu.

At the Christian Lahu’s New Year festivals, some Christian Lahu play harmonica in dance circles, probably because the sounds of gourd pipes and harmonicas are similar. Harmonica in Lahu language is “*ka la naw*,” which literally means “white people’s gourd pipe.” Traditionalist Lahu do not play harmonica in the New Year festivals.

2.2 Singing Songs

Lahu’s traditional singing, called “*k’a mui ve*,” is an aria. It is a type of singing in which singers use poetic language different from that used in daily conversations, dragging stanzas and overlapping them without musical instruments. Both males and females sometimes sing as a duet. At present, there is a great difference in this type of traditional singing between Traditionalist and Christian Lahu. Traditionalist Lahu still use this traditional singing when on a date, and even the younger generation can sing while working in the field. On the contrary, there are very few Christian Lahu who are able to sing except for a few elderly people.

Although not considered “music” in today’s common understanding of the word, we find musical elements play an important role in Traditionalist Lahu’s religious prayers.

Generally, there are two types of Traditionalist Lahu religious prayers. One is *bon ku ve*, which literally means “calling for blessings (of god and spirits), and the other is *k’ao ve*, literally, “telling or talking (to spirits).” For Traditionalist Lahu, it is important to carry musical elements in oral communications for a ritual and religious event. When priests or shamans pray for blessings to god or spirits (*bon ku ve*), prayers in a special religious language will be recited. They also talk to spirits to remove calamities or sicknesses by chanting in a monotonous tone with a steady rhythm (*k’ao ve*). In either case, it is important for religious specialists to be able to use a special ritual language. The musical beauty of prayers is important and Traditionalist Lahu enjoy these religious prayers as a kind of music. They say, for example, that some prayers are pleasant to the ears (*na sha ve* in Lahu) and some are not. One interesting statement of a villager, which is considered half a joke and half truth, is that if a good spirit specialist’s prayer is too beautiful, the evil spirit, whom the prayer is telling to go back to the forest or its territory, would not leave the village, because the spirit would indulge in listening to the musical beauty of the prayer. Some priests and shamans record their religious prayers on cassette tapes to enjoy their musical beauty.³

On the other hand, there is a singing style found only among Christian Lahu called “*li hkaw*.” Although *li hkaw* is usually translated as “songs,” the Lahu traditional style of singing (*k’a mui ve*) is not included in “*li hkaw*,” because the *li hkaw* denotes songs with Western melodies. These modern songs, sung in colloquial Lahu, are often accompanied by musical instruments: mostly by guitar or even by a band with electric instruments. *Li hkaw* is strongly tied to Christian Lahu culture. In a broader sense of the term, *li hkaw* also includes “*hkaw yeh*” and “*hke hpe*.”

“*Hkaw yeh*,” the term itself comes from the English word “choir,” is a chorus with four voice types. In most village churches, there are chorus groups (*hkaw yeh aw mo*) and they regularly practice under the leadership of a village pastor. Christian Lahu have four church services on Sunday and the chorus group sings hymns in the services.

“*Hkeh hpe*” is a play song for children to dance to. *Hke hpe* is often used in church activities, including evangelical tours to non-Christian Lahu villages.

2.3 Comparison of Musical Situations of Traditionalist and Christian Lahu

Based on the above descriptions, I will now compare musical situations among Traditionalist and Christian Lahu.

As Table 1 shows, Traditionalist and Christian Lahu are not very different when

³ On the other hand, Lahu Christians do not place much emphasis on musicality in their oral prayers, which are recited in colloquial Lahu language.

it comes to activities involving the playing of musical instruments. The only difference is the use of the harmonica by Christian Lahu, which is to be regarded as one of the Western influences they received after converting to Christianity.

Table 1: Musical Instruments Played in Traditionalist and Christian Lahu Groups

Playing Musical Instruments	Traditionalist Lahu	Christian Lahu
1 bamboo flute	✓	✓
2 bamboo mouth harps	✓	✓
3 gourd pipe	✓	✓
4 drum	✓	✓
5 cymbals	✓	✓
6 gong	✓	✓
7 stringed instrument	✓	✓✓*
8 harmonica		✓

*Here, one ✓ denotes traditional stringed instrument and the other guitar.
(source: the author's observations)

Table 2: Singing in Traditionalist and Christian Lahu Groups

Singing	Traditionalist Lahu	Christian Lahu
1 <i>k'a mui ve</i> (singing traditional songs)	✓✓*	✓
2 <i>bon ku ve</i> (traditional prayers to ask for blessings)	✓	
3 <i>k'ao ve</i> (traditional prayer to talk to spirits)	✓	
4 <i>li hkaw k'a ve</i> (singing modern-style songs)		✓
5 <i>hkaw yeh te ve</i> (singing in choir)		✓
6 <i>hke hpe te ve</i> (singing and dancing in a modern style)		✓

*Here, two ✓ mean that the activities are more frequently made than one ✓.
(source: the author's observations)

However, as for the activities of singing songs, Traditionalist and Christian Lahu show quite different musical situations. *K'a mui ve* or singing traditional songs is still found among both groups, although it is less heard among Christian Lahu than among Traditionalist Lahu today. *Bon ku ve* and *k'ao ve* are two kinds of religious prayers

addressed to the Lahu god and spirits. These religious prayers are only found among Traditionalist Lahu, because the present day Christian Lahu, who had prayed to the Lahu god and spirits with these chants before conversion, gave up these practices after they became Christian. The musical activities that only Christian Lahu are involved in are singing *li hkaw* (non-traditional style songs) and *hkaw yeh* (choir), and doing *hke pe* (singing non-traditional style songs with dancing). All these three musical activities were most likely introduced from the West or by the Christian church, and now Christian Lahu sing songs in the Lahu language with Western melodies.

We find musical elements playing important roles in Traditionalist Lahu rituals. Musical beauty in the ritual prayers are highly valued by Traditionalist Lahu as gifts from god. Music of Traditionalist Lahu is more embedded in ritual and religious contexts. Among Christian Lahu, we find a new genre of songs “*li hkaw*” or songs with Western melodies and colloquial Lahu lyrics. Christian Lahu *li hkaw* are a product of Christian influences.

In sum, Traditionalist and Christian Lahu groups originally had similar musical situations before a part of the Lahu population converted to the new religion. Today, Traditionalist Lahu’s musical activities are almost completely traditional ones, while many Christian Lahu musical activities were introduced from the West and developed under Western influences.

3. Lahu Pop

Although it is included in *li hkaw* by the emic categories of Christian Lahu, a genre of songs that should be called “Lahu pop” is a distinctive phenomenon that we find among Christian Lahu but not among Traditionalist Lahu. By Lahu pop songs, I denote those songs heard among Christian Lahu that are sung in colloquial Lahu language with melodies of Western popular music. In its simplest form, one or two Lahu people, mostly boys, sing a Lahu pop song with acoustic guitars, while, in a more elaborated style, they form an electric band of four to five members. The singers are not professional musicians who are making a living on music. They sing Lahu pop songs in church services as well as situations outside the church, and some record their songs and put them on cassette tapes, which are distributed among Christian Lahu people in Thailand and Myanmar by sales or by making pirate copies. There are several famous Lahu singers and people enjoy their performances after large prayer assemblies.

Lahu pop songs most likely originated from American church songs that praise God and are sung in the styles of American folksongs and rock and roll, although they

also received influences from Burmese and Thai popular music mainly through radio. However, while Lahu pop originated from Christian folk and rock music, Lahu singers later developed songs that are concerned with non-religious stories such as love and relations, their daily lives, and the history and culture of the Lahu people.⁴ Today, Lahu singers sing Lahu pop songs in non-religious contexts and not to praise God but to enjoy music. Lahu pop songs are no longer music to serve for ritual and religious purposes, but exist for themselves.

4. Mechanical Reproduction and Lahu Pop

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1968), Walter Benjamin considers the changes that occur to the characteristics of works of art as a result of the development of reproduction techniques that made it possible to easily reproduce artworks in large quantities.⁵ Benjamin argues that “the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual - first the magical, then the religious kind” (*ibid.* 223). The earliest artworks had their “unique existence at the place where it happen[ed] to be” or what he terms “aura.” Artworks in the past had their unique quality of existence, and this was inseparable from the fact that they were embedded in the fabric of tradition.

However, by the help of reproduction techniques, artworks had begun to be increasingly detached from religio-ritual contexts and the “exhibition value” began to displace the “cult value” (ritual value). Mechanical reproduction allowed artworks to become more handy and portable and be possessed by the masses. “[T]hat which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” or its unique quality of presence (*ibid.* 221). “At the time, art reacted with the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*, that is, with a theology of art” (*ibid.* 224).

The cases of Traditionalist and Christian Lahu provide an interesting basis for studying the development of “music” from one embedded in religio-ritual contexts to an independent area of art of sounds and voices. The two cases also show the shift from the “cult value” to the “exhibition value” (or “entertainment value,” which seems more suitable for the Christian Lahu case) in the Christian Lahu music. In the Christian Lahu case, techniques of mechanical reproduction, more specifically, the cassette tape recorders and cassette tapes, were the most important factors that have allowed Christian Lahu music to emancipate itself from the religio-ritual contexts. While many musical activities

⁴ Please refer to the Appendix for lyrics of some Lahu popular songs.

⁵ Actually, Benjamin mainly focuses on photography in his considerations on the changes occurred in the characteristics of arts in general. This paper is an application of his thoughts on arts to music of an ethnic minority people.

of Traditionalist Lahu are used for ritual and religious purposes, Christian Lahu today enjoy Lahu pop songs outside religious contexts and as entertainment.

5. Ethnic Music as a Cultural Resource

As already mentioned above, today's musical situations of Traditionalist and Christian Lahu show a clear contrast. The two groups may have been similar in musical situations, however Western influences brought by the Christian church have changed musical situations among Christian Lahu. Today, Traditionalist Lahu are more involved in traditional Lahu musical activities, while Christian Lahu are more into musical activities of the modern Western kind.

The Traditionalist and Christian Lahu people themselves are conscious of the quite different musical situations of the two groups. Because Christian Lahu regard the traditional Lahu god and spirits as "evil spirits" (*ne hai*) and condemn traditional Lahu prayers to the Lahu god and spirits as an act of "worshipping the evil spirits" (*ne hai hta o k'o pui ve*), *bon k'u ve* and *k'ao ve* are religious prayers associated only with Traditionalist Lahu. On the other hand, Traditionalist Lahu sometimes call *li hkaw*, songs sung in Lahu language and with Western melodies as "songs of Christians" (*bon ya ve li hkaw* or *meun neu ve li hkaw*) with an implication that Traditionalist Lahu themselves do not sing such songs.

This does not mean that Christian Lahu have intentionally been trying to make themselves distinct from Traditionalist Lahu by utilizing differences in musical activities. Yet, as a result of Christian Lahu's long experience with the Christian church, their musical situation has become very different from that of the Traditionalist one. Today, Christian Lahu sometimes utilize the different musical situations to express their own distinctiveness from Traditionalist Lahu. In this sense, Christian Lahu music of the modern Western kind is a cultural resource that they can pick up and utilize to claim an ethno-religious identity as Christian Lahu.

6. Conclusion

The Lahu, an ethnic minority in mountainous areas of north Thailand, did not, and still do not, possess a word to mean "music" in the sense that it is an independent area of art or entertainment and that it is not subject to rituals and religions. However, the Lahu people have been enjoying diverse musical activities for many centuries.

Under the influences of the Christian church, the musical situation among

Christian Lahu underwent changes. Traditional ritual prayers, which also have beauty in the sounds and voices, are no longer heard among Christian Lahu. Instead, new kinds of songs, which are sung in colloquial Lahu language with Western melodies in order to praise God, have developed among Christian Lahu.

Also under the influences of the Christian church, “Lahu pop,” or popular songs with Lahu lyrics and the melodies of Western popular music, have emerged and developed among Christian Lahu. Some Lahu popular songs are sung and enjoyed outside Church services and have no religious contents. In other words, Lahu pop is detached from religion or rituals. While many musical activities of Traditionalist Lahu are still embedded in religio-ritual contexts, music among Christian Lahu now has a higher degree of “exhibition value.” As a result of the long experience of Christianity by Christian Lahu, their music has been emancipated from religio-ritual contexts and there has emerged and developed a popular music among Christian Lahu. The new kind of Christian Lahu music is no longer totally religious but is often music for entertainment.

These new styles of songs (*li hkaw*), especially the “Lahu Pop” now found among Christian Lahu, are a cultural resource, since Christian Lahu can utilize it in order to claim a new ethno-cum-religious identity as Christian Lahu.

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Appendix: Some Lahu popular songs

Song 1 -- The Earth is filled with humans

The Earth is filled with humans,
no country with no people,
so for the Lahu people,
we cannot seek a new country.

Long ago, a group of Ate went south
no place even in the northern country
people filled the north
we cannot go back.

Make the place you are living
your country.
Your country is where the Lahu stand,
make it the Kingdom of God.

On the Earth we the Lahu
live together,
though we cannot service
the country of Lahu,
make the kingdom of God.

Through our religion and customs
unite our hearts together
hand in hand, on the Earth,
we help one another.

Song 2 -- Why us the Lahu?

Why us the Lahu,
have to live in the mountain,
not on the fertile land?

When our god made us choose
a deer or a horse,
we chose deer.
Is that why?

That day our god made us choose
fire or water,
we chose fire.
That's why we live in the mountain.
Is it true?
We are the people
without a country.

Today, we have no country,
so we need wisdom.
Without wealth,
no happy life
We need to stand together.
Those who are smart,
study hard.
Those who can earn money,
work hard
Unite one another,
Prosperity is upon the Lahu.

Why us the Lahu,
have to live in the mountain,
not on the fertile land?

Being afraid of malaria,
we live in the mountain.
Sure enough
that is not true.

Our ancestors were attacked,
escaped here and there,
taking our wife and children,
that's why we are forced into
a miserable living,
We are the people
without a country.

Song 3 -- This year at the New Year's Festival

This year, at the New Year's Festival,
we meet,
shake hands,
our hearts are cheerful,
my dear friends.

This year, at the New Year's Festival,
the old and young, children,
every face looks proud,
beautiful, darling,
everyone's happy time.

Lahu's New Year's dance
makes their hearts delightful.
This New Year's dance given
to the Lahu by a god
Make it known till the end of the Earth.

This year, at the New Year's Festival,
boys and girls are waiting for a dance,
playing the drums and cymbal.
Beautiful, truly
at Lahu's New Year's Festival,

Lahu's New Year's dance
makes their hearts delightful.
This New Year's dance given
to the Lahu by a god
Make it known till the end of the Earth.

Song 4 -- None like Lahu suffers hardships in the world

None like Lahu suffers hardships in the world,
cultivate the land to live,
make a living for a year,
but not enough even for a year,
life is hard to live.

Carrying babies in the front,
with firewood on the back,
Lahu women,
never takes a rest before sunset,
why no way out to a better life.

On the Moon,
once mankind reached,
it's a lie – a fairy tale.
When she saw it in her own eyes,
wide opened mouth with surprise.

Our tribes
never under anyone's control,
make our sons and daughters study.
Remember we were dominated,
once without knowledge,
work harder.

On the Moon,

once mankind reached,
it's a lie – a fairy tale.
When she saw it in her own eyes,
wide opened mouth with surprise.

Song 5 -- “Toyota”

I would like to drive a Toyota,
without money, with complaints
Shall we walk?
If I were rich one day,
I'll buy a cool car,
drive along
with a trail of dust.

I would like to have one
like others,
It's been a long time
through hard work.

No Toyota car after all,
What can I say?
When I go to someone's house,
with a frowning face,
a meal with a chili pepper
someday, I will buy a nice car.

I would like to have one
like others,
It's been a long time
through hardwork.

Song 6 -- Pamai (Royal Forestry Department)

“Pamai” has come,
my land was planted for conservation.
If I cut trees,
I would be thrown into prison.
What a nuisance!
I can't appeal to anyone.

There is no land to plough for the Lahu,
in the mountains,
can't eat,
go to town,
with labor work,
Just a meager living

Even working in the Pamai tree planting,
no hope to have an easy life,
without work,
no food,
slave to others,
for the Lahu,
Life becomes poor.

There is no land to plough for the Lahu,
in the mountains,
can't eat,
go to town,
with a labor work,
Just a meager living

Give me a job
even at a construction site.