



Minority Cultures of Laos:

Kammu, Lua', Lahu, Hmong, and Iu-Mien

Edited by
Judy Lewis

Contributors
Damrong Tayanin
Lue Vang
Julia Elliott
James Matisoff
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Southeast Asia Community Resource Center
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in a California Context**

Eric Crystal, Ph.D. and Kaota Saepharn

Preface

Over the past fifteen years, the California Department of Education, Bilingual Education Office has sponsored the development of materials to assist teachers in providing sensitive and appropriate instructional services to newcomer populations. The Asian and Minority Language Group Project has completed handbooks for teachers of Vietnamese, Cantonese, Japanese, Pilipino, Portuguese, Korean, Hmong, Khmer, and Lao students. The Department has also developed literacy instruction programs for Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese; student texts for government and history in Cambodian and Vietnamese; a student text for learning about Indochinese cultures; glossaries of school terminology in Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao; and Hmong; and translations of "52 ways to help your child in school" in Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Hmong, Korean, and Chinese. The production and distribution of teacher-support materials is possible through Transition Program for Refugee Children (TPRC) and Emergency Immigrant Education Program (EIEP) funds. In 1989, the Department printed a three-part volume, *Introduction to the Indochinese Cultures*, written by Sun-Hin Chhim, Khamchong Luangpraseut, and Huynh Dinh Te.

Development of *Minority Cultures of Laos* began the following year on this five-part volume on the less well-known cultures and languages from Laos. Many teachers have by now heard of the Hmong, the largest of the minority cultures included in this book, with a population of more than 90,000 in the United States. West Coast teachers probably know of the Iu-Mien, a group that totals no more than 15,000. Very few teachers have had any contact with or information about three other Laotian refugee groups: the Lahu, Lua' (T'in), and Kammu (Khmu). Each of these groups has its own language, identity, and particular lifeways.

This book is designed to bring together into one volume

information on these five groups, both the recorded research and the peoples' own views. Each chapter is developed by individuals who have knowledge and experience in working with these groups.

As the team leader for this project, it was my pleasure to work with the following individuals who dedicated themselves to complete this book: **Damrong Tayanin** of the University of Lund in Sweden and **Lue Vang** of the Southeast Asia Community Resource Center in Folsom Cordova Unified School District for work on the Kammu chapter, **Frank Proshan** and **Kristina Lindell** for their helpful comments, and **Joel Halpern** for his classic photographs of the Kammu; **Julia Elliott**, graduate student and researcher in linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, and her collaborators for the Lua' chapter, and **Miho Hayashibara** of Sonoma State University for the Lua' illustrations and the cover design; **James Matisoff** of UC Berkeley's Linguistics Department (and through him, Anthony Walker of Ohio State University) for the Lahu chapter; **Yang Dao** for the Hmong chapter; and **Eric Crystal** of the Center for Southeast Asia Studies at the University of California at Berkeley and **Kaota Saepharn** of Oakland Unified School District for the Mien chapter. Finally, I must extend my appreciation to **Judy Lewis** of the Southeast Asia Community Resource Center, Folsom Cordova Unified School District, for editing and preparing the book for printing, and to **Jan McGorry**, Folsom Cordova Unified School District, for proof-reading the manuscript.

We hope this information will be useful to teachers and others interested in the people who until recently lived in villages in the hills and mountains of Laos.

Van LE, Consultant
California Department of Education
Bilingual Education Office
July, 1992

Introduction

Americans have a culture that values “doing,” but Asians share an orientation towards “being.” Americans ask: What do you do? What are you doing? How do you do? but Asians ask: Who was your father? Who is the important person in your lineage group? To which clan were you born? What is your totem group? From what region do you come? Americans’ identity is malleable, always open to the molding forces of potential and accomplishment. Asians’ identity is tied to the village, the region, the country, the ancestors, the social and language groups to which they were born.

The contributors to this book intend to tell you a little about the “being” of Kammu, Lua’, Lahu, Hmong and Mien. Anthropologist Edward Hall tells us that to really understand another person, we have to know his or her entire history. Clearly, this means that close kin will understand one another better than casual acquaintances. Living and working in American society today produces fleeting interactions with non-kin several times each day, and the lack of knowledge about one another’s history makes misunderstanding, even conflict, inevitable.

Those of us in service industries deal with clients who come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and only rarely do we know much about the people who present themselves to us. This means that even before we begin our work we have a problem. *Information* is part of the solution; one goal of this handbook is to collect hard-to-find information about some of the less-frequently encountered newcomers from Laos into one volume. Another part of the solution is *interaction*; we cannot learn about others (or about ourselves) unless we engage in the give-and-take of dealing with people who do not share our kin-like backgrounds. Another goal of this book is to trigger interest in interacting, and to provide material—proverbs, sayings, stories, pictures—about which two

strangers may begin to interact.

We have linguistics, but what about "culturistics"?

Linguists spend their lives uncovering the rules that govern the stringing together of sounds in patterns that are understood by others. The chapter on the Lahu contains considerable detail on the nature of the rules that govern the Lahu language. If there are only 800 Lahu in all of the United States, why is this information necessary for people who may never encounter a Lahu, and who never plan to speak the Lahu language? I think it illustrates the detail with which an outsider can understand and verbalize the unwritten rules of an unfamiliar system.

Think about Jim Matisoff going off to live with the Lahu thirty or so years ago: how did he begin to learn about a language he did not know? At first he probably felt confused, surrounded by sounds, intonations, and gestures that meant nothing to him. He had to figure out what kinds of sounds were important to speakers of Lahu; he knew from study that sounds tend to occur in certain patterns, and that knowledge gave him a method for listening and deciphering what he heard. He may have known something about other languages of the area, and knowledge of areal characteristics may have helped him notice features alien to English—words that act to punctuate sentences, verbs that act like adjectives, verbs that hook together in long strings, and genderless status-bound pronouns, for example.

Over a period of time, he developed ideas—hypotheses—about the underlying rules that governed the language. He tried out his ideas, and revised his hypotheses until they worked well to predict how words could be assembled to produce understandable utterances. His work with understanding an unknown language provides a blueprint for a process to understand the unwritten rules that govern the culture of a group of people.

We learn the unwritten rules for behaving appropriately in

our particular groups just as we learn the unwritten rules that allow us to communicate with one another, usually at our mother's knee. We know that there are rules that govern our behavior, even if we can't list them. We know because when a rule is "broken," we recognize that the other person is not acting in a "normal" way. Specifying a group's ideas of normality is bringing into awareness the unwritten rules of their culture.

Contrast and conflict

The process of bringing those rules to awareness is triggered by contrast, which often appears as conflict (let's say that *conflict* is *contrast* with an attitude). Without contrast, we each assume the other person follows rules as we know them. Once a mismatch of cultural rules is recognized ("hey, that's not normal"), the next step is to understand the other person's behavior, venturing into a world as alien and disorienting as Jim Matisoff's initial Lahu village experiences. The goal is to find out how that other person's behavior "makes sense." The more we know beforehand—general characteristics and cultural patterns—the less confusing and disorienting the experience will be.

It is ironic that Americans—who place great value on the adversarial process, who believe that truth emerges from opposition—tend to avoid intercultural contrast. On one hand, we ignore differences between people by emphasizing our common core as humans: "under the surface, we're all alike." On the other other hand, we emphasize the destruction of differences: "assimilate; become American; be like me." Imagine the field of linguistics if contrast had been similarly avoided: "no matter which language we speak, we all communicate"; or, "they need to learn my language."

The brain that acquires language also acquires culture. In all probability, contrast plays a central role in understanding cultural rules, just as contrast underlies the organization of meaningful sounds in each of our languages. Researchers are

currently looking at the parallels between computer processes and neural processes. In both cases, the elemental level is a state of contrast: on/off; 0/1. Computer models—neural networks—are beginning to illustrate the ways in which millions of incidents of contrast result in complex generalizations about experience.

Personal computers offer an analogy. Computers operate according to specific rules (programs), and we approach the computer knowing that fact. There are two ways to become operators: read the manual to learn the commands and the steps, or just do one thing after another until something works (the computer “understands” and responds). An IBM-type computer operator usually learns the rules before turning on the computer; a Macintosh-type computer operator usually plugs in the unit and starts pushing buttons. The IBM-operators *learn* computer communication through direct instruction; Macintosh-operators *acquire* computer communication through interaction. In either case the manual provides a list of the unwritten rules of the computer’s behavior (and language); using it speeds up the process of understanding the language and culture of the computer. In both cases, however, interaction (and acquisition) is the ultimate determinant of competence.

In the business of understanding the language and culture of another group of people, linguistics has progressed to the point of providing “manuals” for the understanding of languages. However, there is currently no research field for non-communicative aspects of culture equivalent in method or scope to the study of linguistics. Until research provides us with coherent “manuals” that describe the unwritten rules of a group’s behavior—a field that might be called *culturistics*—we have only fragments of knowledge and our own experiences to guide our greater understanding.

Insiders and outsiders

The nature of a culture’s unwritten rules differ when

described by an insider. In every group, certain people are charged with explaining the rules; in American culture, the task falls to mothers (or mothering caretakers) and teachers. What we tell our children comes from our own experiences—making explicit our implicit rules—or from reading what others have written about our cultural group. Some of the chapters in this handbook are written by insiders; they tell Americans what it is that they want others to know about them. What they tell us is more from their experience than from “book learning.” As such, details will differ from group to group. Other chapters are written by outsiders who know most of what has been recorded about the group; the information in these chapters has a more distant tone, speaking in generalities based on research. Some chapters contain a little of each approach. The voice of each chapter speaks to the level of recorded knowledge about each group.

Using this book

The chapters in this handbook can be used in a variety of ways by a variety of people. Hmong, Mien, Kammu, Lua', and Lahu who are only recently literate in English may find out what is known about their own group. The American-born generation may find out about the backgrounds of their parents and grandparents—their roots. People who work with these groups may read just to find out a few of the specific details of the cultures of their clients; they may read only the chapters that apply to the people they already know. High school and college students may use the first-hand accounts to compare (and contrast) the ways in which the various groups express ideas, and discover how their expressive formulas differ from American English. Speech therapists may use information about the various phonologies to better understand the responses of clients. Hmong may read about Kammu, and discover ways in which they are similar to, and different from, one another, or they may discover that Mien “dueling” chants are similar to their own *kwv txhiaj*. And so on.

The Lahu chapter is scholarly and detailed, revealing that linguistic and cultural research has been underway for some time among the Lahu. The material comes from work on the Thai and Yunnanese Black Lahu and Red Lahu, but much of it applies to the Laotian Yellow Lahu as well. Dr. Jim Matisoff, who has written a grammar and a dictionary of the Lahu language, has written about the major features of the language and his experiences among the Lahu, and brings us aspects of the cultural work of his friend Dr. Anthony Walker.

In the Mien chapter, Dr. Eric Crystal presents information on the background and recent history of the people. In addition, there are original texts that come directly from individuals in the Mien community, collected and translated by the first American Mien teacher, Kaota Saepharn.

The Lua' chapter is the shortest and contains the least "already recorded" knowledge; this shows that the Lua' are among the least researched of all the groups. In this chapter, the voices of the people tell about themselves, with the help of Julia Elliott, a graduate student in linguistics who, along with her other Lua' research, is working to develop a writing system for their language.

Swedish researchers from the University of Lund have collected and analyzed the folklore of the Khmu (*Kammu* in this book) for more than twenty years. Kàm Ràw (also known by his Thai name Damrong Tayanin) has been their lead collaborator, and he is the primary author of the *Kammu* chapter. Lue Vang, Khmu by birth but Hmong by culture, worked with Kàm Ràw and the California *Kammu* communities to develop this chapter.

The Hmong have been the most heavily researched of all the groups, and information about their language and culture is fairly easy to find. The material in the chapter on the Hmong does not consolidate all the information already available, but presents heretofore unpublished information and translated texts on selected topics, collected by Hmong scholar Dr. Yang Dao.

This is not a handbook that delivers answers. It is a resource for learning more—about the specifics of certain groups, as well as the processes of uncovering the unwritten rules of cultural groups. It is a beginning; for each group, there is more to learn and more to record, by both insiders and outsiders.

We owe much to the contributors for each chapter. We asked them to consider what it is that American teachers need to know about them, which aspects of their lives are cornerstones to their identity. We are fortunate that the people who are the most knowledgeable for each group were willing to put aside their other commitments to devote time and energy to this project. Errors, of course, are the responsibility of the editor.

Judy Lewis

Folsom Cordova Unified School District
Rancho Cordova, California
July, 1992



From the Village to the City:
The Changing Life of the Kammu

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Note:

In this chapter, many Kammu words and phrases are used. They are printed with an International Phonetics Alphabet font (IPA Roman by Linguists' Software); because IPA does not contain capital letters, many of the Kammu words do not have capital letters.

When Kammu words are first used in running text, they are italicized; when they appear in parentheses, they are not italicized. Single quotes denote a literal translation and double quotes indicate a general rendering in English.

Credits:

The photos taken by Joel M. Halpern are used with his permission. The map in Figure 2 is from Frank Proschan's Ph.D. dissertation, and is used with his permission. All other drawings and diagrams are provided by author Kàm Ràw. The story of the flood is also taken from Dr. Proschan's dissertation; it is a version that was told by a California Kammu story-teller.

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Foreword

As people used to say, whoever knows something must let others know it, too. It is no good to keep knowledge for oneself. If I know something that you do not know, I will let you know. If you know something that I do not know, you must let me know. It is no good to keep the quarrels in our hearts, no good to keep the bad situations in our minds. If there is something that you do not like, just discuss it.

Perhaps your village is different from my village. Whether our culture and society was bad or good, we will never forget our jungle life. Therefore I would like to tell you what our parents have taught us, and now we must teach our children, too.¹

I am very happy because some of our Kammu people are able to see this beautiful world. Some have had an opportunity to learn important things, and some already possess knowledge and skills. Even if we are not clever enough, we have it better here than when we were in our jungle villages.

However, you who have seen this beautiful world, do not forget our people who have not had this opportunity. Whatever we eat, we must think about them; whatever we do, we must think about them; wherever we go, we must think about them. We who have come to live in another country should teach our children to know about our language, culture and customs. The Kammu people used to say this:

táa	kèt	ḡèn	séen	tàay
do not	think	money	100,000	bags
àn	kèt	prèey	séen	kòn
let	think	people	100,000	person

*Don't think of 100,000 bags of money;
Think of 100,000 people.*

There are many leaders in a country, and there are also many inhabitants. For instance, there is one leader who controls a country, one leader who controls a province, one leader who controls a district, one leader who controls a village—and one leader who controls the family. Our parents used to tell us this:

mà	mèh	nàay	prón
mother	is	leader	district
yón	mèh	nàay	khúu
father	is	leader	teacher

*Mother is a district leader,
Father is a teacher.*

Parents are the first leaders of the children. The second leaders of the children are their teachers. Our parents used to tell us this Lao saying:

cáw	pháa	táy	koo	táy
leader	lead	die	then	die
nàay	pháa	lón	koo	lón
leader	lead	wrong	then	wrong

*If our leader leads us to die, we will certainly die.
If our leader leads us the wrong way, we will be wrong.*

The children follow the example of their parents. Whatever the parents decide to do, they should first think of their children. Kindness to other people shows your children how to be kind. Hatred shows children how to hate other people. The Kammu have borrowed this Lao proverb:

dúu	ṇàa	háay	dúu	háay
look	cow	let	look	tail
dúu	nàay	háay	dúu	mèe
look	girl	let	look	mother

*If you look for a cow, look at the tail.
If you look for a girl, look at her mother.*

If you are going to choose a cow or a water buffalo you should look at its tail. If its tail is long almost to the ground, that cow or water buffalo is a tame animal. If its tail is short it means that animal is savage and very dangerous. If you are going to choose a girl to marry, you should look at her mother.

When families all worked together to grow crops and livestock in Laos, the children learned as they worked alongside the parents and other relatives. The father usually took responsibility for the boys and the mother took responsibility for the girls. Now mothers must look after their sons as well as their daughters, and fathers must be interested in guiding their daughters as well as their sons.

According to Kammu thinking "calm" and "cool" are preferable to "hot." "Hot" means hurry and stress, and when people are in a hurry, then quarrelling often arises. The Kammu tell their children and grandchildren about quarrelsomeness. They speak of calm and cool and say that it is not only people who like to stay where it is calm and cool. Wealth and fortune also like to be in a calm and cool family.

Nobody else can make a family rich and prosperous or help them to live well. It is up to the wife and husband to make a good home for themselves and for their children. It is they who can make themselves rich—but they can also make themselves poor.

This work contains two major sections: a description of the Kammu life left behind in Laos and the new life encountered in America. The Kammu life described is the traditional pre-war life of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Since that time the Kammu who live near the lowland Lao towns have adopted Lao names, Lao clothes, Lao language, and Theravada Buddhism. The Kammu, the first people in the land that is now Laos, did have a rich culture and social life, even though it was looked down upon by the other ethnic groups and by the majority Lao people. The story of the Kammu is very much like the story of the Native Americans. Without writing and education, the old ways disappear as the

people take on new identities. We hope that this chapter will help teachers and others come to know the Kammu people a little better, and will encourage the Kammu parents to pass on their knowledge to their children.

Thanks

Thanks to the good heaven spirits,
Thanks to my good village spirits,
Thanks to my good house spirits,
Thanks to my good ancestors.
Thanks to my kind grandfather,
Thanks to my kind grandmother,
Thanks to my kind father,
Thanks to my kind mother,
Who brought me up.
She gave her milk to me, to let me grow up well.
She gave me her tasty food.

Thanks to the good spirits,
Who made it possible for me to come out from the deep dense wild
jungle away from the wild animals.
Thanks to the good spirits
Who brought me to this beautiful world.
Thanks to the good spirits
Who brought me into the big, beautiful and rich countries,
Where there are warm and beautiful clothes,
That I have never seen before,
Where there is plenty of tasty food,
That I have never eaten before.
Thanks to the good spirits
Who gave me an opportunity to have some education.
Thanks to all kinds of good spirits,
And to my mother and father,
Who let me be able to speak some languages.

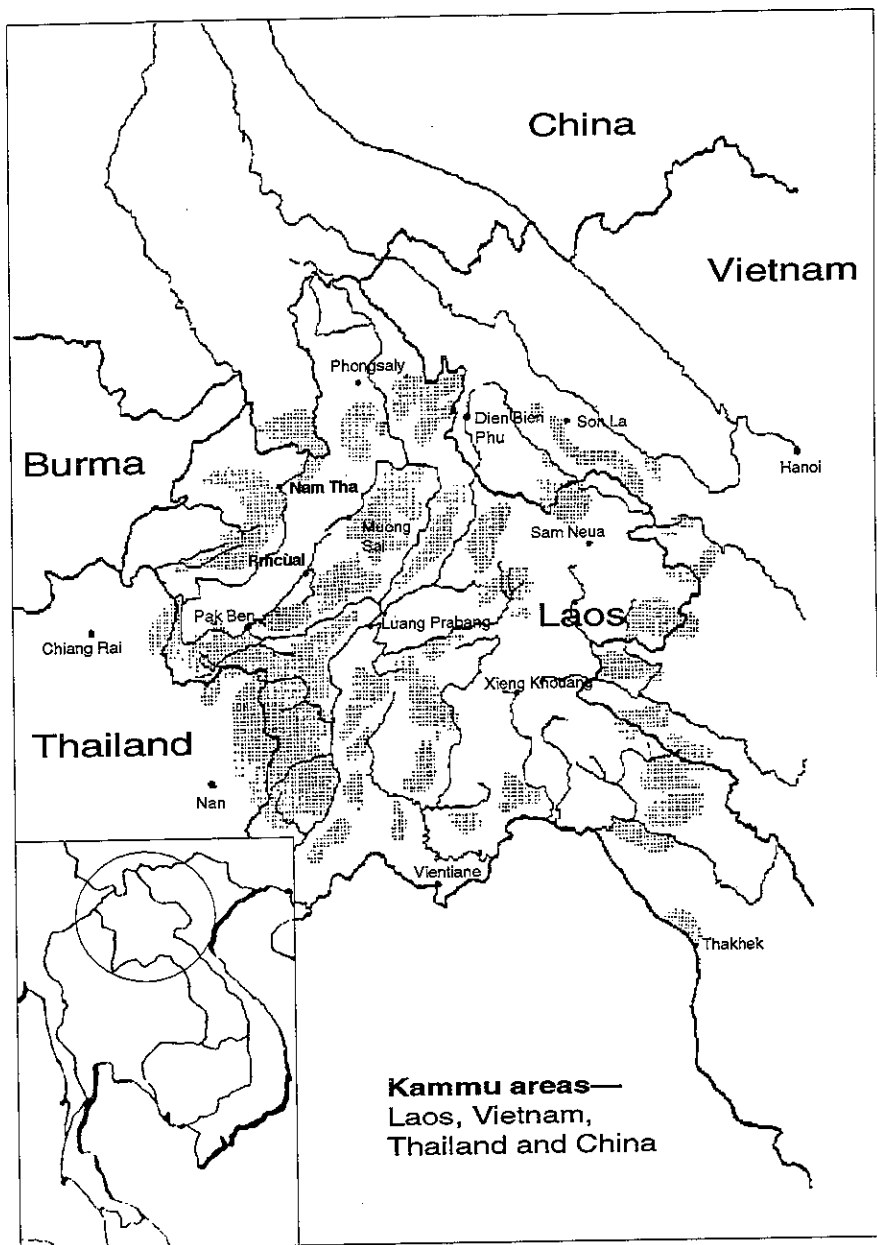


Figure 1. Location of the Kammu in Laos, and places mentioned in the text. Map courtesy of Frank Proschan, 1989.

Who are the Kammu?

The Kammu are a Mon-Khmer-speaking people found in northern Laos, in southern China, northern Vietnam and in northern Thailand. *Kammu* means "people." Most Kammu people now live in Laos, where the total population comprises more than sixty different ethnic groups, speaking 85 languages and dialects.² The Kammu form the second largest ethnic group in Laos; only the Lao population is larger.

The ethnic groups living in Laos speak languages that fall into two main language families: the Austro-Asiatic and the Sino-Tibetan. Linguists look for ancient links between languages to identify groups that have descended from a common ancestor. Chinese, Burmese, Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Karen, Miao (including Hmong) and Yao (Mien) have all descended from some long-ago ancestor group, presumably in northern Asia. These Sino-Tibetan groups traveled south to reach Laos, as did the Tai-Kadai linguistic groups (Thai and Lao). On the other hand, the Kammu, Lua' (T'in), Khmer, and Vietnamese are all members of the Austro-Asiatic family, the original inhabitants of insular and mainland Southeast Asia.

Laos has 4,700 kilometers of common borders with five countries: China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Burma to the northwest, Thailand to the west, and Cambodia to the south. The area is 237,000 square kilometres, 80% of which is mountains and highlands.

The Lao regard the Kammu as their "older brothers," the original inhabitants of the area. The Lao think that the Kammu have special power in the supernatural world of indigenous spirits. Ceremonies at the Luang Prabang court still utilized Kammu to conduct spirit rituals as late as the 1960s.

This chapter is the result of a survey made of 165 villages in Luang Nam Tha province in the 1960s. There were 118 Kammu

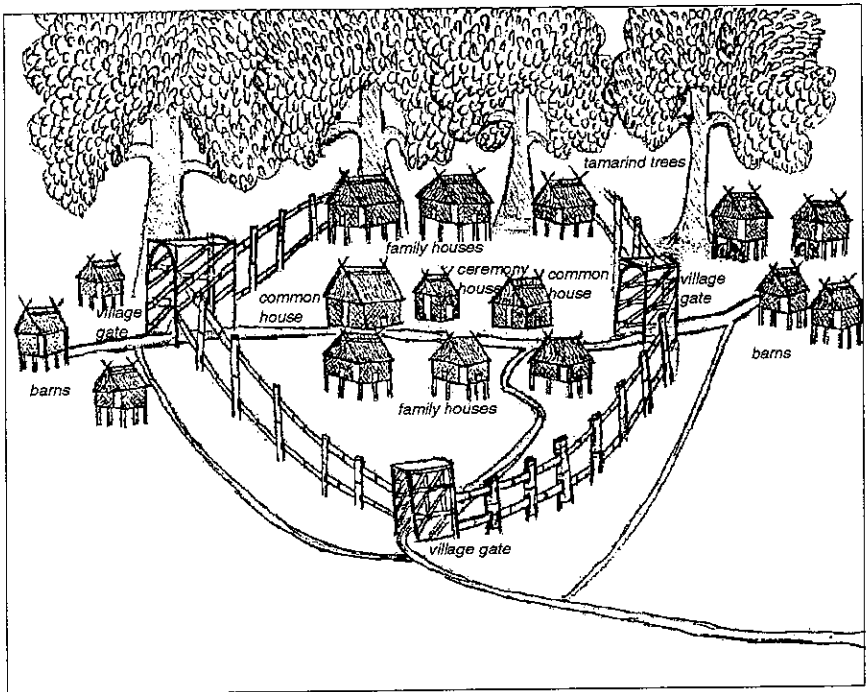


Figure 2. Diagram of Kammu village.



Illustration 1. Kammu village, 1957. (Photo by Joel M. Halpern.)

villages, 14 Lao Lum villages, 24 Rmèet³ villages, 5 Sam Tao (sám tàaw) villages, 3 Lu (lù) villages and 1 Haw Yang (hóo yàŋ) village. These villages were situated close to mine—*rmcùal*—and I visited them all.

Villages

Usually the older Kammu villages are situated on mountain ranges, halfway up the mountain. There is a belt of real jungle with high old trees around the village, and you walk through the jungle for at least 1,000 meters before you reach the area where the fields are made.

In a Kammu village there are family houses and there may be two or three or more community houses. All the unmarried men and boys live in these community houses. When strangers enter a Kammu village, they have to stay in one of the community houses, since males unrelated to the family are not allowed to sleep in a Kammu family house.

When you enter a Kammu house, the first thing they ask you is, "Have you eaten?" Or: "What have you eaten?" Then they give you a rice basket so that you can take a little rice from the basket and inform their ancestors that you have en-



Illustration 2. Kammu girls wearing turbans and carrying head-strap baskets.
(Photo by J. Halpern.)

tered their house. Otherwise their ancestors would believe that you are a thief, or that you are an impolite person. Then the ancestors might punish you.

In some villages there are more than 100 families, but in most villages there are only 15 to 35 families. Generally a village is all Kammu unless it is located in the lowlands.

The Kammu villages in Nam Tha province were usually fairly permanent; the people did not move from place to place. However, in other provinces villages may move when the fields are depleted or if there is a village crisis that is attributed to the action of spirits who live in the area.

Livelihood

Most Kammu people are swidden, or "slash-and-burn" farmers. They grow glutinous rice, maize, millet, sweet potatoes, tobacco, tea, peppers, cotton and many different kinds of veg-



Illustration 3. Kammu people from Nam Tha province, 1957.
(Photo by Joel M. Halpern).

etables and fruits. They eat glutinous ("sticky") rice three times a day. Hunting, fishing and trapping are not only fun for sport, but the catch is very important for Kammu subsistence.

The rice, vegetables, and fruits that we grow, we use ourselves. Meat and fish that we catch we also use ourselves. As we say:

kmmú	əh,	kmmú	cèey
Kammu	make	Kammu	use

kmmú	əh	kmmú	pə
Kammu	do,	Kammu	eat

There was hardly anything that we could export. Salt, pots, and everything made of metal we bought from traders who came from southern China or Thailand. The soil is black and is good for growing all kinds of plants but it requires hard work, of course. Thus, we lived off the land as much as possible, but we had to find a way to buy the things we could not grow or make from natural resources.

The actual income of the rural Kammu was barely above a subsistence level. Sources of cash income were limited. Some villages produced baskets, wooden bowls, rifles, knives, silver bracelets, silver tobacco pipes, and woven cloths to sell. Some villages grew not only glutinous rice, but other crops such as peppers, ginger, tobacco, tea, sugar-cane, betel leaf, indigo (stóŋ), and many different kinds of sweet potatoes, taro and vegetables. The villagers sold these surplus crops.

There was no traffic and no roads, and people walked all the time. Rice, water, salt, iron, clothes, wood, and so on were carried. The men carried things with a carrying pole balanced on the shoulder; women carried things supported by a strap around their foreheads. There were no roads leading to the villages, only one main road from Houei Sai to Luang Nam Tha. I still remember that it took five days and five nights to walk from my village to the China border, and five days and five nights to go from my village to Thailand. There was no industry, not a single factory. Every-

thing we had we made with our hands.

The big problems were food and clothes. It was hard work to get enough to eat and wear, but you should know that we did have enough to eat every year. Only in later years, in my generation, the population had increased so much that it was hard to grow enough rice. We had to divide the fields too many times, and the soil was tired from growing too much. We had found no way to modernize the techniques of growing food.

Money was always a big problem too, but we did not use money every day. On the other hand, we had to have rice, food and clothes every day. As we say:

kmúul	məh	yō
Money	is	friend
ŋó	məh	hrām
Rice	is	heart

Money is a friend, but rice is our heart.



Illustration 4. Kammu women going to buy salt in a market town, Ban Bo Ten.
(Photo by Joel M. Halpern).

People who lived in Nam Tha province had to go to Ban Bo Ten, at the border of China and Laos, or Ban Na Mo to buy salt. Salt was very important; without it, people could die. In the mountains there were no salt-water fish to make fish sauce, and no other sources of salt except the town where salt deposits were mined.

When we traveled any place, we always brought rice and food with us. If we had enough rice and food, we could spend the night wherever we pleased without any problem. Sometimes it got dark while we were still in the middle of the jungle. There was no village anywhere near. The money was of no use there; we could not buy any food or rice in the jungle. As the Lao say:

nák	kháw	nòon	nàa		
Heavy	rice	sleep	wet field		
nák		pháa	nòon	ùn	
heavy		blankets	sleep		warm

*With plenty of rice, sleep at the wet field,
With a load of blankets, sleep warm.*

That is, when we have rice and food enough, we could spend the night in any suitable place, and when we have enough clothes and blankets, we could keep warm. If we did not have enough of these things, however, we had to hurry, so that we could get to a place where we could spend the night, and to be in a hurry is not good.

Sharing a fish

Sharing is very important in village life, and we do, of course, have a story telling about its origin.

Once upon a time an old widow went to fish, and she managed to get a rather big fish. She took the fish and went home to the village. When she arrived home, she wondered what to do to that fish, so that she could keep it and use it for a long time. She could not eat it all in one day, and the leftovers would go bad very quickly.

She asked the villagers: "What can I do with this fish, so that I can use it for a long time?"

One of the villagers said: "Oh, you could salt it! Salt fish can be kept for a long time."

Somebody else said: "Dry it on the drying-rack over the fire! When it gets dry, you can keep it for a long time."

The old widow thought it over and said: "No, I will just cook it and

share it with every family in our village. That is much better, I think! Now that I have something to share you can take part of that, when you get something I can take part of yours."

The widow did as she had said. She cooked that fish and shared it with every family in the whole village, and thus everybody tasted her big fish.

Since then, we always share with other families just as that old widow once did. When we get a big animal or a lot of fish or when we slaughter a pig or a buffalo, we invite the others to join our meal. Elderly Kammu people used to say it like this: "One should never be eating something in front of others without sharing with them. Especially a child; when a child is sitting with you, you should not eat anything without sharing it with the child."

A poor man and a rich man

There is also a story about a poor man and a rich man. In a Kammu village, men, women, and children were busy from the first cockcrow until dark. The men and boys from ten years of age were busy with their traps. Women were busy with rice and water. In the evening the men and the boys had to set their rat-snares, and the next morning they had to get up early and go to examine the traps, collect their catch and carry it home.

Every family should have dead-fall traps (pràay) and rat-snares (mèen). The traps were, so to speak, our markets. Every morning city people go to the market, but we Kammu go to check our traps.

Once a rich man said to his poor friend, "You have a lot of rat-snares and dead-fall traps. I have neither rat-snares nor dead-fall traps, but I do have a big water buffalo bull. Now we will compete with each other. I will kill my water buffalo bull and you make dead-fall traps, and then we will see who eats meat every day."

Then the poor man made one hundred dead-fall traps. The rich man slaughtered his water buffalo bull.

What happened to the water buffalo meat? There was no refrigera-

tor where he could keep his meat. He dried the meat over the fire. When the meat got dried, he kept it in baskets. However, there were many cockroaches (yòor) who came to eat the dried meat. He had to hurry to use all the meat. Some months later the water buffalo bull's meat was gone.

The poor man checked his dead-fall traps and they caught some animals every day. He used his dead-fall traps for three years, and he ate meat every day of the three years. In his family there was never any lack of meat.

Then the one who had a water buffalo bull learned to make dead-fall traps, and rat-snares, as other men do.

This story tells the Kammu people about the society and the village economy, and it tells people not to boast about themselves and their property.

When I was in Laos, I never heard that people were unemployed. Everyone had a lot of work to do. Women were even busier than men. That is because the women were responsible for everything in the house.

The Kammu farming year

Growing glutinous rice means that the Kammu follow a yearly cycle. The Kammu follow a calendar that is different from both the western calendar and the Chinese lunar calendar. The Kammu calendar has ten words plus twelve words that are put together to form a circle of sixty days or sixty years. The Kammu use the year-circle to find the places to make their fields in the right order.

In 1939, for instance, the Kammu year was *píi kát-móo*, and all the Rmcùal villagers made their fields in one place at the *prhàar stream* area and at another place, the *cóon àar* area. In 1940, the Kammu year was *píi kót-sii*, and all Rmcùal villagers made their fields in a place at the *cáay stream* area, and at the *ktáaŋ plàaŋ* area. Here is the plan for the year cycle of the Rmcùal village from 1939 to 1950:

Figure III. Year cycle of Rmcùal, 1939-50

<i>Western Calendar</i>	<i>Kammu Calendar</i>	<i>Field areas</i>	<i>English translation, when possible</i>
1939	píi kát-móo	tii òm prhàar, tii òm cóon àar	prhàar-tree stream thief-cicada stream
1940	píi kót-móo	tii òm cáay tii ktáan plàan	spread-out stream elephant grass meadow
1941	píi rān-səə	tii òm ptkéet tii òp	buffalo horn stream cave stream
1942	píi tóo-sṇáa	tii òm klàan sáa tii òm tóon rān	quartz stream dry creek
1943	píi káa-sṇáa	tii mòk cōn tii òm króon tii òm pylóoy	high mountain króon-berry stream shooting star stream
1944	píi káap-sén	tii ktáan plàan tii òm cnān	elephant grass meadow hemp stream
1945	píi ràp-ràw	tii òm wīn tii òm só	sieve stream dog stream
1946	píi rwàay-sét	tii òm lwà	cannonball-tree stream
1947	píi mən-kəə	tii òm ṇəṇān	rhubarb stream
1948	píi plék-cəə	tii òm lōon rhāan tii òm pryōn	bamboo mountain stream dragon stream
1949	píi kát-plóo	tii òm tráan tii òm rwàay	rhinoceros hornbill stream tiger stream
1950	píi kòt-nīi	tii òm prhàar tii òm cóon àar	prhàar-tree stream thief-cicada stream

The first time the fields were made in the *prh̄ar stream* area was the year *pīi kát-móo*, 1939. The second time, fields were made in that same area was the year *pīi kòt-nīi*, 1950; the third time was the year *pīi r̄aṅ-plóo*, 1961; and the fourth time was the year *pīi tóo-càò*, or 1972. Thus, it is an eleven-year cycle. In some regions they use a cycle of only seven or eight years, and in other areas they use the field areas every fifteen years.

The characteristics of the population make a difference. For instance, in the Kwēn area, there is a lot of land and not so many villages. In some places there is land that has never been used. Thus, along the road from Nam Tha to Houei Sai area, there was still virgin jungle. However, there were many villages in the Yùan and Ròk areas, and the forest was not enough for everyone.



Illustration 5. Kammu in front of their house. (Photo by Joel M. Halpern.)

We therefore had smaller fields than the Kwéén villagers. We left the forest untouched for eleven years to let the trees grow higher and bigger. This is because when we burn the forest to make a field, we need enough ashes so that the plants can grow quickly and produce a lot of rice.

Our field areas are used only by the people of Rmcùal village, other villages have their own field areas, and different ways for using the land. For instance, in some parts of the Yùan area, every family has its own land for making fields. The family can sell their land to another family in the same village or from the neighboring villages, or can buy land from other families. It is the family who owns the land who sells it. But in some regions, the land is owned by all the villagers, and the villagers can make a field anywhere. Thus one family may use a certain field one year and another family during the following cycle.

A family is not allowed to sell the land to another family in such villages. Yet it sometimes happened that a family sold their land to their neighbors. This was because something had happened to that village, and the villagers had to pay for it together, but that family was unable to find money or silver for the costs. They had to pay with their land. Or sometimes, a family did not have enough land to make fields, then they might buy land from their neighbors.

One family should have at least ten *lún* (about 2,000 square meters) for making their fields each year. A large family should have more than twenty *lún*, 4,000 square metres, per year.

The Kammu diet

One family with four persons should have at least 80-100 baskets of rice in a year, or about 3,200-4,000 kilograms. It is not only people who eat the rice, but also the domestic animals—the hens, pigs, dogs or even horses. We needed about 30% of the rice to feed these domestic animals. About ten baskets of seeds are

reserved for the next year's sowing. About 5% of the rice is fed to guests; for instance, when strangers enter the village, the families who belong to that community house must give the strangers some fire wood, rice, food, bamboo mats, water and some vegetables. About 5% of the rice is for making rice wine. Finally, about 1% is for feeding the ancestors and spirits.

The Kammu eating pattern is three meals a day consisting of glutinous rice served with pepper sauce (céew), vegetables and soup (sɲkòŋ tɲpɹì). The morning meal and evening meal are served warm and the noon meal is usually cold leftovers from the morning meal. Kammu do eat fresh meat, for instance meat salad (plàa) and meat stew (sɲkòŋ àh); however, it is usually eaten only on special occasions. When there is an illness, a funeral, a new house, or a wedding, the people slaughter a water buffalo or a cow to make a sacrifice to their ancestors. The Kammu do not kill their domestic animals for non-ceremonial occasions, because domestic animals are very expensive. Sometimes when there is a lucky year, a hunter may be able to shoot down a large wild animal such as sambar deer, bear, boar or barking deer. Then the villagers are able to eat fresh meat.

The usual protein source is small animals such as birds, rats, bamboo rats, frogs and fish.⁴ Every family has its own traps. To preserve meat it had to be smoked and dried, since there were no refrigerators in a Kammu village.

The Kammu used to slaughter a water buffalo or a cow two times a year, for non-ceremonial occasions. The first time was just before the sowing began. The villagers collected the money for a water buffalo, which in my village area was 60 *màn* (French silver coins) for one full-grown water buffalo. Once the money was collected, they bought the water buffalo and slaughtered it. This was done during the sowing period, because nobody had time to hunt or fish. The second non-ceremonial time was just before the harvest began. During this time the people had to hurry to harvest their rice and put it in the granaries before the wild animals or rain

destroyed the crops. The sowing and harvesting are difficult times of the year, and the men, women and children are all very busy.

Domestic animals

The Kammu had water buffaloes, cows, pigs, hens, and goats, and rich families may have had horses. Every family should have some pigs and hens, since these animals are not only valuable but also mean security. When someone falls ill, his family must kill a pig or a hen to make a sacrifice to his ancestors so that the ancestors can help the afflicted person.

We did not use water buffalo milk or cow milk, and we did not use the animals for work, either. Only some villages used the cows for transport. We raised water buffaloes and cows for food and for sacrifice to our ancestors and the village spirits.

We also killed a water buffalo to make a sacrifice to the village spirits once a year so that the village spirits would help us. Our village spirits caused the rain to fall, so that we would have a good harvest.



Illustration 6. Kammu woman carrying her sleeping child.
(Photo by Joel M. Halpern.)

Every Kammu family must have at least two pigs, some hens and a cock, and a dog. We should always have eggs at home, since when we have eggs, it means that we have something to protect us from illness, and it makes us feel safe. When someone falls ill, we first use an egg to call the spirits of illness out of the patient's body. When a man goes to his future father-in-law's house to ask for permission to marry his daughter, first he boils an egg and brings it to give to the girl's father. We also strengthen our souls with an egg. When we have all these house animals, then we feel warm, feel calm.

Wild animals (tóo sát pɿ)

In the Rmcùal village, the villagers shot down many wild boars. I have seen wild boars just outside the village many times, and they sometimes came to stay with our pigs. The Rmcùal villagers hunted mostly barking deer and sambar deer.

The most important Kammu food is found in the water. Fish, crabs and frogs are important in the Kammu diet, but when people go fishing in the streams and rivers they also find many kinds of edible insects and shrimps in the water. Fish and frogs are the Kammu favorite food, because they taste better than water buffalo or cow meat.

A special meal in the autumn (October and November) is frog sauce (tàn tríik), roast fish wrapped with banana leaves (ká kúup) and fresh bamboo shoot soup (kòon tɔ́n) eaten with newly harvested rice.

Wild vegetables (tɱpɿ pɿ)

There were all kinds of wild vegetables around Rmcùal village. People ate bamboo shoots all year round. There were also many kinds of wild sweet potatoes, but people rarely ate potatoes instead of rice. The Kammu people used potatoes as vegetables and as a dessert.

Vegetables, both wild and cultivated, are the most impor-

tant food for the Kammu people, apart from glutinous rice. Even when there is some dried meat or dried fish, they still use vegetables and cook them with meat, because if one cooks only meat without vegetables, it does not taste good at all. Each season had its own wild vegetables to collect:

January-February

People used to pick some kinds of edible mushrooms (tís) from the abandoned fields (túh). Domestic plants that grew by themselves year after year were pumpkins' leaves and gourds' leaves. There were also bamboo shoots (tpánj tàa túh) and many kinds of eggplants (hntòr, lmtàan).

March-June

The Kammu people used both wild and cultivated vegetables. Usually the Kammu people made gardens at the river banks and grew tobacco leaves along with some kinds of vegetables.

I can remember some of the wild vegetables Kammu used for food. We used both the banana flowers (yòl), and the banana young leaves (kóok); the banana leaf was used for wrapping parcels of food, and we used its stems, flowers, and its young leaves for food. We ate fishtail palm (t'ó, taaw), liana (krliŋ) leaves, creeper (srá, crá) leaves, ficus-leaves (lá crì, lá srì), paper-tree-flowers⁵ (ràaŋ saalee), fern leaves, and other edible leaves (trúul, krsúuñ, klpáaŋ⁶), and wild small eggplants (hntór).

Food never ran short in the Kammu village, if one was intelligent and knew how to find wild food. However, if one did not recognize the plants, it could be dangerous since there were some poisonous plants in the forest. It took experience to know how to collect wild vegetables.

July-December

The Kammu people used cultivated vegetables and bamboo shoots at the beginning of this period. However, sometimes some families ran short of rice at this time, because the old rice was gone and the new rice was not ready yet. In cases like this, people had to borrow from their kin.

There are many kinds of bamboo, both cultivated and wild. From the biggest bamboo to the smallest, there are these kinds:

1. spó (giant bamboo)
2. meey pəŋ
3. kóon sáŋ (pig bamboo)
4. tnéc
5. krɛ́al
6. ryàal
7. rháaŋ
8. chúk
9. tlàa (poison bamboo)
10. cós
11. pléey
12. càak
13. tmáar
14. tr'áal
15. póc pèc
16. póc práa
17. plóoŋ

All these kinds of bamboo are used for building houses, weaving baskets, and the shoots are eaten as food. All these kinds of bamboo surround the Rmcùal village, and they were easy to find.

Kammu were known for their baskets. The krɛ́al and chúk bamboo were two kinds used for weaving baskets. The Kammu long basket had a wide top and narrow bottom and was carried on the back; it identified its owner as Kammu, and different regions

had different designs. Chúk and tmáar bamboo were used to make a kind of “wire” for fences and for tying things together; small strips were twisted together to make a larger strand. Giant, meey p̄iŋ, and rháaŋ bamboo were flattened and used for floors, and their joints were used as water carriers. Poison bamboo was used to make the walls and roofs, as well as the spears in large animal traps—its poison killed the animal quickly. Both p̄óc and plóŋ bamboo were used to make the long straws to sip rice wine from the jar, and were also used to cut the umbilical cord of a newborn baby.

There was no soap and no shampoo. People used plé téet twéer fruits and ashes to wash their clothes instead of soap. The krèeŋ-tree and liana bark (knt̄rōŋ t̄aŋ) were used to wash hair, as was the water from washing glutinous rice.

Social Organization

When a Kammu meets another Kammu in the U.S., he asks about the other person’s birth village and his clan. This tells whether the person is a member of one’s “wife-takers” group or “wife-givers” group, and tells about his regional group.

Totem groups

There are a great number of totem groups, or clans. Each clan has a story that tells why they have a particular animal or plant as its totem; some groups have secondary totems as well. Each of the various totem groups falls into one of three alliance groups: *quadruped*, *plant*, or *bird*. It is the alliance group that determines marriage choices—one is the group that gives a wife (the “father-in-law’s” group, or èem), and the other is the one that takes a wife (the “son-in-law’s” group, or khóay). A man belongs to his own local lineage, the k̄óŋ p̄iŋ. In every village, there should

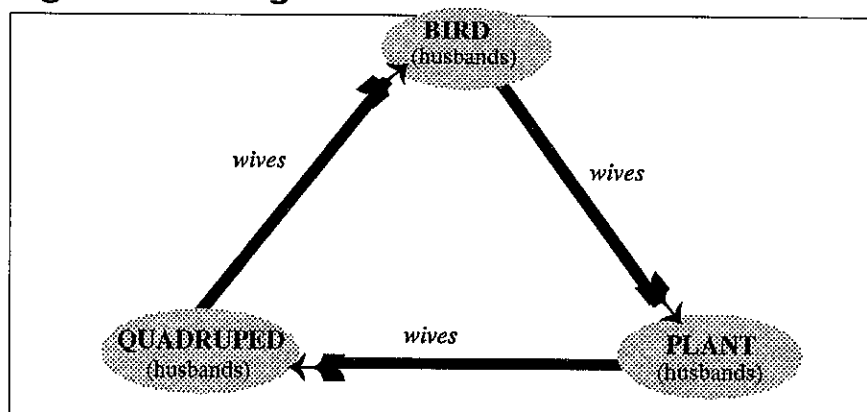
be totem groups or clans from all three alliance groups, so that marriage partners can be located within the village.

Figure IV. Totem groups

BIRD	PLANT	QUADRUPED
tá tkóok (malcoha)	tá twá (fern)	tá rwàay (tiger)
tá cntrè (shrike)	tá crì (rubber tree)	tá tráak (buffalo)
tá rìc (munia)		tá púas (barking deer)
tá kláaŋ (eagle)		tá màr (snake)
tá céec (forktail bird)		tá sfaŋ (boar)
		tá tmòŋ (civet)

For example, in the village of Rmcùal, there were thirty-one families, divided almost equally among the three alliance groups. Eleven families were of the fern totem (tá twá). The fern totem clan was part of the plant alliance group. The quadruped alliance group had nine families, all of the civet totem (tá tmòŋ). The *bird* alliance group had eleven families, all belonging to the

Figure V. Marriage choices



A man from a bird totem group takes a wife from a quadruped totem group (the "wife-givers group"). The bird totem groups are thus the "wife-takers" in relation to the quadruped groups, but "wife-givers" in relation to the plant groups.

forktail bird totem group (tá céec). Some of the civet families had the boar as a secondary totem, as a boar had once saved one of their ancestors. Some of the forktail bird totem clan had the munia bird as a secondary totem, because one had caused the death of an ancestor.⁷

My local lineage was the fern totem clan, of the plant alliance group. The quadruped alliance group was my wife-taker group; my sisters and my daughters should marry males who are of the quadruped totem groups. The other alliance group, the bird group, is my wife-giving group; men of my lineage marry women who belong to bird totem clans. My mother was from the bird group, as my wife should be. My wife can come from any village or region, as long as her totem group is a bird.

There are certain obligations and responsibilities towards each of the other groups. In a gift ritual, I give an egg to those of my father-in-law's group (my wife-givers), but never to the wife-takers. I give a parcel of cooked rice and a rat (dried meat) to the wife-taking (son-in-law's) group. To give the wrong gift to one of the groups would bring misfortune to my group or to the person giving the gift.⁸

The preferred marriage is with my mother's brother's daughter. In this case the bride price is overlooked; if I "turn down" my mother's brother's daughter, then I must pay my mother's brother a fine. If I marry someone other than my mother's brother's daughter, I must pay her family a bride price to reimburse them for the labor they will lose when she comes to live with me and help my family. If I cannot pay the bride price, then I must go to live with my wife's family for a while, to work for them.

These are the traditional ways of marriage and relations between groups. It is not yet clear if the Kammu in the U.S. continue to follow these cultural rules.

Regional and dialect groups

Tmóoy is a word that refers to people who are “like us,” but who do not live with us. Generally, *tmóoy yùan*, *tmóoy ròok*, *tmóoy kwèen*, *tmóoy króoy* (Mekong River), *tmóoy ùu* (Ou River) are Kammu from other regions who speak slightly different dialects, wear clothes that are a little different, and carry baskets that are a little different. The *tmóoy ksak* are the Kammu who conducted special new year ceremonies for the King of Luang Prabang. Sometimes other linguistic groups who are culturally similar to Kammu are also called *tmóoy*—*tmóoy rmèet*, *tmóoy t'in*. In the U.S., there are *tmóoy Stok-ton*, *tmóoy Ric-mon*, *tmóoy Skra-mnto*.⁹

According to Proschan (1989:31), the *tmóoy Stok-ton* number about 400 people, from the regions of Muong Sai, Luang Prabang, and Xieng Khouang. The 500 people of *tmóoy Ric-mon* (actually the San Francisco Bay area) generally come from the northwestern provinces of Houei Sai, Nam Tha, and Pak Beng. People from the same regions also live in Seattle, Washington (about 300 people), Santa Ana (200), Fresno (100), and Oklahoma City (200). Fort Worth and Phoenix are homes to people originally from the Xieng Khouang region.

Thus, even in the U.S. there are regional variations in dialect groups, carried over from Laos. Those in the San Francisco Bay area and Seattle speak the Northern Kammu dialect, which has high and low tones. Corresponding words in the Southern Kammu dialect do not use tones, but instead have different sets of initial consonants.¹⁰ In addition, there are differences in vocabulary and syntax, as well as differences in the social use of language.

There have been several attempts to develop a written form for the Kammu language, but these dialect differences have caused problems in finding one system that represents all the dialects equally well. There are two systems developed by mis-

sionaries, a system developed by the Swedish researchers at Lund University (the one used in this chapter), one developed by Proschan and others (Standard Kmhmu Orthography, SKO), and one recently developed in the Thai script. (See Appendix 3 for a comparison of the two roman script orthographies.)

Social values

Understanding one another

Living in a village required close cooperation between people who were related, between non-relatives, and with outsiders. Within Kammu society there was little distinction of social class or rank. Everyone was fairly equal. Wealthier people had more buffaloes, and precious possessions like the decorated black jar or bronze drum gave families greater status within the village. Generally, the Kammu prefer harmony over discord, cooperation over competition, and peaceful co-existence over domination.

The Kammu learned difficult lessons about getting along with other ethnic groups. The Kammu were looked down upon by the Lao and by most of the other minority groups in Laos. They were often called the *Kha*, a Lao word that means "slave." They were very much like Native Americans, the aborigines of Australia, and other original peoples displaced by more powerful settlers. Until recently, for Kammu to enter Lao society they had to give up their Kammu identity and become Lao. For this reason, and because there are few written historical or cultural records, traditional Kammu knowledge rests only with a few elders and others.

In the village, it was the elders who helped the people get along with each other. When people became unfriendly to each other, the elders would give advice and tell teaching stories. The most important lessons taught sharing, harmony, and caring for others.

Cooperation

People who live close together, such as husband and wife, friends and colleagues, and people of the wife-givers' group and the wife-takers' group have to understand one another and cooperate in all that they do. Whatever they eat, whatever they get, whatever they do, and wherever they go, they need to agree with each other.

It makes no difference where people come from. Whether people come from the north or south, whether they speak this dialect or that dialect, whether they are lowland Lao, Tai, Kammu or Rmèet—only if they understand one another can they become like people of the same village and the same house. Their fathers are our fathers, their mothers are our mothers, their children are our children. As people say:

No matter whose child it is that cries, carry it;
No matter whose paddy rice it is that has fallen flat, raise it up.
If a house leans over towards the valley, raise it up;
If it leans over towards the mountain, prop it up.

Likewise, it makes no difference whether people are Buddhists, Christians, or animists and ancestor-worshippers—we can live together if we can understand one another. Politics and religion have their own spheres of power, but they must not make us forget our kin and our kinship rites. The rites pertaining to the wife-givers and the wife-takers have their own purpose. The laws of the village and those of the country have their various uses, but those laws must not be used in place of the kinship rites.

It does not matter who is poor and who is rich, for if we understand one another well, we will become equally rich. Small trees depend on the shadow of the big trees, and the big trees depend on the small ones. If there are no small trees, the storms will easily break the big ones. Big trees will thus stand firm because of the small ones, and the small trees will grow high because of the big ones. Big logs catch fire because of the small

kindling. If there is no kindling, the logs do not catch fire. If there are no logs, the fire will not get hot.

It does not matter who is clever and who is stupid, or whether one has ability and knowledge. If we understand one another, we will become equally clever and all will have abilities that complement those of others.

High or low rank is not important; if we understand one another we will all have respect for each another. When we understand one another and cooperate, other people cannot harm us. Whatever harm they try to do, they will not succeed. We stay secure because we stick together. We have to stick together the way red ants do.¹¹

Calmness

Before we do something, go somewhere, or say something we ought to think carefully. It is no good to fly into a temper. It is no good to take revenge for trifles. It is no good to speak in a loud voice in order to frighten others. Kammu people say:

nàm	yèn	páa	króon
water	cold	fish	crowd together
nàm	hóon	páa	níi
water	hot	fish	swim away

*Where the water is cold, the fish crowd together;
But where the water is warm, the fish swim away.*

mèey	ńéey	tók	káan	thàan,	còoy	kán	làak
tree	big	fall	middle	path	help	each other	pull
kàm	ńàak	tók	káan	màan,	còoy	kán	kèt
word	difficult	fall	middle	town	help	each other	discuss

*If a big tree has fallen on the road, pull it away together;
If there is a quarrel in town, discuss it with one another.*

khàp	tii	'yúu	déey
narrow	place	stay	may
khàp	céey	'yúu	ńàak
narrow	heart	stay	difficult

*We may stay at a narrow place,
But it is hard to live with a narrow heart.*

mèc	tèe	àh	wèel	táa	kóol	s'óon
know	you	have	jungle-knife	don't	cut	tree
méc	tèe	càan	lmpòon	táa	pnpèe	pri an
know	you	can	speak	don't	cheat	others

*You don't have to cut trees just because you have a sharp jungle-knife;
You don't have to persuade others just because you have a clever tongue.*

Warmheartedness

When we love each other we have peace and we trust each other. We get warm hearts and peace not only from people of our own family and friends, and our own parents, but from everybody. When we keep warm with clothes it is because we can wrap a blanket around us and stay warm from that. When we keep warm from other peoples' bodies, it is because we stay together and sleep on the same bed and thus keep each other warm. When we get warm with the sun, it is because we are sitting in the sun. Some people get warm by their wealth, but those who do that sometimes lose their good relations to other people, and then they may freeze in their hearts. When we trust each other, life will be calm and peaceful.

We say that when we are living, we should have good relations with people. When we die, we should have good relations with our ancestors.

The stages of life

In Kammu society, conformity to social norms is highly valued. The elder says some of these "rhyme words," *kam trkap*, to teach children about what is expected as they grow up. The two halves of each couplet have rhyming words, and have to be said as a unit. (These are in the Lao language.)

háa	píi	nòon	bóo	yáak	lùk.
five	year	sleep	do not	want	get up.

At the age of 5, one does not want to wake up.

síp	píi	sóon	báaw;
ten	year	learn	to be young man.
sáaw	píi	sóon	lùuk.
twenty	year	train	child.

At the age of 10, one is trained to be a young man,

At the age of 20, one trains one's own child.

Or:

síp	píi	nòon	bóo	nàaw;	
ten	year	sleep	no	cold.	
sáaw	píi	èew	sáaw	bóo	báa.
twenty	year	visit	girl	no	tired.

At the age of 10, one does not feel cold while sleeping,

At the age of 20, one does not tire of visiting girls.

sáam-síp	píi	phán	mèey	bóo	tèek
thirty	year	cut	tree	no	measure.
síi-síp	píi	liang	khéek	bóo	àay
forty	year	feed	guest	no	shy.

At the age of 30, one does not have to measure the tree to cut it accurately.

At the age of 40, one is not shy in front of guests.

háa-síp	píi	liang	khwàay	bóo	héé
fifty	year	feed	water buffalo	not	savage
rók-síp	píi	khwáan	héé	bóo	mòn
sixty	year	throw	casting-net	not	round

At the age of 50, the buffaloes do not attack when fed.

At the age of 60, the casting-net does not open when cast out.

cét-síp	píi	nòon	bóo	làp
70	year	sleep	not	sleep
péet-síp	píi	hàp	bóo	déey
80	year	promise	not	can

At the age of 70, it is difficult to sleep.

At the age of 80, no more promises can be made.

Kammu symbols

The bronze drum and the decorated black jar

The bronze drum¹² and the decorated black jar are the "valuable ancients," the most important of the Kammu possessions. To the Kammu they provide security because of their powers, and they convey status because of their value. Only the rich families have a bronze drum and a decorated black jar. They are Kammu symbols.

There are two kinds of decorated black jars: a Cían's jar and a Lwa jar. The giant stone jars in central Laos (the *Plaine des Jarres*, or Plain of Jars) are attributed to the ancient Kammu in the region's legends. The price for a decorated jar was about one full-grown water buffalo. If it was a *really* old decorated jar, as in the picture (see illustration 8), it certainly would cost one water buffalo. The Kammu use their jars for keeping rice wine, which the

Kammu call *pùuc ktán*, or jar wine.

The decorated jar and the bronze drum carry the same high status, and can bring good health and wealth to the owner. The bronze drums are kept outside the village except during important ceremonies. Their magic power is strong enough to protect them, and there are a number of stories telling about the bronze drum.¹³

Both the jar and the drum have spirits. Usually these spirits are benevolent, but

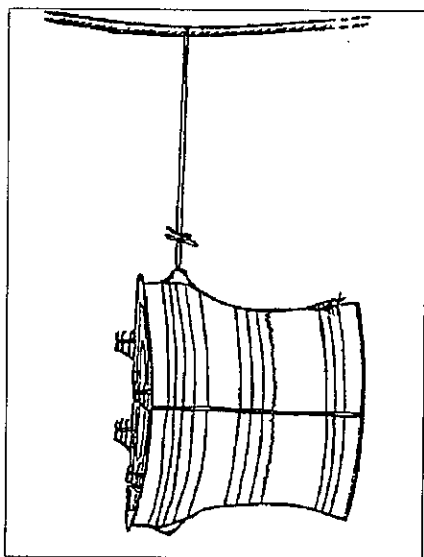


Illustration 7. Hanging bronze drum (kettlegong).

sometimes they are not. Those that contain evil spirits (khóon rêm) cause the owners to become poor.¹⁴ Some Kammu families become possessed by a tiger spirits (róoy rwàay òk) because of these ancient objects.¹⁵ To rid themselves of the spirits' curse, they sell the bronze drum to someone else.

These ancient objects can make the owners "calm" (cùm) and "cool" (yèn). On the other hand, possessing these objects may cause the owners trouble, to be "hot" (há; ròon).

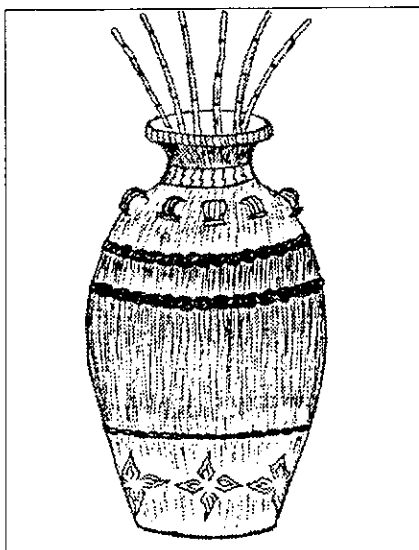


Illustration 8. Decorated black jar.



Illustration 9. Kammu people drink rice wine from a jar. (Photo by Joel M. Halpern.)
The Kammu people serve rice wine when there is a special occasion, or when an important person—father-in-law, friends, chief, or elder—comes to visit.

The Bamboo Rat and the Wooden Drum

The story of the creation explains the importance of the bamboo rat and the wooden drum:

***The Story of the Flood*¹⁶**

Brother and Sister went to dig out a bamboo-rat. They dug the bamboo-rat like this, they dug on for that bamboo-rat, then caught up to the bamboo-rat there.

The bamboo-rat was there; he turned and spoke: "Why are you digging me out? I'm burrowing a hole for myself. The flood is coming," he said.

"Oh, is that so?"

So spoke the bamboo-rat, he spoke to them: "It is, so please do not kill me! You should not dig me out, I am still burrowing my hole. Still making it deeper. You should return home to make yourselves a long drum, go and cut a big tree. Carve yourselves a drum; make yourselves one. In one week's time you must make it ready."

After that they returned home to make a long drum, and in one week the long drum was finished. They crawled in together.

"In one week you must cook yourselves rice, you must cook yourselves rice. In one week you should cut out the wax to close up the drum."

They cooked rice, so that they could eat it when the flood arrived.

It was not a person that told them: a bamboo rat told them, and they did as he said.

Nobody knew that the flood was coming, to rise over the villages, over the houses, nobody else knew.

They knew it from the bamboo-rat, but they did not tell anyone else.

They did as he said.

They cooked rice and cooked more, cooked more and more and put it into the sacks, filled sack after sack—sacks like we have now—then put them all in, into that drum there.

That week is coming—we are tabooed *síi-tóo síi-káa*, people who were born on that day.

Oooo. The day arrived, the week ended and they entered the drum. Splash, splash already, as they crawled into the drum. Carefully they spread wax over the drumhead, sealed the drum, sealed it up.

Until there was no hole at all. Then...

On *kot-níi* day the flood truly arrived.

Down came the water, it rained, rainnnnnnned and rained, seven

days and seven nights.

It became a flood then that rose over the mountains and mountain ranges.

Evvvvvery body died, the land slid, the termite hills broke, and only the two in the drum survived.

Brother and Sister inside of that drum.

Hreeeey, hreeeey, hreeeeeeeey, they floated on water. After seven days they pricked a hole, the water remained everywhere, and they didn't open it yet. There passed another week, seven days, they pricked it again and the water was gone!

They scraped away the wax, scraped it off and came outside.

No villages, no houses, they saw not a single tree, nothing, the water had covered everything, and everything was gone when it receded.

Well, then, there they were, they didn't know what to do.

They didn't have a thing to eat, and so they ate earth. Brother and Sister, they ate earth instead of rice, and it was spirits that made them do so. They lived like that, not knowing what to do: "Sister, go to the south way down there. I will go to the north. Try to find a husband, and I will look for a wife. Whoever we find, we should marry."

There were one brother and one sister. She went way down to the south. "When you go you should sing, you should whistle."

They must have walked in a very nice place there. He walked and sang and whistled. Then he heard "vééééééq." And he saw someone walking far away on the mountain there.

Someone else was there already.

They started to walk toward one another. "That must be my friend already, there's someone else here."

They went on.

She approached, they came closer and it was not someone else, only Brother and Sister.

The departed again, they left, she went on. He went along singing along, he went. He came finally to another village, to another mountain over there, they walked toward one another again. He heard someone singing "kléééév, klééév," but he saw no one but her.

The flood was long over, but there were still no villages, no trees, nothing.

So then, they met in the same way for the third time.

Now there was still one tkóok bird, one single tkóok whose spirit had left it. And that tkóok bird cried, "Tok góok, góok, Brother and Sister, embrace one another!"

And so they had to marry one another.

There were no trees, no timber left, only piles of logs. They floated with the water, and those they used to build themselves a house there. They endured the cold, the freezing there, they ate the earth. Those ones, Brother and Sister there. Brother and Sister are not allowed to marry one another, they were the first ever to do so.

She was pregnant, she was pregnant for three years, that Sister. But she never gave birth, pregnant for three years. Her time finally came then. Out came a round gourd, not a human being.

They placed the gourd outside their home. They fenced it, placed it outside, and fenced all around it, outside their hut. They kept the gourd inside the fence. It got bigger every day, it got bigger and bigger every day. It grew bigger day after day after day.

And then he thought: "Oh, this gourd is enormous, huge already!" They stayed, stayed in their hut, from their house they heard, "fit, fit, fit, fit, fit." Then he asked: "Ha, who is talking? There must be some of our people around."

He went out, opened the door and looked, but nobody was there. He listened very carefully and the sound came from the garden. Carefully he approached, nearer and nearer. He heard someone talking inside the gourd. The gourd was huge now, enormous, and someone inside was talking.

(People have spirits today, it all began right there.)

"Well, what should I do? Someone is inside the gourd. There is somebody inside there, the child of this gourd, the gourd's child."

He took a big iron rod and heated it in the fire, as the spirits directed. The first ones to come out were the Africans, I think, who rubbed off the charred gourd. It was the dark people, the Rmeet (Lamet). Outside, there was a big, long log.

Out came the Rmeet first, so the people always told. Out came the Rmeet first, came and sat down.

The parents bundled up packages: packages of cotton thread, packages of hmpiat thread. Packages of everything: things to make clothes, to make cotton cloth, to make needles, they gathered a little of everything.

They took all kinds of things, they bundled them up and distributed them. They came out and sat down, came out and sat down.

Out came the Rmeet first. Out came the Rmeet first, rubbing off the charcoal left by the hot iron rod. After that, we came next. Then came the Chinese and the Hmong. The Hmong and Mien came next. Americans and French came out last, so beautiful, so white.

There.

Thus people have told us from the beginning, the story of how villages were first made.

There were several bundles there, and we Kmmú¹⁷ took one, took one of the bundles, the biggest one there, but it was coarse and loose.

The Lao, they took the small bag, the small bundle that had silk and wool inside, so they know how to make silk, to make gossamer, then.

Everyone had a bundle.

The Americans, the French had another bundle. They took the bundle of metals, to make screws and motors, to make cars for themselves. Whatever anyone wanted, the parent would give them.

They came and sat down on the log, many peoples came out then.

And the parents gave things to each people.

Well then.

They lived there, without knowing what to do. Then they built villages.

They made villages, made houses for themselves.

They began to have rituals, to have traditions.

Miss Thousand Hats comes up the Nam Beng river, Miss Thousand Ferns comes up along the Nam Tha river.

Everything was arranged as it happened.

Miss Thousand Hats comes to drown villages, drown houses, Miss Thousand Ferns comes to build villages, build houses. To make the tiger have thighs, to make people have tatoos.

The Dai thus have songs, the Chinese thus have elephants, they say.

Some people could read the alphabet: the Lao, the Thai, the Americans, all of them, Lao and Thai. They have pens and pencils to write.

They made an alphabet for each different people. Each group had it own alphabet. We Kmmú didn't have anything.

Once people called to have a meeting, and the Kmmú went, but they ate melons and heard nothing they said.

Well then.

The others talked about what to eat and what to make.

Each country, each people, but we Kmmú ate melons. We crunched deafeningly on the cucumbers, so others gained no knowledge.

The boats, they made boats: "What would you like to use for a boat?"

The Kmmú then, they wanted to use hides, to make a boat from

hides: buffalo hides, cow hides, since they are large, they sewed them into a boat.

The Lao, they used wood.

So they went, the elder brother and the younger brother (they say we Kmmú are under the Lao).

One day they had a boat race, and ours it sank down, sank down under the water, the Kmmú boat made of hides. It became heavier and heavier. Into the water it sank and they called out for help from the Lao.

"Yes, if you agree to be our servants, that you will be our servants, that you will be below us, then we will help you out."

"Oh, we agree, we agree." Heh, heh, heh, heh.

The Lao took their boat. They came in their wooden boat.

I'm saying that the Kmmú were always unfortunate, right from the start.

Sooooo the story goes.

Because of this story, the bamboo-rat is special to the Kammu. It was the bamboo-rat that told the Kammu how to make the wooden drum. The bamboo-rat plays a part in a ritual of feeding the rice child (the spirit of the rice): the paw of a bamboo-rat is used to spoon the rice for the spirit. This ritual assures a good rice harvest, with piles of rice, just as the bamboo-rat makes mounds as it burrows. The wooden drum is another sign of status for the family who has one.

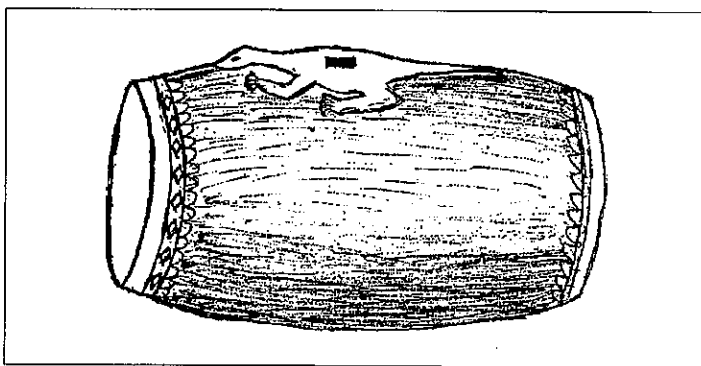


Illustration 10. The long wooden drum.

The Kammu and the elephants

All the Kammu people recognize the *The Flood* and the Cʼaŋ¹⁸ stories, since these stories are ancient stories of the Kammu people. "Born elephant; born Kammu" (káət scáaŋ, làaŋ kmmú). This means that the Kammu and the elephant were born into this world at the same time, the same day, and they therefore have the same status. We also add: "Born Cʼaŋ, born Lwa." Maybe this means that the Kammu and Lwa people are related. When people say this, they mean that the Kammu and Lwa have the same culture hero, Cʼaŋ.

When someone has seen an elephant in his dream, it means that a lord, a leader, or a high person will come. Or the dreamer will meet a person who has high rank, who has power. People who die by accident have the same kind of spirit that an elephant gets when it dies. The Kammu are afraid to hunt or kill an elephant, since the elephant has a soul as people do.

Shoulder bag

Men, women and children over 12 years of age have shoulder bags that can be identified as coming from different regions. Inside the shoulder bag is a silver box (ùup kmúl) and a tobacco container (krèŋ yáa). Inside the silver box there are betel leaves (lá plùu), a lime box (tláp púun), the bark of *pntriik* for chewing with betel leaf. When young boys go to visit young girls, the boys carry their shoulder bags with them. When they leave the girls' house, the girls give them some dried banana leaves for making a cigarette and the bark or root of the *pntriik* for chewing with betel leaf and areca nut, and some tobacco. The boys then make raincoats (kntò), and a woven carrying strap (tár pùh nǝ) in return for the gifts.

Kammu World View

Spirits, ancestors, and rituals

The world of the Kammu is populated by a host of spirits, ancestors, and personal souls. Events are explained as the actions and interactions of these various supernatural forces. A great deal of the folklore explains why events occur, and instructs people how to counteract the effects of the spirits or pacify them. The Kammu word for spirit is *róoy*.

The *róoy lwàaŋ*, or spirit of heaven, sends heat and sunlight, but it can also cause drought. The spirit of heaven usually causes good things to happen for people.

The *róoy cntràas* is the spirit of lightning. The Kammu greatly fear lightning, and every year lightning strikes cause damage in the villages or in the surrounding forests. This spirit of lightning causes illness and seizures in people. This spirit can appear in the shape of a man and he strikes in the form of a goat.

The main enemy of the spirit of lightning is the *róoy pryðəŋ*, or dragon spirit. The dragon spirit lives under the mountains and is associated with water. When the dragon spirit is angry it can cause landslides or floods. Sometimes the dragon spirit takes the form of the python, and Kammu are reluctant to kill or eat pythons. The Kammu avoid the powerful dragon and the lightning spirits and try to avoid acts that would anger them. If the spirits are already angry, the people perform rituals to their ancestors and the benevolent spirits for protection.

The dragon spirit, in the form of a python can marry a woman. Women, especially pregnant women, have to be careful so that the dragon does not steal them and drag them into the river to take them for wives. In the morning hours a pregnant woman has to be especially careful not to go near the rivers.

Both Kammu men and women have tattoos on their bodies. These tattoos, applied when they are young children,

protect the body and the spirits within the body from attacks by evil spirits.

There are many other spirits in the house, the village (*róoy kúŋ*), and the forest. These spirits are basically good. The villagers have to be careful not to offend them, or there will be misfortune that comes to the family. The *róoy èes* are the spirits of the soil, and there are ceremonies so they will help the farmers in their agricultural work. The Kammu are very careful not to injure any living thing in the fields, or the spirits may curse the field for generations. The field spirits have their own spirit villages just as humans have their villages. The spirits marry and have children, and have their own work to do. The nature spirits also rule the lives of the plants and animals.

There is an evil spirit, the *róoy kèn*. These spirits are associated with certain people who can never completely get rid of them. When the spirit is not in the body, the person is normal, but when the spirit enters the body, he is no longer really human. This kind of spirit can be passed from one person to another, usually by food. Sometimes the person who is possessed deliberately infects another person with the evil spirit. No one wants to marry a person from such a family, and the family has few contacts with other people.

The tiger spirit, *róoy rwàay ðək*, is also dangerous. The tiger spirit can come from contracting the wrong kind of marriage. A person afflicted with the tiger spirit becomes ill, and a ritual is performed to expel the spirit. A water buffalo, pig or hen is sacrificed; cooked rice, tobacco, and fermented tea is used in this ceremony.

Another evil spirit, the "elder brother" of the tiger spirit is the *róoy rklàk*. This spirit also comes from marrying the wrong way. Someone from the wife-taker's group and from the wife-giver's group has to be present at the ceremony to expel the *rklàk* spirit. The *rklàk* spirit can also possess objects, like the bronze drum.

The ancestor spirits (*róoy kàaŋ*), on the other hand, protect

their living descendants and are largely responsible for the good or bad fortune of the living. The spirits will not deliberately hurt those who go against taboos, but they will not protect their descendants any more. In this way, the behavior of any member of the family can bring problems to the whole family. Without protection, the evil spirits can attack the family or its possessions, such as their livestock or money.

There are personal spirits, or souls (*hnmàal*) that inhabit each person. When one or more of the souls leave the body, the person becomes sick, depressed, anxious, and can die. A spirit-calling ceremony is performed, in which the spirit caller communicates with the spirit to find out why they have left the person's body, and determines how to lure them back.

Another ceremony, *túk tí* or *súu khwán*, similar to the Lao *baa-sii*, is performed to strengthen the personal souls during different kinds of important events, like birth, marriage, illness, starting a journey, and so on. At the close of this ceremony each guest ties a string around the person's wrist. The strings help keep the personal spirits in place during important events.

The world of spirits helps strengthen family and village ties. The spirits and ceremonies emphasize the relationships between people, and the communal meals and gatherings help remind people to whom they should be loyal. All the spirits except the ancestor spirits can be expelled or appeased with ceremonies.

Christianity

Some Kammu have converted to Christianity, both in Laos and in the United States. As with other groups, there is sometimes conflict between the new religion and the world of spirits and ancestors. Some of the very strict religious groups demand that the converts discard all vestiges of the old ways, especially ceremonies that deal with the spirits.

Charms

The Kammu people use charms to protect themselves. The sacred *banana magic stone* and the *wild boar's fangs* are not only valuables but also for security. All the charms belong to the Cíaj or the Spirits of Heaven. This story tells about charms:

I think it was in the year 1958, when Mrs. Ûuy Làaj went to collect and burn the smaller logs and branches that remained after the field had been burned for the first time. She started to collect the smaller logs and branches and burned them from the lower end up towards the upper end of her field.

When she came to a big termite hill, there was a banana plant that was still unburnt. The fire had burnt everywhere except around that termite hill, and that banana plant. She tried to cut down the banana plant; however, her jungle knife did not go through the banana stem. She ripped off the banana leaves with her hands, and she found a wild boar's fang about ten centimeters long, and a piece of quartz. The quartz was the banana's magic stone. These are the banana charms. She took the charms and put them into her shoulder bag. Then she cut down the banana plant, and her jungle knife went through the banana stem without a problem.

She brought the charms home and gave them to her husband, Làaj Làay. They kept the wild boar's fang and the banana magic stone in their house.

Some months later, she fell ill. She almost died. Then they killed a water buffalo and made a sacrifice to their ancestors, to welcome those charms into the household. After her family killed the water buffalo and made a sacrifice to their ancestors and greeted the charms, Mrs. Ûuy Làaj was well again.

Her husband, Mr. Làaj Làay, took the charms, put them in a bamboo tube and placed the tube on the ground next to a big tree. Then he took his rifle and shot at the bamboo tube. However, the rifle did not go off. He tried and tried to shoot it many times, but the rifle did not go off at all. Those charms—the banana magic stone and the wild boar's fang—can protect themselves against any kind of gun.

Since then all of our villagers believe that the banana magic stone and the wild boar's fang are very powerful and convey status and strength to their owners. Since they can protect themselves, they can also protect their owner.

The banana magic stone and the wild boar's fang are used by the Kammu on many different occasions for a variety of purposes. The Kammu people believe that all Cɛ̄aŋ objects can protect people in dangerous situations, and can make their owners safe and wealthy. Like the bronze drum, these charms can possess malevolent spirits as well as benevolent ones.

The owners have to follow certain procedures to allow the charms to function as protective amulets. For example, a person should observe the time when the pigs are sleeping; from 11 o'clock in the morning to 1 o'clock in the afternoon. When the pigs are sleeping then the wild boar's fang is not effective; it has no power. The person has to treat the charm in the right manner, otherwise it will lose its power and convey no status to its owner.

Kammu Law (kot màay kmmú)

There are the governor, the head of the province (cáw khwéɛŋ), the head of the county (cáw mɛ̄ang), and the head of the district (táséɛŋ). Each village has a headman, or *nàay báan*. When something happens in a Kammu village—a wedding, a quarrel, or some misunderstanding—the Kammu rarely go to discuss their problems with the cáw khwéɛŋ or cáw mɛ̄ang. First they discuss the problem with the village headman, and if they cannot reach an agreement, then they go to discuss the problem with the táseɛŋ.

The village headman and the elder people are the most important people in the village. Kammu people both respect and fear the elder persons and the village headman.

There was no prison in a Kammu village, but the Kammu people used fines as punishment. For instance, a settlement might require payment of three *théep* of French silver coins (fifteen *slíŋ* or *sáam héep*), and a bottle of rice wine and a hen or a pig, depending on the severity of the problem. Examples of village crimes and their settlements are described below.

Wife beating

When a husband beat his wife, then she could return to stay with her parents. Then the husband had to kill a pig and call the elder people and the village headman to come. The husband would have to pay three *màn*, one or two jars of glutinous rice wine, make an apology ceremony (*khán sùu màa*) to her parents, and ask for forgiveness from them and his wife. The pork is prepared and fed to everybody who comes to help the couple resolve their problem. The pig head is cooked and given to her father.

Killing

If someone kills a person, either accidentally or out of anger or for other reasons, he has to pay 60 *màn* as compensation to the family (*kàa húa*), serve five to ten jars of glutinous rice wine, and slaughter three to five pigs. The pork is prepared and wine is served to the elder people and the village headman who come to help the unfortunate family. I have seen this situation in villages near my home village.

Out-of-wedlock pregnancy

When a woman becomes pregnant before she is married, her boy friend will have to make amends. He has to slaughter a pig, provide one or two jars of glutinous rice wine, and invite the village headman and all the elder persons to come to eat the pork stew, drink the rice wine. He performs the apology ceremony, *khán sùu màa*. In this case, the boy asks forgiveness from the village headman and the elder persons in the village (*kòn tháv kòn kée*). The boyfriend also has to give something to the girl's mother. He might give a skirt, a pair of arm bracelets, and three *màn* (*khón rmpù mà*).

These ceremonies are important to pacify the "squandering" spirits (*róoy yáap róoy pèr*). If a boy does not make a ceremony

for the pregnant unmarried woman, her parents, and the village elders and headman, then these squandering spirits would stay in the village. The stores of rice would disappear and there would not be enough food to eat with the rice.

A pregnant woman also has a spirit that can bring either bad luck or good luck to others in the village. For instance, when a hunter goes to hunt, fish, or set the traps, he must avoid pregnant women. If the hunter meets a pregnant woman, he will not catch anything. The pregnancy spirit is a slippery thing, and causes the animal to slip away from the hunter. Or, encountering a pregnant woman on the way to harvest the rice can make the new rice slippery so that the yield is very low.

Education in a Village

Both boys and girls had places where they could learn things in the village. The Kammu boys' school was the community-house. The girls' school was the family house. Since boys older than seven or eight years of age usually stayed in the community-houses, they learned all kinds of different things from the unmarried young men, their fathers, and from the elders. The boys spent their days with the unmarried young men, learning how to hunt and set traps. The boys learned how hunters should walk in the forest so that the animals would not hear them. They learned how to figure out which direction a tree would fall, and how to cut it to make it fall the right direction. When the rice "set ears," the Kammu boys stayed overnight in the fields to scare away the animals. During those long nights, they learned songs and stories of the Kammu.

The knowledge a person needs to live well in a village is not taught in school at all. One learns by doing things together with people who teach how by demonstrating. In school you learn how to read and write—but you cannot build a house with a book. Also,

in school the teachers teach about things that are not visible and cannot be touched. This is a very different kind of learning.

Kammu girls learned to cook rice, pound rice, fish and collect wild vegetables in the forest from their mothers. They began to do household chores with small-sized implements as soon as they were old enough. At a young age they were able to contribute to the family by doing a share of the work.

Parents and elders advise their children. For example, my mother used to ask me when I was at home in the Kammu village:

Kàm, when you have a wife, in which way will you love your wife?"

I answered: "Get married and stay with her all the time. I will never leave her alone."

She said: "No, *Kàm*, that is wrong! If you love your wife and your children you must work very hard to earn money. Then you will be rich in the future, thus both you and your family will stay at home and have a good life together.

However, if you do not work hard before you get married, you will become poor after you have got a family."¹⁹

Elders also liked to say:

tòò	tmprì	tàa	srúat	wáay	kíñ	hryà		
pick	vegetable	from	early	soon	full	bag		
tè	kmprà	tàa	srúat	wáay	àh	kóon	kří	
marry	wife	from	early	soon	have	child	use	

*If you pick vegetables in the early morning, you will get a bag full;
if you marry early, you will soon have children to help you in the work.*

Or, parents or elders would use proverbs and other sayings, rather than repeating commands. For example, an elder might tell a young person to go to the jungle, but the young person might refuse like this: "No, I am not going there, because I am very afraid." The elder person might say:

só	phóon	lón
dog	never	lose
yòŋ	phóon	ŋə
father	never	afraid

*A dog never loses its way, and
a grown-up man is never afraid.*

Or, the mother-in-law might tell her son's wife to go and collect wild vegetables in the forest. Perhaps the daughter-in-law would refuse like this: "No mother, I cannot walk around in the forest, because I am hindered by my child." Then her mother-in-law might answer like this:

tráak	phóon	kəək	yàa	cntāŋ	tèc
Water buffalo	never	hinder	by	horns	its

A water buffalo, it is never hindered by its horns.

The first school

The first school in my village area, I think, began in 1948 or 1950. The Lao government sent a Lao man from Luang Nam Tha city to teach the Kammu to read and write the Lao alphabet. He came and stayed in Mòŋ Knəŋ village, since Mòŋ Knəŋ village was the nai phong's village in our area.

The nai phong in Ban Mòŋ Knəŋ district was a government official. There was no táseŋ; no Kammu had become a táseŋ yet. (The táseŋ governs an administrative unit between *ban*—village—and *muang*—city.) The Kammu had a village headman (nai ban) in each village. The man who was the first nai phong in our area was named "Keo San's father," from the Mòŋ Knəŋ village. He was a nai phong only for 2 years then he died. Nīi Ràw succeeded Keo San's father. Some years later ŋəa Tīl became a nai phong. Then I think it was in 1957, ŋəa Tīl became the first real táseŋ in our area.

The teacher came to the Mòŋ Knəŋ village and told the

táséɛŋ to inform all the village headmen to come to a meeting. The táseɛŋ sent a message to every village. When the village headmen got the message from the táseɛŋ and the teacher, they went to the Mòŋ Kùŋ village. The táseɛŋ and the teacher told them: "Now the government has sent a teacher to teach the children to read and write in the Lao alphabet. Now every village must bring some workers and some thatch and some bamboo for building a school. Then three boys from each village can go to school."

After they finished their discussion with the táseɛŋ and the teacher, all the village headmen returned to their villages. When they came home, they did as they had been told by the teacher and táseɛŋ.

Our village headman collected thirty *màn* and then he asked the boys in the village: "Who would like to go to school? We will pay each boy ten *màn* and each year we will give you food and rice every day during the period of your stay in the school there."

None of the boys in our village wanted to have the money or to go to school. Then the village headman chose three boys in our village, gave the money to them and said: "You have to take this



Illustration 11. Kammu boy carrying trap, knife, and other things. (Photo by J. Halpern.)

money, and tomorrow you must go to school! Otherwise we will be in trouble."

Then three boys from our village went to that first school. One of them was one of my elder brothers, N̄i-Ràw. Some months later, the teacher and the táseɛŋ said to my elder brother: "There are not enough pupils! We have to ask some more boys!" The táseɛŋ sent a message to every village calling all the village headmen to come to the táseɛŋ's village to have a another meeting.

Every village headmen went to the meeting with the táseɛŋ and the teacher at Mòŋ Kn̄ŋ village. The táseɛŋ and the teacher told them that they must bring two more boys from each village. The village headmen returned to their villages, and told all the boys in the village. "Now the táseɛŋ and the teacher need to have more pupils, they need to have two more boys from each village, but we are unable to collect more money for you. Therefore, when you hear that the táseɛŋ and the teacher will come to our village, all of you boys must run away into the jungle!"

My elder brother returned to our village and told us that the táseɛŋ and the teacher would come to catch the boys in our village. First came the teacher, then the táseɛŋ and their pupils. I was about nine years of age at that time. We were sitting in and around the community-house at about eleven o'clock in the morning when we heard the dogs bark around the village. All of us boys ran into the jungle. Then we carefully and quietly returned and stayed just outside the village and listened for the dogs' barking to hear if the visitors had gone or not. We hid under the bushes just outside the village, and we could hear what people were talking about. The táseɛŋ told the village headman: "We are coming to catch the boys in every village and let them go to school!"

We were under the bushes up the hill. About ten yards away from us, there were many pomelo trees with ripe pomeloos. Before the pupils, the teacher, and the táseɛŋ ɲ̄a-Tiil left for the Mòŋ Kn̄ŋ village, they came towards the place where we were hiding. Some of them climbed the pomelo trees. They shook the

pomelo-trees, and the pomeloes fell down. Some pomeloes hit our heads, but we did not make any noise—we just kept completely quiet.

Some of the pupils ran down to pick up the rolling pomeloes. They ran towards the bushes where we were hiding. We got up and ran away into the dense jungle again. They cried out: "Here they are, here they are!" We ran as quick as we could move our feet.

When I was just of the right age to become a school boy, people made us afraid of school. We were always running away from school. Now I am crying because I would like to go to school every day, but it is too late for me.

Of course, although I did run away from school, I learned something useful and valuable for life. I learned to be a good hunter, a good fisherman, a good worker in the Kammu village, and a well-behaved man. I also learned to help sick people, I learned to be a good shaman and a medicine man. I also learned the Kammu rituals, traditions, and many other aspects of village life. I believe that it was not only I who had a hard life. Perhaps there are many Kammu people who had the same kind of life.

The Changing Life of the Kammu

The Kammu have been in Laos forever. Kammu have spread out to live in Vietnam, Burma, Thailand, and even southern China. The Kammu moved for survival. They moved because more powerful people wanted the land. They moved to be nearer the fertile fields. They moved because the village spirits cursed the village. They went to the lowlands to trade with other people. They stayed temporarily in the lowland cities to do *corvée* work for the government. The unmarried men went to the cities or to Thailand for a few years to earn money to buy a bronze drum.

In the late 1950s and 1960s the Pathet Lao came to some

villages and told us we should help them overthrow the Lao government. They promised that the Kammu would not be low-status minorities any more. We would have land and schools. There would be Kammu government officials, they said. Some Kammu believed them, and joined the Pathet Lao. Others did not believe these things, and joined the organized hilltribe forces known as the “secret army.” Other Kammu tried to avoid both sides. The Kammu hated to move from their villages.

The Kammu who are in the United States today have come as political refugees. The Kammu never dreamed that they would live in the United States. Adjusting to a life so different from the villages and towns of Laos has been a great challenge.

Our Kammu people are happy to see this beautiful country, and have the opportunity to obtain good education. We bring skills and knowledge that are useful in the jungle and in the fields, but are of little use here.

As our parents used to say to us:

sín	àl	lè	lèə	màat	píc	tàa	yú
thing	no	good	then	take	throw	in	bush
sín	ì	kù	lèə	màat	ró	tàa	tèey
thing	we	like	then	take	put	in	bag

Bad things we must throw away in the bush.

Good things we must keep in a bag.

Our bodies are still Kammu, but our minds have already changed. Our eyes have seen beautiful things and our ears have heard new ideas, and the places, weather, and environment are so different. So we must change, too. However, we need to be careful when we follow the new environment, since there are both positive and negative consequences.

The skills that were needed in village life were different from the skills city people need. It took time to learn to do everything. If a person did not learn the skills, then that person could not do any kind of work. People would also call him *Nàar*.²²

Ñàar has neither skill nor knowledge at all. Whatever he tries to do, he does not know how to do it. I do not want people to call me Ñàar.

There are also many stories of clever persons, such as the story of Càarj Làay and Téek. Téek and Ñàar were always competing with each other. However, Ñàar never overcame Téek, since Téek and Càarj Làay had skills and were clever.²⁰

I know there are many Kammu people who have never been to school and have little knowledge, but we are at least better than Ñàar.

When I was in my village, every time I tried to think of money, it seemed that the money was in the sky, indeed, money was very far away from the Kammu villages. However, people did not think of money all the time as we do now. Now, it seems to me that the money is in my garden, because now we are living in rich countries. The Kammu borrowed a Lao saying:

ṇèn	thòon	yúu	bón	yàak
money	gold	is	place	difficult
máak	màay	yúu	bón	sún
fruit	tree	is	place	high

*Wealth is hard to reach;
Fruit is high up on the tree.*

Of course, conditions are very different in villages and cities. In a village a person can live well, even if he or she has never been to school. However, one must be rather intelligent and learn a lot to get enough food. In the forest one can find many things to eat. One need not use money to buy things, everyone just hunts, fishes, and collects wild vegetables, potatoes, and mushrooms.

Now we are in a big country, and our lives have changed very much, everything is different from the village life. Now we need to learn the city ways, and as you know, people in the city do not use jungle knives or axes for their work as we did in our Kammu villages. What the city people need to use are papers and

pens. We have had to learn how to use pen and paper, and a computer. If someone cannot hold a pen, he cannot get a job, or even cash a check. Of course, it is not so easy to learn the new life, new culture, and new language.

In a city, before a person can do something, he has to read signs. The city is more dangerous than the jungle, too. People are more dangerous than cobras, pythons, tigers, boars, and bears. The wild animals rarely kill people, but people kill other people every day. When you get afraid in the jungle, you just sing a song to scare away the dangerous animals. However, you cannot sing a song to scare away a thief or a car that is going to hit you. You have to use your intelligence to protect yourself.

How we feel and what we hear is different, and what people ask and talk about is also different.

In the Kammu village we used to question each other like this:

"How is the field?"

"Oo, the rice is growing fine, but we do not have enough rain."

Here in the city, people ask each other about school, and talk about Asian history, culture, religion, folklore, folklife, music, politics, archaeology, economics and anthropology. We do not understand anything at all.

However, you should not think that we are good for nothing because of that. We can tell people about the tigers, bears, boars, and cobras. Or we could tell them about our many different kinds of traps, about seventeen kinds of bamboo and how to use each one for different purposes, about wild plants used for curing. However, we cannot tell people about archaeology or anthropology, since we have never learned about these things. We can teach them our knowledge, and they can teach us theirs.

Parents and children

Our children go to school and learn to speak English very quickly. Even so, they still have problems understanding textbooks and writing essays. Kammu parents do not know what it is like to go to school, so it is easy for the children to fool the parents. The parents don't know what the teachers expect them to do. Teachers tell them, "support your child in school." To the Kammu parents, *support* means to provide them with food and clothes and a place to sleep while they go to school. However, the teachers mean another kind of *support*: encourage your child, have books and magazines in the home, have regular mealtimes, bedtime, and study time, sit with your children while they study, take your children to visit the library and the zoo, and so on.

In school, the children also learn many new ideas about life. They see that different families make different choices. They learn different explanations to questions like, "What makes lightning?" "Why does it rain?" "What makes a person sick?" "How is sickness cured?" "Is the earth flat or round?" and so on. The scientific explanations cause conflict because the parents' beliefs are so different.

The children also learn that everyone has individual rights in America, even children. In Laos, the parents were responsible for the children, and made decisions for them. In America, the parents' opinions and decisions don't matter if a doctor or a judge decides that the child's rights are violated. The parents also feel that they have lost control of their children because of different ideas about discipline. In Laos, if a child doesn't learn from words, parents use the hand to spank the child. No one has taught them a different way to discipline their children, and they are left with no means to control the children's behavior while they are still young. As a result, the children don't respect the authority of the parents. The parents know that the children can tell the teacher

about physical punishment, and the police will come.

Another difficult problem is money. The children expect the parents to give them money so they can go to stores and buy things. They want to have clothes and shoes, toys and electronic games like their classmates. The parents don't have that kind of money, and they have many relatives they must help. A few teen-agers have turned to crime to get the money they need. Their victims are their own people. In a village, crime was handled by the headman and the elders, along with the victim's family. The old way of solving problems doesn't work in the U.S.—there is no headman, no *tásēn*, and no group that identifies themselves as a "village."

Lack of awareness and understanding

In school and society most Americans consider the Kammu people to be the same as the Lao. The Kammu have taken Lao names, and arrived in the U.S. as Laotian nationals. Most adults understand the Lao language. As a result schools and agencies may have hired Lao to help with interpretation and problem-solving. All of the Kammu children go to school, and this is the one place that the children and their parents can learn about American society. Ideally, schools would be able to match Kammu personnel with Kammu populations. In addition to helping the students and their parents understand American ways, they would be able to identify the children and teenagers who are headed for a life of trouble, and can help the parents get help before it is too late.

Working in America is another problem. Kammu children have no idea about the world of work, and the parents have no way to help them decide about their futures. Kammu parents don't even know all the kinds of jobs that exist, and how to become qualified for different kinds of work. If the children and parents could set goals for the future, they could work towards them. They

would know that sacrifice today would result in a good income tomorrow.

Conclusion

The Kammu are in the United States without preparation, but they are willing to learn. Their children are their hope for the future, but they don't really know how to help them prepare. The gap between the parents and children is a real problem, and the school is a place where American society, Kammu children, and their parents all come together. Many Kammu have already forgotten their past, but don't know their place in the future. They hope for sympathetic teachers who can help them learn what they need to know.

Americans still use the words *carpe diem* ("seize the day"), handed down from their ancestors in ancient Rome. The Kammu say:

rè	òh	yèm	òm	rèh			
Hurry	fetch	while	water	rise up			
yèm	kàə	cùur	cú	òh	òm	pəəy	àh
While	it	go down	like	fetch	water	no	have

Hurry fetch water while it rises up.

When it has already dried out, we cannot fetch any.

It means the same thing.

Endnotes

1. Vang and Lewis, 1984 (1990).
2. Barbara Grimes, editor of *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (11th edition, 1988) lists 90 languages found in Laos, although this includes immigrants such as Chinese, Russian, Khmer and Vietnamese. An alphabetical list, grouped into language families, follows (members of the boldfaced groups have come to the U.S. as refugees):
 AUSTRO-ASIATIC: Alak 1, Alak 2, Angku, Arem, Bit, Bo, **Brao (Laveh)**, **Western Bru**, Con, Halang, Halang Doan, Hani, Ir, Jeh, Jeng, Kantu (High Katu), Kasseng, Kataang, Katu, Kha Tong Luang, Khlor, **Khmer**, **Khmu (Kammu)**, **Khoun (Kween)**, Khua, Kuy, **Lamet**, **Laven**, Luen, Lü (Lue), **Mal**, Mankong, May, Mlabri, Ngeq (Nkriang), Nguôn, Nyaheun (Hin), Ong, Oy (Huei), Pacoh, Pakatan, Phai (Pyai), Phon Sung, Pong 1, Pong 2, Pong 3, Puoc (Xinh Mul), Sapoin (Hapool), Sapuan, Sô (Kah So), So Tri, Sok, Sou (Souk), Tai Loi, Talieng, Lower Ta'oih (Tong), **Upper Ta'oih (Kantua)**, Tareng, Thavung, The, Tum, **Vietnamese**.
 SINO-TIBETAN: Akha, **Chinese** (various dialects), Hani (Haw), **Hmong Daw**, **Hmong Njua**, Kado, Kaduo, Kang (Dong?), **Lahu (Mussuh)**, **Mien**, Mun (Man Lan-tien), Nung, Phana', Phu Thai (Phutai), Phuan, Phunoi (Côn), Puko, Rien, Saek (Tai Sek), Sila, **Tai Dam**, **Tai Deng**, **Tai Kao**, Tai Long, Tai Nua (Chinese Shan), Northern Tai, Yoy.
3. Also spelled Lamet, taken from the Lao word in which an /l/ is substituted for the /r/.
4. See Tayanin and Lindell (1990) for a full description of hunting and fishing.
5. Mulberry or Broussonetia *papyifera*.
6. Bauhinia *blakeana*.
7. See Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin, 1984: 127-133 for totem stories.
8. See Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin, 1984: 218.
9. Proschan, 1989: 50.
10. The consonants contrast as voiced and unvoiced. For example, in English, the initial consonant in *tog* is unvoiced, but in *dog*, it is voiced (feel your vocal cords vibrate for /d/ but not for /t/).
11. The red ants literally stick together to make a bridge of themselves

to let their colony-mates cross over.

12. Also translated as kettlegong (*yàan* in Kammu).
13. Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin, 1984, 150-151.
14. Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin, 1984: 150.
15. Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin, 1984: 151. Sée Khám's family bought a kettlegong and then became possessed an evil tiger spirit.
16. Narrated by Khan Suksamphan. Transcribed and translated by Damrong Tayanin, Kammeung Manokoune, Frank Proschan. In the original translation, the poetic structure is maintained. For Kàm Ràw's version of the Flood story, see Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin, 1984: 3-8.
17. *Kmmú* is the spelling of the ethnonym in the Swedish orthography; Kammu is the way the Swedish team transliterates *kmmú*; *Kmhmu* is the spelling in the Standard Kmhmu Orthography; .
18. Lindell, Swahn, and Tayanin, 1984, 21-22. Proschan (1989:185-190) notes that several of the Austro-Asiatic cultures (Stieng, Black Tai, Laha, Lao, Thai, Phuan, and presumably others) have this character, who represents the "spirit of struggle and revenge, a hero of subjugated people." (Chamberlin, 1986:77 in Proschan, 1989: 186).
19. Often boys would go to work on plantations or as laborers in the cities to earn the money for bride price, or to buy a bronze drum—which was sometimes used as bride price.
20. Lindell, Swahn and Tayanin, 1984: 32-39.

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Appendix 2: Different names for Kammu

Ka Mu	Khas Thuong
Kamu	Khamou
Kammu	Khamu
Kemu	Khāmü
Kh'mouk	Khmou
Kha	Khmous
Kha Khmou	Khmu
Kha Khmu	Khmu'
Kha Mooh	Kho' Mu
Kha Mou	Kmou
Kha Mu	Phou Theng
Khas Kmous	Xa-Kao
Khas Laos	

Appendix 3: Kammu orthographies

Consonants

<i>Lund Orthography</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Standard Kmhmu Orthography</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
p`	pàar	b	baar	two
p´	páaŋ	p	paaq	open
ph	pháan	ph	phaan	kill an animal
b´	bák	´m	´mak	hit; strike
t`	tàr	d	dar	run
t´	tá	t	ta´	grandfather
th´	thúu	th	thuu	siphon with a tube
d´	dóom	´n	´noom	see; try
c`	cà	j	ja´	far
c´	cáŋ	c	caq	bitter
ch´	cháay	ch	chaay	be able
k`	kàay	g	gaay	return
k´	ká	k	ka´	fish
kh´	khúul	kh	khuul	hair; feathers
m`	màh	m	mah	rice
m´	múuc	hm	hmuuc	ant
n`	nòom	n	nôôm	press; squeeze
n´	nám	hn	hnam	big
ñ`	ñèer	ñ	ñèèr	small; thin
ñ´	ñíp	hñ	hñip	grasp; catch

ŋ̀	ŋàr	q	qar	cold; freezing
ŋ́	ŋó	hq	hqo'	paddy rice
l̀	lám	l	lam	delicious
ĺ	lá	hl	hla	leaf
r̀	ràaŋ	r	raaq	flower
ŕ	róoŋ	hr	hrôôq	jew's harp
ỳ	yàt	y	yat	exist; be (present)
ý	yáaŋ	hy	hyaaq	female
'ý	'yáŋ	'y	'yaq	rice basket
ẁ	wèc	v	véc	return; enter
ẃ	wá	hv	hva'	monkey
'ẃ	'wáak	'w	'wwak	drink; smoke
h́	hóot	h	hoot	harvest
ś	só	s	so'	dog

Vowels

Lund	SKO
i	i
ii	ii
ĩ	w
ïï	ww
u	u
uu	uu
ia	ia
ia	wa
ua	ua
e	é
ee	ée
ə	e
əə	ee
o	ô
oo	ôô
ε	è
εε	èè
ΛΛ	êê
ɔ	o
ɔɔ	oo
a	a
aa	aa

The Lua' (T'in):
Remembering Life in Laos

Julia Elliott

with members of the Lua' community:
the **Andee, Boonnam, Douangmeechit, Douangvila,**
Khamda, Khatiya, Pomsyda, Vongpheng, and Vongsa
families

Illustrations by
Miho Hayashibara

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Foreword

The T'in are one of the least known groups of Thailand and Laos. (For lack of an alternative, I use *T'in* as a general cover term for the people and languages variously referred to as *Lua'*, *Mal*, and *Prai*. See the *Ethnonyms* section.) Published material concerning T'in traditional culture is relatively scarce, and all of it is based on research conducted in Thailand, none in Laos. Dessaint (1981) has written the most detailed ethnography. The notes in Lebar (1964) are primarily from Bare (1961). Filbeck (1964, 1971, 1973) has also published some brief ethnographic articles, in addition to his more extensive work on various aspects of the dialects of T'in spoken in Thailand. Several graduate students at Mahidol University in Thailand, along with Professor Suwilai Premsrirat (1988), have done linguistic fieldwork in Nan province. These M.A. theses can be found in the library at the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development at Mahidol. Although I have heard reports of missionaries working in Laos (before 1975) who may have recorded some of their observations, nothing has been published to date. (See Filbeck 1978b: 67.) I am not aware of T'in people who may have written about their own communities.

The main body of this chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I give a brief summary of basic ethnographic information gathered from my own research, as well as from published sources. The last section is a brief sketch of the Lua' language based on my field research. The middle section is a first-person description of life in Laos. Because there is so little recorded knowledge regarding Lua' traditions, this description is based entirely on the personal stories of Lua' families in northern California (primarily Santa Rosa, and also Fairfield and Stockton). A number of elders, both women and men, talked with me about their lives growing up in Laos. They recalled their daily

activities—working in the rice fields, gathering food in the forest. I also asked specific questions about marriage practices, village leadership, spirit ceremonies, and so on.

The interviews were conducted in English, sometimes through a Lua' interpreter. In weaving together the pieces of many conversations and editing them for this section, I stayed as close as possible to the words of the Lua' speakers. When many people gave the same information, *we* has been used to represent "the Lua' people." There are also direct quotes, in italics, from various individuals who recounted stories specific to their own lives.

In compiling the accounts of many different individuals, I tried to distill those aspects of Lua' culture that were reflected in all of the interviews. Nonetheless, while many of the practices described here might be common to most Lua', others may be specific to a particular village. For the most part, the speakers themselves did not make generalizations about Lua' customs. Rather, they described life as they knew it in their own villages, telling their personal experiences.

It is important to keep in mind that among the T'in, traditions (for example, the types of spirit practices) and language vary from village to village, sometimes considerably. Filbeck (1971, 1987) distinguishes two main groups in Thailand, the *Mal* and the *Prai*. Not enough research has been done to determine how closely or distantly related the Laotian Lua' of northern California may be to these or other groups.

Also significant is the fact that the lives of all the people whose memories make up this chapter were seriously disrupted for 20-30 years by the conflict in Indochina. In some cases, only a few members of a village or family left Laos. In others, half or more of a village emigrated together. In the Thai refugee camps where they lived for five to fifteen years before coming to the U.S., Lua' people from villages that had never had any contact in Laos were all living together. Speakers of different dialects encoun-

tered one another for the first time. Marriages took place between people from distant villages. Thus, although there is some tendency for people from the same village in Laos to settle near one another in the U.S., the American communities also consist of a mixture of people from different villages, speaking different dialects of Lua'.

The process of writing this chapter involved the cooperation of numerous individuals. All of my Lua' co-authors worked diligently, with unbounded patience, to help me understand their stories. I bear the sole responsibility for any lack of comprehension that may have resulted in errors or misstatements.

Julia Elliott
Graton, California
July, 1992

Who are the Lua' (T'in)?

Location

In Southeast Asia, the T'in live on mountain slopes at moderate altitudes in the northwest part of Sayaboury province in northern Laos, and the northeast part of Nan province in northern Thailand—near the Lao—Thai border. It is hard to know just how large the population is, but some estimate that there are at least 25,000 in Thailand, and 5,000 or more in Laos. There are also roughly 1,500 still in refugee camps in northern Thailand.¹

There are approximately 75 Lua' families now living in northern California—in Stockton, Fairfield, and Santa Rosa. Another 15 or so families have settled in Rochester, Minnesota. There are a few families in various other cities—in Fresno, Sacramento, and San Diego in California, and in Illinois and Washington state. There are a total of about 500–600 individuals in the United States.²

All of the Lua' in this country are originally from Sayaboury province, Laos. Between 1975 and 1979, they escaped the war in their area by walking across the border into Nan province in northern Thailand, a journey of one to two weeks. In Thailand, they stayed in refugee camps with other groups from highland Laos (Hmong, Mien, Khmu, and so on) until resettling in the U.S. As of 1992, several families a year are still arriving in the United States from the refugee camps.

Language

The Lua' language belongs to the Khmuic branch of Mon-Khmer, a sub-family of Austroasiatic. The Mon-Khmer family includes Vietnamese and Khmer, though Lua' is not closely

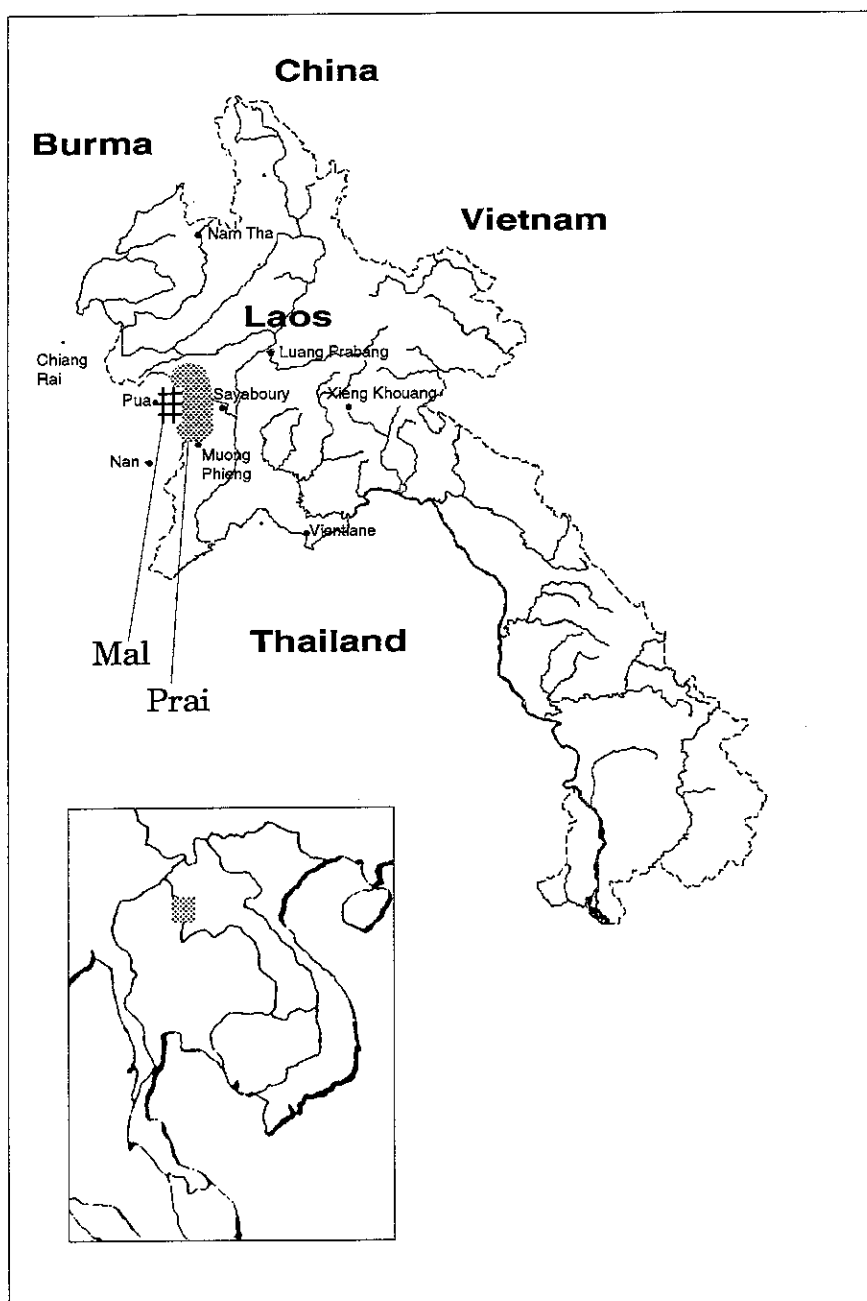


Figure 1. Location of T'in (Lua', Mal, Prai) settlements in Sayaboury province, Laos, and Nan province, Thailand. Adapted from Filbeck (1978).

related to either one. The Khmuic branch includes Khmu, Lua', and Mlabri.³ The Lua' and Khmu are thought by many to be among the original inhabitants of Laos.

There are many different dialects of Lua' with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility. Each village has its own way of speaking. Some speakers from different villages understand each other easily; others hardly understand each other at all. Most Lua' also know Lao.

Like many languages throughout the world, Lua' has no written tradition. Some Lua' speakers who are literate in Lao are able to write Lua' a little bit using the Lao script. Filbeck (1976) has written about the use of a Thai script for Mal (a T'in dialect spoken in Thailand.)⁴

Ethnonyms

The Lua' are known by many different names.⁵ Those who have settled in the U.S. usually call themselves *Lua'* or *T'in*. *T'in* is a Tai word meaning "place" or "locality" (Thai - ที่; Lao - ຖິ່ນ) —possibly with reference to the T'in as the original inhabitants of the area. T'in is spelled a number of different ways. *T'in* is one of the most common. (The apostrophe indicates aspiration—[t^h].) But there are also *Tin* or *Thin* or *Htin*.

According to Filbeck (1987) and Dessaint (1981), the T'in who live in Thailand find the name *T'in* at least somewhat derogatory.⁶ Filbeck characterizes the T'in as divided into two main cultural and linguistic groups—the *Mal* and the *Prai* (or *Pyai*).⁷ According to his analysis, *Mal* is an indigenous ethnonym. He suggests that *Prai*, although originally borrowed from Thai, should now be considered a T'in word because of various historical sound changes. Some of the groups of T'in in Thailand use the terms *Mal* or *Prai* to refer to themselves.

In Laos however, the situation seems to be quite different. The Lua' speakers in the United States report that they have

never heard the term *Mal* (which is not surprising since those dialects appear to be spoken only in Thailand). Furthermore, many people are either unfamiliar with the term *Prai* or say that it is a derogatory term used by Lao townspeople. *T'in* is the most common name used by government officials and therefore of course by refugee camp and resettlement personnel. Among the Lua' from Laos, *T'in* appears to be a relatively neutral, inoffensive term. They are used to using *T'in* when describing themselves in official situations or in written documents. Among themselves however, they most commonly use *Lua'*.

Unfortunately, *Lua'* is also a potentially confusing term. In northern Thailand, the term is often used to refer to various Mon-Khmer groups—the T'in, Lawa, Khmu and others (Dessaint, 1981; Filbeck 1971). It may be spelled *Lua'* or *Lua* or *Lwa'* or *Lawa*.⁸ (Here the apostrophe represents a glottal stop or short vowel—[lua?].) The Lua' (or Lawa) of northwestern Thailand are only very distantly related to the Lua' (or T'in) of northern Thailand and Laos.⁹

Traditional culture

One thing that distinguishes the Lua' from some of their neighbors is that they are a matrilineal, endogamous society. The descent system is bilateral. The basic social unit is the family. A household usually consists of a wife and husband with their children and their married daughters' families. The youngest daughter and her husband take care of her parents when they get old, and she inherits the household. (Therefore, female children are naturally very desirable.)

In general, there is no social organization larger than the village. Since each village is essentially autonomous, the Lua' (T'in, Mal, Prai) cannot be considered a single homogeneous group (Dessaint, 1981).

Most Lua' are primarily subsistence farmers practicing

shifting cultivation of glutinous rice. They also make some money producing *miang* (fermented tea leaves) and growing tobacco for sale or trade.

Traditional Lua' religious practices are based on ancestor worship and maintaining harmonious relations with the many local spirits that inhabit houses, villages and various natural phenomena. Many religious practices are concerned with the rice cycle, and also with healing. Illness and misfortune are generally the result of some kind of disharmony between spirits and people. Curing involves placating the disturbed spirits. All living things also have souls. Every human being has 32 souls. Separation of any of these souls from the body can cause illness or death. In such a case, a cure requires calling the souls back and securing them to the body (often by tying a white string around the wrist.) Other causes of illness include spirit possession and sorcery. Many Lua' beliefs and practices are similar to those of their lowland Lao neighbors. This is not unusual. As Kunstadter has pointed out, "Similarities or syncretism of this sort is common in South-East Asia, where the long-established religions have been tolerant, and favoured coexistence rather than exclusiveness."¹⁰ In recent years, both in Laos and in the refugee camps in Thailand, some Lua' have also been introduced to Catholicism by missionaries. In terms of the many Lua' rituals that are so intimately connected with the rice cycle (of planting and harvesting), it is understandable that these traditions have been lost in the transition to urban life in the U.S.



Life in Laos

The village community

Every Lua' family belongs to a village. The villages are separate from each other and do things in their own ways. Each grows its own rice and takes care of its own people.

In Laos, we don't meet people from other villages very often. That's why each village has its own dialect. Sometimes we can understand people from different villages easily, sometimes we can't. We usually marry within our own village, so many of the families in one village are related to one another. Everybody in the village knows each other very well and we try hard to get along.

Lua' villages are on mountain slopes at moderate altitudes (about halfway up), usually near a river. Most villages have about twenty to fifty households—some less, some more. In large villages, houses may be grouped together into several neighborhoods.

Each village has a name and no matter where we live we keep the same name. We don't stay in one place, we move around—

about every five or ten years. All the people move together. If we have plenty of food, we stay in one place. But if the rice fields are not good, or we have problems with the spirits, we move to a new place. Sometimes the spirits grab you right on the ankles and you die. They follow in your steps. If too many people die or become sick in one village we move. If a tiger eats our animals, and we shoot it but it doesn't die,¹¹ then we move. Sometimes we just move a short distance, maybe ten minutes' walking. The village leader (*nay-ɲwal*) calls all the families together. We discuss the matter—should we move or should we stay. We take a vote.

After we move, we never go back to the old place alone. There are too many ghosts there. It's hard to move all the time. There's a lot of work to do—cutting big trees, cutting all the grass, building new houses. We don't move around now as much as we used to.

The *nay-ɲwal* represents the village at district government meetings. If a village doesn't have a *nay-ɲwal*, the district leader (*taseng*) comes to find one for them. When we vote for a *nay-ɲwal*, we choose a well-respected man who is known for his fairness. A good *nay-ɲwal* knows how to talk with powerful (government) people. He's not afraid of them. Usually he can read and write Lao.

The *nay-ɲwal* keeps a list of all the people in the village and collects taxes for the government. He tells us what the government wants from us—such as rice or vegetables to give to the soldiers. Sometimes people get mad and don't want to do it. But it's not the decision of the *nay-ɲwal*. He just brings orders from the *taseng*. When the *taseng* comes to the village, he talks only to the *nay-ɲwal*. If the *nay-ɲwal* can't go to the district meetings, then the assistant *nay-ɲwal* goes. The government pays the *nay-ɲwal* a little bit for the work he does.

We have to work for the *nay-ɲwal* sometimes, especially when he goes to the district meetings. Sometimes he's gone for two or three days, or a week. Some *nay-ɲwal* have to go a long way, eight to ten hours' walking. If we don't help the *nay-ɲwal*, he tells the

taseng that we're lazy.

One person says: *In our village there was one nay-ɣwal and one assistant nay-ɣwal. One person from each family had to help the nay-ɣwal for free once or twice a month. We helped him cut trees (to make a rice field) or plant rice.*

The nay-ɣwal also helps people with their problems. He acts as a judge. If a husband and wife fight, he talks to them about it, says something good to them. He tries to get them to stay together. If they don't listen, if it doesn't work out and they separate, then one of them has to pay a fine to the other one. Sometimes people won't accept what the nay-ɣwal says and they go talk to the taseng. If there is a serious problem, for example if someone is killed, the police come to the nay-ɣwal to find out what happened.

The family

When a young couple gets married, they go to live with the bride's family. In one house there are about one to five families¹² living together—an older couple with their unmarried children, and their married daughters' families. If there are several married daughters in one household, the parents' house may become too crowded. Then the older daughters and their families move out into new homes. The youngest daughter and her husband stay with her parents to take care of them when they get old, and she inherits the household.

When the children are



young, the whole family sleeps together. It is very scary and lonely to sleep alone. Often everybody sleeps in a row: the father near the door, then the mother, then the baby, then the second child, then the oldest child by the wall. We have a saying about sleeping together:

If you sleep face to face, elephants will chase both of you.

Sometimes the old people tease the young ones and try to scare them. They say:

If you sleep at the head, (it will get you!)
If you sleep next to the head, it will walk on you!
If you sleep in the middle, it will eat you!
If you sleep next to the end, it will kick you!
If you sleep at the end, it will carry you away!

It is common for cousins to marry one another. Marriage is permitted between any cousins of the same generation—first, second, third cousins and so on. But there are certain rules.

A woman can marry the son of her father's younger brother, or the son of her father's sister. She cannot marry the son of her father's older brother or the son of anyone related to her mother.

A man can marry the daughter of his father's older brother, or the daughter of his mother's brother. He cannot marry the daughter of his father's sister or younger brother. A man cannot go back and marry someone from the house where his father grew up. We say a man should "go in line." He should marry the daughter of his father's next older brother:

khlop	ləl	baaʔay
follow	go	older brother

follow the older brother

If people follow these rules, no cousins who have grown up in the same household will marry each other. If two people who

grew up in the same house as children marry each other, then when they fight, neither one wants to leave. When they argue they say:

"You get out!"

"No, you get out!"

"It's my house!"

"It's my house too!"

And no one will leave.

But if they follow Lua' customs, the husband goes to live with the wife's family. Then if they fight, the husband has to leave. It's not his house.

A brother and sister shouldn't flirt with each other. If they play like that, lightning comes. If cousins inside the same family (from the same household) marry, it is no good. The old people say bears kill people who do the wrong thing.

People usually marry someone in their own village, but sometimes a young man will leave home to travel around for a few years. He earns money trading with the Lao and with other Lua' villages.

An old man says: *My parents died. My brother and sister died. I had no family. I was the only one left. I travelled around and met a woman in another village. I fell in love with her and we got married.*

When visitors come from another village, the young women hurry to comb their hair. They give betel and *miang* (fermented tea leaves) to the young men.

When a boy goes to visit a girl that he likes, sometimes he is too shy to give her something, so he gives it to the little children to give her. When a girl likes a boy, she carries water past his house to try to impress him. She makes cigarettes for him and takes betel to his parents. She takes water and wood to his house to look like she works hard. If she doesn't do anything, he won't be interested in her. His parents will say, "Your girlfriend doesn't do anything

around the house. I don't even see a bucket of water. When the bucket falls, she doesn't even pick it up!" She husks rice at his house and cooks for his parents. She brings food and water for him when he's working. She makes him fix things for her. He sharpens knives for her. The boys and girls tease each other a lot. The old people say, "Quit joking around with each other. Just get married!"

Once a couple has decided they like each other and want to get married, the engagement is arranged by the brothers of the mother of the bride (khensaan). The khensaan talk to the groom's parents about the engagement. They pay the bride's parents about four French silver coins (ten in some villages).¹² The bride's parents keep half the money, and give half to the khensaan. When the engagement has been arranged, the groom goes to the bride's house and works to show her parents he's not lazy.

One man says: *If I meet a woman and she's very beautiful and I like her, first I must ask her mother and father if I can marry her. If they say no, but I marry her anyway, then I will have bad luck. Maybe I will get hurt or even die.*

When it's time for the wedding, the groom takes his belongings to the bride's house—mats, spoons, rice baskets, blankets. He takes a silver plate to hold rice, flowers and incense for the wedding ceremony. The bride's little sisters or nieces wash the groom's feet, and then he pays them. After the wedding, everybody sings and plays and dances. The bride and groom have to stay in the house for three days after the wedding. They are very shy around each other, shy about eating together.

We have some sayings about marriage:

If you tease someone too much, you end up marrying that person.

If you think someone is ugly, something will make you fall in love with that person.

If you sing when you eat, you will end up married to an old man.

The khensaan are the brothers and male cousins of one's

mother. (The mother's oldest brother has more power.) They are the village elders. They help arrange marriages and at the wedding they say nice words to the couple. They pray for them and wish them good luck.

If a couple is having problems, the khensaan of the husband and the khensaan of the wife get together with the couple to discuss what to do. They speak good words and try to teach the husband and wife how to get along. If the husband moves out or doesn't like his wife, the khensaan have to find out whose fault it is. If they decide there's no problem, nobody pays. If the khensaan can't solve the problem, then the family goes to the nay-ṛwal (village leader) for help. If the couple finally decides to separate, both the man and the woman are free to marry again. Some people get married two or three times.

If a woman gets pregnant before she is married, the father of the child has to pay the woman's parents. When the baby is born, he has to help take care of it. If he doesn't marry her, he has to pay her family some more. If a husband leaves his wife while she's pregnant, he has to pay her family. He must gather wood and water and herbs for her, and take care of her until the baby is born. If a married woman goes around with another man, she has to pay back her husband double the amount he gave to her family when they got married.

There are small khensaan and big khensaan. Not every family has a big khensaan. There are about eight to ten khensaan in one village. Good khensaan (especially the big khensaan) are people who talk very well. They know what's right and what's wrong. They know who is telling the truth. We believe the older people more than the younger ones. Some women know how to talk about problems. If a woman talks well, the men believe her. If a woman has power, if she knows how to talk well and solve problems, she can be a good khensaan .

We teach our children to have respect for their elders. Children go visit the old people who live nearby their house. If the old people are sick, those who live nearby always bring them medicine and take care of them. We want our children to know how to eat nicely, how to sit politely, how to talk respectfully. When someone comes to visit us, we should give them wa-



ter to drink and food to eat. Children should share with their sisters and brothers. When they grow up, they should take care of their parents and family.

One man says: *When I was a young boy, I was scared of my father. He talked very strong. I had to listen to him. After I grew up and got married, I remembered the things my father told me. Now I think what he said was good. But when I was still young, I got mad at him sometimes.*

Daily life

Cycles of time

There are seven main seasons in the Lua' year:

ñaam	pok	see	<i>clearing season</i>
season	cut	field	

ñaam	toic	see	<i>burning season</i>
season	burn	field	

ñaam	sii	saa	<i>planting season</i>
season	plant	rice	

ñaam	leh	səmiə	<i>rainy season</i>
season	come	rain	

ñaam	loo	waak	<i>weeding season</i>
season	pull	grass	

ñaam	kio	saa	<i>harvest season</i>
season	harvest	rice	

ñaam	khon	saa	<i>storage season</i>
season	gather & bring home	rice	

Some of the old people tell about the ten days in a Lua' week.¹³

ni? (ñi?)	day	min
ni?		plək
ni?		kat
ni?		khot
ni?		luan
ni?		tau
ni?		kaa
ni?		khap
ni?		tap
ni?		wai

Different people have different names for the days, and also put them in different orders. Some of the other names are:

niʔ (niʔ) day	pui
niʔ	suk

The rice cycle

aj	see	aj	suan
make	field	make	garden

farming; to be a farmer

Most Lua' people are farmers. Our main crop is "sticky" (glutinous) rice. Everybody who is able to works in the rice fields. We also grow vegetables and raise a few animals.

Farming is hard work. The old people tell us not to play, and not to get up late. We have to go to the fields early in the morning. Some people get up at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. It is usually about half an hour's walk to the rice fields. If you're lazy, you don't get to eat. If you're not lazy, you have enough food and money. Some people are lazy; some people are hardworking. Lazy people don't have enough food for one year. Hardworking people have seed leftover to plant more rice next year.

Clearing and burning the fields

ñaam	pok	see
season	cut	field

ñaam	toic	see
season	burn	field

In March and April we clear a place in the forest to make the rice fields. We cut down the shrubs and small trees and leave them to dry out. In April or May when everything is dry, we burn the fields. The ashes make good fertilizer. Clearing and burning the fields is hard work. Everybody helps each other. We say: "I help you today; tomorrow you help me." We don't work alone. If only one person works, they'll never finish. Usually several families work together—maybe twenty to thirty people. Each family has their own field. Families with ten to twelve people have big fields;

families with three to four people have small fields.

In the middle of April, after this work is done, we celebrate the Lao New Year. Everybody walks through the village clapping their hands and singing songs. We kill a pig and make sticky rice with honey and drink rice wine. We pick flowers and give flowers and food to the spirits. The old people talk to the spirits. They say: "Please help me. I give you food—bananas, rice, chicken, everything. Please don't kill my child. Take care of my family. Let the rains come. Let me be rich." The celebration lasts about one week. Nobody works during that time, otherwise the rice won't be good.

Planting the rice

ñaam	sii	saa
season	plant	rice

In June, just before the big rains start, we plant the rice. We carry the seed in small baskets tied around our waists. We use sticks (lam lug) to make holes and put the seeds in the holes. If families work together to plant the rice sometimes they can finish a field in one day.

Before we go to plant the rice, we make offerings to the *simaal saa* ("rice spirit"). A rich family might kill a big pig; poor families kill a chicken or a fish. To the *simaal saa* we say: "This is the rice and I hope life for us will be better and nothing bad will happen. Watch out for the little bugs that come to eat the rice, and the mice that come to eat in the nighttime." If we don't talk to the spirit it will make us sick. If we let the old people say something, nothing bad will happen. Nobody will get hurt while they work. Some years the *simaal saa* is not so good. Then there is no rain, or too many weeds, or birds eat the rice.

Weeding and watching the fields

ñaam	leh	səmiə
season	come	rain

ñaam	loo	waak
season	pull	grass

July and August, when it rains, is the time to weed the fields. If we don't take the grass out, the rice doesn't grow very well. We either pull it out by hand or use a hoe. When we have money to buy tools, we can grow more rice. We also have to watch out for mice and other animals that eat the rice. We build traps to catch them. If we catch something big that we can eat, we eat it. The little children use bamboo noise makers to scare away the birds. Sometimes one or two people from each family will sleep in the little house in the field to watch over the rice.

Harvesting and threshing the rice

ñaam	kio	saa
season	harvest	rice

We harvest the rice between September and December. Some kinds take about two or three months to grow, some kinds take five or six months.

There are three main kinds of rice:

saa dɔɔ <i>early rice</i> —	takes three months; cut in September.
saa kaŋ <i>middle rice</i> —	takes four or five months; cut in October or November.
saa pii <i>late rice</i> —	takes six months; cut in December.

When we cut the saa kaŋ, the saa pii has not sprouted yet.

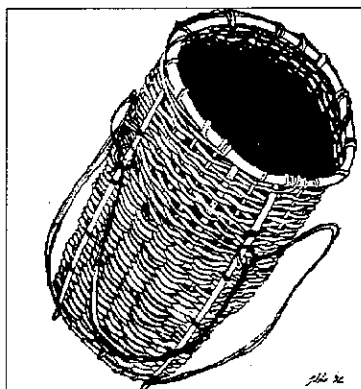
When the rice is ready to harvest, we cut it with knives or sickles and stack it up. To thresh the rice (khal saa) we lay it on a log, pile it up and hit it with a stick. Or we hold the rice together in a bunch and hit it over a mat. Some people trample it with their feet. Sometimes we all do it together in one day, twenty or thirty

people working together.

Bringing home the rice

ñaam	khon	saa
season	gather & bring home	rice

After we thresh the rice, we carry it to the village in back baskets held with straps across our heads. We take turns helping each other. We say: "This week we'll put away your rice; next week we'll put away my rice." Twenty to thirty people work together. It's a lot of fun. We have a special little house to keep the rice in, so if our house burns down, we still have rice.



After this work is done, we kill a pig and have a big party in the village with the children and everybody. If we don't finish the work, we cannot have the party. We celebrate with fireworks. (People put gunpowder inside of bamboo sticks, light them, and throw them at night.) We also have a spirit ceremony. We make offerings of rice, two bowls for each house, and banana leaf cones with candles and flowers inside. We feed the spirits (ploong) first. If we eat first, that's not good. We might get sick.

When ñaam khon saa is over, there is no work for awhile. Lots of people get married at that time. We buy new clothes and shoes, cut our hair. We have time to relax and sing songs.

Husking and winnowing the rice

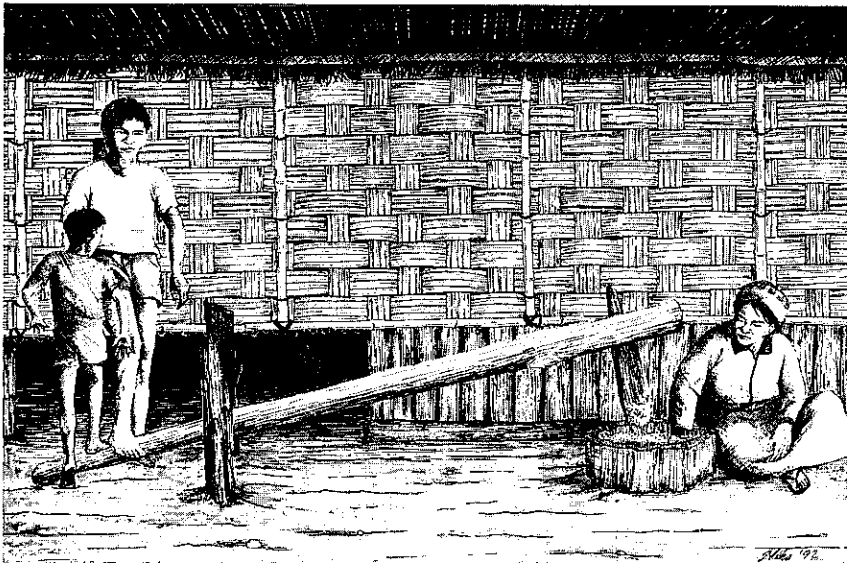
khət saa
husk rice

khləŋ saa kuum saa
shake rice toss rice

winnowing rice

Husking the rice is a vital daily activity and everybody helps out. We do it in the morning (especially when it's hot) and every day after working in the fields. There are several different ways to do it. Some people use a kind of large mortar and pestle. Some people have a rice pounder that is worked with the feet. Sometimes the teenage girls and boys all work together. Girls put the rice in and boys pound it. Some people carry their little sisters on their backs while they pound the rice. Then we use flat baskets to winnow the rice.

An old man says: *In the morning we would pound rice, and winnow it. The guys would tease us and say we were showing off for the girls.*



Hunting, fishing, gathering food

In addition to rice, we grow corn, potatoes, peppers, cucumbers, melons, eggplants, greens, and other vegetables. We also gather things to eat in the forest. The fruits we don't have to buy, they're around us everywhere. We usually boil the vegetables in broth, or steam them in bamboo baskets. We cook a little pork or chicken with the vegetables if we have any. We use a lot of hot pepper too, pounded in a wooden mortar and pestle together with garlic, fresh herbs, and salt.

Some people keep pigs and chickens. They are used for food, sacrificed for ceremonies, and also sold or traded for clothes, salt and other things. Some families also have water buffalo.

When we don't have anything to do in the rice fields, we go catch animals in the forest and get crab and fish at the river. We look for plants and mushrooms in the forest. At home we make bamboo mats and trade them in town for clothes.

Most Lua' villages are near rivers. We go swimming every day. When we go fishing, we ask all our friends to go too. In the afternoon we go wading in the river to catch fish. The fish come at that time and we hurry to catch them. We put the fish in a basket with salt and spices and let it ferment for a few days. In the summer when the water is warm, some people dam the stream. They put poison made from tree bark in the water. It kills the fish and people walk in the stream and gather them up. People only do that once a year, and they make a dam so the fish downstream don't die. Some people don't like using poison because all the fish die, big and small. We usually fish with nets and traps.

The season to look for animals is when the sun is so hot it makes you dizzy, in August and September when there's not much rice to eat. We go to the forest to hunt. If we see fruit we pick it and eat it. Sometimes we look for honey. We use traps (nglah) made with sharp sticks to catch rabbits, squirrels, and lizards. When it gets dark, we head home. We gather wood to make a fire, chop the

wood, and take it in the house.

In January also we go look for things to eat. We collect bamboo and black grass to make mats, and wood for the fire. We make slingshots to hunt birds. We go sleep in the house in the rice field. Some people stay six or seven nights, some stay three nights.

An old man says: *Sometimes I stay only one night because I miss my children. I might take a bird home to my son.*

In April, we collect a kind of sour fruit. When we come home, we bring flowers and make a necklace with them. Life was fun but we were poor.

A girl says: *My aunt would go hunting with the men and boys and they said she looked like a monkey when she climbed a tree. She didn't like to work in the rice fields. She liked to hunt and fish.*

A woman says: *In our country it was fun. We'd go look for wood, collect peas in the garden. When we came back we'd cook them and eat. Then we'd go swim in the pond by the farm. After that we fed the pigs. Then at night we'd make mats. Some people felt jealous that they couldn't go out and look for things because they had to stay home and take care of the babies. We had to go get water every day, morning and evening—sometimes from far away. We carried it on our back in bamboo tubes. Our backs hurt now because we carried heavy things. Over here it's nice, we have things—but there's no place to hunt or go look for things. I miss Laos.*

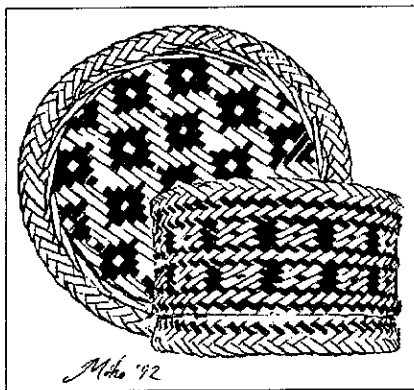
Both women and men do all kinds of work: growing rice and vegetables, taking care of animals, gathering food in the forest, making mats and baskets, cooking, chopping wood, carrying water. Usually women do the cooking, but men can do it too. Men do most of the trading but some women are also good traders. Women don't hunt with traps but they do hunt small things like fish and crab. The old people take care of the little children while the parents are in the fields. If there are no grandparents around, the mother stays home to look after her children. Sometimes she

brings them to the field with her.

Children work along with their parents. The older boys help their fathers—they hunt, fish, catch crab. The girls and young boys help their mothers—they cook rice, carry water and wood, feed the chickens and pigs.

Trading and making money

When the rains come, we stay at home and make baskets that we use for cooking and storage, and mats that we can trade for clothes.



We also collect special sticks, dry them, and put them in bundles to make candles. We trade the candles in town for clothes. We don't have any clothes if we don't go trade for them. When we go to town we put flowers behind our ears. They smell good. We have no shoes to wear when we go somewhere.

In the United States you have to have money for everything. In our country the government officials come once or twice a year to collect some money, or some rice to give to the soldiers. Some years the government wants food and vegetables for the soldiers. The soldiers who stay on the border don't have enough water to drink, enough rice to eat.

To get money we raise pigs, chickens, cows and water buffalo to sell. In 1975, one big pig was worth about ten coins. A shirt and pair of pants cost about two coins. Sarongs are cheaper than pants. Rich people have lots of pigs and chickens—rice too. Traders are the rich people in our country.

Some boys 17 or 18 years old go work in town for a few years to make money, selling something in a store. Others go work on a

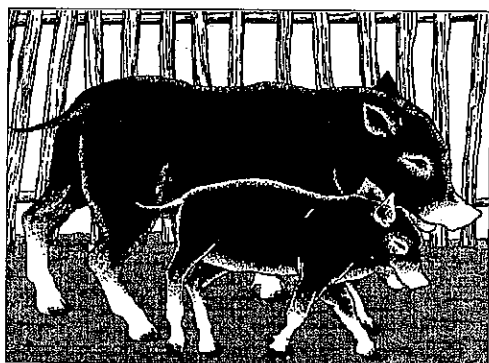
ranch with the water buffalo. When they make money they bring it home to their family. Often the young men have to go be soldiers. The military comes to the village to catch the young men. Some people don't want to go and they try to run away. Then the military takes the parents and puts them in jail in town.

We grow things that people come to buy—peppers, tobacco. Before we sell the tobacco, we first slice it and dry it. We also make a lot of *miang* (fermented tea leaves). We collect wild tea in May or June, bring it home and steam it. Then we put it in bamboo tubes that we bury in the mud by the river. We leave the *miang* there for two or three months to ferment. The tubes are about two feet long and five inches in diameter. One tube is worth one to two coins.

Some Lua' people are rich. They live in the mountains and have ten or twenty water buffalo or cows. They also have a lot *miang*. It takes ten to twenty people one day to collect all the tea leaves. Sometimes they hire people to work for them in their fields. They pay with rice, food, clothes, or money. Other rich people live near town. They might have a little store and sell clothes or medicine. The rich people buy food from the poor people.

Rich people—when they eat, they eat well. But poor people—they don't eat well. When they find something good they sell it to the rich people. The big pigs they sell; they eat the small pigs.

One man says: *I did a little bit of trading. I raised pigs. Some mother pigs have ten babies, eight babies maybe. When the pigs grew up I'd sell them and try to make a lot of money. Sometimes I went to the mountains to buy a skinny pig. I brought it*



home and fed it until it grew big. I'd buy cheaper than I'd sell. If I sold a pig, I made more than if I sold a chicken. I'd buy a lot of clothes in town. I'd pay people to carry the clothes and then I'd sell them in the villages. I'd buy and sell, buy and sell.

We were very poor in Laos; it was a hard life. We were so poor that sometimes we had only one bar of soap to share with everyone.

An old man says: I only had one pair of pants to wear when I was young. I had to wash them a lot, and just dry them by the fire. Some people laughed at me.

There were a lot of bugs. When we slept, the mosquitoes always bit us—we didn't have sheets. There was no doctor. When we were sick, we had to take care of ourselves. It was hard to find food. We had to look for food all the time. If you're not a person who works hard, you don't have enough to eat. But sometimes we worked hard all day and still didn't have enough to eat. In this country people have a lot of food in the fridge but they're not hungry, they don't want to eat. We say:

mian	han	mian	mii
country	rich	country	have
pon	si?ee	ka?	ai cat
eat	something	?	not tasty

In a rich country when you have something (plenty) to eat, it doesn't taste good.

In Laos we had to work hard for food; it tasted good.

Sharing

khwah	noi
share	each other
<i>share with each other</i>	

Sharing and working together is very important to Lua' people. When we go somewhere we always tell friends to go with us. If we have a lot of work, heavy work, we say, "Please come help

us,” and someone comes to help. Today I work with you, tomorrow you work with me. We say: *ət ləŋ noi*—which means “take turns helping each other.” It’s more fun that way. In two to three months we finish the hard work for all the families. If a man has a lot of people come help him plant rice and corn, he provides all the food for them. He kills a pig and cooks it and everybody eats together. His children pass out water, tea and cigarettes to the workers.

If someone catches a deer, he cuts it up and shares it with everyone in the village. We tell our children—if you have some food, you have to share it with your brother and sister, your uncle. We say:

khwah	noi	it-cəŋ
share	each other	little bit

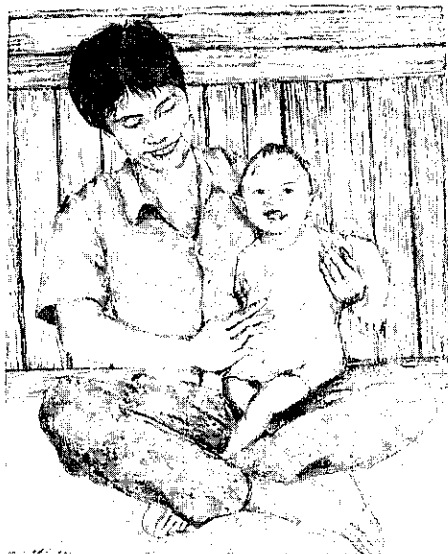
share a little bit with each other

khwah	oon	tək	əm	it-cəŋ
share	give	to	her/him	little bit

share, and give a little bit to her/him

A young man says: *If only one couple lives in a house, we call that stingy. When you live with other people, that’s nice. It shows you’re willing to share.*

After you’re married you should stay with the wife’s parents for at least a couple of years. You should have at least have one child with the wife’s parents—so they get to know you better, so they get to see their grandchild in your arms.



Feeding the spirits

An important part of daily life in a Lua' village is keeping the many local spirits content. When the spirits are happy, life is good. When the spirits are dissatisfied, life is difficult. People get sick and rice doesn't grow. If you don't talk to the spirits in the right way, they can kill you. You have to feed them too, so nothing bad will happen. If you don't feed them with the right thing, they can hurt your family and bring you bad luck.

Spirits (ploŋ)¹⁵ live in many places—in trees, big rocks, mountains, and rivers. There are forest spirits (ploŋ loŋsaʔ), farm spirits (ploŋ see ploŋ suan), house spirits (ploŋ cian) and village spirits (ploŋ ŋwal). In muddy places there are spirits that make people sick (ploŋ phoŋ).

All living things—people, animals, and plants—have souls (simaal). Every person has 32 simaal. When you get sick, it might be because some of your simaal are not with your body.

We also pray to the spirits of our ancestors to take care of us. If we aren't good, if we do something disrespectful, the spirits of our ancestors will hurt us and make our families sick.

Some people say the ploŋ have no physical bodies. Others say they do have bodies but you just can't usually see them. Sometimes they look like big monkeys. They walk around like people do and make the pigs and chickens wake up in the middle of the night.

If we don't want to say ploŋ, we say *saʔ* ("thing") instead:

saʔ cian the house thing

instead of

ploŋ cian the house spirit

The ploŋ have power. They can control an animal, such as a bear or a tiger, and make that animal hurt people. For example, a ploŋ has a cave inside a big rock and a bear lives there. If people take a gun and shoot the bear it doesn't die, because the ploŋ owns

the bear. If a bomb breaks the rock, the *plɔɔŋ* makes us sick. Maybe we die.

If you don't keep the *plɔɔŋ ŋwal* ('village spirit') happy, it can make a tiger or bear or elephant come into the house and scare people. Sometimes the *plɔɔŋ* looks just like a bird. When you try to kill it, it flies away into the forest. Later it cries like a human being. A monkey in the jungle can be a *plɔɔŋ* at night and come eat people.

A *plɔɔŋ* can try to trick you and make you afraid. It sends a tiger and a mouse together to your house. The little mouse comes in carrying a great big piece of wood—as big around as a person's leg. That scares you and makes you go outside. Then the tiger eats you.

If you're scared of the *plɔɔŋ* it hurts you more. You can die in your sleep if the *plɔɔŋ* takes away your spirit. When the *plɔɔŋ* plays a trick, you have to make sure everyone stays awake. If you sleep, you die. At night we have to stay home, keep the door closed. Only adults go out at night. Sometimes at night when you're sleeping, the *plɔɔŋ* sits on you. You can't move, can't breathe. You have to pray and fight.

A young man says: *One time when I went to visit my friend, a plɔɔŋ shook a tree by me. I tried to sing a song to make myself not afraid.*

In some villages, when you go to visit someone you have to ask them first, "Can I come in your house?" If they say no, you can't go in. If nobody's home, you can't go in or around or in front of their house. That would offend their *plɔɔŋ ciay* ('house spirit'). Their *plɔɔŋ* knows if you go near their house. If you disturb the *plɔɔŋ*, it might make them sick or hurt, might make them die. The *plɔɔŋ* tells them in their dreams who came in the house. They have to give something to the *plɔɔŋ* to apologize for the disturbance.

Sometimes when a woman is pregnant and about to give birth, a hen comes along with a baby chick. It's a *plɔɔŋ phi-phay* that tries to kill the baby and eat its spirit. You hear the *plɔɔŋ phi-phay*—

cheep cheep like a chick—but you don't see it. A moomoon ('spirit doctor') can kill it. He takes a young egg and puts magic on it. The phi-phay comes to eat it and gets inside the egg. The moomoon puts it in there. You can't even break the egg with a rock. He puts the egg inside a bamboo tube and buries it.

When a person gets sick, it can be a sign that one of the plooj wants to be fed. Some people know how to break a stick in a certain way to find out if the spirit wants to eat a pig or a chicken. They break the stick into pieces to find out how many animals the plooj wants. Sometimes the plooj put rocks or sand in someone's side to cause pain or fever.

A man says: *My daughter was sick for three months. I fed the plooj with chickens and eggs and she was never well. Someone came and they knew how to tell what the plooj wanted to eat and they said it wanted dog. The plooj knew that I was the leader and thought I didn't believe in it. So it tried to do something to me, but it went to my daughter instead. We took two dogs and cooked them and brought them to the plooj and then my daughter felt better. Later I joined the Catholics and eleven families joined with me. Between 1973 and 1974 all the people in my village joined the Catholics. They didn't want to serve the spirits any more.*

We take flowers to the plooj lonsa? ('forest spirit'). And we put out a little bit of rice and meat for the plooj cian. Sometimes we give them cigarettes and betel too. They cannot come down and eat like us. They eat the spirit of the food. Sometimes the moomoon puts powder on a dish nearby the food. Then he can see the tracks of the plooj when they come. Before he can do this he has to be a master, to be able to put a lot of power in the powder.

The moomoon learns magic from the old men. And the spirits tell him things when he sleeps. When he sleeps, he dreams and he learns. The magic he learns from the spirits is stronger than the magic he learns from the old people. The spirits have more power.

Sometimes the spirits bother you if you forgot to do the

right thing in a ceremony—for example at a wedding. People who work with bad spirits can cause illness. They are people who get jealous easily. If you don't give them things they put a curse on you. You need a moomoon to help you if they make you sick. He blows on you, sometimes with a candle, to get rid of the evil spirit.

A young man says: *When I was growing up the spirits grabbed me only one time. I was six or seven years old. My mom was pregnant and she lost the baby. We went back to that place where she lost the baby to cut the rice. That baby came back and grabbed me. I was sitting on a bench in the rice house in the field, by the fireplace. I was trying to roast my corn and I heard knock knock knock under the bench. I didn't pay attention. I knew it was that baby coming back. I put my hand under there and it grabbed me. I was so scared I almost passed out. My hand got all swollen.*

You can get sick if any of your simaal become separated from your body. The moomoon knows how to bring your simaal back to you. He does a special ceremony called *tək simaal*. He calls the simaal and ties white strings around your wrist to keep the simaal tied to your body. Sometimes he takes water and blows on it and gives it to the patient to drink. When a baby is born, the moomoon talks to the spirits and ties the strings.

When someone dies, we put rice around the body and on their chest to feed the souls. We have a little house (*ndoon*) for the spirits of our ancestors inside our own house, or just outside. We leave food there for them. Only little children can see these spirits.

When a couple gets engaged, the bride's parents take the groom to the *ndoon*. They let the spirits of the ancestors know that he will be her husband, so they won't think he's a stranger. The parents say, "This is our son-in-law. Don't hurt him. Don't make him sick." If the son-in-law isn't introduced to the spirits, they might do something bad to the daughter. The father's spirit stays over the head of the bed when we sleep. The mother's spirit stays in the corner.

The spirits of our grandparents look after us. We pray to them and say:

mom-soon grandfather (maternal)	mee-soon, grandmother (maternal)	mom-puu grandfather (paternal)	mee-yaa grandmother (paternal)
laksaa take care	khwan-lia? grandchild		

Grandfather, grandmother, take care of your grandchild.

A young man says: *I put earth and flowers in my hair and prayed to my grandparents to take care of me when I went to war. And one time the souls of my grandmother and grandfather spoke in my ear and told me, "Don't go that way. You'll get hurt."*

The Lua' Language

There is no one general language name for the group of related dialects that Lua' belongs to, although the term *T'in* is sometimes used in this sense. There are many different dialects of T'in spoken in Laos and Thailand, and several in the United States. Not enough research has been done to be able to determine just how closely related all these different dialects are to each other. The general features described here are derived only from study of the dialects spoken in Lua' communities in northern California, but are probably common to most dialects. Dialect differences may be found primarily in pronunciation and vocabulary. Some dialects may be more heavily influenced by Lao or Thai (or, in the case of American dialects, by English) than others.

Lua' shares many of the areal features common to other Southeast Asian languages:

- Words do not have prefixes or suffixes to mark gender, number, case, tense, and so on. When needed, these meanings are usually expressed by separate words.

- Classifiers are used to specify nouns when counting.
- Adjectives function like verbs
- Several verbs are often strung together one after the other (called “serial verbs.”)
- Final particles are used to form questions and to give a particular emphasis to a sentence.

As yet, there is no writing system for the Lua’ language. All Lua’ forms in this chapter are transcribed in the International Phonetic Alphabet. Lua’ has a typical Mon-Khmer sound system:

Figure II. Consonants

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
STOPS, voiceless unaspirated	p	t	c	k	ʔ
STOPS, voiceless aspirated	ph	th	ch	kh	
STOPS, voiced	b	d			
NASALS	m	n	ɲ	ŋ	
FRICATIVES		s			h
GLIDES/LIQUIDS	w	l	y		

All consonants can occur in initial position, both singly and in STOP+GLIDE, NASAL+STOP AND NASAL+STOP+GLIDE clusters such as *khw* and *ng* and *mphl*. At the end of a word, all stops are always voiceless and unreleased. All other consonants except *s* can also occur word-finally. As is characteristic of Mon-Khmer languages, final palatals (*c* and *ɲ*) and glottals (*ʔ* and *h*) are common.

Vowels

Many Mon-Khmer languages have fantastic numbers of vowels (as many as 30 or 40). Lua' has a full set of both long and short vowels.

Figure III. Vowels

SHORT			LONG		
i	ĩ	u	ii	ĩĩ	uu
e	ə	o	ee	əə	oo
ɛ	a	ɔ	ɛɛ	aa	ɔɔ

Diphthongs are also common, and include the following:

iə (or ia) iə (or ia) uə (or ua) io

Other combinations may be thought of either as two vowels, or as a vowel plus a glide consonant:

ĩi (iy)	ai (ay)	ui (uy)	ɔi (ɔy)
iu (iw)	eu (ew)	au (aw)	

Syllable structure

Most native Lua' words consist of one syllable. A few have one weak presyllable (most commonly *si-*) followed by a strong one.

mah	you
pɔŋ	eat
saa	rice
wic	yet; already
sinoot	beak
sinaal	wing
siləp	to scoot on one's belly

Syntax

The basic word order is SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT (SVO):

ən	pən	saa
I	eat	rice

I'm eating

Because adjectives function like verbs, no verb “to be” is needed in sentences such as:

saa	cat
rice	to-be-tasty

the rice is tasty

Negatives are formed by putting *ai* (‘no, not’) before the verb:

ah	ai	ləl	mphəlbət	khaa
they	not	go	catch	fish

they're not going (or didn't go) fishing

YES-NO questions may be formed with rising intonation or by putting the particle *də?* at the end of the sentence:

mah	ləl	ciaŋ	də?
you	go	home	Q

are you going home?

The affirmative response would be: *ləl (I'm) going*

The negative response would be: *ai ləl (I'm) not going*

(Another areal feature of Southeast Asian languages is that the subject is often omitted in informal conversation where it is clear from the context who or what is being referred to.)

WH-questions are also formed by putting a question word at the end of the phrase:

mah	ləl	waa
you	go	where

where are you going?

mah	aŋ	siʔee
you	do	what

what are you doing?

Tense is not marked on the verb. Other words may be used to make the time of the action explicit:

mah	pɔŋ	saa	wic
you	eat	rice	yet

have you eaten yet?

mah	aŋ	siʔee	niʔsɛn
you	do	what	yesterday

what did you do yesterday?

mah	ləl	waa	niʔlak
you	do	where	tomorrow

where are you going tomorrow?

Modifiers (eg. possessives, attributive adjectives, relative clauses) follow the nouns they modify:

ciɑŋ	ən
house	my

my house

plɛʔ	it	nee
fruit	small	this

this small fruit

siŋ	ən	pɔɔn	niʔsɛn	ai	lɔʔ
pig	I	get	yesterday	not	good

the pig / pork I got yesterday is not good

Phrases are often strung together without conjunctions or other connectives:

ən	pɔŋ	siŋ	ən	pɔɔn	niʔsɛn	ən	soʔ	mphul
I	eat	pig	I	get	yesterday	I	hurt	stomach

I ate the pig / pork (that) I got yesterday (and) I got a stomachache

Classifiers

In English, special measure words are used when counting

certain mass nouns: *bar* of soap, *drop* or *body* of water, *kernel* or *ear* of corn, *head* of cattle. In most Southeast Asian languages, these special words (called *numeral classifiers*) are required for counting any kind of noun. Nouns may be categorized according to natural kind (humans, animals, trees); shape (long, round, flat); relative size; consistency (rigid, flexible); function (tools, vehicles); as well as many other features. Often classification is based on plant-part metaphors: “long thing” (stick-like); “flat thing” (leaf-like); “round thing” (fruit-like).

Lua’ has a rich numeral classifier system. The word order in the classifier construction is: NOUN + ADJECTIVE + NUMERAL + CLASSIFIER (CLF) + DEMONSTRATIVE

siŋ	cɔŋ	pia	naŋ	nan
pig	big	two	classifier	those
<i>those two big pigs</i>				
khwan	maa	nɔŋ		
child	one	classifier		
<i>one child</i>				

These are a few of the most common classifiers:

nɔŋ	for humans
naŋ	for animals (‘body’)
leʔ	for fruit (botanically); round things (from <i>pleʔ</i> , ‘fruit’)
lem	for long rigid things (‘stem’)
sen	for long flexible things
plah	for flat cloth things: pants, mats, carpets etc.
phia	for one of a pair (eg. body parts); ‘half’ (eg. fruit)

The number “one” with the classifier for “humans” often means something like “alone” or “by oneself”:

mah	leh	maa	nɔŋ	dəʔ
you	come	one	person (clf)	Q
<i>did you come by yourself?</i>				

ən	u?	ciaŋ	maa	noŋ
I	stay	house	one	person (clf)

I am at home alone

In general, Lua' numbers are borrowed from Lao. But the numbers one through four used in classifier constructions are native Lua' words:

siŋ	maa	naŋ
pig	1	clf-animals

one pig

siŋ	pia	naŋ
pig	2	clf-animals

two pigs

siŋ	phɛ?	naŋ
pig	3	clf-animals

three pigs

siŋ	phoon	naŋ
pig	4	clf-animals

four pigs

Pronouns

Lua' pronouns are not specified for social distance (as they are in Lao, for example). There are distinctions in number that are very different from either English or Lao: a singular-dual-plural distinction in the first and second persons, and an inclusive-exclusive distinction in the first person plural. The same forms are used for subjects, objects, and possessives.

	SINGULAR	DUAL	PLURAL INCLUSIVE	PLURAL EXCLUSIVE
1st P	ən I	aa we two	ææ we incl. you	ih we excl. you
2nd P	mah you	paa you two	pææ you all	
3rd P	əm s/he		ah they	

Terms of address

Similar to other Southeast Asian languages, Lua' uses a rich set of kin terms as terms of address. Salient features include relative age and sex of speaker and addressee. Some of the terms are the same as Lao; others seem to be native to Lua'. Parental and marital status is also an important factor in choice of address term.

It is generally considered impolite to call one's elders by name. Older males are addressed as *luŋ* ("uncle"); older females as *mee cɔŋ* ("aunt"; literally 'big mother').

When first names are used, they are almost always preceded by an honorific (hon.)—*ii* for females and *baa* for males. These honorific terms are used for babies and children as well as for adults; for both intimate friends and strangers. From the time adults first become parents and throughout the rest of their lives, they are most commonly called by the name of their oldest child (male or female):

mɔm	ii	nou
father	honorific	Nou

Nou's father

mee	baa	nyok
mother	honorific	Nyok

Nyok's mother

Discourse

Another areal feature that Southeast Asian languages share, is similarities in the formulaic phrases used in everyday encounters. In Lua' the typical greetings include:

mah	pen	siʔee
you	be	what
how	are	you?

ai	pen	siʔee
not	be	what
<i>fine; no problem</i>		

mah	aŋ	siʔee
you	do	what
<i>what are you doing?</i>		

ai	aŋ	siʔee
not	do	what
<i>nothing</i>		

mah	ləl	waa
you	go	where
<i>where are you going?</i>		

ən	ləl	min
I	go	play
<i>I'm going to play (visit)</i>		

mah	pɔŋ	saa	wic
you	eat	rice	yet
<i>have you eaten yet?</i>			

Afterword

This chapter represents a first attempt to record the language and lifeways of the Lua' of Laos. Clearly a definitive ethnographic description will require a great deal more research. Perhaps one day members of the Lua' community will themselves have the opportunity to write about their history and traditions. Many stories remain to be told.

Endnotes

1. Rischel (1992 personal communication) estimates there are over 25,000 T'in in Nan province.

James Chamberlain of the International Organization for Migration in Bangkok (1992 personal communication) estimates that there are about 1500 T'in in Na Pho camp in northeastern Thailand.

Dessaint (1981:114-118) cites various estimates for the population in Thailand: 12,000-35,000 (Bare 1961); 18,900 (Young 1961—figures cited in Lebar); 16,000 (Srisavasdi 1963); 14,548 (Dessaint 1963-64); 23,397 (Tribal Research Center 1971-72.)

Filbeck (1978:2) gives an estimate of 25,000 for Thailand. In a more recent paper, Filbeck (1987:130) states, "In Thailand, the T'in are estimated to number from 14,000 in 40 villages to over 24,000 in 63 villages," and that "both estimates are currently found at the Hilltribe Research Institute of Chiang Mai University." McKinnon (1989: 424-426) lists the 1987 Tribal Research Institute estimate for Nan province as 28,516.

For Laos, Dessaint (1981: 118) cites a figure of 5,000-6,000 T'in around 1960, based on the estimates of a missionary working there at that time.

Finally, the figures in *Ethnologue* (Grimes, 1988: 601-602) clearly illustrate the problems involved in estimating the number of speak-

ers of a language when the mutual intelligibility of purportedly related dialects has not been well established. Grimes lists the Mal population as "3-4,000 in Thailand; 5-6,000 in Laos; 20,000 in Thailand in the Mal group of languages; 40,000 including Laos." Listed separately with no figures given are: "Lua' (East Pua, Pray, Pray 2)" and "Phai (Thung Chan Pray, Phay, Kha Phay, Pray 1, Prai)" and "Pray 3."

2. Estimates of the Lua' population in the U.S. are based on personal reports from Lua' in Santa Rosa in reference to family and friends in other locations.
3. Rischel (1989) has observed that T'in and Mlabri seem more closely related to each other than either are to Khmu, and that therefore it may be plausible to posit "Tinic" (comprising T'in and Mlabri) as a sub-branch of Khmuic.
4. Currently I am working with members of the Lua' community in Santa Rosa, California, on a practical orthography for Lua' based on the Roman alphabet.
5. Names for the T'in:

T'in (Tin, Thin, Htin, H'tin)

Kha T'in (Kha Tin, Kha Thin, Kha Htin, Ka tin, Katin)

Chaw T'in

Prai (Pray, Pyai, Phai, Phay, Pai, Pay)

Kha Phai (Kha Pai)

Phu Phai (Phu-Pai, P'u Pai, P'u P'ai)

Mal

The T'in may also be grouped with other Mon-Khmer speakers under any of the following terms:

Chao Doi

Chao Khaw

Kha (Ka)

Ka Che (Kache, Kaché)

Lua' (Lua, Lawa, Lwa')

Sources: Lebar (1964:128); Dessaint (1973:10-11; 1981:107-109); Filbeck (1987); Grimes (1988: 601-602).

6. Suwilai Premsrirat (1992 personal communication) confirms that in her experience, the Mal and Prai of Nan province strongly object to the term *T'in*.

7. *Prai* and *Pyai* represent two different cultural and linguistic sub-groups of *Prai*. (Filbeck 1987:135)
8. Not to be confused with *Lue* (*Lü*), which is not a Mon-Khmer language at all, but rather belongs to the Tai family.
9. In Thailand, the *Lua'*/*Lawa* live in Maehongsorn and Chiang Mai provinces, whereas the *Lua'*/*T'in* live in Nan province. (Much of the most recent research among the *Lua'*/*Lawa* has been done by Kunstadter. See Endnote 10.) *Lua'*/*Lawa* belongs to the Palaungic branch of Mon Khmer (Diffloth 1975, Lebar 1964); *Lua'*/*T'in* belongs to the Khmuic branch.
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11. ie. The tiger is controlled by a *phoṇ*. See section on "Feeding the Spirits."
12. One family is a mother and father and their children.
13. Old French Indochina silver coins.
13. It is difficult to determine meanings for most of the day names: *tau* is "turtle"; *luaj* is "way, road."
14. Often called "monsters" in English by *Lua'* speakers.

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The Lahu People and their Language

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Introduction

One of the most memorable evenings of my life, both in linguistic and human terms, was spent in a crowded house in a remote Akha village, in Mae Chan district of Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, in August 1977. Our hospitable Akha hosts had gone all out to make us comfortable, lavishing the best of food, drink, and smoke on us, and as the evening wore on an atmosphere of high hilarity developed.

We guests had gone up to the village as a party of eight. By coincidence we were all of different nationalities. The five Westerners in the group included a Swedish linguist working on Akha, a Danish nurse, a New Zealand geographer, a Dutch demographer, and me, an American who had been working on the Lahu language since 1965. Accompanying us were three permanent residents of Thailand: the Swedish linguist's Akha informant, asòq (this was his parents' house); my chief Lahu informant, yâ-pā-é ("Sonny"), from a Christian village near Chiang Dao; and a polyglot young man with many names, a Chin born in Burma with a Lahu wife, fluent in Chin, Burmese, Lahu, Shan, Central Thai, Northern Thai, and English.

Most of our Akha hosts spoke Northern Thai (in a rough-and-ready version, minus syllable-final consonants), and a few of the older men spoke good Lahu, remembering the language from the days before the villagers had moved to Thailand from Burma.

So no fewer than six languages and dialects were crackling simultaneously around the smoky firelit room: Akha, Lahu, Northern Thai, Central Thai, English, and Danish! Incredible feats of consecutive and instantaneous translation were being performed on all sides, sentences that began in one language would end in another, and the tiny room became for several glorious hours a microcosm of the Babel of the entire world.

At one point when we were all flying high, asòq tried to

tease us “Westerners” that despite our relative sophistication we still couldn’t stomach all aspects of life in the hills. He suddenly waved a big fat brightly colored insect in front of our faces. When he had our full attention he casually pulled off its six legs and popped the squirming body into his mouth, enjoying our appreciative gasps. He jovially offered to collect some more bugs so we could sample them too, but there were no takers.

The Lahu language in its areal and genetic context

The Southeast Asian linguistic area, defined broadly to include China south of the Yangtze, northeast India, and the Himalayan region, as well as peninsular and insular Southeast Asia, is one of the great linguistic areas of the world, with five major language families flourishing in symbiotic profusion: Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao), Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer), and Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian). Despite their genetic diversity, long periods of intimate contact have largely homogenized the phonology, grammar, and semantics of these languages.

The Lahu language is an important member of the Loloish¹ branch of the Lolo-Burmese subgroup of the vast Tibeto-Burman family. Lolo-Burmese is one of at least six major divisions of the Tibeto-Burman family, which, farflung and ramified as it is, is only part of a larger linguistic stock, Sino-Tibetan, which includes Chinese. The Loloish family itself may be further subdivided, with most researchers agreeing on a grouping into Northern, Central, and Southern Loloish. Lahu, along with Lisu, belongs to the Central Loloish subgroup. See Figure I.

The name *Lahu*

Further complicating the ethnic and linguistic diversity of mainland Southeast Asia is the fact that nearly every people is

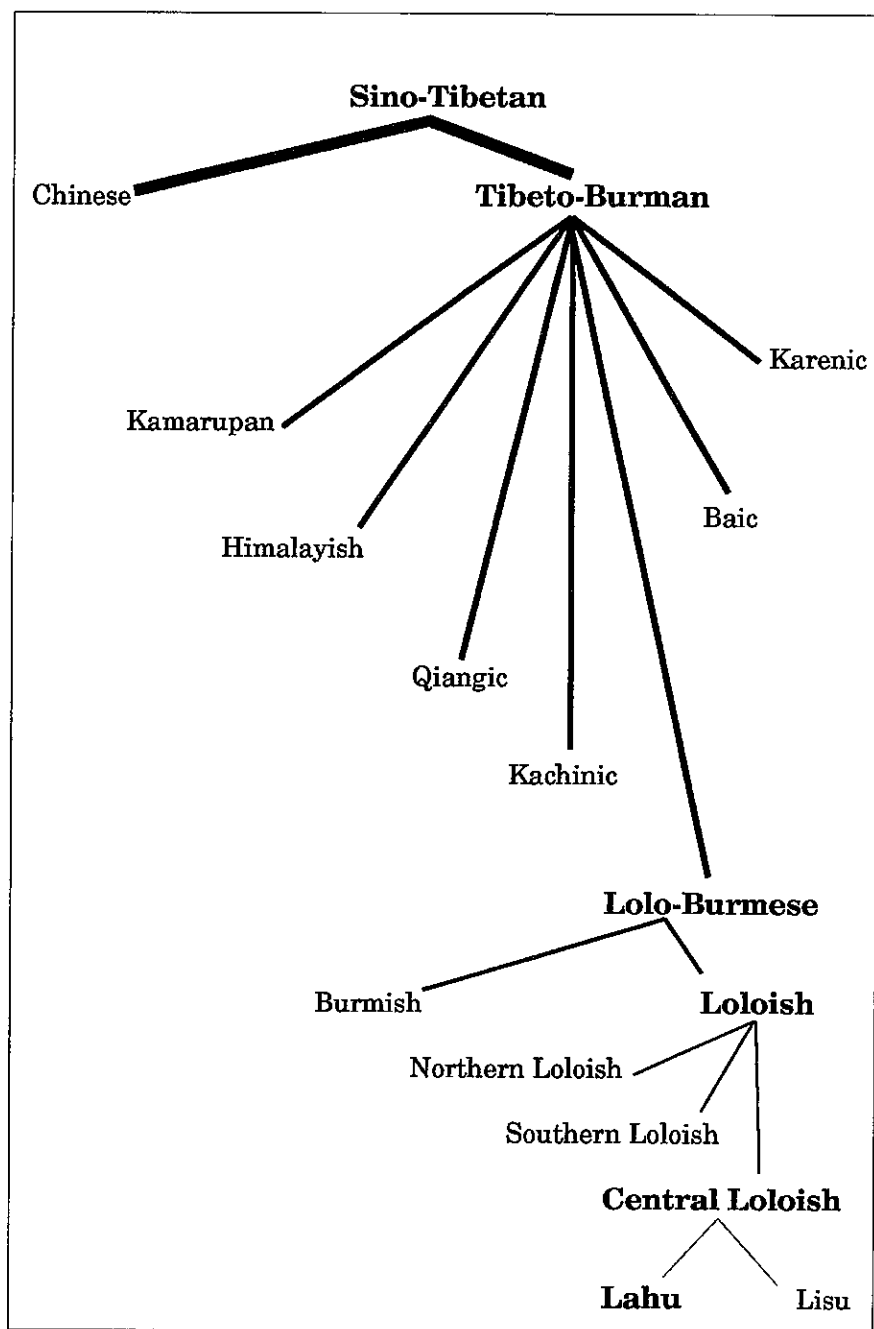


Figure 1. The position of Lahu in the Sino-Tibetan language family.

known by several different names: what they call themselves (their "autonym") plus the various names by which they are known to neighboring groups (their "exonyms").² Typically, the majority plains-dwelling populations tend to lump all the hill-dwelling minorities together by a general term, for example, in Thai, *chaaw-khăaw* 'hill people'.

The Lahu refer to themselves as *lâhū yâ* (*yâ* means "son, child"). In the "standard" Black Lahu dialect, the first syllable is pronounced on a high-falling tone, and the second on a very low tone, written with a circumflex /[^]/ and a macron /⁻/, respectively: *lâhū*. It is also pronounced *lâhō*, especially in Yunnan.³ The Burmese, Shan, Thai, and Lao refer to the Lahu by a name romanized variously as *Muhsur*, *Mussur*, *Mussuh*, *Musuh*, *Musur*, *Musso*, *Mûssö*, *Muso*, *Musö*, and so on. This term is most likely derived from Burmese *mouʔ-hsôu* 'hunter'. In Vietnam, the Lahu are called *Coxung* (also spelled *Co Sung*, *Coxung*, or *Khu Xung*).⁴

Lahu dialects and cultural subdivisions

Over time, several different subgroups of Lahu have emerged. There is a bewildering profusion of names for various "kinds of Lahu," though most of them have more cultural than linguistic significance, and several appear to be quite recent.⁵ The loose, egalitarian structure of Lahu society makes it easy for groups to split off from one another, either because of a grievance, or in response to the appeal of one of the charismatic, messianic leaders who often arise during times of social or political stress, and who may enjoin their followers to adopt distinctive dress or ritual practices.

Based on purely linguistic criteria, the two fundamental branches of the Lahu people are the *Black Lahu* (Lahu Na, *lâhū-nâʔ*) and *Yellow Lahu* (Lahu Shi, *lâhū-ši*).⁶ The Black Lahu are far more numerous than the Yellow Lahu in China and Burma, and are certainly the more prestigious group. Virtually all Yellow

Lahu can understand Black Lahu, but few Black Lahu speakers make the effort to learn Yellow Lahu.⁷ The split between the Blacks and the Yellows must go back several hundred years, since the two dialects are now quite divergent in phonology and lexicon. In Thailand the largest Lahu groups are known as *Red Lahu* (Lahu Nyi, lâhū-ni) and *Lahu Shehleh* (lâhū še-lé), but on linguistic grounds these can be shown to be subvarieties of Black Lahu. The relatively few Lahu villages in Laos include at least two varieties of Yellow Lahu, as well as two interesting-sounding varieties called *White Lahu* (lâhū-phu) and lâhū a-phû-be-le. Men and women in the latter group wear little gourds around their necks, apparently obeying an injunction of some messianic prophet, since a gourd figures prominently in the Lahu creation myth. Next to nothing is known about the Lahu dialects spoken in North Vietnam.

When I arrived on the scene in Thailand in 1965, I was advised to work on the "standard" Black Lahu dialect, even though it was spoken by only a small minority of Thai Lahu, all of whom had immigrated from the m̐-pù-lón area of Burma's Shan State at the urging of American Baptist missionaries in the 1950s.⁸ This advice was excellent, since the m̐-pù-lón dialect proved to be virtually identical to the largest and most prestigious dialect of the language, the Black Lahu of Yunnan Province, China. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to hear this dialect during an all too brief visit to the Lahu Autonomous County in Yunnan in August, 1991. This is the dialect that the missionaries in Burma had used to translate the *New Testament*, and it is this dialect that is described in my grammar and dictionary (*The Grammar of Lahu*, 1973/82; *The Dictionary of Lahu*, 1988).

The Lahu who have come to the United States as political refugees from Laos in the aftermath of the Indochinese wars are of the Yellow Lahu group. Unfortunately the Yellow Lahu dialects of Laos remain among the least studied varieties of the language.⁹ Many of these immigrant Lahu are at least nominally Christian,

which will facilitate their assimilation into American life. On the other hand, the Christianized Black Lahu of Thailand are so culturally different from the animist majority that they are considered by the other Lahu to constitute a separate ethnic group, now increasingly called *Lahu Krit* (*Krit* is from the first syllable of *Christian*). Their language now contains a number of loanwords from English, and even a few from Latin and Greek, via translations of the Bible. More significantly, missionaries have enriched the Lahu lexicon by creating neologisms for non-Lahu concepts in such areas as hygiene, music, and education. Naturally enough, this enrichment has gone hand in hand with an impoverishment of the lexicon of the Christian Lahu of Thailand in the realms of traditional religion and culture.

Two rival romanized writing systems for Lahu have been devised by Catholic and Protestant missionaries in China and Burma, and Chinese linguists developed another orthography in the 1960s.¹⁰ My own writing system is the one most suitable for technical linguistic purposes, though it requires a number of special symbols that render it unsuitable as an orthography for everyday use. Generally, outside of China, only the Christian Lahu can read and write their own language.

Distribution of the Lahu population

Outside of the Lahu Autonomous County, established in China in 1953, where Lahu officials have some degree of jurisdiction over local affairs, the Lahu people as a whole are not in control of any particular block of territory. Like other hillfolk of Southeast Asia they live in scattered villages in the mountains, high above the plains-dwelling majority populations who live by wet-rice cultivation. On any given mountain one is apt to find several different villages inhabited by hillfolk whose languages are all mutually unintelligible (and sometimes not even remotely related genetically).

Lahu villages are to be found over a wide area between the Salween River on the west and the Mekong River on the east: the southwest portion of Yunnan; the Kengtung area of Shan State in Burma; the northern Thai provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Tak, and Kamphaeng Phet; Nam Tha Province in northwest Laos; and a few scattered areas in north Vietnam. See Figure II.

Sharing this vast mountainous region are dozens of other "hilltribes" of various linguistic affiliations, including fellow-Loloish groups like the Akha, Axi, Bisu, Lisu, Mpi, Nasu, Nosu, and Sani; "Burmish" peoples like the Achang, Atsi (or Zaiwa), Maru, and Lashi; more distantly related Tibeto-Burman communities like the Naxi, Jingpho (or Kachin), and Karen; and the linguistically unrelated Hmong (also known as Miao or Meo), Mien (also known as Yao), and Mon-Khmer peoples like the Bulang, Lawa, Lamet, and Khmu. It is curious that Lahu seems to enjoy rather more prestige among other groups of hillfolk than the average minority language, and is often used as a *lingua franca* by such groups as the Akha and the Mien.

In addition to contact with other minorities, the Lahu have always maintained delicate relationships with the coterritorial majority populations in the several countries where they live: the Yunnanese Chinese, the Shan (and to a much lesser extent the ethnic Burmans) in Burma, the northern and central Thai in Thailand, and the Lao in Laos. The fact that every village community has a different history of relationships with neighboring peoples, both lowlanders and hillfolk, means that the people we call *Lahu* are extremely diverse. They have freely borrowed vocabulary, dress styles, technology, and social, political, and religious ideologies from the literate civilizations on whose peripheries they live.

It is impossible to give a precise figure for the total Lahu population, since accurate census data is available for China and Thailand, but not for Burma, Laos, or Vietnam. Relatively recent

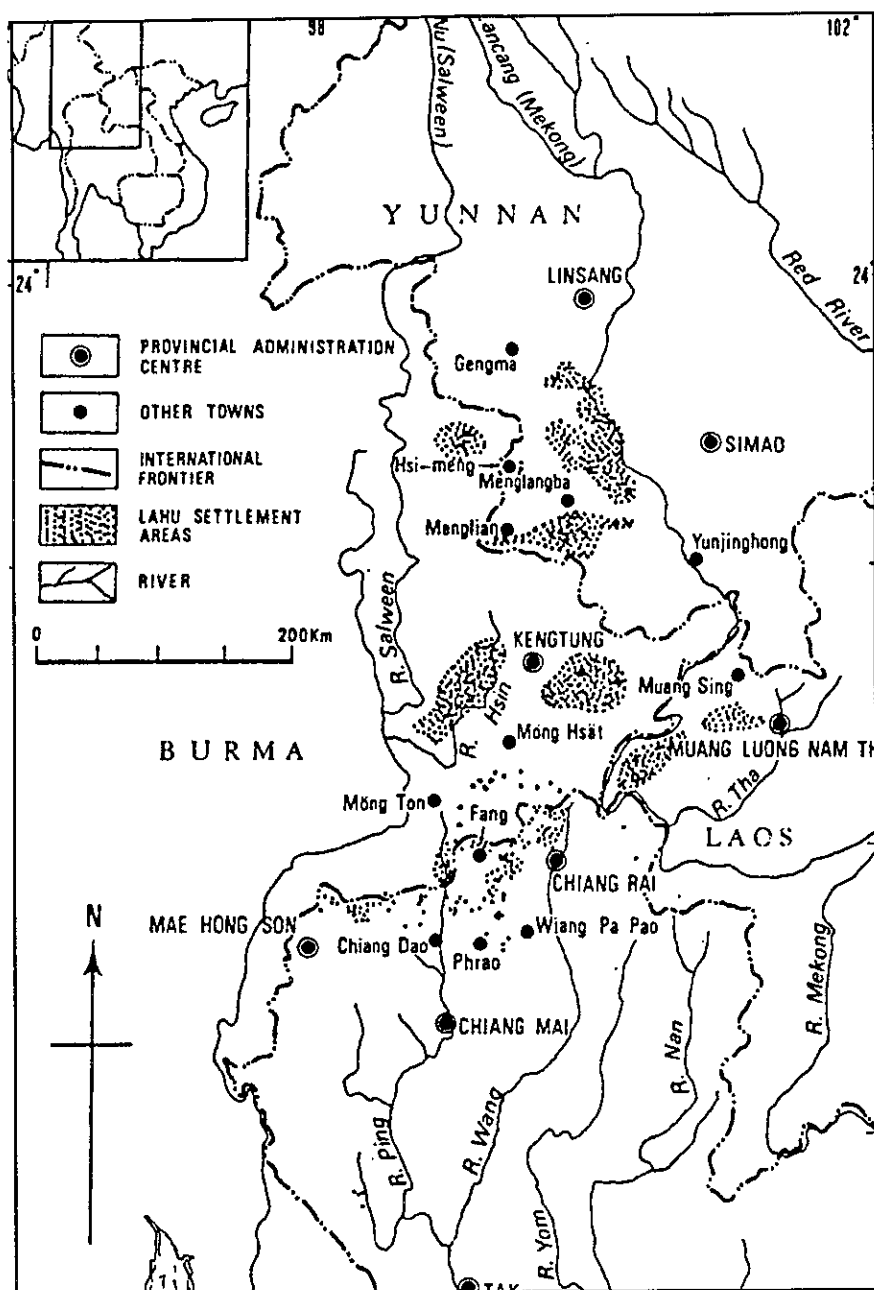


Figure II. Distribution of Lahu settlements between the Salween and Mekong Rivers, in the early 1980s. Map courtesy of Anthony R. Walker.

Chinese figures put the Lahu population in China at 300,000.¹¹ Estimates of the number of Burmese Lahu have fluctuated wildly, from a low of 40,000 to a high of 230,000. The Lahu in Thailand have been accurately numbered at 40,000. The small Lahu community in Laos is now thought to comprise from 8,000 to 10,000 persons, while the even smaller Lahu presence in Vietnam seems to number about 1,500. The tiny but growing Lahu population in the United States is approximately 800, clustered in the vicinity of Visalia, a farming community near Fresno, California. Thus, our latest best guess at the world's total population is about half a million, broken down as follows:

China	300,000
Burma	150,000
Thailand	40,000
Laos	10,000
Vietnam	1,500
United States	800

The oldest Lahu settlements are those in China, with the southward movement from Yunnan to Burma dating back to the early 19th century. In China in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Lahu, frequently led by messianic "priest-chiefs," gained some notoriety as rebels against imperial Chinese rule. Some moved out of Chinese territory into Burma and then into Laos, partly because of the pacification measures in Yunnan but also because they continually needed new land. The richly forested, sparsely inhabited hills beckoned them ever southwards.

As early as 1837 Lahu had settled in the Shan States of northeast Burma under Burmese jurisdiction, forging links with lowland chiefs by helping to defend the Kengtung valley, and providing local princes with rice and porters. But they remained fiercely independent, and occasionally plundered their Shan neighbors instead of helping them. Lahu migration into Burma continued throughout the first half of this century, intensifying when the Communists took over Yunnan.

During World War II many Christian Lahu fought as guerrillas against Japanese and Thai troops occupying Kengtung. Since then, there has been continued unrest in the Shan States, first due to the Nationalist Chinese (the KMT or Kuomintang) presence, then to the Shan rebellion against the Rangoon government. Lahu factions have taken both sides, and like other minorities of the region, have suffered abuses from everybody. As the Kikuyu proverb puts it, "When two elephants fight, the grass gets trampled." New arrivals continue to slip across the Burmese-Thai border, as the political and economic situation in Shan State deteriorates.

The Lahu in Thailand and Laos have all immigrated within the last hundred years or so, and many much more recently than that. The Lahu in Thailand have been relatively well off, with extensive trade links established between them and the lowlanders. The recent electrification (hence televisification) of many hilltribe villages in Thailand will only intensify the cultural assimilation of these groups to the values of the larger Thai society. Yet land disputes with Thai peasants and officials are on the increase, as are serious social problems like heroin abuse and prostitution that are now affecting all the hilltribes of the kingdom. In Laos, the Nam Tha province was under Pathet Lao control long before the final communist victory in that country. Information about the effects of the fighting on the Lahu is just now coming to light, and there is considerable evidence that the Lao Lahu were displaced by the activities of both the Pathet Lao and the anti-communists.

In present-day China, the Lahu people enjoy the status of one of the 55 officially recognized minorities. Since 1953, they have played a major role in the local administration of the Lancang Lahu Autonomous County in the far southwest of Yunnan, where Chinese and Lahu are the joint official languages. Lahu also figure prominently in the affairs of the adjacent Menglian County (officially the "Tai-Lahu-Lawa Autonomous

County"). These areas have hitherto been off-limits to foreigners, though I was able to pay a brief visit to a Lahu village in Lancang in August, 1991.¹² Social engineering in Yunnan, aimed at integrating Lahu and other minorities into the mainstream of Chinese communist society, has been intense. At the same time the government has encouraged retention of aspects of Lahu culture that do not conflict with its political philosophy, especially language (through script reform, publications, and radio), music and song, dance and story-making. Lahu village children in Yunnan may now have their first two years of primary school instruction in Lahu, after which they plunge into the regular Chinese-language curriculum. While some Lahu doubtless have been completely assimilated into Chinese society, it is unlikely that Lahu culture will soon disappear.

In the 1970s, a few Lao Lahu who had been closely affiliated with the American military effort arrived in California. Shortly thereafter several hundred Yellow Lahu were included in a group of mostly Hmong refugees from Laos who were sponsored by the Church of Latter Day Saints and settled near Salt Lake City, Utah. By the familiar process of "secondary migration," most of these Hmong and their Lahu associates soon moved back to California, concentrating in the farming community of Visalia, near Fresno. Lahu children are now attending the California public schools and becoming bilingual in English. At least one Lahu young woman is now attending the University of California at Davis.

Lahu Daily Life and Social Organization

Lahu customs differ greatly from place to place, and from subgroup to subgroup. This account is based primarily on research into the Lahu language and culture carried on in Thailand from 1965 to 1980. Lahu children in American schools today have

never lived in traditional villages, but their parents have. The parents who have come here as refugees carried with them the social world of their upbringing, which naturally provides the context for raising their children in the United States. Understanding what kinds of lifeways the parents consider normal can help teachers better understand the gaps that exist between the world of the home and the world of the school.

Traditional Lahu village society is permeated with the beliefs and practices of animism or spirit propitiation, while Christian villages have discarded most of the practices associated with the old religion. The Lahu now living in the United States are almost all Christian, so the descriptions here apply to them only in part. Their adherence to Christianity defines them as a separate kind of Lahu, but to a greater or lesser extent, they still consider themselves *Lahu-ya*.¹³

It is hard to exaggerate the difference in atmosphere between an animist and a Christian Lahu village. Animist villages are funky and unsanitary, with livid red streaks of betel juice everywhere. Disease and malnutrition are all too evident, and illiteracy is nearly universal. Yet there is a certain cultural richness too. In the evenings, people spend hours dancing, and the young folks may line up in two long rows, the boys opposite the girls, capping each other's antiphonal love-verses as they throw beanbags back and forth, occasionally slipping off by twos into the woods. The bamboo jewsharp twangs, and the gourdflute casts its mournful bagpipe sound on the soft air. The old folks forget their rheumatism with a few pipes of opium, or swap stories over a kettle of rice-liquor. In a Christian village by contrast, the young people gather around the fire in the evening and practice singing Lahu translations of American Baptist hymns in four-part harmony. Christian villages are relatively clean, some medical care is available, and many people can read and write. It is a tradeoff.

The Lahu village and household

Lahu villages in Southeast Asia generally consist of fifteen to thirty households, and average one hundred inhabitants, though the largest Lahu village in Thailand has more than one hundred households, with over six hundred inhabitants. At the other extreme one finds "hamlets" with as few as five or six households and only about twenty-five to thirty people. Lahu villages are typically located on relatively flat ridges in the hills at elevations ranging up to 1200 meters.

The basic social and economic unit in Lahu society is the autonomous household, which averages seven members, usually of two or three generations. The oldest active male is household head (*yè-šē-phā*). Each household manages its own agricultural and other activities independently, since in most Lahu groups there are no strong clan or lineage ties between households. The Shehleh are an exception, with named patrilineages uniting several households into "spirit groups" that share a house altar to the guardian spirit of their lineage. Households are bound together into a relatively stable village community by economic convenience, long association, kinship, marriage, friendship, or a combination of such ties. However, at any time a village may split up, for example when conflict with other households or with the village leader cannot be resolved in any other way.

Lahu society is egalitarian, with no important distinctions in rank or status. Kinsmen are called *ḡ-ví-ḡ-ni* ('elder siblings-younger siblings'), but they do not consider themselves a corporate group. The Red Lahu kinship system is cognatic, in that descent is reckoned both on the father's and the mother's side, but men are deemed to be closer to their paternal kinsmen, and women to their maternal kin. Consanguineal kindred are called *ḡ-ví-ḡ-ni tē-tē* ('real older-younger siblings'). People are reckoned as "real" kin if they can trace direct descent from a common ancestor

within three generations (that is, first and second cousins, but not third cousins). Kinship does restrict the choice of a spouse and it partially determines inheritance of property. Yet blood relationship is not necessarily a stronger bond than friendship. While kinship ties may predispose two persons to help one another, they are no guarantee of assistance.

Households may separate when the village moves to find new fertile land every ten years or so. Occasionally village fission occurs when the priest determines that the local spirits are hostile, as when disease or accidents strike many people within a short period of time. One or a group of households may leave for a new village location as the result of an unresolved feud, an unsatisfactory divorce settlement, or other perceived injustice.

Lahu house (yè) and domestic animals (cê-cà)

Lahu houses are usually raised on stilts and made of bamboo, with wood used only for the main supports. The roofs are thatched with grass or leaves. The house is entered by climbing a stout wooden ramp (gò), notched to prevent slipping in the rainy season. The ramp leads to an exterior porch or veranda (kô-cá), made of a series of wooden planks or split bamboo slats. There may be small sheds on this porch to store bamboo water containers and firewood, and grain may be spread to dry here. Footwear is taken off and left on the veranda before entering the house proper.

Around and under the houses roam chickens, ducks, horses, buffaloes, cows, dogs, an occasional cat, and pigs. Only horses, fowl, and sometimes pigs (whose flesh is an essential ingredient in major ritual feasts) have their own shelters (eg. gâ?-lô 'roosting shed for chickens'). Since cows and buffaloes are not penned, most households prefer to erect some kind of wooden or bamboo fence around their property. Otherwise the cattle might eat the lower thatch-work, or push their heads up through the floor slats or the walls to chew clothes, blankets, soap, or other

bovine delicacies.

Some households erect paddy-granaries (cà-cí-yè: see illustration 1) near their houses, and each village usually possesses several large wooden foot-operated rice-pounders (ché-kə: see illustration 2), which may be sheltered.

Where possible, water is channeled into the village from a spring, waterfall, or stream. A crude but effective aqueduct (qhò?-tī) is constructed from sections of bamboo, split longitudinally and placed end to end; each section is supported by a pair of forked sticks about two meters high, forming a long elevated trough. At the aqueduct's outlet a platform may be built above the mud, where villagers can bathe and collect water in bamboo tubes for household purposes.

The interior of the house consists of a single main room, with sleeping areas screened off with bamboo partitions. The focal point of the house is an earthen fireplace (qha-cí-pè), the social center of the household. There is always a kettle of water on the tripod (ha-khi: see illustration 3) over the fire, ready for making tea. Over the fireplace, suspended by bamboo ropes from the roof beams, is a large rack (gò?-kə), used for drying chili-peppers and storing other items. The household head's

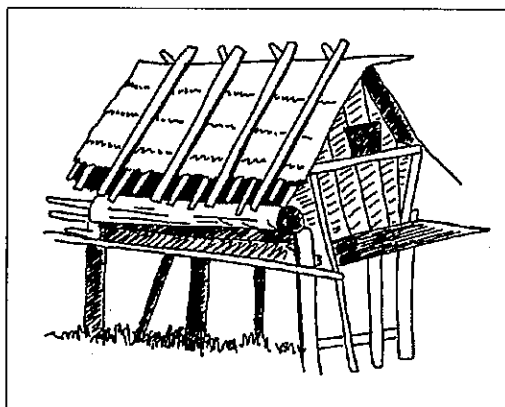


Illustration 1. cà-cí-yè paddy-granary

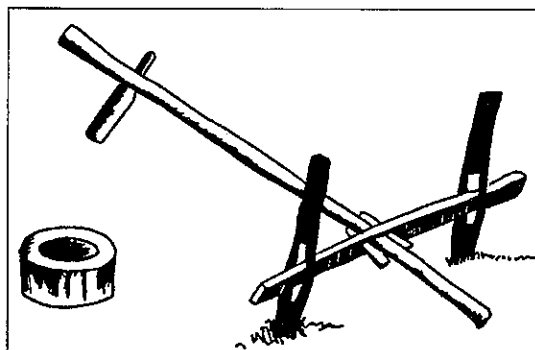


Illustration 2. ché-kə paddy husker

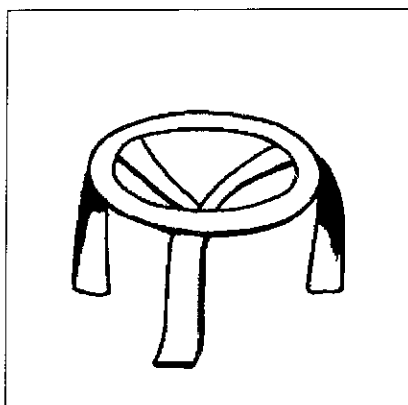


Illustration 3. ha-khi cooking tripod

room is against the back wall of the house, and has a small wooden altar to the house spirit (yè-nê).

Households generally construct a fieldhut (á-po-qo) in each of their fields. These structures, minimally furnished but pleasant and airy, are used especially during periods of intense agricultural labor, since the fields are often located at a considerable distance from the village.

Sometimes a newly married couple will spend most of the year in their fieldhut for the additional privacy it affords, returning to the village only on festival days. Other simple structures built for crop storage include chili-drying huts (á-phê? hú yè: see illustration 4) and rice stoops (cà-phô?).

Occasionally an eccentric or "lone wolf" villager who prefers to avoid the give and take of normal village life will set up a household in a remote area all by himself. This is rather dangerous from the point of view of security, and such loners often come to grief.

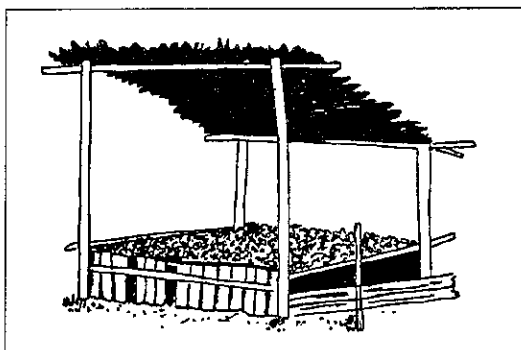


Illustration 4. á-phê? hú yè chili-drying hut

Village government and justice

Each village has a headman, a council of elders, and usually a priest. These individuals make decisions about village affairs, settle disputes, and deal with lowland government officials who govern the district. The headman (qhâʔ-ʂe; qhâʔ-ʂe-phâ) is chosen more or less democratically by the household heads from among themselves, although the sons of former headmen are thought to be especially suited to the task. In the past, some villages had a group of young "village warriors" to help maintain law and order, but nowadays headmen prefer to call on the lowland police for help. If the village has a priest (to-bo-pā; pō-khû), his influence generally extends beyond the realm of religion to decisions that affect the welfare of the villagers. In Christian villages the pastor is often more educated than the headman and becomes the chief link between the village leaders and the majority government.

There are limits to the headman's power. The village elders can remove him or can have the Thai authorities do so. The village priest can threaten him with sickness, or dissatisfied villagers may simply move away, leaving a leader with no followers. On the other hand, an especially gifted headman may achieve eminence, so that his moral authority is recognized by a whole group of villages within an area, sometimes even including villages inhabited by different hilltribes. Villages or village segments that move in search of better soil or more congenial social climates conform to the prevailing power structure of the area into which they enter.

Disputes that cannot be settled within the household are brought to the headman. Penalties generally take the form of cash fines, a small part of which always goes to the headman, with the rest usually divided among all the households of the village. This practice gives everyone a stake in the peaceful resolution of conflict. A violation of customary law is an offense against the

whole village, so that compensation is required to restore the village harmony. The public acknowledgment of blame mollifies the parties and their relatives as well. Once this secular harmony has been restored, the headman must then perform the proper ceremonies to make things right with the spirit world.

Malicious gossip and false accusations are punished by a fine paid to the defamed party. In cases of theft for which restitution is not made, the fine may be supplemented by a beating that the victim is allowed to give to the thief.¹⁴ Murder cases are usually handed over to the Thai authorities, but if the case is settled within the village, a large fine is imposed.¹⁵ The headman takes a portion of the fine, but the remainder is given to the relatives of the victim, not shared among the whole village. Revenge killing of the murderer by the victim's kinsmen is allowable, but it is forbidden to harm the murderer's innocent relatives.

Discovering the truth in a legal dispute can be done by various tests of innocence. In the judicial ordeal called *cà-pha khò? dâ? ve* ("mutually munching the paddy"), each contender is given a mouthful of raw rice to chew. The one whose saliva flows copiously to moisten the paddy is telling the truth, while the dry-mouthed one is the liar. (Sometimes the guilty one's rice is moistened, but in blood, not saliva.) The guilty party has to provide a pig for the whole village. A more serious test, called *à-mī šī?-thē-twē ē dō ve* ("drinking [water] where a charred firebrand has been dipped"), requires each person to drink this specially prepared water. This ordeal is seldom used, since it is believed that the guilty one will die. Generally a villager who has been correctly accused of a breach of the law will not attempt to plead innocent, for he believes he will receive a much harder punishment in the form of sickness or death to himself or his close kinsmen should he attempt to lie before the supernatural powers.

Clothing, Arts, and Crafts of the Thai Lahu

Hillfolk like the Lahu are dependent on markets in the lowlands or visiting traders for many of their material necessities. They build their own houses, and can skillfully fashion baskets, mats, crossbows, traps, musical instruments¹⁶ (see illustration 5) and many other useful objects from wood and bamboo, but Lahu villagers in Thailand no longer weave their own cloth, make silver

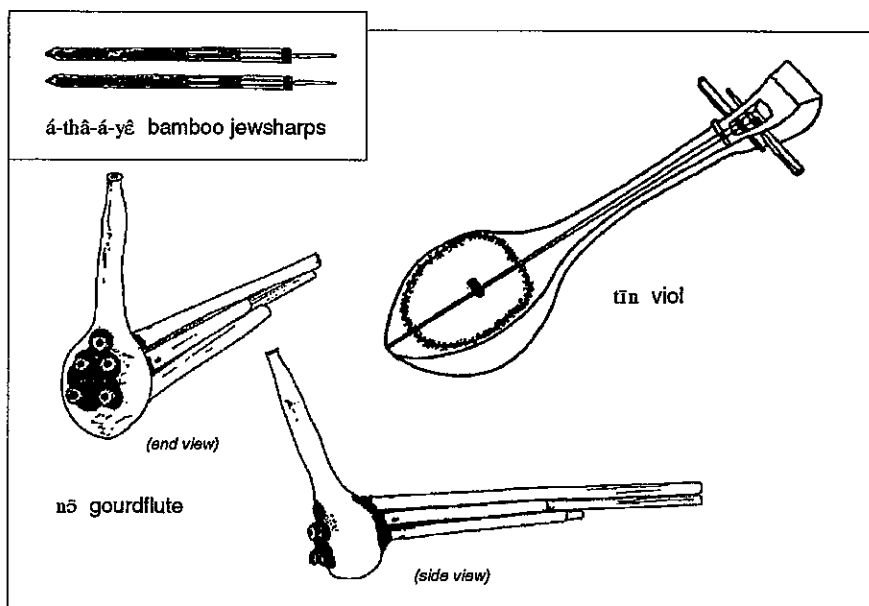


Illustration 5. Musical instruments

jewelry, or work clay. Clothes for men are bought readymade; women's clothes are stitched and embroidered in the village from readymade cloth. Silver ornaments, if not family heirlooms, are bought in towns like Fang, where there are Chinese or Hmong silversmiths who cater to hillfolk. Many villages have blacksmiths (cà-lí-pā; cf. Thai chàan-lèk) who make and repair tools, as well as shoe horses.



Illustration 6. á-pòl-yà-ma tunics

straight down the front, or else closes on the diagonal from the neck to the right armpit or the right side of the waist, similar to a style worn by the women. Nowadays most men prefer lowland readymade shirts. When working in the fields, protective cloth leggings are worn below the knee. Men traditionally wore blue or black cloth turbans, but these are rapidly giving way to cheap

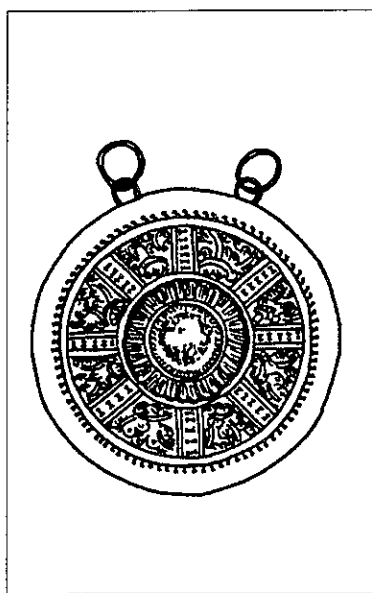


Illustration 7. tí-pwè? pendant

Lahu men traditionally wear dark knee-length baggy pants and waist-length black jackets; each group has distinctive patterns and colors for decoration. The Black Lahu man wears a jacket that either closes

cloth or plastic hats. White Lahu men wear white trousers and jackets for their monthly lunar festivals, but dark clothes at other times. Men often wear heavy silver bracelets. At New Year's, Red Lahu young men may attach silver rupees to their shirt front from neck to waist.

Lahu women in Thailand and Laos often wear the sarong skirt and western blouse typical of the lowland costume. If a woman does wear traditional dress, it is easy to recognize to which subgroup she belongs, since styles vary strikingly. All Lahu women embroider

and appliqué long bands of colored cloth, but each group has its own special needlework techniques. The women's costumes are liberally decorated with sewn-on silver coins, buckles, and buttons. Like the men, women of all Lahu groups wear protective leggings when working in the fields. In place of the traditional blue-black turbans, most Lahu women now wear lowland towels twisted around their heads.

Black Lahu women wear an ankle-length black or indigo-dyed tunic, with openings on both sides from the hem to the waist. The edges are decorated with strips of appliquéd color and intricate patterns of geometric shapes. The tunic is fastened at the right shoulder, and embellished with rows of silver buttons and dangles. The tunic (á-pò?-yà-ma: see illustration 6) is worn over loose ankle-length trousers. Thailand's Black Lahu are Christians originally from Burma, and they prefer blouses and sarongs worn in either Burmese or Thai style.

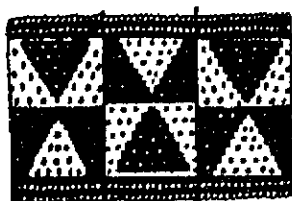
The Shehleh women wear side-split tunics that open in the front, and fasten with a silver button or large buckle between the breasts instead of on the shoulder. The appliquéd bands are usually white or pale yellow, with accent colors of red or blue. Under the tunic, the women wear wide-legged black pants and leggings. Tightly wrapped around their necks are many strands of small white beads.

The Red Lahu women wear a wrap-around sarong topped by a waist-length blouse fastened in the front by a disc-shaped silver clasp. The skirts are decorated with horizontal bands of color, as are the edges and cuffs of the jacket. The costume of Yellow Lahu women is similar, but on festive occasions they may wear long tunics and pants like the Black or Shehleh women.

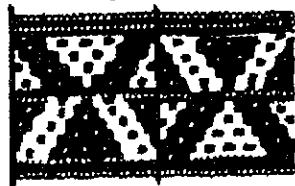
On ceremonial occasions all unmarried women wear as much jewelry as their household can afford, decorating their blouses or jackets with silver buttons and old silver rupee coins. Wealthy women may wear silver earrings, neckrings, bracelets, finger-rings, and pendants (tí-pwè?: see illustration 7), even when



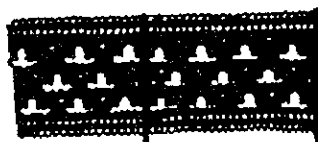
Illustration 8. mí-cho shoulderbag



khá7-pà-ha-vé7
arrowfeather pattern I



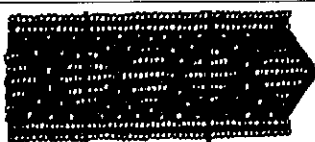
khá7-pà-ha-vé7
arrowfeather pattern II



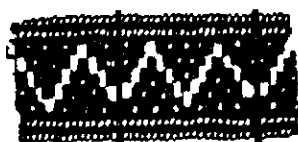
ná-sé7-ha-vé7
fish scale pattern



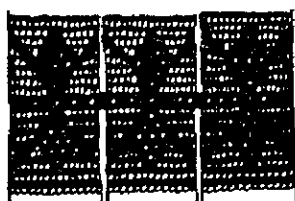
ná-lón-sé7-ha-vé7
big fish scale pattern



cá-qô-ha-vé7
drum pattern



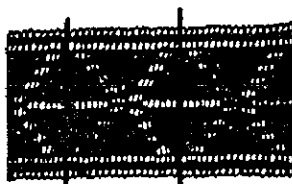
na-qô7-qô-ha-vé7
water zigzag pattern



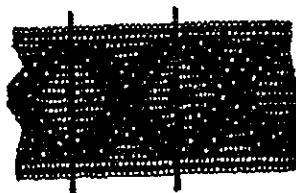
na-gù-na-gá-pé-ha-vé7
spider pattern



na-yè-ma-ha-vé7
waterbug pattern



na-yè-ma-phá-ha-vé7
waterbug nest pattern



mé-nô7-ha-vé7
scissors pattern

Illustration 9. Shoulderbag weaving patterns

working in the fields.

Children wear smaller versions of their elders' costumes. Babies are swaddled in old cloth, but wear small jackets and beautifully stitched skullcaps. Like the Mien, the Lahu believe that beautiful caps deceive malicious spirits into thinking the babies are flowers, so they will ignore them and vent their malice elsewhere. Small Lahu children of both sexes, like all toddlers in Southeast Asia, wear nothing below the waist in warm weather.

Perhaps the most striking of Lahu artistic creations are the shoulderbags (*mí-cho*: see illustration 8), carried by men and women of all subgroups. They are either black and white or brightly colored, with distinctive geometrical patterns, and have many practical uses, holding everything from food and tobacco to bullets and felled small game. The shoulderbags are either woven on the backstrap loom, or made of black cloth decorated with colorful appliqué. The decorative patterns used on the shoulderbags all have descriptive names, such as those in Illustration 9.

Daily routine

Everybody works hard. Some tasks are performed by both sexes, others are typically gender-specialized, but most people can extend themselves when necessary (men can cook, women can butcher, and so on).

The Lahu villager rises early, generally before 6 a.m. A man may rinse his face before taking a knife and basket and disappearing into the jungle to collect firewood. Boys may go with their fathers, or may check their bird-traps. Usually a man fells a sizeable tree and returns day after day to take wood from it. (Nobody would touch wood from a tree felled by another villager; this would lead to a dispute, and a fine by the headman.) Meanwhile the women and girls wash a bit and comb their hair, then put bamboo containers into a wickerwork basket and go to fetch water.

The girls also tend the infants when their mothers are too busy. The women gossip at the trough as they feed their pigs and fowl. Pigs get mash made the evening before from rice bran and maize or banana-stalks. Fowl are released from their huts and fed a couple of handfuls of paddy.

During the bustle of early morning activity the old men snooze peacefully at home while the old women sit around the fireplace passing out instructions to the younger members of the household. At some point in the morning most villagers will have slipped off into the bushes surrounding the village to defecate, followed more often than not by an appreciative group of pigs or dogs. A small stick, rather than water or leaves, is used for cleaning. The womenfolk next make breakfast, cooking rice and preparing a relish. Sometimes this is a thick vegetable or meat soup highly spiced with hot peppers, or just a paste of chili and salt crushed together with a little dried fish. Breakfast is eaten around 7:00-8:30 a.m., and the scraps are thrown on the floor for the ever-ravenous scavenger dogs. Then women make the pig mash for the evening.

After breakfast the boys drive the cattle out to the jungle where they are left untended to graze at will, until they come back to the village of their own accord in the late afternoon. The household prepares for the day's work in the fields. The men assemble the farming implements and shoulder their guns. A Lahu almost always carries a gun outside the village, not so much for self-protection but in hope of finding some animal to shoot for food. The women pack a shoulderbag with the uncooked rice and condiments for the noon meal. Infants who still need regular breast-feeding are taken to the field strapped to their mother's or father's back. Children of five years or older will either accompany their parents to the fields or remain at home to look after big infants (too big to carry but too small to walk). On their way to the fields boys and girls often play small bamboo flutes or gourd pipes. By 10 a.m. the village is deserted of most able-bodied men, women,

and children.

Once at the field the household quickly settles down to the day's work. In or around the fieldhut play the children who are either too small to help their elders or who have been designated to care for the infants. There is a lunch break around 1:30 p.m., allowing rest and tool-sharpening for an hour or an hour and a half. The lunch fare is the same as breakfast. They are back to work by 3:00, continuing until 5:00 or even much later if the night is to be spent in the fieldhut. Between five and seven o'clock the villagers return home and much of the morning routine is repeated. The womenfolk feed the pigs and fowl, collect water, and prepare the next morning's pig-mash. The men go out to collect firewood or to try their luck in shooting a squirrel or junglefowl. Men and women husk paddy in one of the communal village rice-pounders.

The women prepare the evening meal—more of the same. After dinner is the time for visiting friends. Some of the younger men may decide to spend the night in the jungle hunting. By 9:30 all is quiet except perhaps for the soft playing of a jewsharp or gourdflute, and giggles from the village girls who wander from house to house encouraging the youths to come out and join them in the night. A favorite pastime for young unmarried girls is to crouch under a young man's house and jab him with a sharp stick pushed up through the slats of the bamboo floor.

Time reckoning and yearly festivals

The word for year (qhɔʔ) is related to the verb "to return." Years are grouped into cycles of twelve (ɔ-lɔ), each named for a calendrical animal. This ancient system of time reckoning probably goes all the way back to an Austroasiatic or Austro-Tai prototype, though the immediate source of the Lahu system seems to be Chinese. The traditional week of twelve days (ɔ-jɔ) is also marked by the same cycle of animal names, and is important for

the naming of children:

<i>lâ-qhò?</i>	Year of the Tiger	<i>lâ-ni</i>	Tiger Day
<i>thô-lâ-qhò?</i>	Year of the Rabbit	<i>thô-lâ-ni</i>	Rabbit Day
<i>lô-qhò?</i>	Year of the Dragon	<i>lô-ni</i>	Dragon Day
<i>šâ-qhò?</i>	Year of the Serpent	<i>šâ-ni</i>	Serpent Day
<i>mû-qhò?</i>	Year of the Horse	<i>mû-ni</i>	Horse Day
<i>yò-qhò?</i>	Year of the Sheep	<i>yò-ni</i>	Sheep Day
<i>mò?-qhò?</i>	Year of the Monkey	<i>mò?-ni</i>	Monkey Day
<i>gâ?-qhò?</i>	Year of the Cock	<i>gâ?-ni</i>	Cock Day
<i>phî-qhò?</i>	Year of the Dog	<i>phî-ni</i>	Dog Day
<i>vâ?-qhò?</i>	Year of the Pig	<i>vâ?-ni</i>	Pig Day
<i>fâ?-qhò?</i>	Year of the Rat	<i>fâ?-ni</i>	Rat Day
<i>nû-qhò?</i>	Year of the Ox	<i>nû-ni</i>	Ox Day

In Christian villages, people have largely replaced the twelve-day cycle by the "international" seven-day week (*ò-ší*), where Sunday is a day of rest called *ší-ni* "day of grace," and the other days are counted from it (Monday is "day of grace plus one," and so on).

The term *ší-ni* has a different meaning for the animist Red and Black Lahu, for whom it designates a bimonthly day of rest, at the new and full moons, during which agricultural work ceases, and everyone attends to religious matters.¹⁷ Homes are lit with beeswax candles or offerings are brought to the village temple, where the people dance. For Shehleh, White, and Yellow Lahu, *ší-ni* occurs every twelfth day, between each *ò-jò* cycle.

The New Year's celebrations (*qhò? câ ve*) are by far the most important of the traditional Lahu yearly festivals. It coincides roughly with the Chinese New Year in most Lahu groups, and the festivities show the influence of Chinese culture. (In Christian villages, Christmas may now have become a more important observance.)

The Red Lahu New Year falls at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth lunar months of the Northern Thai calendar. Villagers, especially unmarried young folk, wear new clothes and the family's silver jewelry is unearthed from its jungle

hiding-place to be displayed. The celebrations last eleven days, of which the first and more important portion is the *yâ-mî-qhò?* or Female New Year, which lasts six days, and is presided over by the heavenly Female Guardian of the Year (*qhò?-šē-ma*). This is followed by the five-day *hó-qhâ?-qhò?*, or Male New Year, presided over by the heavenly Male Guardian of the Year (*qhò?-šē-phâ*).

There are complex protracted rituals, devoted to clearing the way for good fortune and helpful spirits in the upcoming year. In the center of the village people build the "Year Tree" (*qhò?-cē*), which is the focal point of the succeeding ceremonies. Each evening villagers dance around it to the accompaniment of the gourdflute. Pounded glutinous rice-cakes (*š-phù?*) are fried in pork fat and seasoned with coarse salt. New Year's games include the men's top-striking (*khō dō? ve*: see illustration 10), and the women's disc-throwing (*mâ?-ní-šī bà ve*). Households exchange gifts of rice-cakes, pork, and beeswax candles. On the first day of Female New Year, a woman from each household visits every other, and ritually washes the hands of the household head and his wife. Later in the day, parents receive a full bath from their adult children. During Male New Year, ricecakes are placed on all the knives, farming tools and guns owned by the household, with prayers to the Heavenly Blacksmith that these objects not harm anyone during the year. The household and ancestral spirits are fed pork soup with rice, fruit, and tea, along with tobacco, cigars, and rice liquor.¹⁸

The New Rice Festival (*cà-šī-š câ ve*) is observed at the first harvest of the season by all Lahu, including Christians, in October or November. The ritual must take place on Barking-Deer Day (*chi-ni*). This is actually Serpent Day (*šī-ni*), but the inauspicious homophony with 'die' (*šī*) and 'blood' (*šī*) has

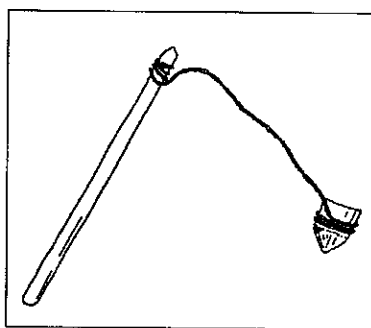


Illustration 10. *khō* striking top

resulted in a change of name. Each household presents gifts of new rice to all the others. The young men test their marksmanship. Everybody wears their finest clothes. A pig is slaughtered for the whole village.

Marriage

Generally a man has only one wife. There is no rule or belief that a man should be older than his wife, or even that they should both belong to the same generation. Close consanguineal kin (ḡ-ví-ḡ-ni tè-tè) cannot marry for three generations (ḡḡ? cwe hḡ? dà? mâ phè?). There is also a prohibition against marriage between a pair of siblings of one family and a pair of siblings from another. If this happens, the two couples may not live together in the same village.

The choice of a marriage partner is not arranged by parents. Girls usually marry at fourteen to sixteen years of age, and boys between fifteen and twenty. There are no marriage payments, neither brideprice from the groom nor dowry from the bride. The marriage is negotiated by a go-between, often in the absence of the betrothed pair. Once all the details of the union are agreed upon, the couple begin to live together, but the marriage is not official until the wedding feast. This takes place after the girl's family has raised enough pigs to feed the entire village and the guests from the boy's village. It might be several years before the wedding feast is held, and there may be one or two children by then. The Christian Lahu marriage involves an exchange of vows, music, and readings from the Bible.

A newly-married couple traditionally receives a good-natured fertility blessing:

he-ṣā qhā?-cá-ṣi qhe qay-ʔ mē;
tò-pē-ni à? yā-qhē ṣi qay-ʔ mē.

May you become like the *qhâ?-cá* fruits in a fallow field;
may your waists be yellowed with your children's feces!

Most newly married men go to live with the wife's family, to "work as a son-in-law" (*má m̄ ve*). According to tradition a man must work for his father-in-law's household for the first two years of the marriage. The couple then returns to his own father's house for one year, then back to the father-in-law's house for two more years, then back to his own family for one year. After six years of living with both parental families, a man may finally establish his own household, but he can be required to do so in his father-in-law's village. In practice these rules are often broken; a man may easily buy his way out of further service after the initial two-year period.

Divorce, especially among young couples without children, is frequent, and may be initiated by either partner. Little or no stigma attaches to either a man or woman who has been divorced even many times. Divorce cases must be brought before the headman. The one asking for the divorce pays twenty Indian silver rupees or 120 baht; the headman gives ten rupees to the one divorced, keeping one rupee for himself, and distributing the rest equally among the village households.

Childbirth, naming, and child-rearing

Sexual relations are absolutely forbidden during menstruation, lest the woman conceive a rat. The Lahu believe that conception occurs when the the life-force that resides entirely within the man's semen is implanted inside the womb for the woman to nourish. During the last month or two of pregnancy a spirit-doctor is summoned to perform the exorcistic rite called *jō te m̄ jō? ve*, so that the woman will not die in childbirth.

Little ritual accompanies the birth, unless difficulties arise. The husband helps throughout the delivery, supporting his

wife from the back and massaging her stomach as she kneels on the floor and grasps a rope or blanket hung from the cross-beam of the roof. Meanwhile the midwife squats in front of the woman to receive the newborn child. If the child fails to cry, a piece of chili is put into its mouth. The husband places the placenta in a bamboo container and buries it underneath the house-ladder. It is he who must clean up all the blood from clothes and objects, since he alone is responsible for the birth. The new mother lies by the fire for twelve days with warm stones on her stomach. Spirit-traps (lé-ó: see illustration 11) must be set up in front of the house after the birth to prevent malevolent *chí-chí* from entering. The death of a woman in childbirth is a major disaster, since her many souls themselves become malicious spirits. Every attempt is made to save the life of the mother rather than the child.

Twins are neither dreaded nor welcomed,¹⁹ except that people worry the mother won't be able to nourish them both. Well-developed miscarried fetuses are supposed to be cut in half by the father and buried on either side of a path as a protective device against future abortions or stillbirths, but many men are unwilling to perform this rite. Weaning is not enforced until a woman's next pregnancy; her last child may be suckled until age four or five.

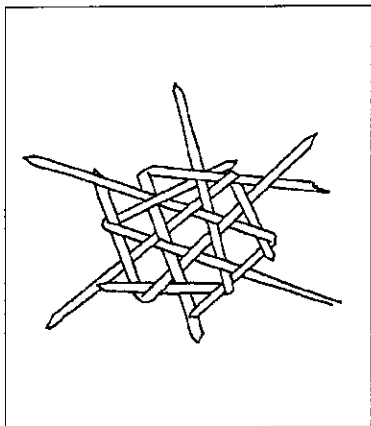


Illustration 11. lé-ó spirit trap

Among some Lahu groups there is a naming ritual to formally introduce the new soul to the household and ancestor spirits. Traditional names for boys and girls begin with the prefixes *cà-* and *na-*, respectively. The other part of the name is usually the calendrical animal associated with the day of the child's birth, or a word that signifies the time of day when the birth occurred, or the birth-order of the child among

its siblings, or a word that refers to some physical characteristic or hoped-for attribute. Examples of names are:

Calendrical animals

Boys:	cà-qā	buffalo	cà-phî	dog
	cà-chî	barking deer	cà-mò?	monkey
	cà-thô	rabbit	cà-yò	sheep
	cà-nû	ox; bull	cà-gâ?	cock
	cà-fâ?	rodent	cà-vâ?	pig
	cà-lâ	tiger	cà-lô	dragon
Girls:	na-thô	rabbit	na-nû	ox
	na-phî	dog	na-mû	horse
	na-mò?	monkey	na-yò	sheep
	na-fâ?	rodent	na-vâ?	pig
	na-lâ	tiger	na-lô	dragon

Time of birth

Boys:	cà-khî	moonlit night; midnight
	cà-thî	dawn
	cà-há	night
	cà-gû	noon
	cà-sô	morning
	cà-ŕ	new moon; New Year's
Girls:	cà-he	born when sun was shining strongly
	na-thî	dawn
	na-he	born when sun was shining strongly

Birth-order

Boys:	cà-ú	first-born; ú means 'head; top; origin'
	cà- 𑜋	first-born; 𑜋 means 'be big'
	cà-le	last-born
Girls:	na-ú	first-born
	na- 𑜋	first-born
	na-ŕ	first-born; ŕ means 'new'
	na-le	last-born

Physical characteristics

Boys:	cà-qu-ni	red	cà-có-nê?	skinny
	cà-chu-pā	fat	cà-dâ?	good-looking
Girls:	na-có-nê?	skinny	na-chu-ma	fat
	na-dâ?	pretty ²⁰	na-phu	white, fair

na-ǵǵ-lǵ	pleasingly plump with round face
na-lǵ?	smooth

Desirable attributes

Boys:	cà-ye	strong	cà-bo	blessing; grace
	cà-má	lucky in hunting		
	cà-lǵ	custom; proper behavior		
	cà-mǵ	teacher		
Girls:	na-khâ	gold	na-hǵ-khâ	queen
	na-šǵ	precious	na-ye	strong

Often the name given a child at birth will be changed, either because of some physical characteristic that was not present at first (a scar, prominent teeth), or because of some event that occurs later in life (a spectacular hunting success). These "nicknames" (ǵ-mǵ-kwǵ?) tend to stick, so that the original name is forgotten.

A child's name is routinely changed if it turns out to be sickly, with the new name expressing the desired characteristic of strength, e.g. cà-ye 'strong boy' (name applied to a sickly boy, or to one whose siblings have died), na-ye 'strong girl'. However, if a child is constantly sick, it may be ritually adopted by a couple who are known to have healthy children (often the grandparents), though the child continues to live with its real parents.

The Lahu treat their children with tolerant but unsentimental affection. From an early age they are expected to pitch in and help with whatever work they can, especially the care of still younger siblings. Even tiny tots are allowed to play near the open fire, and to handle large heavy bushknives that they can hardly lift. Very young children sleep with their parents; older unmarried children sleep on either side of the fireplace. (The Lahu, as well as the Thai, think it strange and rather heartless that Westerners make their babies sleep in a separate bed.) Fathers take an active role in child care, and often carry their small children (especially their sons) around with them. I have never seen or heard of a Lahu parent striking a child.

Death and funerals

As with other Southeast Asian groups, the death of a person who has lived to adulthood is an important time for all the survivors. A "good death" (ši dà? ve) is one that occurs without prolonged suffering, preferably in one's own home, where the household and ancestor spirits are familiar. Bad deaths (ši mâ dà? ve)—death by accident, in childbirth, or after a painful illness—leave a legacy of malevolent spirits for the living.

The prayers and ritual offerings speed the deceased on his way to the Land of the Dead (chə-ši mû-mì). The deceased takes with him his shoulderbag, clothes, and pipe, but all jewelry is removed from the corpse. His cotton wrist-strings are cut with scissors, so that his souls may depart from the body. (In the case of a bad death, the wrist-strings are not removed, because no one wants these particular souls on the loose.) The corpse is shrouded in white, and the mourning kinfolk lift the shroud and weep. The male relatives fire gunshots from the veranda. Pigs are killed for the funeral feast; the corpse holds a rope tied to the snout of one of the dead pigs. A piece of lead is tied in white cloth and put on the chest of the corpse, to pay the ferryboat owner who is to take him to the Land of the Dead. If the deceased is the household head or his wife, the body must be taken out through a hole made in the bamboo wall slats in the rear of the house.

Chicken curry and "ragweed rice" (a-bê-5) are prepared by the deceased's family from rice donated by all the other households in the village. The gravesite is determined by throwing a bushknife into the air and seeing where the blade pierces the ground. The soul does not go immediately to the afterworld. On the first night after burial it returns to its house. On the second night it tries again, but can only reach the house-ladder. On the third night, it can no longer pass beyond the boundaries of the village. Then it gives up and goes away, returning on the twelfth

day to partake of the feast offered to it. Thereafter it stays in the afterworld until summoned to another feast.

There is generally equality of the sexes with respect to inheritance. On the death of a household head, his widow is recognized as head (*yè-šē-ma*) and custodian of household property. She is usually assisted by the eldest male in residence, her son or son-in-law, who will succeed to the position of full household head on her death.

Lahu Economy and the Agricultural Cycle

Like other hilltribes, the Lahu subsist largely on what they grow and produce. In northern Thailand and the southwestern part of Shan State in Burma, hill-rice is the staple crop, supplemented by corn. Rice is a basic part of the diet, eaten for every meal of a Lahu's life, often with little else to go with it but salt and hot peppers. It is fortunate then that the Lahu eat their rice unpolished, a much more nourishing food than the more prestigious polished white rice of the plains.

The rice is cultivated in "swiddens" on the steep mountainsides by the age-old slash-and-burn technique.²¹ Since fertilizers are not available, the land in a given area is soon played out, and the village must move elsewhere in search of fertile soil, every ten years or so. Farmers maximize use of the land by recultivating old fields after a fallow period (*he-ḡō ḡō? ve*), and to some extent by rotating crops.

Besides feeding themselves, the Lahu face the problem of earning the cash to buy items in the market towns, and to pay the head taxes levied by the lowland government. The chief cash crop for most non-Christian Lahu villages is opium, with tea, coffee, chili-peppers, buckwheat, and maize of relatively minor importance. Opium growers site their villages at elevations around 1200 meters (4000 feet) or higher, since the poppy strains used in

Southeast Asia grow best at this altitude. Poppy fields are sited a little above the village, and ricefields slightly lower.

The agricultural cycle, which involves long periods of backbreaking work, is fourteen months long, beginning in January with the selection and clearing of new fields, and ending with the final collection of raw opium in February of the following year. See Figures III and IV.

Figure III. Order of agricultural tasks

he te ve/he m̃a ve	cultivate a swidden
he ca ni ve	search for a new field
he ve ve	lay claim to a field
he thu ve	clear land by felling big trees
he phō ve	clear undergrowth with bushknife
he tú ve	burn a field (first burning)
he tò? ve	field burns ²²
he gā? ve	rake unburned vegetation for reburning
he ji ve	clear by a second burning
cà šē ve	sow rice broadcast (in a seedbed)
cà bē? ve	make holes for the seeds with a dibble-stick
cà ti ve	sow rice (in dibbled field, one seed at a time)
he qō ve	hoe field; turn soil with a mattock
he dō? qay ve	break up clods of earth with a large hoe
he chā ve	scrape off weeds
he mù? ve	weed a swidden

Figure IV. Maturation and harvest of rice-plants

cà-yō šē ve	sow seeds broadcast in nursery (2 months pass) also called cà-yē šē ve or hō-yē šē ve
hō-yē qō le ti-mi qhō qhāy ti ve	pull up rice-seedlings and transplant them into field (1 month passes)
hō-dō phō? ve	"riceplants turn": i.e. become viable green plants about a cubit long (2 months pass)
cà-ō ō la ve	panicle-bearing shoots bud forth (2 weeks pass)
ō-nu qō? pē? tō? la ve	panicles pop forth from the heads of the shoots
phī-qhō phē? ve	plants come into the gray phase (the flowers)

	and kernels appear, and the whole field looks gray) (1-2 weeks pass)
ò-nu ɔ la ve	panicles bend under their own weight as the rice-grains grow big (2 -3 weeks pass)
cà mɛ ve	paddy ripens (turning yellow)
cà ɣəʔ ve	reap paddy with sickle
cà phôʔ ve	pile up paddy into stoops
cà jəʔ ve / cà dɔʔ ve	thresh paddy with flails
cà phi ve	thresh paddy by hand (on threshing mat or against a board)
cà phə ve	fan paddy (to remove lighter chaff)
cà-ʃi pū kə ve	carry the unhusked paddy into granaries for storage
cà tē ve	husk rice in a pounder (the edible husks are saved for the pigs)
cà ha ve	winnow husked rice in a tray
ɔ̄ câ ve	eat rice

The swiddens are far too steep for oxen or water buffaloes, even if the Lahu could afford them. Everything must be done by people-power. The agricultural implements available for this unremitting toil are of the simplest design, but they do the job. They include the tools shown in Illustration 12.

In northern Thailand, as population pressure from the lowlands intensifies, the Lahu and other hillfolk find their traditional semi-nomadic way of life increasingly threatened. It is no longer easy to clear fresh land. After returning to the United States from my 1977 fieldwork, I was grieved to hear of the death by shooting of a good friend, the polyglot young Chin man mentioned in the introduction. Apparently he had run into trouble by attempting to intervene as an interpreter in a land dispute between an Akha village and a group of Thai peasants who were inching their lowland fields up a mountainslope. In recent years some Christian Lahu in Thailand, including part of my main research village of Huey Tat, have moved to lower areas where they now live by wet-rice cultivation in permanent villages.

The Lahu depend on the raising of livestock and hunting

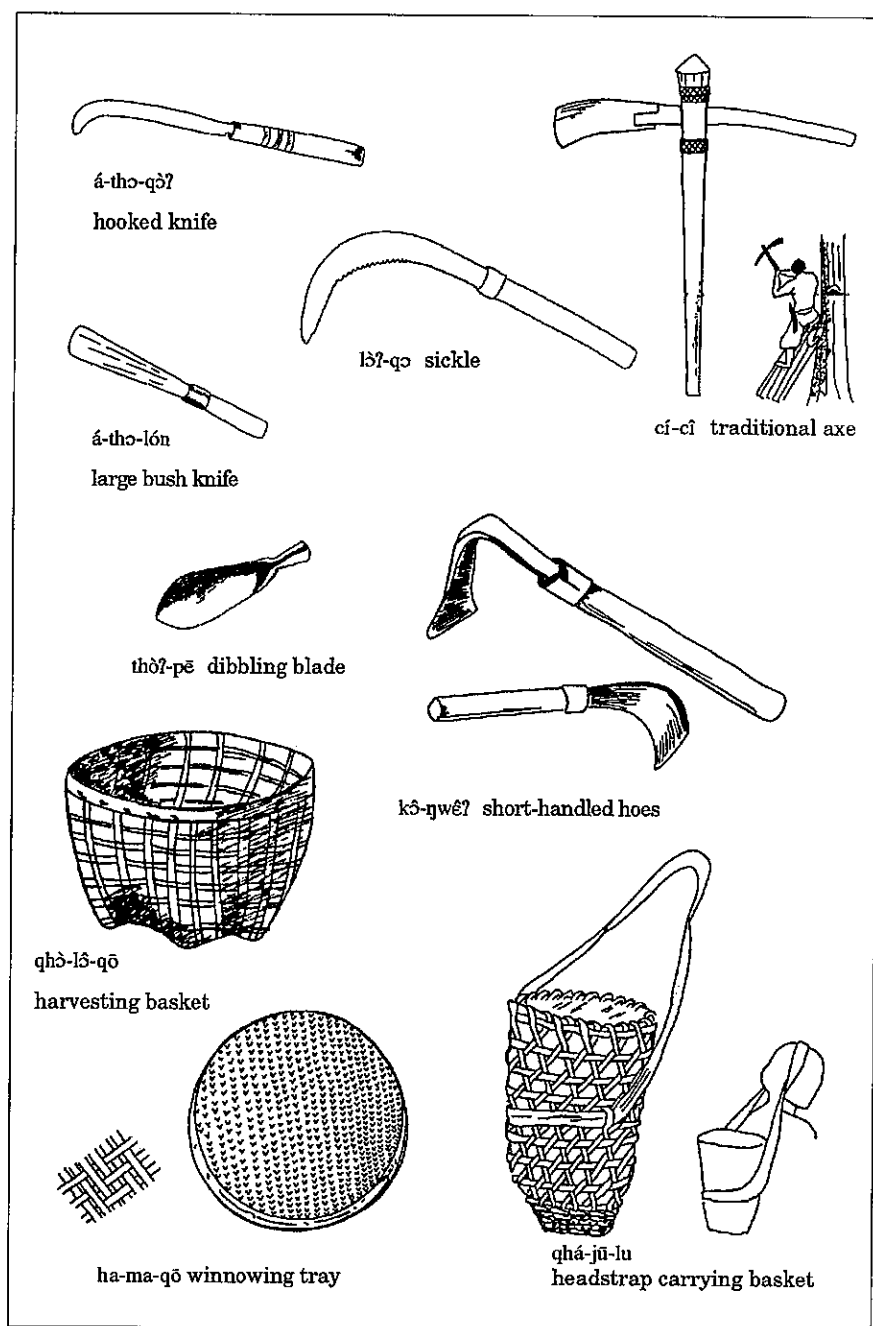


Illustration 12. Common Lahu tools and implements.

to provide meat to supplement their rice. Chicken is eaten only rarely, and pork, the most prized meat of all, is consumed only on special occasions. Lahu women invest a great deal of time and energy in the raising of a piglet to the size for butchering, but almost all mature pigs are sold to the lowlanders rather than being eaten in the village. Much of the Lahus' meager meat consumption is ritualistic in nature. The many rituals to invite good fortune, to forestall bad luck, to cure illness, to summon back wandering spirits, to honor the ancestors, to celebrate weddings and funerals, and so on, require the sacrifice of an animal, usually a chicken. After the spirit of the animal serves its purpose, the meat is shared among all those who participate in the ritual.

The Lahu are known as *Muhsur* by the Burmese and Thai; this name—which means “hunter”—is how the Lahu characterize themselves. Their reputation was once well deserved, when the jungles and forests teemed with game of all kinds, both edible (wild boar, wild cattle, barking deer, sambhur deer, bear) and sportive (tigers, dholes, etc.).²³ The big game is now long gone, and in most areas there is no longer much to hunt except birds, rabbits, and rodents, but Lahu men are still preoccupied by hunting, and are never happier than when off on a hunting expedition. The weapons of choice

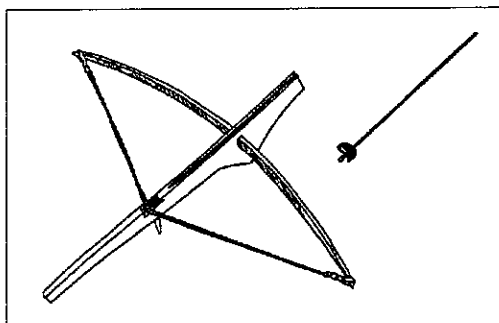


Illustration 13. khâ? crossbow

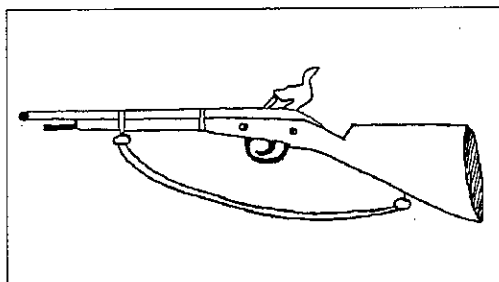


Illustration 14. nâ? muzzle-loading rifle

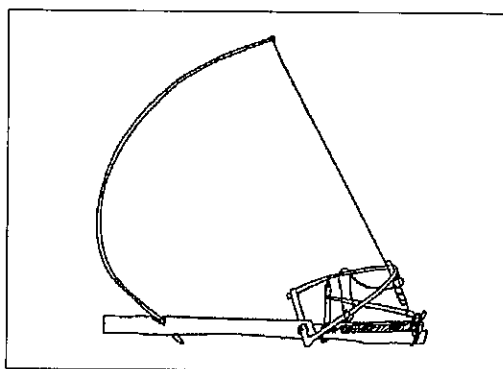


Illustration 15. qō-ní-va noose bird trap

are the crossbow (khâ?; see illustration 13) and the muzzle-loading rifle (nâ?; see illustration 14).²⁴ Many kinds of ingenious traps are also used, including noose birdtraps (qō-ní-va; see illustration 15); basket fishtraps (ŋâ-šé-qō; see illustration 16); speargun traps (hāw); falling-log traps (va-tê); and pheasant traps (gō?-va; see illustration 17).

On the rare occasions when a big animal like a wild boar is killed in the hunt, the carcass is shared among the various members of the hunting party, the village notables, and all the households of the village. No bodypart goes to waste, from the snout to the tail, inside and out.

The Lahu, like the other hilltribes, have a deep and detailed knowledge of the flora and fauna of their environment. They can name dozens of birds and imitate their calls; they can describe countless species of mushrooms, and can distin-

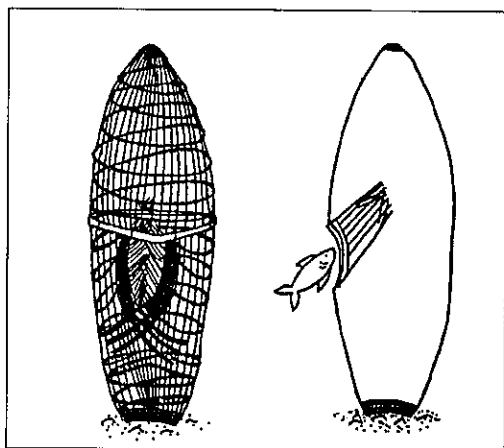


Illustration 16. ŋâ-šé-qō basket fishtrap

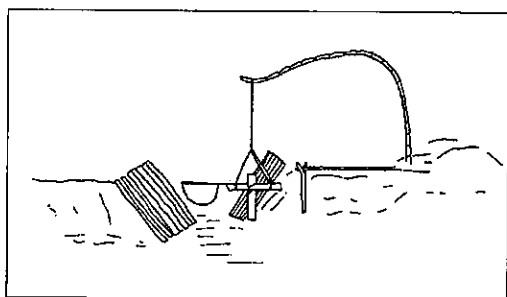


Illustration 17. gō?-va pheasant trap

guish the delicious from the poisonous; they know which of the many species of bees, hornets, and wasps have the tastiest larvae and make the best honey; they know the habits and favorite foods of all the animals. They love the forested mountains in which they live, and most would never trade their "hills and valleys" (qho-qhō-lō-qhō) for the far easier life in the plains.

As with all other aspects of village life, there are prayers for successful hunting. The rifle-spirit (nāʔ-nê) is promised a portion of the kill if the hunt is successful; after a kill, the hunter must give the gun its share by rubbing some blood on the barrel. The hill-spirit (qho-nê) is considered to be the guardian of wild animals, and must be propitiated before setting out to hunt, or before burning off the animals' habitat to clear land for fields. In his guise as patron of the opium fields, the hill-spirit is called the opium spirit (fi-nê). In the rite called *fi-nê lō ve*, the cultivator of the opium field offers a single chicken egg pierced at the bottom so that the contents drip onto the ground. This represents the wish that the opium sap may flow as abundantly from the poppies of the field.

A text of a typical Red Lahu prayer to the hill-spirit, called *ša lō ve* "Praying for Game," recorded by Anthony R. Walker (1976e), is presented with the translation in Appendix I.

Lahu Religion and Ritual

Anthony Walker (1970a:188) calls Red Lahu religion “a cult of health and prosperity.” It offers both an explanation for and a means of dealing with sickness and misfortune, and provides a way to prevent such problems in the future. An oft-repeated prayer runs like this:

chê-ša-cò-ša,	May we be healthy and prosperous,
yà?-ša-mi-ša,	may we sleep well and sit well,
â-dô-â-hā,	may we suffer no distress,
â-dô-â-khí,	nor be racked with cares,
mā-ši-mā-nà ve,	let there be neither death nor sickness!
chí bon qò? phā le tā pī mē	once again create and ordain
	this blessing for us!

Lahu believe that a person's physical body has a spiritual counterpart or “soul,” sometimes regarded as a single entity and sometimes as a plurality. Opinion differs greatly on the number of souls one has; estimates include 2, 3, 4, 12, 17, and 32. Most people recognize a “slow-moving” vs. a “fast-moving” soul; the fast one has the tendency to depart the body, causing illness, while the slow one leaves only at death. Sickness, if no natural cause is apparent, is often interpreted as due to injury or loss of a soul. Treatment may involve recall of the soul, or propitiation of the spirit that attacked it. When a normal death occurs, the soul goes to the land of the dead (chò-ši mû-mì), but an unnatural or “bad death” (ši mā dà? ve) transforms the soul into one or more malicious spirits.

Syncretism in Lahu religion: layers of belief

Syncretism (that is, the combining of elements from differ-

ent belief systems) is a feature of Asian religion in general.²⁵

Lahu communities today are diverse in their beliefs and practices, reflecting exposure to alien creeds that has varied with time and place. In Yunnan some Lahu groups are said to have followed the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, with Taoist and Confucian elements, that was prevalent in pre-revolutionary China. In Burma, there are Lahu who profess Theravada Buddhism and support communities of monks in their villages. In Thailand a number of young Lahu men have entered the Buddhist novitiate. The Red Lahu in Northern Thailand "have little, if any, difficulty in accepting the beliefs and practices of the folk Buddhism of the rural Northern Thai people" (Walker 1970:28). The free borrowing of elements of others' religious practices is visible in the smallest of details: the yellow cloth purchased by villagers for the prayer flags outside the blessing-house is the same as the cloth that the lowlanders use for Buddhist monks' robes.

Lahu traditional religion incorporates elements of animism, magic and sorcery, Chinese ancestor worship, and Buddhism. The Lahu believe in an abstract and distant supreme being called ḡ-ṣa (often written *G'uisha* in romanized spelling), but also in a stunning variety of lesser spirits, many of them malevolent, powerful, and rather stupid. It is they who are responsible for the evils of life and must therefore be constantly propitiated or exorcised. Since the late 19th century, animist concepts and rituals have been reinterpreted in Christian terms by Western missionaries.

There is a body of superstitious customs that cannot be localized in any particular religion, and appear to represent a very ancient stratum of folk belief. Among these is the concept of "pairs" (ḡ-ce)—man and woman, sun and moon, morning-star and evening-star are cosmic and "rightful" examples of ḡ-ce. But when building a house it becomes ritually important to avoid making things in pairs, or with the same number of objects on both sides (for example, the number of layers of thatching must not be the

same on each side of the ridgepole of a roof).

One and the same ritual object may receive different interpretations according to the particular framework of belief that is paramount at the moment. On certain festivals a type of wooden pillar called *kɔ-mô-twē* is erected in front of Red Lahu places of worship. These are clearly phallic in shape, bespeaking an ancient folk origin, yet their very name has Buddhist overtones (*kɔ-mô* can also mean “stupa; Buddhist pagoda”). The pillars are said to represent wishes for robust health and growth of people, crops and livestock in the village.

On a more abstract lexical level, the same religious term can have different nuances of meaning in the various belief systems espoused by the Lahu. The most striking example is the word *ɔ̌-bo(n)*. In ordinary language, shared by animists and Christians, *ɔ̌-bon* means “good luck; good fortune,” or simply “one’s fate in life,” whether it is happy or not. For Buddhists, *ɔ̌-bon* is “karmic merit” acquired by doing good deeds, a store of accumulated virtue that ensures a better life in one’s next incarnation. For animists speaking of religious matters, *ɔ̌-bon* is a “boon” or “desired result” to be sought from *g̃t̃-ša* or a spirit. On the level of interpersonal relationship, the Christian Lahu see *ɔ̌-bon* as a “favor; something done out of charity”; in a more religious sense, it translates the Christian notion of “divine grace” or a “blessing from God.”

In a Christian context the phrase *ɔ̌-bo te ve*, where *ɔ̌-bo* is the object of the verb *te ve* ‘do; make’, may refer simply to an act of interpersonal kindness, and is sometimes best translated as “to do as a favor; do out of charity rather than for gain.” In the older usage, it refers to an elaborate animist/Confucian ceremony with Buddhist overtones, performed to acquire merit or cure illness, comprising the following five parts:

•və? t̃i ve slaughter of a pig

Before the sacrifice the pig must be apologized to in these

words:

ṇà nò thà? tē ni šē? pō? ʔ cā le hu tã ve le,

ṇà tĩ-cā le bo te ve bā? tã cò lã

Since I have fed you three times a day and taken care of you,
may my killing you now to eat and make merit not bring any
guilt upon me!

•chə-ši ʔ cā ve

feeding of the ancestral spirits

•vā?-šā cā ve

offering a pork feast to the village

•ká-mo-khe phe ve

binding of wrists of all members of
donor households²⁶

•cò cə ve

construction of a symbolic bridge
over the path leading to the village

The spirits

The Lahu universe is populated by a large number of spirits called *nê* (cf. Burmese *nat*), which come in good, neutral, and evil forms. All of them must regularly be attended to or propitiated (*nê te ve*).

Spirits in natural phenomena and inanimate objects

The animists believe that most objects in the natural environment have spirits that can affect the lives of humans, like the hill spirit (*qho-nê*), stream spirit (*lò-nê*), sun spirit (*mũ-ni-nê*), lightning spirit (*mũ-thê?-nê*), rainbow spirit (*á-lâ-mì-šĩ-jə-nê*), and so on. These nature spirits are not intrinsically malicious, but they can be enraged by a human's unwitting behavior (for example, stepping into a stream at a wrong point), and they are each capable of inflicting a particular range of illnesses on the offender. Thus the rainbow spirit can cause fever, anorexia, jaundice, and abdominal swelling; the sun spirit specializes in splitting headaches; the stream spirit can cause drowning, and so on.

Some man-made inanimate objects—notably rifles—also

have spirits. We have seen how a man must reward the gun spirit after a successful hunt. The spirits of agricultural implements and knives also receive offerings during the Male New Year.

Good spirits

Every household has guardian spirits. The most important of these are the house-spirit (yê-nê), the lineage spirit (for the Shehle Lahu), and the spirit of the locality. Rituals for the house spirits, especially during the New Year's celebrations, ensure good fortune and protection for the household members during the upcoming year. A shrine to the house-spirit is usually permanently set up in the household head's room. (See ba-la-qā-ē, illustration 18).

The ancestral spirits are basically benevolent, but must never be neglected, since a discontented ancestor can cause much trouble for its descendants. In a society where lore is transmitted orally, the rituals of ancestor worship also serve to cement the names of the ancestors in the memories of the living generations. It seems clear that the element of ancestor worship in Lahu religion has been borrowed from Chinese culture, where it has always been of paramount importance.

Evil spirits

Most to be feared are the spirits that are inherently malicious toward human beings. These usually attack by biting (nê chê? ve 'spirit bites'); but some are also capable of entering a body and taking possession of it (nê ge ve 'spirit enters'). A victim

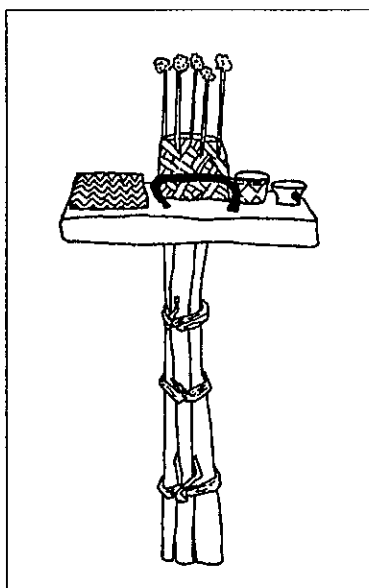


Illustration 18. ba-la-qā-ē
shrine to the house spirit

of demoniacal possession must be beaten until the spirit leaves his body. These spirits usually turn out to be the ghosts of non-Lahu (Thai, Chinese, and so on).

Among the worst spirits are those that have their origin in blood. These spirits are invariably intent on harming people, and without ritual intervention will cause their victims to have fatal accidents. The dreaded *jaw*-spirits (jɔ-nê) have their origin in the blood shed by the sun or moon during eclipses. (Solar and lunar eclipses are caused by a celestial tiger and frog biting the sun and moon, respectively.) Other malevolent spirits are the mɛ̀, mû, and gûl, spawned from the souls of those who have died "bad deaths" (deaths that involve blood leaving the body), and which lurk around their graves for all eternity.

Another kind of evil spirit, called *chɛ-chɛ* in Red Lahu and *tɔʔ* in Black Lahu, comes in three forms: one kind attacks fowl at night; another kind only goes after people in the jungle; but the third type can reach a person anywhere. A *chɛ-chɛ* may take up permanent residence in a person's body, and is acquired either by inheritance from parents or by picking up some beautiful object. The spirit periodically leaves the host's body and attacks people by entering them (not so serious), or by fatally but invisibly biting them on the neck like a vampire, often in the guise of a cat or other animal. The possessed person is a "witch," a passive harbinger of evil. The victim will actually see the *chɛ-chɛ* in the form of the witch's body, and may before his death announce the name of the witch, who must then be banished from the village (but is not usually killed).²⁷

There are also a variety of lesser evil spirits possessing specialized powers, including the "Lawa spirit" (á-và-nê) that inhabits abandoned Buddhist temples, and causes sudden unexpected illnesses. The charcoal spirit (ʃí-gəʔ-kâʔ-êʔ-nê) frightens people who spend the night in the jungle; it is like the wind, having no human or animal form, and can leave its victims paralyzed.

Human beings are not entirely helpless against the depre-

dations of evil spirits. Besides the verbal weapons of exorcism or propitiation at the disposal of "spirit-doctors," various ritual objects help to keep the spirits at bay, including a kind of pitchfork called *mè-tò-lê?*, useful in repelling the *mè* and *jo*; and "spirit guards" of several shapes, which can be placed in front of an endangered house, or at the gateway to the village.

G'uisha and the Creation

Above all of this unholy rabble, there is an abstractly conceived supreme supernatural called *g̃t-ša*,²⁸ the creator of heaven and earth. Among the Red Lahu, *g̃t-ša* is conceived both as a personal God, appropriately addressed as "Father G'uisha," and as a diffused divinity incorporating several other deities, of whom a female counterpart, *ay-ma*,²⁹ is the most important. Christians have reinterpreted G'uisha after their own fashion.

The lesser deities are believed to be children of G'uisha. One of these, *pi-yâ* or *k̃-yâ*, embodies an efficacious power that may be harnessed for good or evil, and is associated with metal-working, the fabrication of tools and weapons. Also in this category of minor deities are the spirits viewed as divine prototypes of human roles in society: the Divine Headman (*g̃t-ma-a-dô*), the Divine Blacksmith (*g̃t-ma-ca-lí-pā*), and so on.

In the beginning Father G'uisha (*g̃t-ša*) created heaven (*mû-no-ma*), and Mother Ay-ma created earth (*mì-nâ?ma*). But while G'uisha worked rather lazily, resting frequently to drink tea, Mother Ay-ma was extremely diligent in her work. So when the time came for Father G'uisha to join earth and heaven together, he found to his surprise that earth was very large and heaven rather small. In order to make the ends join properly, he was compelled to crease up the earth, creating hills and valleys. At first the surface of the earth was uninhabitable, too soft and muddy. So G'uisha summoned *pi-yâ* and cared for him for a number of years, feeding him nothing but iron and copper. *Pi-yâ*

gained great strength from this diet, and finally shot his power against the earth, which immediately solidified.

The heavens have a number of layers: first the sky with its sun, moon, and stars; above this is the land of the dead (cho-ši-mû-mì); and above all is the place where G'uisha lives (gî-ša-mû-mì). Between the sky and the land of the dead is a great four-faced mountain, around which the sun, stars, and moon revolve. During the day when the sun is shining on the land of the living, it is night in the land of the dead, and vice versa.

G'uisha eventually created men and put them inside a great bottle gourd. They couldn't break out, so they called to a sparrow for help, promising it rice when they would begin to farm the land. The sparrow pecked conscientiously for several days, but could not pierce the gourd. Then a rat was appealed to, with the same promise, and finally succeeded in gnawing through. Because of their initial assistance to mankind, birds and rodents eat a share of the ripening rice to this very day.³⁰

Rituals and ceremonies

The lives of the animist Lahu are punctuated by a great variety of religious ceremonies and practices, involving individuals or the whole village.³¹ The animist Lahu are called *pê-tû-pā* ("beeswax-burners") both by themselves and by the Christians, because of the major role that candle-lighting plays in many of these rituals. Each animist

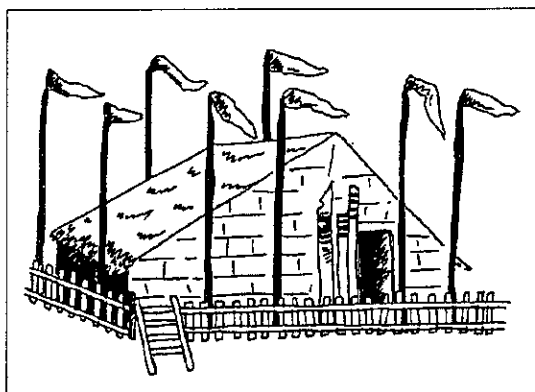


Illustration 19. bon-yè blessing house (BL)
hó-yè palace (RL)

community of any size has a number of "ritual specialists," some of whom deal with G'uisha and others with the spirits.

The ritual center of the village is a temple dedicated to G'uisha, called *bon-yè* ("blessing house": see illustration 19) in Black Lahu or *hó-yè* ("palace") in Red Lahu. It is usually located at the higher end of the village, set apart from ordinary houses. It may be raised on piles, but is sometimes flush with the ground to enable it to withstand vigorous dancing. The *hó-yè* is filled with a large number of ritual objects, each of which is fraught with deep symbolic significance, though people have different explanations for them. If a village is too small or priestless to have a temple, it may have a simple shrine dedicated to the spirit of the locality. Christian communities have churches, also called *bon-yè*, which often double as schools. Shehleh and Yellow Lahu villages do not have temples, but rather a fenced dancing circle as their ritual center.

If a village has a *hó-yè*, there will be a whole hierarchy of ritual officials associated with it, at the summit of which is the *pó-khû* or *to-bo-pā*, the priest of G'uisha. A *pó-khû* is highly regarded, since he fulfills the key functions of mediating between G'uisha and the people, and leading public rituals honoring the supreme divinity.

The village headman also plays an important ritual role, since his responsibility for maintaining village harmony is a reflection of the orderliness of the world in general. Many Red Lahu headmen have an altar in their house dedicated to the Divine Headman, the heavenly prototype of earthly authority.

In contrast, the spirit-doctors (*mó* or *nê te šē-phā*) deal with the unsavory world of the *nê*, propitiating or exorcising them as the need arises. They operate on a private, free-lance basis, not out of a place of public worship. They are not particularly respected by the community, and in fact are often opium-addicts. Only such folk would want to have such intimate dealings with the spirits anyway.

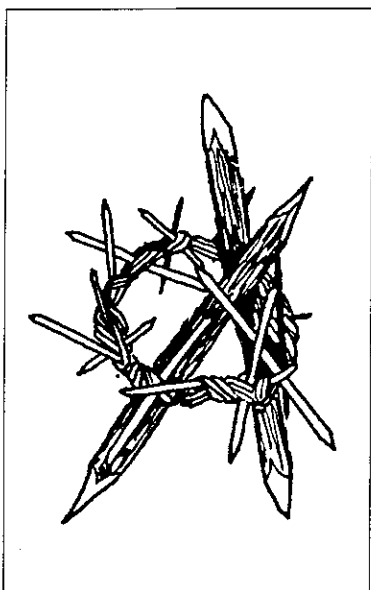


Illustration 20. pi-go ritual object

In Christian communities the pastor (šā-lā),³² takes the place of the priest of G'uisha, and there are no spirit-doctors at all.

On the fringes of ritual respectability are people (often women) who are periodically "possessed" by G'uisha, who causes them to weep and shake. During this state, known as *šā-cā?yā?ve* ("G'uisha's rope descends"), they may be permitted glimpses into the world of the after-life.

On the seamy side are the practitioners of black magic, sorcerers known as *nê-pi-pù-šē-phā*, who cooperate willingly with an evil spirit to cause

harm to a person.³³ Their activities resemble voodoo, involving ritual objects like the spiky *pi-go* (see illustration 20), and practices like sewing up a cat's eyes and dropping it into a stream in a weighted sack.

Finally, there are the "charm-blowing doctors" (*šā?-mā?-pā-mó*), who may be called upon to administer "first aid" to counteract medical emergencies like hemorrhages, stomach-ache, something stuck in the throat or an eye, or bites of poisonous insects or snakes. This is accomplished by muttering brief incantations (*šā?*) in Shan, pronounced Lahu-fashion, while blowing on the injured bodypart. These versatile practitioners also offer protection from spirits, or from animals when sleeping in the jungle, and can make love-potions.

Messianic movements and Christianity

Throughout Lahu history there have been periodic appear-

ances of messianic figures, who have sometimes gained influence over a wide territory, even among non-Lahu. Beginning as charismatic priests leading religious revivals, they would extend their interests into socio-political affairs, often claiming for themselves extraordinary, even supernatural, powers (for example, imperviousness to bullets). Some of these cult movements have resulted in the formation of new cultural subgroups. It seems clear that Christianity in its early days in Burma and Yunnan was seen by the Lahu as a revivalist cult, and the pioneer missionary as a messianic figure. Such religious ferment seems to be especially strong in times of cultural and political stress from the lowlanders. Lahu are then apt to turn to holy men, who alone can unite the fiercely independent village communities to combat the lowlanders' organizational advantage, while offering supernatural means of countering their technological superiority.

The most recent prophet to affect Northern Thailand was called *pɔ-khû-lón* ("great priest"), usually known by his sobriquet *mɔʔ-náʔ-to-bo* ("Gibbon Priest"). He came from a village in the hills above Mong Tong in Shan State, and was regarded by his followers as the earthly embodiment of G'uisha. He was a religious innovator and a moral reformer, introducing several new deities into the Lahu pantheon, banning alcohol, opium, and gambling, and emphasizing Confucian virtues. He paid intermittent visits to Thailand until his death in 1981 or 1982.

G'uisha has been reinterpreted as the "Judeo-Christian" God by European Catholic and American Protestant missionaries who have been working with the Lahu since the turn of the century. The most active proselytizers in Thailand have belonged to the American Baptist Mission, which claimed 28,000 converts in Burma and Thailand in 1950. There are now close to 40 villages of Christian Lahu in Thailand, comprising some 7,000 people, over one-sixth of the Lahu in the country. In these villages, needless to say, no one grows opium, chews betel, or drinks fermented alcoholic beverages. Recent attempts to ban tobacco

smoking as well have not met with much success so far.

Christian missionaries in China and Burma had little success in converting individual Lahu, but if they won over a village headman and council of elders, whole villages would convert. Villages are either wholly animist or wholly Christian; since Lahu society already tends toward fragmentation during times of conflict, villagers see no point in tolerating additional disunifying factors like religion. While all the members of a Christian village profess Christianity, at times of sickness or death belief in the spirits may resurface, especially among those who had converted for other reasons than deep religious conviction. Theological subtleties like the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism are understood by very few Lahu.

In Southeast Asia, the Christian Lahu constitute a "minority within a minority," and are often referred to by a separate subgroup label, *Lahu Krit*. On the other hand, the recent Lahu refugees to the United States, who are almost all Christian, find this a great advantage in adapting to American life and culture.

The Lahu Language

The sound pattern of Lahu: monosyllables with tones

Like the other Sino-Tibetan languages (see Figure I), Lahu has a monosyllabic structure; that is, its morphemes are almost always only one syllable long. A morpheme is the minimal unit of meaning in a language. A word may contain one or more morphemes: the English words *ball* and *friend* contain only a single morpheme; *foot-ball* and *friend-ly* have two morphemes; *foot-ball-s* and *un-friend-ly* have three morphemes. Like English, Lahu contains many polysyllabic words, both compounds consisting of two roots (like *football*), and words (like *unfriendly*) containing a root plus a prefix and/or suffix. A monosyllabic language like Lahu lacks morphemes that are more than one syllable long, but cannot be divided into smaller meaningful units, like *giraffe*, *senate*, *pickle*, *syringe*, *stomach*, *ankle*, *swallow*, *furnace*. By and large, every syllable of a native Lahu word has a separate meaning.

Monosyllabic structure goes hand in hand with the development of “Sinospheric” (Chinese-type) tone-systems,³⁴ where every syllable is pronounced with a distinctive pitch-contour, so that the tone of the syllable is just as important to its meaning as its consonants and vowels.

Black Lahu has seven tones (compared, for example, to the four of Mandarin, the six of North Vietnamese, and the eight of Cantonese). See Figure V. Five of these tones are smooth and open, pronounced without constriction; the other two are “checked,” with the flow of air stopped suddenly at the vocal cords by a glottal stop. The glottal stop, symbolized by ʔ, is the sound found in English between the vowels of the colloquial negative interjection “uh-uh!”³⁵

Figure V. The seven tones of Black Lahu

<i>Name of tone</i>	<i>Pitch</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Example</i>
Mid	33	unmarked	ca 'look for'
High-rising	35	/ ' /	cá 'boil'
High-falling	53	/ ^ /	câ 'eat'
Low-falling	21	/ ' /	cà 'ferocious'
Very low	11	/ - /	cā 'feed'
High-checked	54?	/ ^ ʔ /	câʔ 'rope'
Low-checked	21?	/ ^ ʔ /	càʔ 'push'; 'machine'

[The phonetic values of the tones are roughly indicated on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). The first digit represents the starting pitch of the tone; the second stands for its final pitch. Thus the high-rising tone (45) begins above the mid-range at a pitch of 4, and slides up to a high final pitch of 5.]

Any Lahu writing system must include symbols for the tones. In the system used here, the tones are indicated by accent marks over the vowel. The mid-tone (33) is left unmarked, as a sort of baseline. The two checked tones are distinguished from each other by different marks over the vowel, but both are written with glottal stop after the vowel /^ʔ/ vs. /^ʔ/.

Consonants and vowels of Black Lahu

Lahu syllables have a very simple structure, consisting of only three parts: an initial consonant, a vowel and a tone. The initial consonant is optional (a syllable may begin with a vowel), but the vowel and tone are obligatory. This structure may be symbolized by this diagram (known as a *syllable canon*):

T
(C)V

Note that there are no syllables with final consonants, since glottal stop -ʔ is best regarded as a tonal feature. Even in syllable-initial position, only a single consonant may occur, not groups or clusters of consonants like *pl-*, *gr-*, or *str-*.³⁶

Black Lahu has 24 initial consonants and 9 vowels, as shown in Figure VI:

Figure VI. Black Lahu consonants and vowels

Consonants (24)					Vowels (9)		
p	t	c	k	q	i	ĩ	u
ph	th	ch	kh	qh	e	ə	o
b	d	j		g	ɛ	a	ɔ
m	n			ŋ			
f		ʃ		h			
v		y		ǧ			
	l						

Consonants

The top three rows of the chart are the three series of obstruents (stops and affricates): plain or voiceless unaspirated /p t c k q/, voiceless aspirated /ph th ch kh qh/ and voiced /b d j g/. English only has two series, voiced and voiceless. (Aspiration of voiceless consonants occurs automatically in English in syllable-initial position, but not after *s-*, as in the words *pit* [p^hit], *spit* [spit], *bit* [bit].) The affricates /ch j/ have close English equivalents (*ch* as in *church*, *j* as in *judge*), but the unaspirated affricate /c/ has no English counterpart.

Lahu, like Hmong, has a contrast between ordinary velars /k kh/ and postvelars /q qh/, with the latter pronounced far back on the palate, much like the Arabic sound transcribed with *q*, as in *Iraq*. There is no voiced postvelar stop in Lahu, only the ordinary /g/.

The symbol /ǧ/ stands for the voiced velar fricative [ɣ]. This Lahu sound derives from Proto-Lolo-Burmese *r-, which must

have been pronounced something like the “uvular *r*” of Parisian French. The symbol /ʃ/ stands for a sibilant like English “sh”. The letter /ŋ/ represents the velar nasal, like “ng” in English *sing*; but this sound can begin a syllable in Lahu (e.g. *ŋâ* ‘T’, *ŋâ khe* ‘five animals’, *ŋâ-šā* ‘fish’, *ŋā pī ve* ‘lend’, *ŋo-ŋo* ‘almost’), while English *-ng* only occurs in syllable-final position.

The five palatals /c ch j š y/ have special dental pronunciations before the vowel /i/:

/ci chi ji ši yi/ → [tʂ₁ tʂh₁ ʈʂ₁ s₁ z₁]

These dental sibilants [tʂ tʂh ʈʂ s z] do not occur before any other vowel. Lahu is one of the few languages in the world to lack a phoneme /s/.

Similarly, the four labials /p ph b m/ have special affricated variants before the vowel /u/:

/pu phu bu mu/ → [pfu pʰfu bvuu mvuu].

The syllable /ni/ is pronounced [ñi], with a palatal *n*; but [ñ] does not occur before any other vowel, so it is not a phoneme, and there is no need to write it with a separate symbol.

Vowels

Five of the nine vowels of Black Lahu are written with the ordinary letters /a i u e o/. /e/ and /o/ are monophthongs (“pure vowels”) as in French *été* or *eau*, not diphthongs as in English *day* or *doe*. There is a contrast between the two front vowels /e/ and /ɛ/, with the latter like the vowel in English *bed*; and a parallel contrast between the back vowels /o/ and /ɔ/, the latter similar to the vowel of French *pomme* or German *Kopf*, with no close English equivalent.

The central vowels /ɨ/ and /ə/ complete the system. /ɨ/ is similar to the Russian vowel transcribed as “y” in words like *ty* ‘you’, *jazyk* ‘language’. /ə/ is similar to the vowel in “r-less” British English *girl*, *hurl*.

Besides the nine simple vowels, various types of diphthongs also occur, both rising and falling. The most common

native Lahu word with a diphthong is *qay* 'go'.

Differences in Yellow Lahu³⁷ phonology

The sound system of Yellow Lahu differs from that of Black Lahu in several important respects:

• *Consonants*: Yellow Lahu (YL) does not have the post-velar stops /q qh/; i.e. there is no distinction between *k* and *q*, or between *kh* and *qh*. Where Black Lahu (BL) has post-velars, Yellow Lahu has ordinary ones:

'nine'	BL qɔ̌	YL kɔ̌ ⁵⁵
'bitter'	BL qhâ	YL kha ⁵⁵

• *Vowels*: YL does not have the central vowels /ɨ/ or /ə/; i.e. there is no distinction between /i/ and /ɨ/, or between /e/ and /ə/. Where BL has central vowels, YL has the corresponding front vowels:

'dog'	BL phɨ̌	YL phi ⁵⁵
'put in'	BL kə̌	YL ke ⁵⁵

• *Tones*: While the number of tones in YL and BL is the same, the phonetic values of several of them are quite different, e.g.:

BL low-falling /ˋ/ [31]	is	YL high-falling [53]
BL high-falling /ˊ/ [53]	is	YL high-level [55]

Since both of these very frequent tones are higher pitched in YL, this dialect makes an impression of highness and shrillness on the listener used to BL.

Lahu spelling

The first writing systems for Lahu were developed by Catholic and Protestant missionaries in China and Burma. These orthographies have many good points, including an accurate representation of the seven tones by means of accent marks; but they include ten unnecessary consonants and one extra vowel

symbol.³⁸ In the 1950s a different writing system for Lahu was developed by Chinese linguists in Yunnan, with the choice of symbols close to that used for the official “Pinyin” romanization of Mandarin. This Chinese orthography indicates the tones by arbitrary consonants after the vowel (e.g. *caq* for cá, *cad* for cǎ, etc.), but fails to distinguish between the low-falling /˥/ and very-low /˩/ tones, or between the vowels /ɨ/ and /ə/, even though these contrasts do exist in the Black Lahu dialects of Yunnan.

The notion of alphabetical order is still very new to the Lahu. The order adopted in *The Dictionary of Lahu* is rather complex, since not only the vowels and consonants, but also the tones, must appear in a fixed sequence. This order is printed at the bottom of every page of the *Dictionary*, as follows:

Order of tones:	a á â à ǎ ǎ? ǎ?
Order of vowels:	a i u e o ɛ ɔ i ə
Order of consonants:	q qh k kh g ŋ c ch j t th d n p ph b m h ɣ ʃ y f v l

(Words without an initial consonant are listed first in the *Dictionary*.)

Problems for Lahu in mastering the English sound system

Because of the vast differences between the sound systems of Lahu and English, the Lahu student will experience difficulty mastering some English sounds and combinations of sounds.

On the level of intonation, Lahu (like other speakers of tone languages), tend to give equal melodic prominence to each syllable, rather than swallowing up or “underarticulating” unstressed syllables, as we do in English.

Since Lahu lacks consonant clusters at the beginning of syllables, speakers will naturally tend to simplify English initial clusters to single consonants. In addition, since Lahu has no syllable-final consonants at all, they are likely to pronounce English closed syllables under a checked tone /˥/ or /˥˩/, since

glottal stop is the closest thing Lahu has to a consonant after a vowel. Thus the English phrase *green card* comes out in American Lahu speech as gî?-khà?: in *green* the English *gr-* is simplified to *g-*, and the final *-n* is rendered by the stopped tone /`ʔ/, as is the final *-d* in *card*. Notice that Lahu speakers naturally interpret English aspirated consonants (like the “c-” in *card*) as equivalent to the Lahu voiceless aspirated series (*kh-*).

Lahu, like Japanese, has only one liquid (/l/, but not /r/), and has the sounds [s] and [z] only before the single vowel /i/. Lahu speakers will have trouble pronouncing English /r s z/, tending to substitute [l ʃ y], respectively.

Lahu speakers do pretty well with English vowels, since the nine vowels of Lahu form a relatively rich system (as compared, for example, to Japanese, which only has five vowels). However, Lahu lacks the very low front vowel [æ], found in English words like *pat*, *sad*, *bad*, so that speakers are likely to substitute the closest Lahu vowel available, /ɛ/, as in English *pet*, *said*, *bed*. Thus English *alcohol* /ælkəhɒl/ comes out as êkôhôn in Lahu.³⁹ The English diphthong /ay/ as in *ice*, also tends to be replaced by Lahu /ɛ/, as in êʃikîmî ‘ice cream’ (note also the replacement of English “s” by Lahu ʃ, the simplification of “cr” to k, and the addition of a final “echo-vowel” -i to make the final -m of *cream* pronounceable.)

Greetings and formulaic expressions

Lahu dispense with many of the greetings used in Western countries, or Asian countries with elaborate social etiquette like Japan. These are simple, egalitarian folk, who see each other every day of their lives, and who do not need to stand on ceremony.

In traditional Lahu discourse there are no “time of day” greetings like our *good morning*, *good evening*, *have a nice day*, and so on, nor do family members say anything to each other before going to bed (*good night*, *sleep well*). Casual partings are not marked by any particular formula; if you want to leave a friend’s

house at night, you just get up and go, perhaps with a yawn or a smile. At most one might say *qay a šā* 'I'm going', which requires no response. In the case of more serious separations, as when someone is setting out on a trip, the person who stays might say *a-yé-yé qay* 'Go carefully'.

Lahu do not traditionally thank each other verbally for the little mutual services of daily life (serving or passing food, making a fire, picking up or carrying something for someone, and so on). Christian missionaries have introduced the expression *ḏ-bō-jā* as an equivalent for English *thank you* (literally, "the blessing is very great"), but it sounds strange to use it overmuch in casual situations. Grunts, smiles, or nods are preferable in most cases, with the tacit understanding that daily kindnesses are a matter of course and will certainly be reciprocated.

One situation where greetings are truly important is when meeting a stranger on the road, especially on an isolated path in the hills. The obligatory greeting establishes whether one is friend or foe, and one's reason for being there. It usually takes the form of the question *qhò qay le* "Where are you going?"⁴⁰—to which only a brief answer is expected.

The friendliest greeting upon meeting someone you know is an inquiry about his latest meal: *ḥ cá ò lá* "have you eaten yet?" This is only rarely to be construed as an invitation to eat together. There are normally only two possible answers: *cá ò* "(I've) eaten already" or *má cá šē* "(I) haven't eaten yet," either of which is accepted without comment.

Lahu vocabulary and word-formation

Lahu, like all human languages, has a large vocabulary,⁴¹ especially rich in areas like plant and animal terminology. In monosyllabic languages like Lahu or Chinese, where morphemes are just one syllable long, many syllables are "homophonous," pronounced exactly the same way in isolation. To compensate for

this, the Sino-Tibetan languages create additional “phonological bulk” typically by compounding (joining separate roots together to form words), by affixation (adding prefixes or suffixes to roots) or by reduplication (repeating syllables).

No fewer than five separate Lahu roots are now pronounced *ha* (all under the mid, unmarked tone), though these were all distinct at the Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) and Proto-Lolo-Burmese (PLB) stages. They are distinguished in modern Lahu by the additional syllables with which they typically co-occur. See Figure VII.

Figure VII. Expanding homophonous monosyllables

	PTB	PLB	Lahu mono- syllables	Lahu di- syllables
‘hundred’	*b-r-gya	*ʔ-ra¹	ha	tê ha
‘moon’	*s-gla	*s-la³	ha	ha-pa
‘tongue’	*s-lya	*s-l(y)a¹	ha	ha-tê
‘spirit’	*s-hla	*s-la³	ha	ð-ha
‘winnow’	*g-ya(p)	*ʔ-ya¹	ha	ha ve

Compounding

By and large, one can figure out a meaning for the vast majority of syllables in all the thousands of Lahu compounds, though historical change has sometimes made this difficult (as in English *nostril*, where the second element descends from a now obsolete Old English morpheme *thyrel* ‘hole’).

Most Lahu compounds have only two or three syllables, though certain extra-long ones (especially flora and fauna names) may run to five or six, for example, á-lâ-mì-ší-jɔ ‘rainbow’; pā-pā-qú-ti-ni ‘dragonfly’; a-gò-a-lí-pē or na-gù-na-gá-pē ‘spider’; khâʔ-pà-mē-čf-câ-kwì ‘greater racket-tailed drongo’ [*Dicrurus paradiseus*].

Often the same element occurs with great semantic consistency in a large number of compounds, like the morpheme -ší,

which occurs in dozens of compound nouns referring to round or spherical objects, including:

ši small spherical or globular object; ball, fruit, pellet, seed, etc.

á-phè?-ši	pepper-pod	à-mī-ši	hand grenade
î-ši	fruit	ó-qō-ši	head
ò-ñ- qō-ši	stomach ulcer	ò-lâ-ši	kidney
kâ?-ši	goosepimples	khō-ši	a top
cà-ši	paddy; rice	cī-ñ-ši	tonsils
cú-ši	nipple	cú-nê?-ši	breast
chi-tu-ši	weights	jù?-ši	beads; cowrie
tí-qhâ?-ši	button	dâ?-ši	lightbulb
nâ?-ši	bullet	nâ?-chî-ši	pill
ni-ma-ši	heart (organ)	nī-ši	testicle
nō?-ši	bean	pā-jî?-ši	pimple
pê-ši	taro	pō-lè-nī-ši	tomato
phô?-mó-ši	pumpkin	bó-ši	ball
mâ?-tèw-ši	die; dice	mâ?-pāw-ši	coconut
mù-ši	mushroom	mê?-ši	eye
mō?-ši	cannonball	mò?-kə-ši	star
há-pi-ši	stone; rock	gū-tu-ši	navel
ša-ma-ši	kernel of corn	šo-ši-kî-ši	"balls of iron and bronze" (bullets)
šê-ši	sand		
yò-mû-ši	wool pompom		
vâ-ši	hailstone	lò-kî?-ši	brick

Prefixation

Important Lahu prefixes include a-, á-, and ò-.

a- (vocative) kinship prefix. This element appears before kinship terms, often in direct address (vocatively), for example, a-e 'mother!', a-ni 'younger sibling!', a-pa 'father!'. These kin terms can also occur with the general prefix ò- (discussed below), in which case they are used to refer to that person, not in a term of address.

á- noun-forming prefix. This bulk-providing prefix occurs in about 70 nouns, occupying some 13 pages of the Lahu dictionary, making it the second most common prefix in Black Lahu. Examples include: á-qhâ 'ragweed', á-qhō 'home', á-cè 'hawk', á-chè? 'goat', á-thâ 'jewsharp', á-pò? 'shirt', á-pō 'banana', á-lè? 'salt'.

ð- noun-forming prefix. Words with this prefix constitute over six percent of the *Dictionary of Lahu* (86 of 1349 pages). This prefix is sometimes added to roots that are already free nouns: e.g. *šā* or *ð-šā* 'meat; animal'; *gā* or *ð-gā* 'strength'; *nī* or *ð-nī* 'day'. More often its presence serves to convert a bound noun into a free noun, capable of standing alone in a noun-phrase: e.g. *cè* 'morpheme in plant-names', *ð-cè* 'a plant'; *šī* 'round object morpheme', *ð-šī* 'a ball; a sphere'.

When the context is clear, a general morpheme with the *ð-* prefix can substitute for a noun with a more specific first syllable. In the following sentences the word *ð-šī* 'round object' is interpreted as *fruit* in (a), but as *bullet* in (b):

- (a) *šīʔ-cè* *chi tē* *cè* *lè* *ð-šī* *mā dàʔ*
 tree this one kind top *** not good
 This kind of tree's fruit is no good.
 (As for this kind of tree, roundthing is not good.)
- (b) *nāʔ* *chi tē* *cè* *lè* *ð-šī* *mā dàʔ*
 gun
 This kind of gun's bullets are no good.
 (As for this kind of gun, roundthing is not good.)

Sometimes the *ð-* prefix has nominalizing force, serving to convert a verb into a noun:

<i>ð-u</i>	an egg	<i>u</i>	to lay an egg
<i>ð-qəʔ</i>	a curved thing	<i>qəʔ</i>	to bend
<i>ð-cā</i>	a sprout	<i>cā</i>	to sprout
<i>ð-chu</i>	fat, grease	<i>chu</i>	to be fat
<i>ð-phôʔ</i>	a heap, a pile	<i>phôʔ</i>	to pile up

Reduplication and elaboration

Nouns are repeated or "reduplicated" to achieve several semantic effects:

Inclusive reduplication signifies all the members of the class represented by the noun:

<i>yā-mī yā-mī</i>	all the women
<i>hó-qhāʔ hó-qhāʔ</i>	all the men

Sequential or distributive reduplication shows that the things represented by the reduplicated noun are considered one after the other:

ð-œ ð-œ
ð-tɔ ð-tɔ

pair by pair
a section at a time

Indefinite reduplication indicates uncertainty about the exact scope of reference of the noun:

tê chi kîlô-lô
tê gâ-gâ

about ten kilos
somebody or other
(one person-person)

Emphatic reduplication heightens or intensifies the meaning of the noun:

ð-lɛ-lɛ
mô-mô ɔ

the very last
way down there

Particularly interesting are the hundreds of special four-element compounds I call elaborate expressions (*Elab's*),⁴² where either the first and third, or the second and fourth, syllables are identical, yielding structures of the form A-B-A-C or A-B-C-B. For example:

fâ?-ɔ-ŋâ?-ɔ
rodent-rice-bird-rice

rat food and bird food
(epithet for harvested paddy
left out in the fields too long)

khô-mu-khô-nè
word-high-word-low

high and low pitched words; tones

ha-lè-ha-qa
spirit-warm-spirit-qa

happy and relaxed

dɔ-ša-gâ-ša
think-easy-gâ-easy

be serene and easy in one's mind

Usually the non-repeated syllables of an *Elab* are closely related semantically (synonyms, antonyms, or correlatives), like *foot/hand*, *silver/gold*, *male/female*, *high/low*, *beg/beseech*. Some of these "elaborate couplets" may recur with other repeated syllables to form families of related *Elab's*; thus *fâ?* 'rodent' and *ŋâ?* 'bird' also appear in such expressions as *fâ?-thɔ-ŋâ?-thɔ* "zoo" ('rodent-jail-bird-jail'), *fâ?-é-ŋâ?-é* "little animals; the small fauna of the forest" ('rodent-small-bird-small'), *fâ?-hu-ŋâ?-hu* "nourish the rats and birds" (by giving them a chance to eat the crops).

Sometimes a syllable occurs only in a single *Elab* but nowhere else in the language, like the *-qa* in *ha-lè-ha-qa*, so that its

original meaning can only be guessed at. There are also cases where a syllable means one thing in Elab's but another in ordinary language. For example, the second member of the common couplet *dô/gâ* 'think/feel', as in *dô-pô-gâ-pô* "think penetrating thoughts" (*pô* 'pierce'), *dô-yà-gâ-yà* "be broadminded, imperturbable" (*yà* 'be long'). Although *dô* is still the ordinary verb 'think', *gâ* no longer occurs as a free verb in modern colloquial Lahu, functioning rather as a desiderative verb-particle, as in *pô gâ* 'want to pierce', *qay gâ* 'want to go'.

Elaborate expressions are freely sprinkled into ordinary Lahu conversation, but they are especially characteristic of the archaic ritual language used in animist prayers, where they come thick and fast, often twice in the same clause, once in a noun phrase and one in the verb phrase (see Appendix I).

Neologisms and language contact

Besides its basic stock of vocabulary inherited from Proto-Lolo-Burmese (and ultimately from Proto-Tibeto-Burman), Lahu contains many words borrowed from the languages with which it has come in contact. This process of adopting loanwords is accelerating at a dizzying rate, as the Lahu struggle to keep up with the conceptual world of the late 20th century.

Many of the earliest loans into Lahu are from Chinese (e.g. *ò-lî* 'custom', *šô-ci* 'shuttle'). The largest number of loans in the Black Lahu of Thailand that I have studied since the mid-1960s are from Shan, since these villages had just crossed the border into Thailand from Shan State 25 years before. Many Burmese words also filtered down into Lahu via Shan, including a number of religious and governmental terms that ultimately derive from Sanskrit/Pali. A Lahu word like *šālā* 'teacher', now used as a title for Christian pastors and Western professors, has a long and honorable history, starting with Sanskrit—*ācharya* (see note 32).

The Lahu of Yunnan are now undergoing a massive lexical assault from Chinese, as they are integrated into the Chinese educational system.

There are a few English loans in Lahu from the days of British rule in Burma (e.g. *lô-lî* 'lorry; truck'), but this is nothing compared to the influence English is having on the language of the

Lahu now resident in California.

Besides borrowing words outright, a language can keep pace with the modern world by creating new words ("neologisms") out of its own lexical resources, by using old morphemes in new combinations; or it can create novel "blends" of parts of foreign words with native morphemes. Lahu uses both these strategies, as illustrated by several of the compounds listed above under *ši* 'round object'. Sometimes these are new combinations of native Lahu morphemes:

à-mī-ši	hand-grenade ('fire-ball')
ò-ŋ-qō-ši	stomach ulcer ('stomach-ball')
cí-ŋi-ši	tonsils ('spit-spheres')

Sometimes they are blends of *ši* with Shan or Thai roots,

mà?-pāw-ši	coconut (1st element < Thai <i>məphráaw</i>)
šé(n)-ši	(a) jewel; precious stone (b) lightbulb (1st element < Shan <i>s'eq</i> 'precious')

or blends with Burmese morphemes (via Shan):

dā?-ši	lightbulb (1st element from Burmese, ultimately from Pali/Sanskrit <i>dhātu</i> 'element; primitive matter')
dā?-mī-ši	flashlight battery/synonym (Red Lahu) <i>fāy-fā-ši</i> from Thai <i>fajfāa</i> 'electricity'
yā-cū-ši	weight (1st element from Burmese <i>ra-ju</i> 'scales')

Most recent are blends with English syllables:

bó-ši	ball (first syllable from English).
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Several blends of other Lahu morphemes with English-derived elements were already in use in Thailand in the 1970s, e.g.: *šú-kē?-lê?* 'cigarette' (from Lahu *šú* 'tobacco' + English -garette); *cā?-tō* 'tractor' (from Lahu *cā?* 'machine' or 'push' + English -tor); and *mōtō-pō?* 'motorcycle' (from English 'motor' + Lahu *pō?* (-*pō?-pō?*) 'sound a motorcycle makes').

Although it is a lexicographer's nightmare trying to cope

with this influx of new vocabulary from such a multiplicity of sources, these borrowings and blends will only enrich Lahu, not impoverish it. English and Japanese, very receptive to foreign influence, are among the world's most successful languages.

Lahu grammar: general comparison with English

The “information-packaging strategies” of Lahu and English—the principles according to which phrases, clauses, and sentences are put together in the two languages—are vastly different in almost all respects: grammatical categories, parts of speech, word order.⁴³ Before discussing Lahu grammar on its own terms, let us look at a few of the more striking areas in which it differs radically from English:

•*No articles*

Lahu, like other Asian languages, does not mark its nouns as definite vs. indefinite, and has no grammatical category corresponding to the English articles *a*, *an* and *the*. Instead Lahu has classifiers and demonstratives, that perform similar tasks of individuating and referring to nouns.

•*No plural marker on nouns*

Lahu does not have an obligatory category of number for its nouns; that is, it does not mark plural nouns any differently from singular ones. If it is desired to express a precise plural number (for example, *three birds*) this can be done with a numeral-plus-classifier construction (ṇâ? šê? khe ‘bird + three + animal classifier’). For imprecise plurality (*some birds, birds*), a group classifier can be used with the numeral *tê* ‘one’ (ṇâ? tê phâ ‘birds; all birds; birds in general’ [‘bird + one + group classifier’]).

•*No gender distinction in third person pronouns*

As is typical for Sino-Tibetan languages, there is no distinction made between masculine and feminine third person pronouns. *He* and *she* are both expressed by Lahu *yô* (just like Mandarin *tā*).

Lahu pronouns do not inflect for case (like English *he/him, she/her, I/me*), but when a pronoun is functioning as an object (especially as an indirect object) it is often followed by the noun-particle *thâ?* (ṇâ ‘I; ṇâ thâ? ‘me; to me; for me’).

•*No category of tense for verbs*

Like many languages, Lahu does not divide up verbal events by “tense” into a past, a present, and a future. The important thing to indicate in Lahu is the “aspect” or internal dynamics of the verbal

event; whether it is just beginning, whether it is continuing, whether it has been completed, whether it has led to a new state of affairs, and so on. This information is conveyed by aspectual particles, rather than by changing the form of the verb itself.⁴⁴

When necessary, an event can be precisely situated in time by using a temporal adverbial like á-ni thâ 'yesterday', pò la ve tê šī thâ 'last week', šs-pō 'tomorrow', mâ mō-mō qo 'soon', and so on.

•**No separate class of adjectives**

In Lahu, words that translate English adjectives (for example, dà? 'be good; be pretty', chu 'be fat', cī 'be sour') do not form a separate "part of speech," but are only a subclass of the verbs. Since these "adjectival verbs" are full verbs in their own right, they may be negated by the adverb mâ 'not', just like ordinary "action verbs": qay 'go', mâ qay 'not go'; cī 'be sour', mâ cī 'not be sour'. Note that the English copula (the verb 'to be') is not expressed in a Lahu adjectival verb; it is "built into" the verb itself.

•**Verbs come last in the clause**

Unlike English clauses, where many things can follow the verb (objects, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and so on), the verb must come last in a Lahu clause.⁴⁵

•**No obligatory noun-phrases—topics, not subjects**

Unlike English, where every sentence has to have a "subject" before the verb (even impersonal meteorological statements like *It is raining*),⁴⁶ a Lahu sentence can be perfectly good and complete with no nouns in it at all. Lahu sentences do not have particular nouns that can be singled out as the subject, since all the nouns occur in a row before the verb, and their ordering is relatively free. The noun-phrase that happens to be put first in the sentence may be the agent of the verb, its direct or indirect object, a time expression, a locative, an adverbial noun, or anything else that is singled out as the "topic."

•**No active vs. passive voice**

Since a passive construction in a language like English serves to reverse the roles of the subject and the object (*The wind blew the tree down* compared to *The tree was blown down by the wind*), it is not surprising that the active vs. passive distinction is alien to Lahu grammar, since Lahu sentences do not have clearcut subjects at all. Any noun-phrase may freely be "topicalized" by being put first in the sentence.

•**No prepositions—just postpositions**

Along with its verb-final structure goes the fact that Lahu does not have prepositions or other grammatical morphemes that precede the word they affect.⁴⁷ Instead Lahu has a large number of postpositional particles, that follow the noun, verb, or clause that they govern.

Clause structure: word order and parts of speech

A phrase is a string of morphemes that behaves as a grammatical unit. If the head of the phrase is a noun, it is a *noun-phrase* (NP); if the head is a verb, it is a *verb-phrase* (VP).

A clause in a verb-final language like Lahu⁴⁸ consists of a verb-phrase together with zero or more preceding noun phrases that are associated with it. A simple sentence may contain only one clause; compound and complex sentences contain more than one clause.⁴⁹ The last clause of a non-simple sentence is called the *final clause*.

In Lahu clauses the verb phrase is king, since a clause need contain no noun phrases at all to be complete. The “subject” may be understood from the context, as in the nounless sentence

mo-chwe	chê	tù	ve	yò
quite a while	stay			
Adverb	Verb	P	P	P

(X) will stay quite a while.

Taken without context, a large number of translations are possible (“We’ll stay...”, “They’ll stay”, “People will stay...”, and so on). If absolutely necessary a noun may be added for contrast or clarity.

As this example illustrates, a verb phrase may contain adverbs before the verb, and/or particles after it. The verbal nucleus of the verb phrase may itself consist of a single verb (as here) or may contain as many as five verbs in direct juxtaposition.

The following simple sentence contains four noun phrases before the verb phrase:

yà? -ni /	hà -hi tē qhâ? 5 /	šā /	qhò -qhe -phô //	gà? câ	e	tù	le
NP1	NP2	NP3	NP4	VP	P	P	P
TIME	TOPIC	OBJECT	PLACE				
today	our village	game	where	hunt eat			

Where shall our village go off to hunt today?

(In the diagram of this sentence a single slash separates one noun phrase from another, while a double slash sets off the last noun phrase from the verb phrase of the clause.)

As observed above, verb-finality goes along with relatively free order of noun phrases before the verb. Although this sentence is quite natural as it stands, other orderings of these four noun phrases are possible to convey slightly different emphases. In general noun phrases indicating time and place tend to come before those referring to participants in the verbal event. Interrogative noun phrases tend to occur right before the verb. In the above example NP4 refers to place, but since it is interrogative ('where?') it appears right before the verb.

The verb phrase of this sentence contains a verbal nucleus of two verbs (gà? 'hunt' and câ 'eat'), followed by two verb-particles, e 'motion away from', tù 'future; unrealized action'; the clause ends with the unrestricted particle le 'question marker'.

Parts of speech (form-classes): nouns, verbs, and particles

Form-classes or "parts of speech" are different from language to language. Words and morphemes are grouped into such classes both on the basis of their grammatical behavior and their semantic content. The English words we call "verbs" share properties both grammatical (e.g. *-ing* as mark of the progressive aspect; *-ed* or a vowel change as mark of past tense; *-s* as mark of third person singular in the present tense), and semantic (they refer to actions or states rather than to things).

Based on such considerations, Lahu can be shown to have only three major form-classes: *nouns*, *verbs*, and *particles*. Minor classes include pronouns, numerals and classifiers in the noun phrase, and adverbials in the verb phrase. Conjunctions and

interjections, which are loosely connected to the rest of their sentences, belong neither to a noun phrase nor a verb phrase.

The numerals are a closed set of morphemes that can be listed in a relatively short list; classifiers always occur after a numeral. Nouns can then be defined as words that can be modified or counted by a numeral-plus-classifier. By this definition, pronouns and demonstratives are considered subclasses of the nouns. Verbs are defined as those words that can be negated by the adverb *mâ*. Adverbs must precede the verb they modify.

The most complicated morphemes in Lahu are the various classes of particles. Particles are bound morphemes with abstract grammatical functions, expressing such essential notions as case relationships, verbal aspect, inter-clausal relations, the nature of the evidence for the utterance, the speaker's emotional attitude, degrees of politeness, and so on. Particles are considered to be separate words, not inflectional endings; even though they cannot occur alone in a phrase, they are written with spaces before and after them. In this respect Lahu particles resemble English prepositions and articles, which are written as separate words even though they cannot occur independently.

Like other Southeast Asian languages, Lahu has dozens of particles, which are conveniently divided into several subtypes:

- *Noun-particles* (Pn) may occur only after nouns. An example is the object-marker *thãʔ*.
- *Verb-particles* (Pv) only occur after verbs. An example is *tù*, which indicates future or unrealized action.
- *Unrestricted particles* (Pu) may occur after either nouns or verbs. The Pu's may be further subclassified according to the types of clause in which they appear:

Non-final unrestricted particles (Punf) occur only in non-final clauses. Examples include *qo* 'if', *thô* 'even; also'.

Final unrestricted particles (Puf) occur only in final clauses—*lâ* 'yes/no question marker', *hé* 'possibility', and so on.

Several particles may occur in a row. In these particle-strings, unrestricted particles always come last.

Relations between noun phrases and the verb phrase

When a noun meets a verb with no intervening particle to spell out the nature of the grammatical relationship between them, this must be deduced from the inherent semantic features of the noun and verb themselves. The most important of these relationships include:

•direct object + verb

ṣ	câ	ve ⁵⁰	to eat rice
rice	eat	P	
á-thâ	mô?	ve	to blow the jewsharp
jewsharp	blow	P	
phu	tân	ve	to offer money
money	offer	P	

•indirect object + verb

pɔ-khû	(thà?)	phu	tân	ve	offer money to the priest
priest	Pn (object)	money	offer	P	

The particle *thà?* is especially common after indirect objects, since these are typically human, and might be interpreted as the initiators of the action if they were not marked specifically as objects:

pɔ-khû	phu	tân	ve	the priest offers money
priest	money	offer	P	

•topic + verb

í-kâ?	gò	ve	water is cold
water	cold	P	
ni-ma	hā	ve	heart is sad
heart	sad	P	
mû-yè	là	ve	it rains
rain	come	P	

•instrument + verb

í-kâ?	chî	ve	wash with water
water	wash	P	
à-mī	chî?	ve	singe in fire
fire	singe	P	

che-kə	tē	ve	crush with a pounder
pounder	crush	P	

• *location + verb*

á-qhɔ	chê	ve	stay at home
home	stay	P	
í-kâ?	pā-tî?	ve	sink into water
water	sink into	P	
yà?-qɔ	jû	ve	walk along a road
road	walk	P	

• *“tied noun” + verb*

A few verbs are so tightly bound to a particular preceding noun that the two words form a sort of compound:

í-kâ? hé	ve	bathe
water-bathe	P	
í-kâ? ší	ve	be thirsty
water-thirst	P	

The verbs *hé* and *ší* never occur without the noun *í-kâ?* ‘water’ preceding.⁵¹

• *purpose + te ‘do/make’*

ú-gê	te	ve	use for a pillow (purpose)
pillow	use	P	
pillow	make	P	make a pillow (object)

• *physical characteristic + te ‘do/make’*

ð-dî	te	ve	be lumpy
lump	do	P	
ð-qhɔ	te	ve	have holes
hole	do	P	

Final unrestricted particles: audible punctuation marks

The final unrestricted particles operate on whole sentences, rather like punctuation marks in written English. They may be divided into several subclasses:

• *Declarative (full stop or exclamation point)*

The particles *yò*, *ɔ*, *lɔ* mark their sentences as affirmations or declarations, with *ɔ* and *lɔ* showing more emotional involvement than the neutral (and most common) *yò*. In this example they occur after nouns:

lâhū-yâ	yò	He’s a Lahu.
---------	----	--------------

lâhū-yâ ɔ
lâhū-yâ ɔ

He's a Lahu, of course.
Gee, he's a Lahu!

• *Dubitative (suspension dots)*

The particles *hé* and *nè-ɔ* express doubt, possibility, a feeling of less than certainty:

lâhū-yâ hé
câ ò nè-ɔ

I guess he's a Lahu...
I suppose he's eaten by now...

• *Persuasive (exclamation point plus question mark)*

The particle *mē* conveys a sense of urging, requesting assent:
qha-bû? câ mē Please eat your fill, won't you!?

• *Interrogative (question mark)*

Lahu uses four interrogative final unrestricted particles to form various kinds of questions:

lâ 'yes/no questions'

yô kâ?	qay	tù	lâ	Will he go too?
he	go	future	question	
ɔ	câ	ò	lâ	Have you eaten already?
rice	eat	completed	question	

The yes-or-no question may be "disjunctive," that is, both possible answers may be contained in the question: *nò qay lâ mâ qay lâ* 'Are you going or not?' (literally 'You go? you not go?').

lê 'request for assent; tag-question'

Like French *n'est-ce pas*, this particle invites the listener's agreement:

yô kâ?	qay	tù	lê	He's going too, isn't he?
he	go	future	question	
ɔ	câ	ò	lê	You've eaten, yes?
rice	eat	completed	question	

nā 'rhetorical or indirect questions'

yô kâ?	qay	tù	nā
he	go	future	question

I wonder if he'll go too?

yô kâ?	qay	tù	nā	ɲà	mā	ʃi
he	go	future	question	I	not	know

I don't know whether he'll go too.

yô	kà?	qay	tù	nā	mā	qay	tù	nā	gà	mā	xi
he		go	future	Q	not	go	future	Q	I		not know

I don't know whether or not he'll go too.

le 'substance questions' ⁵²

This is the particle to use at the end of sentences that contain a specific interrogative noun or adverbial:

a-šu le	who is it?
á-thò?-ma le	what is it?

Other interrogatives that require *le* at the end of the sentence include:

à-thò?-ma te le	why?	qhà ve	which?
qhà-qhe	how?	qhà-qhe ve	what kind of?
qhà-thâ?	when?	qhà-nî	how many?
qhà-ma	how much?	qhà-hi	how big?
qhà-xi	how long?	qhà-fi	how far?
qhò	where?	qhò-phô	what direction?

•*Quotative (quotation marks)*

The final particle *cê* indicates that the speaker is reporting something at second hand. As one would expect, *cê* is especially frequent when telling traditional stories, since these by definition are things one has heard from someone else. Storytellers tend to use it in almost every sentence, to maintain the proper storytelling atmosphere, but it is usually best left untranslated:

à-šwè thâ / ò-chô nî gâ // cò ve cê

Once upon a time there were two friends (it is said).

Cê may be ordered differently with respect to other final particles, with change of meaning. When *cê* appears in the same clause as an interrogative particle (*lâ*, *le*), it marks a quoted question; but according to whether *cê* follows or precedes the interrogative particle the sentence is interpreted either as a direct or an indirect quoted question:

nò ve lâ cê	He said, "Is it yours?"
nò ve cê lâ	Did he say it was yours?
phu qhà-ma cò le cê	He said, "How much money is there?"
phu qhà-ma cò cê le	How much money did he say there is?

•*Interjectory [exclamation point]*

Lahu is rich in final particles whose only function is to show emphasis or emotion, for example: *è?*, *ma*, *và*, *nē*, *yâ*, *lè?*, *qô?-ma*, *qô?-lè?*, and so on. In languages like English, strong emotion is shown

mostly by intonation or one's "tone of voice." In tone languages like Lahu, where every syllable already has a distinctive "melody" of its own, intonation alone cannot do the job of conveying emotional involvement. In rapid colloquial Lahu these particles appear in practically every sentence, sometimes several in a row in a single clause:

yàʔ-tə-phô kàʔ mâ ʃi ò yâ ma nē
shame way even not know P P P P

She's absolutely shameless about it now!

âa, cho là ò lo và nē
come P P P P P

Aha, people are coming now!

As one might expect, these particles are picked up by children at a very early age, but are hard for a foreigner to learn to use in a natural way. Every village and every speaker seems to have a stock of favorites. In the Black Lahu village of Huey Tat, many of these particles are compounded with the verb qôʔ 'say',⁵³ with the most common of all being qôʔ-ma:

nà mâ qay qôʔ-ma I'm not going!
I not go say-P

Compound sentences and non-final unrestricted particles

These important particles (Punf's) appear at the end of non-final clauses to indicate the nature of their semantic relationship to what follows in the sentence. They play the same roles as English "subordinating conjunctions" like *because*, *although*, *when*, *if*, and so on, though of course these come at the beginning of their clauses in English. The meanings of some Lahu non-final unrestricted particles are illustrated below, by using each of them at the end of the same clause,

yô / tê ni qha-gà / yàʔ-qə // jû ve
he all day road walk P

...he walked on the road all day...

and connecting the clause to one of the two following clauses (according to which one makes the best sense):

hè jâ ve yò	(he) is very tired
mâ hè šě	(he) isn't tired yet

- *le* 'conjoining' (*and; and then*)

yô tê ni qha-gà yà?-qo jû le ## hè jâ ve yò⁵⁴
and

He walked on the road all day, and is very tired.

For additional emphasis on the first clause, its verb may be reduplicated:

yô tê ni qha-qà yà?-qo jû-jû le ## hè jâ ve yò

He walked and walked on the road all day long, and is very tired.

- pa-to 'causal' (because; since)

yô tê ni qha-gà yà?-qo jû ve pa-to ## hà jâ ve yò.
cause

Since he has been walking all day on the road, he's very tired.

- thô 'concessive' (though; although)

yô tê ni qha-gà yà?-qo jû thô ## mâ hà šē.
even so

Although he's been walking all day on the road, he isn't tired yet.

- thâ 'temporal' (when)

yô tê ni qha-gà yà?-qo jû thâ ## hè jâ ve yò.
when

When he's been walking all day on the road, he's very tired.

If the verb of the temporal clause is negated by *mā* and followed by the verb particle *šē* 'yet', the combined meaning is like that of English 'before', literally "when not yet":

yô yà?-qo m̃a jũ šē thā ## m̃a hə šē.
not yet when

Before he walks on the road, he's not tired yet.

- go 'conditional' (if; when[ever])

This particle often has the conditional meaning of *if*, sometimes shading into the sense of *when(ever)*:

yô tê ni qha-gà yà?-qo jû qo ## hà jâ ve yò.
if

If/whenever he walks on the road all day, he's very tired.

The Lahu noun-phrase (NP)

In the following sections we explore a few aspects of the internal structure of the Lahu noun phrase.

Personal pronouns

As noted above, Lahu pronouns do not distinguish gender in the third person, so Lahu learners of English may confuse *he* with *she*, or *him* with *her*.⁵⁵

Lahu does not distinguish singular from plural with common nouns, but pronouns (and proper names) can take the plural suffix *-hi*. Pronouns also take *dual* suffixes like *-hi-ma* or *-hi-nè* when exactly two people are meant:

ŋà 'I'	ŋà-hi 'we'	ŋà-hi-mà 'both of us'
nò 'you'	nò-hi 'you all'	nò-hi-mà 'both of you'
yô 'he/she'	yô-hi 'they'	yô-hi-ma 'both of them'

There is also an impersonal third person pronoun that cannot be pluralized: *šu* 'remote or contrastive third person; they; others'.

In the Tibeto-Burman languages of the Himalayish group (in Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan) there is a widespread distinction between inclusive and exclusive pronouns and verb-forms—*we inclusive* (*we including you*) vs. *we exclusive* (*we but not you*). This is alien to the Lolo-Burmese branch of Tibeto-Burman to which Lahu belongs.

The egalitarian nature of Lahu society is reflected by the lack of pronouns that make distinctions of politeness, or establish relative rank or social distance.⁵⁶

Numerals and classifiers

Although Lahu noun phrases lack articles or plural markers on nouns, this is made up for by using quantity expressions consisting of numerals plus classifiers and/or demonstratives. A Lahu "quantified noun phrase" has three parts: the head, the numeral, and the classifier, in that order.⁵⁷

Head	Num	Clf	
cho	tê	gâ	a/one person
pâ-vî	nî	khe	two civet-cats
nâ?	šê?	qhô	three guns
yà?-qo	ô	câ?	four roads
pê-hô	š	qhô	seven candles

There are eleven numerals in Lahu, the numbers from 1 to 9, the interrogative *how many?*, and a Shan-derived word for *several*, given here with their reconstructed Proto-Tibeto-Burman roots:

	Lahu	PTB
one	tê	*day
two	nî	*g-nis
three	šê?	*g-sum
four	ô	*b-ləy
five	ŋâ	*l-ŋa
six	khô?	*d-krok
seven	š	*s-nit
eight	hî	*b-r-gyat
nine	qô	*d-gəw
how many?	qhà-nî	*ka-nis
several	lây	[from Shan; cf. Thai lăaj]

10, 100, 1000 and other “round numbers” are classifiers, not numerals.

The numeral *tê* ‘one’ has a range of other meanings, including the inclusive sense “the whole,” as in *tê ni qha-gà* “the whole day long”; and most importantly an indefinite sense much like the English article *a/an*:

á-ni thâ	cho	tê	gâ	là	ve	cê
yesterday	person	1	CLF	come	P	P

They say a person came yesterday.

A numeral must virtually always be followed by a classifier. Only in counting and doing arithmetic (a new and far from widespread activity) may the numerals occur alone (*tê*, *nî*, *šê?*... ‘one, two, three...’); but even here, the general classifier *mà* is often used (*tê mà*, *nî mà*, *šê? mà...*).

A classifier is a type of noun that occurs after numerals, and that serves to designate the head-noun as belonging to a

certain class of objects. The closest thing to classifiers in English are words like *loaf*, *head*, *sheet*, *rasher* that are used in counting particular kinds of things: *five loaves of bread*, *1000 head of cattle*, *a sheet of paper*, *two rashers of bacon*. Lahu classifiers may be divided into several types:

- Auto-classifiers*. Some nouns take themselves as classifiers:

yè	tê	yè	a house
house	one	house	
qhâ?	nî	qhâ?	two villages
village	two	village	

- Special classifiers*. Many nouns require special classifiers that place them in a particular semantic category, or mark them as having a particular shape, for example:

gâ	for living human beings
khê	for animals ⁵⁸
kà	for places
cè	for plants
pê?	for fields
qô?	for books or papers
qhô	for elongated objects
câ?	for stringlike objects
ši	for round objects

- Measure classifiers*.

í-kâ? tê lî?	a/one liter of water
là tê khê	a/one cup of tea

- Time classifiers*. These usually occur without a head noun:

tê ha-pa	one month
ô ni	four days
hí qhò?	eight years

- Group classifiers*. These appear only with the numeral *tê* 'one; whole':

lâhū tê phā	all the Lahu
ô-qā tê gâ	a bunch of buffalo
hê?-pā tê ca	a (married) couple of Chinese

- General, all-purpose classifier* *mà*. This is the "lazy-man's classifier," and may be used instead of most auto- or special classifiers. To use it for humans is rather pejorative. The only other classifier that

compares with *mà* in generality is *cò* 'kind':

yè nî mà	two houses
yà?-qo tê mà	a/one road
nâ?-chê tê cò	a/one kind of medicine

•*Round-number classifiers*. Ten (*chi*) and all higher round numbers are classifiers. The way to say *ten* is *tê chi*, or "one ten-unit," just as *500* is *gâ ha* "five hundred-units." The higher round numbers are borrowings from Shan:

hé	thousand	măn	ten thousand
şén	hundred thousand	lân	million

Like other East and Southeast Asian peoples, the Lahu calculate in *myriads*, or units of 10,000, so that 46,000 is expressed as *ş măn khô?* *hé* "four (times) ten-thousand (plus) six (times) thousand." Doing mathematics in a foreign language is never easy, and this difference in the way higher numbers are conceptualized can be expected to cause problems for Lahu math students in the United States.

***The object noun-particle* thâ?**

This important particle is a good example of how a concrete noun can develop a more abstract grammatical meaning. As an independent noun prefixed by ð-, or a constituent in noun-compounds, Lahu *thâ?* means 'upper surface; top part':

ð-thâ?-phô	the outer side; top surface
khi-tò-qo-thâ?	instep; upper side of foot

şê-şî	chi	mì-châ	ð-thâ?	bu	tɛ	a
sand	this	floor	surface	pile	put	P

File the sand up on the floor!

As a noun-particle (often reduced to *hâ?* or even *â?*) this word has developed into an object-marker. It is easy to see how its basic, concrete meaning "top surface" came to be bleached into the abstract idea of "impingement upon; being topped by the action of the verb." In this function it is used rather sparingly, only where clarity demands or emphasis is required. When both direct and indirect objects are present, *thâ?* will follow the indirect object. This is because indirect objects are typically human, so that an explicit marker makes the situation clear:

lì?	chi	ηà	thà?	pî	tā	ve	yò
book	this	me	object marker	give	P	P	P

(Someone) has given me that book.

Without *thà?*, this sentence could be interpreted as “I have given (someone) that book.”

Genitive (possessive) constructions

Possessive constructions in Lahu are marked by the most important of all Lahu unrestricted particles, *ve* (which also serves as a relativizer and a nominalizer). The possessor comes before the thing possessed (possessor + *ve* + thing possessed):

ηà	ve	ò-chô	my friend
I	possess	friend	
lâhū-yâ	ve	mû-mì	the country of the Lahu
Lahu	possess	country	
phî	ve	mē-tu	a dog's tail
dog	possess	tail	

As in other languages, Lahu possessives are “recursive”; that is, something that is possessed can still be the possessor of something else:

ηà	ve	ò-chô	ve	ò-mî-ma	ve	phî	ve	mē-tu
I	have	friend	has	wife	has	dog	has	tail
the tail of the dog of the wife of my friend								

Many possessive constructions may be shortened by leaving out the particle *ve*, becoming more like noun-compounds:

và?	ve	ò-šā	the flesh of a pig
và?-šā			pig-flesh; pork

The *ò-* prefix in the full construction helps to set off the thing possessed as a separate noun. Similarly, *ve* is often omitted after a pronominal possessor; the following three ways to say “your father” show a continuum of closeness of bonding between the two nouns:

nò	ve	ò-pa	(full genitive)
nò		ò-pā	(genitive <i>ve</i> omitted; prefix retained)
nò		-pa	(prefix also omitted; noun-compound)

Demonstratives and locatives

• *Spatial demonstratives.* For people who live in the hills, it is important to know which way is up. Five demonstrative nouns function to indicate a general relative position, including two that specify space above or below the speaker: *chò* 'here'; *ô* 'there'; *cô* 'way over there; yonder'; *nô* 'up there'; *mô* 'down there'. These "spatial demonstratives" are diagrammed in Figure VIII:

Figure VIII. The spatial demonstratives

		nô		
cô	ô	chò	ô	cô
		mô		
nô 5 phê lò qha-pâ?-a		Up there the dogs are barking!		
mô kà? he mâ ji pè šē		Down there the fields aren't all returned yet.		

• *Spatial nouns.* For more precise specification of relative location, a number of "spatial nouns" can be used after the noun that is the point of reference, including:

ò-qó-ji	middle
ò-qhò	above; over; on top of (but not touching)
ò-qhó	inside
ò-qhò?-nó	in back of; behind
ò-thà?	on top of; above and touching
ò-na	in front of and above
ò-pâ(-nê)	next to; nearby; in the vicinity of
ò-bà	outside
ò-hó	under(neath); bottom
ò-šū-šē	in front of; before

Thus, *yè ò-qhó* 'in(side) the house', *yè ò-hó* 'under(neath) the house', *qhà? ò-pâ-nê* 'near the village', and so on.

•*Locative noun-particles.* Lahu has several noun-particles of general locative meaning (*kàʔ, ɔ, lo*) which are neutral with respect to directionality, and may all follow the equally vague spatial demonstratives. In the following examples *lo* does not specify direction of motion, or even motion vs. rest. The interpretation depends on the built-in semantic features of the clause's verbs:

há-qō	<i>lo</i>	mī chē	ve	
cave	P	is sitting	P	

He's sitting in the cave. [place at which]

há-qō	<i>lo</i>	lòʔ	e	ò
cave	P	enter	P	P

He has already gone into the cave. [place to which]

há-qō	<i>lo</i>	tšʔ	e	ò
cave	P	emerge	P	P

He has already come out of the cave. [place from which]

•*Determiners: this and that.* The demonstrative *chi* 'this' can modify nouns in several ways. It may directly follow the noun it modifies (N + *chi*: *chɔ chi*); or it may be connected to its head noun by the genitive particle *ve*, with this combination coming either before (*chi* + *ve* + N: *chi ve chɔ*) or after (N + *chi* + *ve*: *chɔ chi ve*). All these constructions mean "this person," as does a fuller construction with numeral-plus-classifier added (*chɔ chi ve tê ġă*).

Often *chi* has a weaker referential force than *this*, and just serves to refer back to something that has already been mentioned or introduced into the discussion, much like the English definite article *the*.⁵⁹

The Lahu expression for *that* is *ô ve* (literally "of there") where the first element is one of the spatial demonstratives:

that N	ô ve + N
	or, N + ô ve + Num + Clf

that rock	ô ve há-pí
	or, há-pí ô ve tê šī

the rock down there mô ve há-pì
or, há-pì mô ve tê sĩ

The Lahu verb-phrase (VP)

As we have seen, the verb phrase is the most important part of a Lahu clause: a clause must have a verb phrase, whereas noun phrases are optional. The core of a verb-phrase is a verbal nucleus consisting of one or more verbs. This nucleus may be preceded by adverbials and/or followed by verb-particles (Pv).

In order to be considered a verb, a morpheme must be negatable by means of the adverb *mâ* 'not':

thè? ve	to kick	mâ thè?	does not kick
dû ve	to dig	mâ dû	does not dig

By this definition, adjectives in Lahu are really verbs, since they can be negated:

qhâ ve	to be bitter	mâ qhâ	is not bitter
lù ve	to be ruined	mâ lù	is not ruined

The English verb *to be* is already built into a Lahu adjectival verb. For Lahu learning English there will be a tendency to omit the copula before adjectives: *This tea bitter; She pretty*.

The comparison of adjectives is conspicuous in English (*good/better/best; loud/louder/loudest; humid/more humid/most humid*), but is much vaguer in Lahu. To express a higher than normal degree of a quality, the adverb *a-cí* 'more' or the extensive expression *šu a-ké* 'than others' may be used before the adjectival verb. There is no clear contrast between the "comparative" and the "superlative" degrees:

dâ? ve	be good; be pretty
a-cí dâ? ve	more good; more pretty
šu a-ké dâ? ve	better/prettier than others

Nouns are negated by means of the verbal expression *mâ hê?* 'is not so; is not the case':

yô / lâhū-yâ // mâ-hê?
 he Lahu not so

He is not a Lahu.

á-pò? chi / ñà ve // mâ-hê?
 shirt this mine not so

This shirt isn't mine.

Verb-particles (Pv)

Verb-particles amplify the meaning of the verb in a variety of ways, conveying notions of aspect, directionality, subjective attitudes towards the event, and so on. Conspicuously absent are any that refer to tense. There are more than twenty important verb particles, which may be divided into four subclasses:

•*Directional verb particles.* The Pv's of this class include: dà? 'reciprocal; mutual'; və 'transportatory motion', e 'motion away'; la 'motion towards', and lâ 'non-3rd person benefaction'.

The verb particle dà? indicates that two or more people or things are involved in the action:

dô? dà?	strike one another
mò dà?	meet each other
šū dà?	be the same
cá dà?	be related, be connected
hâ? dà?	get married ("take each other")

The verb particle və shows that something is being transported from one place to another by the action of the verb:

yù və	take something and move it
fá və	take something and hide it

To indicate a specific direction of movement, either e (motion away) or la (motion toward) is used:

qô? e	go back to	qô? la	come back to
lô? e	go and enter	lô? la	come and enter
pho e	go flee; run away	pho la	come fleeing
yù və e	carry something away	yù və la	carry something toward

La and e are also used in a figurative sense, to indicate becoming, or a gradual approach to a present or future state of affairs:

pə e	be finished; all used up
pə la	be almost finished
chu e	continue getting fat
chu la	be nearly overweight

•*Experiential verb particles.* These verb particles express subjective attitudes toward the nature of one's experience. They include: qhe 'excessive repetition'; gā 'desiderative' (speaker is willing to do something); jo 'experiential' (speaker has already had the experience at some time in the past), and à 'asseverative' (speaker vigorously asserts the truth of the verb).

cā qhe	overeat; eat constantly	yà? qhe	sleep too much
ši gā	want to know	tš? e gā	want to go out
mā yà? gā	not want to sleep	mā tš? e gā	not want to go out
cā jo	have eaten (it) before	mā cā jo	have never eaten
ši à	I know it!	dà? à	Good!; Fine!
cò à	Yes, we have!	chē à	He's there!

•*Aspect particles.* The verb particles of this group are among the most important particles in Lahu. They include: tā 'durative; perfective'; tū 'future; hypothetical; purposive'; šš 'durative'; šē 'inchoative'; and ò 'completed action; change of state'.

The verb particle *tā* derives from a full verb meaning 'place on; put on; stand upright'.⁶⁰ As a verb-particle *tā* indicates that the verbal action is stable, quasi-permanent, likely to last (durative); or that it is over and done with (perfective):

yō-hi	á-qhō	tí	chē	tā	ve
they	home	only	stay	P	P

They just stayed at home.

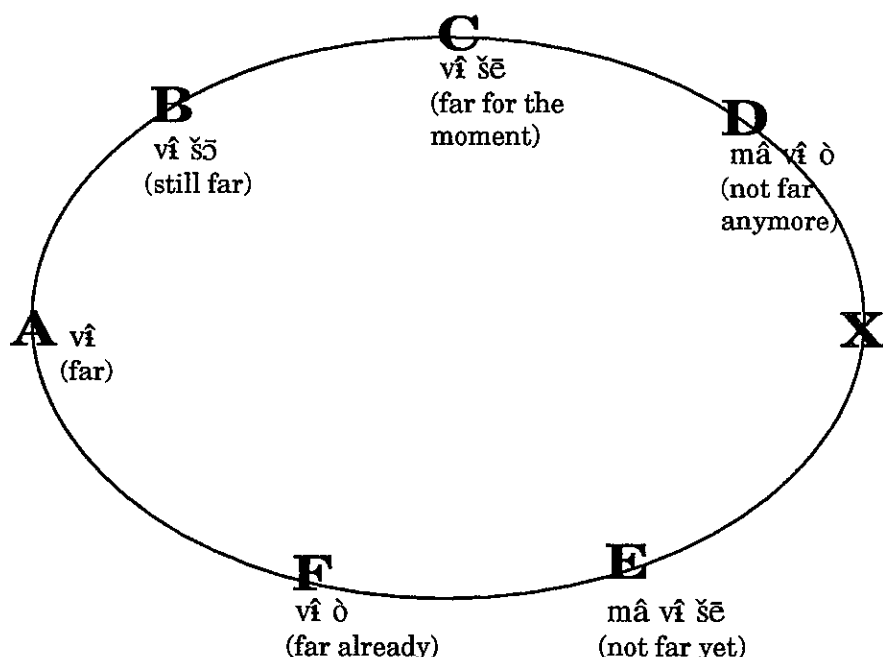
cō	tā	ve	và?-ó-qō
boil	P	GEN	pig-head

a pig's head that has been boiled

The particle *tā* does not combine with adjectival verbs, apparently because they already refer to quasi-permanent qualities or states.

The verb particle *tū* indicates that the action has not yet been completed, but will be carried forward into the future. Often it is specifically one's purpose for the future:

Figure IX. The aspectual verb particles in action



Suppose we were walking along a road toward a distant destination, X. At the starting point, A, we are far (vî) from our goal. After going a short way, up to point B, we are still far from X (vî š̌). Somewhere past the halfway point, at C, we are still relatively far away, though this farness is about to change to relative nearness: we are still far, but already looking forward to the time when we will be quite near (vî š̌ē). As X is closely approached, at point D, we might say 'It's not far anymore' (mâ vî ò). Leaving X for home, before having walked much of the way back (point E), we could say mâ vî š̌ē 'We're not far (from X) yet'. Finally, at F, as we approach our starting point A, we may say, thinking back on X, vî ò 'It's far already.'

nò kà? qay tù lá
 you go P question

Will you go too?

ṇà lâhū-khō ca hē tù là ve yò
 I Lahu language P P P P

I've come to study the Lahu language.

However, *tù* is certainly not an obligatory future tense marker. In many sentences the future meaning is provided only by the general context, or by time expressions—*šō-pō* 'tomorrow', *né-qhō?* 'next year', *mā mō-mō qo* 'soon', and so on.

The particle *šē* also carries an action into the future, but it conveys a sense of anticipation, as if this is only the first of a series of related actions. It is used in imperatives to suggest doing something first, before anything else:

í-kā? hē šē
 bathe P

Take a bath first (and then we'll eat).

yè-mí hō? tā šē
 P P

Shut the door tight first (and then we'll talk).

This verb particle is frequently combined with the negative *mā* 'not' to mean 'not *verb* yet':

mā qay šē not go yet mā šī gā šē not want to know yet

The verb particles *šō* and *ò* have opposite aspectual meanings. While *šō* indicates that the state or action of the verb is still going on, *ò* shows that the action has been completed, or that there has been a change in the state of affairs:

cò šō	still have (some)
cò ò	have now (didn't have before)
mû-yè là šō	It's still raining
mû-yè là ò	It's raining now
cā ò lâ	Have you eaten yet?
cā ò	Yes, I've eaten

The relationships of the aspectual verb particles to each other and to the negative adverb *mā* are illustrated in Figure IX.

•*Imperative verb-particles*: a, šā, yà, vā, lò, -?. These verb

particles lend an imperative meaning to the verb, each with a different emphasis or emotional tone. The particle *a* (which frequently combines with other imperative particles) forms a mild imperative or suggestion:

<i>pī a</i>	Give (it to me) please.
<i>tō? a</i>	(Why don't you) cut it.

The *Pv šā* announces an intended action of the first person:

<i>qay a šā</i>	I'll be going.
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The particle *yà* makes a brusque imperative, used in impatience or anger:

<i>na yà</i>	Listen, you!
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vā is used in the sense of "let's do it!":

<i>cā a vā</i>	Let's eat it!
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lò is used to urge someone with insistence.

<i>ca yā? lò</i>	Go to sleep now, come on!
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Any action verb can be given an imperative sense by adding a glottal stop after the normal vowel and tone of the verb. This is represented in writing as a dash followed by a glottal stop: *-ʔ*.

<i>mi-ʔ</i>	Sit!
<i>dō-ʔ</i>	Drink!
<i>qay qay qay-ʔ</i>	Go, go, go!

Verb concatenation

Like other Lolo-Burmese languages, Lahu is remarkable for the ease with which two or more verbs may be strung together or "concatenated" by simple juxtaposition to form complex verbal nuclei. Sometimes verbs come to be juxtaposed even though they belong to separate underlying clauses; that is, the verbs refer to a series of separate, temporally consecutive actions, like the verbs *jump*, *bite*, and *eat* in the following sentence:

<i>lā</i>	<i>pō?</i>	<i>chē?</i>	<i>cā</i>	<i>pā</i>	<i>šē</i>	<i>ve</i>	<i>cē.</i>
tiger	jump	bite	eat	finish	P	P	P
	V1	V2	V3	V4			

The tiger jumped (out) and bit (into them) and ate (them) all up!

Yet the closeness of the semantic relationship between each pair

of verbs in such strings is a matter of degree. Although the jumping, biting, and eating are three successive actions, clearly *bite* and *eat* (chê? câ) are more closely related to each other (almost forming a lexical compound) than either is to pô? 'jump'. The fourth verb in the string, pè 'finish', is here used in an abstract aspectual sense (translated by *all up*), indicating that the whole series of actions was carried through to completion.

The most interesting strings of verbs ("true concatenations") are those that form a single verbal idea, so that they all belong to the same clause. One of the verbs in each concatenation is the main verb or verb-head (Vh), which maintains its basic meaning; the other verb(s) undergo semantic bleaching, acquiring more abstract grammatical meanings so that they modify the verb-head. Several dozen Lahu verbs have the ability to combine with large numbers of other verbs in concatenations; these modifying verbs are called "versatile verbs" (VV) as a tribute to their flexible nature.

Versatile verbs may occur either before and/or after the verb-head. In the following example of a five-verb concatenation, all four of the versatile verbs follow the verb-head:

cì	gò	tô?	mā	pī	cô
N	Vh	VV	VV	VV	VV
tooth	pull	emerge	teach	give	correct

(They) ought to show them how to pull out teeth.

The verbs *tô?*, *mā*, *pī*, and *cô* have much more abstract meanings as versatile verbs, as shown below:

	<i>as verb</i>	<i>as versatile verb</i>
tô?	emerge	out
mā	teach	show how
pī	give	(marker for action that benefits another)
cô	be correct	ought

In the following concatenation, one versatile verb precedes the verb head, while three other versatile verbs follow it:

nà-hĩ	ga	yù	qay	ci	cô	ve	lâ
	VV1	Vh	VV2	VV3	VV4	P	P
we	help	take	go	send	correct		

Should (we) make (them) help to take (it) away?

Still, most concatenations only contain one or two versatile verbs. About a dozen of these (the “pre-head versatile”) precede the verb-head in concatenations; almost 40 versatile verbs follow the head (the “post-head versatile”).

A well-defined subclass of about twelve mutually exclusive posthead versatile verbs have concrete meanings related to modes of motion or directionality (up, down, in, out, and so on). They are closely welded to the verb head, similar to English directional adverbs like *out* or *away*:

<i>verb</i>	<i>as verb</i>	<i>as versatile verb</i>	<i>example</i>
kə	put into	(head verb) into	mô? kə ve ‘blow into’
bà	throw; discard	(head verb) away	qhê? bà ve ‘chip away’
yà?	descend	(head verb) downward	pô? yà? ve ‘jump down’

Among the most important of the versatile verbs are the “variables,” so called because they can occur in variant orders with other verbs, with each order having a distinct meaning. These include *chê*, which as a main verb means “be in a place; dwell; stay.” As a versatile verb it has acquired the more abstract meaning of “progressive” or “continuative.” The meaning of the following two concatenations is different, according to the position of *chê* in the string of verbs:

câ	phê?	chê
Vh	VV	VV
eat	be able	PROG (‘progressive action’)

is still able to eat

câ	chê	phê?
Vh	VV	VV
eat	PROG	be able

is able to continue eating

The meanings of the variable versatile verbs are best characterized as aspectual. They are similar semantically to the aspectual

verb-particles. Besides *chê* this class includes seven other verbs (see Figure X) whose meanings as auxiliaries can be illustrated by combining them all with the same head-verb, in this case *və?* 'put on; wear' (see Figure XI).

Figure X. The aspectual versatile verbs

<i>verb</i>	<i>as verb</i>	<i>as versatile verb</i>
<i>chê</i>	dwell	continuative
<i>ci</i>	send	causative
<i>qay</i>	go	continuative; inchoative
<i>mɔ</i>	be a long time	durative
<i>ni</i>	look at	tentative
<i>pə</i>	finish	completive; exhaustive
<i>pî</i>	give	benefactive; permissive
<i>lò?</i>	enough	sufficitive

Figure XI. A verb head combined with aspectual VV's

<i>və? chê</i>	is wearing	<i>və? ci</i>	make/let someone wear
<i>və? qay</i>	goes on wearing	<i>və? mɔ</i>	has worn for a long time
<i>və? ni</i>	wear and see; try on	<i>və? pə</i>	(1) has already put on (2) everybody wears
<i>və? pî</i>	dress someone	<i>və? lò?</i>	(1) enough to wear (2) wear enough

Worthy of special mention is the verb *ġa*, the only Lahu versatile verb that can either precede or follow a verb-head. As a main verb, it means 'get; obtain':⁶¹

<i>mâ</i>	<i>ġa</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>kà?</i>	<i>mâ</i>	<i>bə?</i>
not	get	P	even	not	angry

Even if I don't get it I won't be mad.

As a pre-head versatile verb, *ġa* means 'have a successful past experience; have managed to Vh; have gotten to Vh' or 'must Vh':

<i>ġ-chî</i>	<i>mè-mè</i>	<i>ve</i>	<i>kà?</i>	<i>mâ</i>	<i>ġa</i>	<i>câ</i>	<i>ve</i>	<i>yò</i>
		P			VV	Vh	P	P
curry	tasty		even	not		eat		

We didn't get to eat very tasty food either.

Sometimes in this position it means “must; be obliged to”:

chi-bəʔ	ɲà	ǵa	qay	ve	yò
		VV	Vh	P	P
now	I		go		

I must leave now.

As a post-head versatile verb, ǵa has a range of “accomplishment” meanings:

jûʔ	ǵa	ve
Vh	VV	

get by impaling

kâlâ-phu	ve	ɔ̄-chî	ɲà	câ	mâ	ǵa
				Vh		VV
whiteman	GEN	food	I	eat	not	

I just can't eat white men's food.

Causation and benefaction

The oldest way of forming causative verbs in the Tibeto-Burman family was by an *s- prefix.⁶² Although this prefix has long since disappeared in the Loloish languages, its effects survive in over a dozen verbs of causative meaning that differ only in tone and/or initial consonant from a corresponding non-causative verb:

dɔ̄	drink	tɔ̄	give to drink
dɛ̄	come to rest	tɛ̄	put something down
mɔ̄	see	mɔ̄	show
jɔ̄	practice	cɔ̄	train someone
câ	eat	câ	feed someone
nɔ̄	wake up	nɔ̄	wake someone up
vî	be far	fî	separate; demarcate
dû	dig	tû	bury someone
vàʔ	hide oneself	fàʔ	hide something
vəʔ	wear	fî	dress someone
yàʔ	sleep	í	put to sleep
lɛ̄ʔ	lick	lé	feed an animal
tòʔ	be burning	tú	kindle; set on fire

For all other verbs, Lahu now must form causatives by means of verb concatenations, using such versatile verbs such as those below:

yù	take	yù khá	make blocked up
te	do	te qè	make wide, widen
pî	give	ce pî	cause to fall, drop
cì	send on an errand	qay cì	cause to go

Lahu is careful to specify for whose benefit the verbal action is performed. This is done by two morphemes, the versatile verb *pî* 'give' and the verb-particle *lâ*. Logically enough, the outer-directed "give-word" *pî* is used to indicate that the action affects a third person; while the inner-directed "come-word" *lâ* shows that the action affects a non-third (first or second) person.

chò lâ	chop for me/us/you
chò pî	chop for him/her/them
phê lâ	release me/us/you
phê pî	release him/her/them
phè?-mā lâ	confess to me/us/you
phè?-mā pî	confess to him/her/them

şu thà?	tâ	dê	pî-?
3SG P	neg imper	Vh	VV
others	don't	scold	

Don't scold other people!

şà thà?	tâ	dê	lâ
1SG P	neg. imper.	scold	VV

Don't scold me!

Nominalization and relativization

Lahu has no fewer than five "nominalizing" particles that have the power to convert a verb or a whole clause into a noun-like structure that can fill the role of a noun phrase in a larger sentence. Four of these particles have highly specific meanings, as we can illustrate by combining them with the clause *í-kâ? hé* 'bathe':

pā	agentive nominalizer; one who V's; a V'er
í-kâ? hé pā	bather; one who bathes

kǎ	locative nominalizer; the place where V í-kǎ? hé kǎ bathing place; bathroom
thā	temporal nominalizer; the time that one V's í-kǎ? hé thā the time for bathing
tù	purposive nominalizer; something for V-ing í-kǎ? hé tù bathing suit; thing for bathing

Purposive nominalizations are commonly used for describing objects that are new to Lahu culture:

ò-bó pho tù	can-opener (thing for opening cans)
cí sǐ? tù	toothbrush (thing to wipe teeth)
gá-yo ò-sá kə tù	tire-pump (thing for putting air in tires)
gǎ?-mu dǒ? tù	badminton racket (thing to hit chicken feathers)

The fifth nominalizing particle, *ve*, is the most important particle in the whole language. It forms the most general kind of nominalization:

í-kǎ? hé ve	bathing; to bathe
-------------	-------------------

Frequently *ve* marks a clause that is embedded as the topic of a larger sentence:

<i>gà mã qǒ? te ve</i>	<i>tê chi qhǒ? gà ò</i>
my not doing that again	has now reached ten years
I haven't done that for ten years now.	

We have seen how *ve* marks the relationship of possession, subordinating one noun (the possessor) to the thing possessed. Similar to this function is the role of *ve* as the marker of relative clauses—whole clauses that are subordinated to a noun-head (called the “relative head” or “Nrh”).⁶³ The relative clause (enclosed in square brackets) usually comes directly before the Nrh:

[yà?-qo jû qay ve]	a-pi-qu chi a-šu le
	Nrh

Who is this old lady [who is walking along the road]?

[nò ð-mî-ma cō tã ve] và?-ô-qô câ pà ò lâ

Nrh

Is the pig's head [that your wife boiled] all eaten up?

In some cases, the relative clause may be shifted to the position directly after the Nrh:

và?-ô-qô [cō tã ve] mề jã

Nrh

A boiled pig's head is very tasty.

There is sometimes ambiguity between relativization and nominalization:

<i>tê-qhâ?-tê-lò</i>	ĩ	ve	a-pi-qu chi	ĩ	e	ò
whole village	know		old woman this	die	P	P

If the italicized clause is interpreted as a nominalization, the sentence means:

What the whole village knows is that the old woman has died.

If it is taken as a relative clause, the sentence means:

The old woman whom the whole village knew has died.

Conclusion

Like all languages, Lahu is a complex and powerful instrument of communication. I hope to have shown, even in this brief grammatical sketch, how much there is to learn from the linguistic heritage of the peoples of Southeast Asia, who are now living among us and trying to cope with our alien language.

Endnotes

1. The name Lolo still carries pejorative connotations to Chinese ears, and the term currently preferred in China is *Yi*.
2. For example, the names *Miao* and *Yao* are the Chinese exonyms for the groups who call themselves *Hmong* and *Mien*. For detailed discussion of problems in the nomenclature of Tibeto-Burman peoples and languages, see Matisoff 1986a.
3. The etymology of the name *Lahu* remains obscure, though I believe the second syllable *-hu* derives from a Proto-Tibeto-Burman root **s-lu* 'people,' that underlies the element *-su* in many Tibeto-Burman ethnonyms (e.g. Lisu, Bisu, Nosu, Tosu), as well as the second syllable *-lo* of *Lolo* itself.
4. See Vuong Hoang Tuyen 1973. The Vietnamese exonym Kha Quy seems to refer specifically to the Yellow Lahu, who are also called Kwi in Thai and Shan. A group of Lahu in Yunnan are also known as Kucong Yi (see Fei Xiaotong 1990:11-24).
5. Anthony Walker (1970:32-40; 1974) has collected 23 different group names from informants in Thailand, while David Bradley (1979:26-29, 37-43) gives 42 subgroups of Lahu. All these names are listed in *The Dictionary of Lahu* (Matisoff 1988:1348-50).
6. The use of color-names ("chromonyms") to distinguish among cultural or linguistic subgroups is common in Southeast Asia (e.g. White Hmong vs. Green Hmong), and may have originally had something to do with the characteristic color of the women's clothing, though this is now far from obvious in many cases.
7. In "Lahu Bilingual Humor" (Matisoff 1969b) I recorded several jokes about misunderstandings between Black and Yellow Lahu speakers arising from differences in meaning between words that appeared similar in the two dialects.
8. My chief village of study is called *hwè-tà?*, located in Mae Taeng District of Chiang Mai Province, inhabited mostly by Christianized Lahu Na, with an estimated population of 185 people in 1970. I carried out fieldwork there in 1965-6, 1970, and 1977, and have paid brief return visits in 1985 and 1991.
9. One of the few studies of Yellow Lahu available is Nishida 1969, which describes a dialect of Chiang Rai Province, Thailand.

10. For a critique of this Chinese orthography, see Matisoff 1984.
11. *Beijing Review*, No. 9, p. 17 (March 3, 1980).
12. I was denied such permission in 1983 and 1984, though in 1983 I did get to meet a few urbanized Lahu in the Yunnanese cities of Kunming, Simao, and Jinghong. I have been invited to return to Lancang in April 1993, for the ceremonies marking the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Lahu Autonomous County.
13. Since my own research in Thailand was done mostly in Christian villages, I am indebted for most of my ethnographic information on traditional Lahu village life to my good friend and colleague in Lahu studies, the British anthropologist Anthony R. Walker. He worked with the animist Red Lahu (Lahu Nyi) of Northern Thailand from 1966 to 1969. See *References* for a list of Walker's works consulted for this article.
14. Justice sometimes takes even rougher forms. A rascal who had usurped the headmanship of the Christian village of hwè-tà? was eventually punished by being tied down naked in the hot sun for half a day (1966).
15. Ten thousand baht (about \$500) was the prevailing rate for premeditated murder in the 1970's. This is a very large sum of money for a villager.
16. These instruments include bamboo jewsharps with delicate reeds, used especially in courtship (á-thâ-á-yê); simple wooden viols (ūn); and gourdflutes (nǝ). Gourdflutes, which sound something like bagpipes, are made of five bamboo tubes with reeds and holes, attached by beeswax to a resonating chamber consisting of a gourd also perforated by several holes.
17. This is similar to the Northern Thai custom of *wan phrá?* The waxing and waning of the moon is carefully tracked by the Lahu, and there are eight terms for the various phases.
18. If one of the ancestors is known to have been an addict, he is offered opium and smoking paraphernalia.
19. Unlike the case with the Akha, for whom multiple births are an animalian phenomenon, a terrible calamity for which both parents are punished severely, and the twins themselves are put to death.
20. By coincidence, both of my own daughters' names bear appropriate sound/meaning resemblances to preexisting Lahu names: Nadja was immediately dubbed na-dà?, while Lexa (the last-born) was called na-le.

21. The word *swidden* (along with its variants *swithen* and *swizzen*), used to be an “obsolete except dialectal” word meaning “a piece of land cleared by burning,” akin to Old Norse *sviðna* ‘be singed’ and Danish *sviðning* ‘burning; singeing’ (see *Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 3201). The word was resurrected by anthropologists in the 1950s to refer to the fields created by slash-and-burn techniques.
22. The verb *tú* ‘set on fire; kindle’ is the causative/transitive counterpart of the intransitive verb *tò?* ‘be on fire; burn’. Lahu retains over a dozen pairs of related verbs like these.
23. *Tracks of an Intruder* (Young 1967), is an interesting account of the hunting adventures of an American scion of a missionary family, who grew up with the Lahu and shared the thrills of hunting with them in the good old days.
24. Similar words for *rifle* are found throughout mainland Southeast Asia (e.g. Burmese *se-nat*, Jingpho *sənát*, Mon *sənat*, Khmu *snàat*). A likely source for this loanword is Portuguese *espinharda* “the prickly one; the spiny one,” presumably a 16th century soldiers’ slang word for “musket.”
25. Cf. for example the intertwining of Hinduism and Buddhism in India, of Shinto and Buddhism in Japan, and of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism in traditional China.
26. The Lahu share with the Tai peoples the custom of wrapping threads (called *á-mo-khe* or *ká-mo-khe*) around the wrist for ritual purposes. The threads ensure that a person’s souls will not stray from his body, or express a spiritual bond between oneself and others in the community. A traveler often has these threads tied before setting out on a journey, and must leave them in place until he returns.
27. These passive witches are to be distinguished from *sorcerers*, who through their own volition activate evil forces against others.
28. I have discussed the etymology of *gà-ša* in “God and the Sino-Tibetan Copula,” 1985.
29. The name Ay-ma derives from a-e ‘mother’. She is the creator of earth, while *gà-ša* is the creator of heaven. Some informants regard her as the spouse of *gà-ša*, while others heatedly deny such a possibility.
30. Rice which is left unharvested in the field too long is called “food for rodents and birds” (*fā?-ʒ-ŋā?-ʒ*).
31. Walker (1970a:269) distinguishes among *diagnostic*, *prophylactic*, and *therapeutic* rituals, designed to figure out what is wrong, or how

to protect against evil, or how to cure evil, respectively.

32. This word derives ultimately from Sanskrit *āchārya* 'great teacher', via Burmese *hsəya*.
33. These individuals are sharply distinguished from "witches," who harbor evil through no fault of their own.
34. Included in the category of "Sinospheric" languages are the unrelated Tai-Kadai and Hmong-Mien families, as well as Vietnamese (genetically Mon-Khmer but under intense influence from Chinese). The Tibeto-Burman languages of India and the Himalayas have more morphology, are less tonal, and are more under the cultural/historical influence of India — the "Indosphere" — than of China). The terms *Sinosphere* and *Indosphere* were introduced in Matisoff 1990b, "On Megalocomparison."
35. These checked syllables descend from older syllables with the final consonants /-p -t -k/, but in modern Lahu it is preferable to consider these glottal stops to be tonal features, not syllable-final consonants. For discussion see Matisoff 1973, Chapter I.
36. Syllables in languages like English and Russian permit complex consonant combinations both before and after the vowel, for example, the English *stretch*, *sixths* [siksθs] and the Russian *zdravstvuyte* 'hello.'
37. The subvariety of Yellow Lahu with which I am somewhat familiar (see Matisoff 1969b "Lahu Bilingual Humor") has been identified as *Lahu Shi Banlan* by Bradley (1979); this is not exactly the same as the Laotian variety of Yellow Lahu spoken by recent Lahu arrivals to Visalia, California.
38. For a full discussion of problems with the various transcriptions of Lahu, see Matisoff 1984 ("Problems in the Orthography of Lahu"), and *The Dictionary of Lahu*, pp. 14-28.
39. In this word, not only does English æ come out as Lahu ε, but the first English l is omitted entirely, while the final l is realized as vowel nasalization (symbolized by -n; Thai also substitutes -n for final English -l).
40. Thai lowlanders use an exactly equivalent expression (paj nǎj) in this situation. Foreigners in Thailand are often startled when greeted on the street in Thai-style English with the expression *Where you go?* Such a "personal question" strikes a Westerner as rather nosy, but for a Southeast Asian it is as harmless as *How ya doin'?*, and does not require anything but the most perfunctory answer.

41. Incomplete as it is, *The Dictionary of Lahu* has 1349 pages of entries.
42. See Matisoff 1973a:81-6, 297-301. The term "elaborate expression" was first used by Haas 1964 (pp. xvii-xviii), to characterize analogous expressions in Thai. Similar quadrisyllables are in fact a Southeast Asian areal feature (Matisoff 1983: 76-7): for Chinese, see Ching 1964; for Vietnamese, see Liem 1970; for Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao), see Pan and Cao 1958. Unlike the situation in Lahu, however, where two of the four syllables of an *Elab* are almost always identical, this repetition is merely optional in these other languages.
43. The following description of Lahu grammar is very sketchy. For full details please consult *The Grammar of Lahu* (Matisoff 1973/1982).
44. English verbs are inflected both for tense and for aspect, e.g. *we went* and *we were going* are both "past tense," but the latter is also "progressive aspect."
45. Except for verb-particles and clause-particles, which can follow everything else.
46. The only exception is imperative sentences (*Shut the door!*; *Take out the garbage!*), but even here grammarians argue that there is an "underlying subject" *you* that has been omitted (*You shut the door!* *You take out the garbage!*).
47. The connection between verb-final structure and the absence of prepositions was discovered by Joseph Greenberg in 1966, on the basis of data from many languages around the world.
48. The more than 250 Tibeto-Burman languages are overwhelmingly verb-final in structure, and this is assumed to have been the original Sino-Tibetan word order. Though certain branches of Tibeto-Burman (Karenic and Baic) as well as Chinese itself, now have non-verb-final structure, this is assumed to have developed secondarily.
49. Technically speaking, a *compound* sentence contains one or more non-final clauses, but none of them is "embedded in" the other (they just occur in sequence). A *complex sentence* has a clause that is inserted into the main clause at a certain point (e.g. a relative clause that modifies a noun).
50. *Ve* is a nominalizing (unrestricted) particle used in citation forms, like English *to*.
51. If one is thirsty for something other than water, the expression *də gâ* 'want to drink' must be used instead of *šf*; for bathing in something other than water a different washing verb must be used.
52. These are sometimes called "WH-questions" by grammarians of

English, since so many English interrogative words begin with those letters. With equal justice we might call them "QH-questions" in Lahu!

53. Cf. the British English exclamatory phrase *I say!*
54. The boundary between clauses is indicated by double crosshatches (##). The meaning of *le* is sometimes causal, not just conjoining. In the appropriate context the first clause could also be translated "Since he walked on the road all day...." The particle *pa-to* (next section) has a more specific causal sense.
55. Although grammatical gender is not much developed in Lahu, there do exist suffixes to distinguish the sex of some nouns referring to people or animals:

-pā 'masculine'		-ma 'feminine'	
cho-mô-pā	old man	cho-mô-ma	old woman
và?-pā	male pig; boar	và?-ma (-qu)	sow
-šē-phâ 'masculine'		-šē-ma 'feminine'	
qhâ?-šē-phâ	headman	qhâ?-šē-ma	headman's wife
yè-šē-phâ	household head	yè-šē-ma	household head's wife

56. See Cooke 1968 for a detailed study of the complex pronominal distinctions made in Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese, national languages of peoples with highly stratified social systems.
57. This is the same order as in Thai, but different from the Chinese order of numeral + classifier + head.
58. The range of *khe* includes all living animals above the level of insects. (Dead animals and bug-like creatures are only worth the general all-purpose classifier *mà*.) Subhuman spirits and motor vehicles also take this animal classifier: *nê-hây nî khe* 'two evil spirits'; *lɔ̃lɔ̃ šê? khe* 'three trucks'.
59. We have already seen how the English *indefinite* article is approximated by the Lahu numeral *tê* 'one.'
60. For a discussion of the historical process of "grammaticalization," whereby a full noun or verb comes to play the more abstract role of a particle, see Matisoff 1991b.
61. In several other Southeast Asian languages, there are verbs meaning 'get; obtain' that show striking parallelism to Lahu *ga* in their semantic and syntactic behavior (e.g. Thai *dâj* and Hmong *tau*). For details see Matisoff 1991b, pp. 418-26.

62. For a discussion of Lahu causatives in the context of the Tibeto-Burman family as a whole, see Matisoff 1976.
63. For a discussion of the deep connection among nominalization, genitivization, and relativization, see Matisoff 1972b. Relative clause formation in Lahu is an intricate topic which is only touched on briefly here. For details, see *The Grammar of Lahu*, pp. 472-503.

Appendix I. "Praying for Game"

Šā lō ve (an animist religious text)

- (1) ó, ó ! yǎ?-ni chò kǎ? thī-ŋǎ-thī-khā tǎ? le
O, o! today in this place we have brought forth silver and gold altars
- (2a) vǎ?-pǎ-vǎ?-ma lǎ?-šā cē hín hu šē-phá
for him [the Hill Spirit] who hath 7000 pigs, male and female, on his
right hand
- (2b) lǎ?-mē cē làn hu šē-phá
for him who nourisheth seven millions on his left hand
- (3) chò kǎ? ho cǎw-mǎ-cǎw-tú cǎw-ŋ cǎw-yó
[and for all ye rulers of] this place, Lord Maw, Lord Tu, Great Lord, Lord
Yaw [Shan deities]
- (4a) á! vǎ?-pǎ-vǎ?-ma lō-cǎ-qhā-cǎ ve mē
ah! for male and female pigs we beg and beseech thee
- (4b) chí-pǎ-chí-ma lō-cǎ-qhā-cǎ ve
for barking-deer male and female we beg and beseech thee
- (5) yǎ?-ni khó-ló-khó-tán tǎ? le
today bringing forth gifts and offerings
- (6) nō khi-hó-lǎ?-hó gǎ ve
we reach under thy feet and under thy hands
- (7) á! hǎ-ŋǎ-ŋǎ-ŋǎ tá yù khá
ah! do not block us up with hardship and distress
- (8) bǎ?-ŋǎ-šǎ-ŋǎ
may they be easy to shoot and fell
- (9) šo-cǎ?-kǎ-cǎ? phe le
binding them up in [thy] chains of iron and brass
- (10a) ŋǎ qhó-ú cǎ ŋǎ qo yù le qhó-ú tá lá
when I circle round the hilltops put them on the hilltops for me
- (10b) qhó-mē cǎ ŋǎ qo yù le qhó-mē tá lá
when I circle round the foothills put them at the hills' feet for me
- (11) šó-phǎ?-ma-phǎ? qǎ le
covering [their eyes] with the leaves of trees and plants
- (12a) á! tē kǎ qo cho-mó-cho-hó phǎ-kú-ma-kú tǎ? gǎ, phǎ-lí-ma-lí fǎ gǎ
one half for the elders' sake I wish to bring forth for apportionment

amongst the men and women, I wish to divide according to our men's
and women's customs

- (12b) tē kō qo mī-hu-yā-hu gā, a-vī-a-ni mī-hu-yā-hu gā le
with the other half I wish to nourish my wife and children,
my kinsmen's wives and children
- (13) nō thā? lō ve
I pray to thee
- (14) tā-hā-tā-gō pē? lā
do not give us hardship or distress
- (15) a-cí mǎ?-cā lā
please help sustain us
- (16) yǎ?-ni pā tā qē, ha tā qē pē? lā
today grant us that the evening-star may not set, that the moon may not
set for them [i.e. that the game animals may not live until the end of this
day]
- (17a) qhō-ú cō gā qo yù le qhō-ú tē lā
when I circle round the hilltops set them on the hilltops for me
- (17b) qhō-mē cō gā qo yù le qhō-mē tē lā
when I circle round the foothills set them at the hills' feet for me
- (18) cho-yā hó-ti? mā cō, ta-ti? mā cō
we humans have no power in our heads, no power in our eyes
- (19) nō khi-qhō-lā? qhō lō-cā-qhā-cā ve
from inside thy feet and thy hands we beg and entreat thee for food
- (20) tā-hā-tā-gō pē? lā
do not give us hardship or distress
- (21) yǎ?-ni pā tā qē, ha tā qē pē? lā
today grant that neither the evening-star nor the moon may set for them
- (22) a-cí mǎ?-cā lā mē
please grant us help and sustenance
- (23) á! nō qhō-ú cō gā qo
ah! when I circle up there atop the hills
- (24) qhō-ú 5 šō-phā? ma-phā? qō le, qhō-ú tā lā mē
on the hilltops cover [their eyes] with leaves of trees and plants, please
place them atop the hill for me
- (25) šo-cā? kī-cā? phe le, qā gū chí šī-šī tā lā mē
binding them in thy chains of iron and brass, place them right in front of
me

- (26) šo-móʔ-kí-móʔ qô-thàʔ qôʔ še le tâ lâ mē
leading them to my big gun of iron and brass, place them there for me
- (27a) nò hó-tiʔ-ta-tiʔ cò še-phá
O thou who hast power in thy head and in thine eyes
- (27b) nà tí qo hó-tiʔ-ta-tiʔ mâ cò le
since I have no power in my head or in my eyes
- (28) nò khi-hó-làʔ-hó lò-câ-qhâ-câ ve
under thy feet and thy hands I beg and beseech thee for food
- (29a) á! yàʔ-ni thi-ŋô-thi-khâ tšʔ le
ah! today bringing thee a silver and gold altar
- (29b) šwè-ŋô-šwè-khâ tšʔ le
bringing thee silver and gold streamers
- (29c) câ-ú-dò-ú tšʔ le
bringing thee the very best of food and drink
- (30) nò khi-hó-làʔ-hó lò-câ-qhâ-câ ve
under thy feet and thy hands I beg and beseech thee for food
- (31) a-cí màʔ-câ lâ mē
please grant us help and sustenance
- (32a) tê kš qo mī-hu-yâ-hu
with one half nourishing my wife and children
- (32b) tê kš qo cho-mô phâ-lī-ma-lī fī gâ cē,
the other half I wish to divide according to the customs of our
male and female ancestors, as I have said
- phâ-kū-ma-kū tšʔ gâ le cē
 offering it to [all the] men and women [of the village], as I have said
- (33) nò khi-hó-làʔ-hó lò câ ve
under thy feet and thy hands we beg for food
- (34) vâʔ-pâ-vâʔ-ma, chí-pâ-chi-ma, pè-lšʔ-thi-lšʔ ve
male and female pigs, male and female barking-deer, plenty to
share and feast upon
- (35) màʔ-câ lâ
help and sustain us
- (36) yàʔ-ni pš tâ qè, ha tâ qè pèʔ lâ mē
today grant that the evening-star not set [for them], that the
moon not set [for them]
- (37) ó, ó! hàʔ lâ ò mē
o, o! please accept [our prayer]!

Appendix II. Lahu proverbs

1. á-phè?=cè hó cho má ší; pû-cho=cè hó cho ší ve.
People don't die under pepper-bushes; people die under sugar cane.
(Misfortune tends to strike us unexpectedly.)
2. ší?-ká-kwi qo à-mī mš; yâ-nè qo cho-mš cî-lè? cè.
Dry branches make good tinder; the young make good servants for their elders.
3. ò-lo má ší qo, hē-šā=pā qho tâ lô?
Unless you know what you're doing, don't go into an abandoned field.
(Look before you leap.)
4. šú-qu mà?-hí-kwi qo há-pi à? tâ thó?
Don't knock out a clay pipe on a rock.
(Don't build a fire in a wooden stove.)
5. yâ-dâ? qo yè chō tâ mī; nē-dâ? qo yâ chō tâ mī.
A fair youth should not consort with bears; a fair maid should not consort with youths.
(‘consort with’ is literally “should not sit next to”)
6. á-tho í-kâ? cho-ghā mā tō.
A knife leaves no cutting-mark on water.
(You can't teach a fool anything.)
7. tē thu kâ qo tē lò te tho ve.
If he hears a span he'll say a cord.
(He always exaggerates.)
8. á-thè?=tū á-thè? tī mā ḡa.
A knife can't whittle its own handle.
(One hand washes the other.)
(You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.)

9. lâ mã ʔi qo lâ-gə qhê? mã phê?
You can't skin a tiger until he's dead.
(Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.)

10. to ʔi ví á ʔi.
The body is dead but the stinger lives.
(The evil that men do lives after them.)

11. dô-mi qo gâ? á mi.
By the time you've realized what's happening there's nothing you can do about it.
(“When think-catch cannot chase-catch.”)
(You can lock the barn door after the horse is stolen.)

12. ne-khî-ne-jò è qo ne-và-ne-lò? lo.
When a maid feels pregnant it's burdens aplenty.
(‘When maid-state-maid-feel, maid-burden-maid-plenty.’)

13. ʔu ve mã-qhò á? qo tâ ca mã.
Don't go sitting on other people's stools.

14. vâ?gò lâ mã chê? ve mã hê?
A tiger will bite even a scrawny pig.

15. lò-qá? ve qo ô-khò mã bù.
A great river does not make a loud noise.
(Still waters run deep.)

16. tê gâ ʔi?-cê tâ? qo tê gâ khi-mé=qwê? thâ? gò ve.
When one climbs the tree the other pulls on the backs of his knees.

17. á-tò? á hê qo pê-gâ?-wí tâ hí?
Don't shake up the wasps until you've got a good fire going.

18. chê?-gə mã thu qo qá-chû=cê tâ tâ?
Don't climb a thornbush unless you've got thick skin on your belly.

- 19a. vâ-qô=de chê qo vâ-qô=ne ʔa chî? ve.
When you're in a grove of vâ-qô bamboo, you've got to tie things with vâ-qô

fibers.

- 19b. mē-mô=de chē qo mē-mô=ne ġa chī? ve.

When you're in a grove of mē-mô bamboo, you've got to tie things with mē-mô fibers.

- 19c. tō-kō=de chē qo tō-kō=ne ġa chī? ve.

When you're in a grove of tō-kō palms, you've got to tie things with tō-kō fibers.

(When in Rome, do as the Romans do.)

20. ó-ká-ó-là? qo ó-qā=kho; šš-ká-šš-là? qo šš mā qwè?

No matter how you bend it, it's a buffalo-horn; no matter how you think about it, there's no way out.

21. nū mō qo mūl-nwe câ qo qhē hō? lo.

If an old ox eats new grass, he gets diarrhea.

(People should act their age.)

22. mā mō? kà? šu câ kà mō qo cí-khī tō? ve.

Even if we're not hungry, if we see somebody eating our mouth waters.

23. mā ġa qo mā ġa thā è šī ve tí yò.

You have nothing to lose by trying.

('As for not getting it, you can only know at the time you don't get it.')

24. ó-qō há-pi kō ā ve mā hē?

You don't have your head stuffed with rocks.

(You're not invincible.)

25. bo te ve bo ká te ve kà? yò.

To acquire merit, you must do meritorious work.

(There is no faith without works.)

26. câ a qo nū a ni.

Smell before you eat.

(Look before you leap.)

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The Hmong:
Enduring Traditions

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Foreword

I have neither covered all aspects of Hmong culture nor addressed all its particularities with equal emphasis. I have not described Hmong village life, and I have only touched briefly upon the music, embroidery, and other arts that are an important part of Hmong traditions. There are several serious works already completed by other authors on those subjects, and I have listed them in Appendix I (*Additional resources*) for Hmong and other friends who may be interested in reading more.

Our goal here is to expose our readers to the features of Hmong culture that are important in understanding the lifeways and priorities of Hmong living today in the United States. Our four thousand-year old culture has survived persecution and diaspora and, in spite of difficulties and problems, has been transmitted to us through the links of generations reaching far into the past. Our culture reflects fineness and determination through a philosophy of wisdom gained from love and freedom, expressed in a flowery language. This cultural heritage is the result of experiences that, across centuries, have forged the moral spirit of the Hmong scattered today all over the world.

I hope that this chapter will contribute to a better understanding of the Hmong people and will encourage young Hmong, wherever they are, to continue the mission of their ancestors. This means that they must work to strengthen cultural, moral, and spiritual values while honoring their ancestor spirits, to build strong Hmong unity through the clan and marriage system, to fine-tune harmony through social organization grounded in justice and solidarity, and to project dignified renown through hard work and progress. I hope that Hmong-Americans will continue to preserve and develop this rich cultural heritage, which is our small contribution to the multicultural richness of the United States.

Yang Dao
Minneapolis, Minnesota
July, 1992

Who are the Hmong?

The Hmong are among the most ancient peoples in Asia. The Chinese call them *Miao* while the Vietnamese, the Lao, the Thai and others continue to refer to them as *Meo*, a name the Hmong do not accept. Their name means “man” or “human being,” in contrast to “spirit.” In China, *Miao* is the official ethnic designation, which includes Hmong and related groups.

Thought to be originally from the Yellow River area of China, the Hmong have been a people without a homeland for more than 4,000 years. Today Hmong can be found in southern China, northern Vietnam, northern Laos, northern Thailand, northern Burma, and since 1975, in Australia, France, Canada, Argentina and the United States.

Ten years ago there were between six and seven million Miao around the world, culturally and linguistically divided into



These three girls are all called Miao in China: on the left is a White Hmong girl from Laos (U.S.) wearing Green Mong dress; in the center is a Hmou from Guizhou; on the right is a Hmong from Guangxi. The girls on the right and left can communicate very easily; neither can communicate with the Hmou in a Hmongic language.

three main groups: Hmou, Krohsiong, and Hmong. Located mainly in Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan and Guangxi provinces of China are 2.2 million Chuanqiandian Miao (the Miao subgroup that includes Green Mong and White Hmong), some 44% of the total Miao population. In North Vietnam are 400,000 Hmong; in northern Laos 200,000; in Thailand 132,000 (including 50,000 Lao Hmong in Thai refuge camps); in northern Burma 8–10,000; in Australia at least 400; in Canada about 700; in France 11,500, with another 1,500 in French Guyana, South America; in Argentina about 120; and more than 90,000 in the United States.¹

All the Hmong who have taken refuge in the United States came from Laos. They have been resettled throughout the country, but more than half of them—46,000—have chosen California as their home. Nearly 17,000 Hmong live in small communities across the state of Wisconsin and 16,000 have established themselves in the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis and in surrounding Minnesota cities. Michigan, with 2,000 Hmong and Colorado, with 1,000 Hmong, are the next most densely populated states; other states have fewer than 1,000 Hmong.²

To their new homes, the Hmong have brought their social

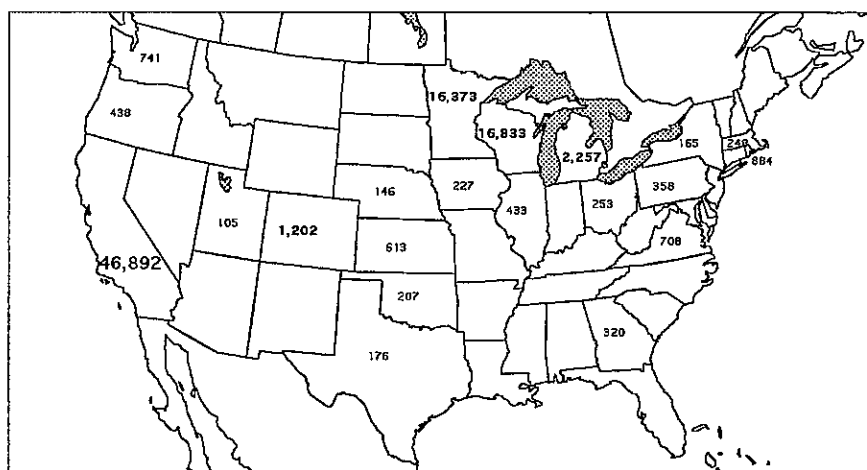


Figure 1. Hmong population in states reporting 100 or more Hmong on the 1990 census.

organization, their moral values and, for most of them, their traditional beliefs. They continue to speak their own language and to celebrate *Tsiab Peb Caug*, Hmong New Year. They still identify themselves as Hmong, believing that solidarity has allowed for their survival as a people. Despite their dispersal all over the world, they continue to maintain relationships by exchanging letters, recorded tapes, video cassettes, and by making use of the global telephone communication network. Recently, they have been able to take advantage of international detente to resume or establish contact with Hmong still living in China.

A long history of living in the territory of others has taught the Hmong the value of adjusting themselves to mainstream society. A proverb says:

<i>hla</i>	<i>dej</i>	<i>yuav</i>	<i>hle</i>	<i>khau</i>		
cross	river	will	take off	shoe		
<i>tsiv</i>	<i>teb</i>	<i>tsaws</i>	<i>chaw</i>	<i>yuav</i>	<i>hle</i>	<i>hau</i>
flee	country	leave	place	will	take off	status

Cross the river, you'll take off your shoes;
Flee from your country, you'll lose your status.

Many of the American Hmong realize that they will never return to Laos. They have been studying English, attending vocational training programs, and learning Western ways of living and thinking. An increasing number, both men and women, work in American companies and in private or government agencies; still others have set up their own businesses—food stores, cleaning and lawn mowing services, financial services, agricultural product cooperatives, security agent services, and dental clinics.

The Hmong unemployment rate in the United States is still relatively high, ranging from a low of two to five percent in North Carolina, Texas, and Nebraska to a high of 90%+ in Fresno, California (IRAC, 1987). Where high welfare dependency exists, it is caused by the wide gulf between their preparation for life and the economic roles available to them in the United States. Like

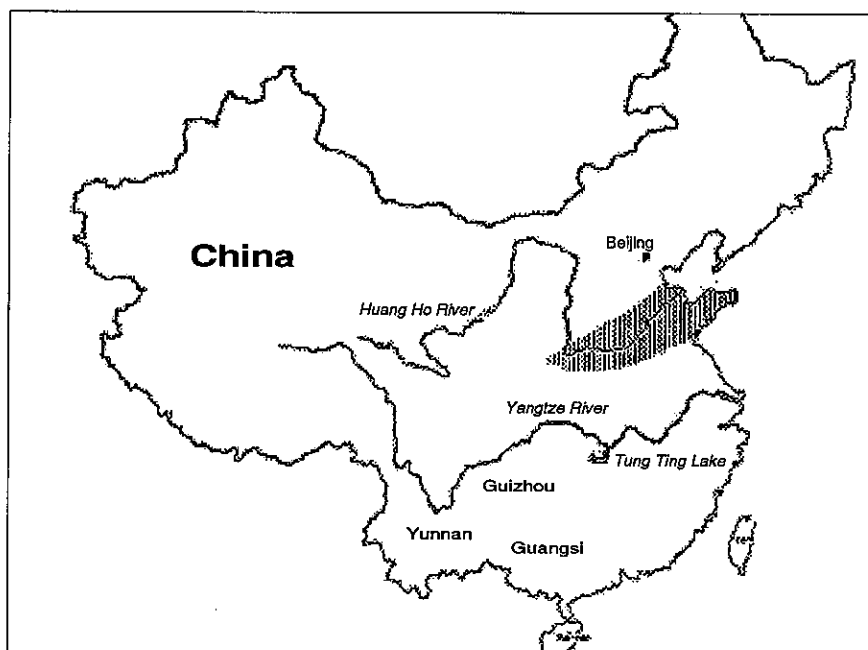
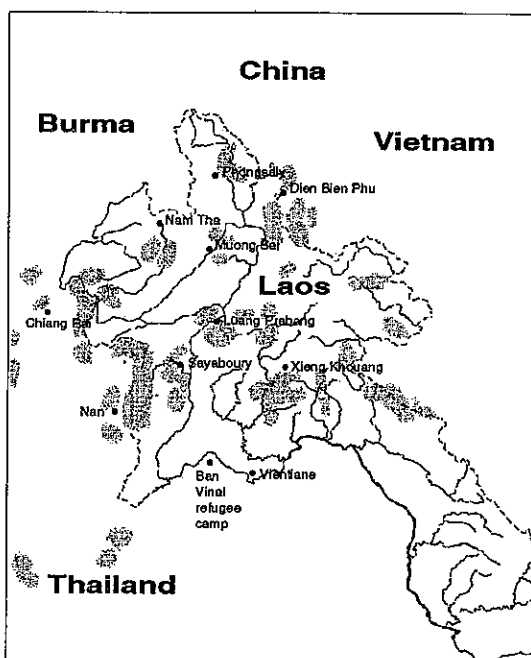
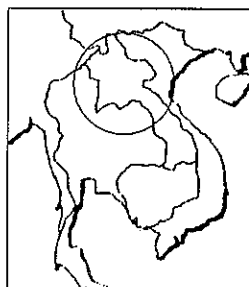


Figure II. Home of the Hmong, Hmou and Krohsiong 4,500 years ago.

Figure III.
Hmong in America
came most recently
from Laos. The
shaded areas show
Hmong settlement
areas in Laos and
northern Thailand.



other rural peoples resettled in the United States, they face a leap from agricultural self-sufficiency to a complex market economy with thousands of occupational roles bounded by literacy and vocational experience. In addition, many of those who are now in their adult years grew up during war and flight; they have never experienced the traditional self-sufficiency of the highland village, but instead, saw rice drop from the sky and waited in long lines for rations in the refugee camps. But the Hmong refugees, like generations of Hmou, Krousieng, and Hmong before them, have the ability to adapt to new circumstances. The accomplishments of Hmong youth in American schools are an encouraging sign for the future of the Hmong community in the United States.

A 1987 study conducted by the Indochinese Refugee Action Center provides a sketch of the American Hmong future. IRAC surveyed ten communities with Hmong populations, and asked for information about employment, welfare dependence, education, and entrepreneurship. In Providence, Rhode Island, with a 1986 population of 2,300 Hmong, 90% of the graduating seniors continued to post-secondary education, and six had graduated with a bachelor's degree; one was enrolled in medical school. In Decatur, Georgia, with a small Hmong population of 690, seven Hmong graduated from high school, and six continued on to college. In St. Paul, Minnesota (8,000 Hmong), 130 persons graduated from high school in 1986, with twenty in the top decile and some 80% continuing on to college. In 1986 alone, five obtained their bachelor's degrees (law enforcement, political science, and theology) and eighteen graduated from two-year associate arts programs. In the sister city of Minneapolis (3,500 Hmong), young women did well: in 1985, ten ranked in the top decile, and in 1986, twenty women graduated from high school, with one of them earning the salutatorian spot. In Chicago, with a small Hmong population of 350, fifteen students graduated from high school in 1986, and at least thirty Hmong were enrolled at the university level—four at the graduate level, including one at the doctoral level. In Fresno, California, with the largest U.S. popu-

lation of Hmong (estimated at 18,000 in 1987), 300 graduated from high school in 1986. Fifteen others graduated from California State University, Fresno; sixty-five graduated from Fresno State University; 300 graduated from the two-year Fresno City College; 75 others graduated from private colleges.

History of the Hmong

The history of the Hmong is not easy to determine since, for much of it, the Hmong have not had a writing system for recording their own version of events. However, Hmong oral texts and “flower words” carry glimmers of the past, and along with Chinese accounts of disputes with the Hmong and their ancestors, and translations of contemporary Chinese research, the Hmong past can be reconstructed.

Loss of a homeland in China

The Hmong, Hmou, and Krohsiong are descendants of the *San Miao* (‘three’ Miao), believed to be the first settlers of the Yellow River basin in China. Tapp(1991) speculates that they may have been the aboriginal Chinese. Documents written by Chinese officials and generals refer to the Miao, but at that time *Miao* (a variant of *Man*) included other ethnic groups who also did not speak Chinese or adopt Chinese ways. Miao is often translated from the Chinese as “barbarian.”

According to the Chinese histories, a Han Chinese general named Huan Yon (or Xuan Yuan) first defeated the San Miao, led by a man named Chi-you, in the Yellow River basin. Huan Yon was then named Emperor, as Hoang Ti (“Yellow Emperor”). The Hmong revolted against Hoang Ti again and again, but beginning in the 26th century B.C. they moved from the Yellow River basin southward, into the mountains of Guizhou and Yunnan. A common Hmong expression comes from that time: *Tsis pom Dej Dag*

siab tsis nqig ("One does not have to die before seeing the Yellow River"). The Hmong entered history 4,500 years ago, bearing weapons. Since then, they have seldom abandoned them, protecting independence and seeking peace in rugged remote mountain areas.

In Laos as well as in the United States, the words of the Hmong shaman continue to invoke the emperor under the name *Faj Tim Huab Tais* ("King Hoang Ti"). Over time, he has been forgotten as a real-life enemy and has become the Hmong shaman's spirit ally after death.

Both Hmong legends and researchers (Wu, 1991) suggest that the Hmong once had territory of their own, and a civilization marked by cultural advances, including the development of firearms and a penal code. If true, that area was most likely the "San Miao state," including portions of modern Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan, Jiangxi, Hubei, and Henan. The capital of their state is thought to have been Changsha.

Hmong legends tell of a kingdom that was governed by *Txiv Yawg*, who led them towards progress and prosperity. This prosperous period is exemplified by a Hmong woman who died two thousand years ago in Hunan province. In 1971, during archaeological excavation, her body was discovered incredibly well preserved, still draped in silk clothes. Even today, the Hmong believe that most of their folktales, legends, popular songs, music, musical instruments, and marriage and funeral rites came to them from that distant period.

During the summer of 1988, in order to learn more about the history of the Hmong, I visited China with several other Hmong delegates. We participated in a Hmong conference in Beijing, and we met with Hmong historians. We visited the Hmong, Hmou, and Krohsiong people scattered over six southern Chinese provinces. We confirmed that the Hmong ancestors once lived in a kingdom called the "Country of the Yellow River," a fertile area located between the Hoang Ho River and the Yang Tse-Kiang River. On the train that took us from Beijing to Guiyang in



This White Hmong girl (of the Thoj clan) lives in Guangxi province, about 20 kms. from the Vietnam border. Her dialect is virtually identical to that of Hmong from Laos.

Guizhou province, we traveled through an immense rice-covered plain that stretched as far as the eye could see. Our Chinese hosts told us that it once belonged to the Hmong, Hmou, and Krohsiong.

Over the past 40 centuries, groups of the Hmong have moved further and further south, seeking new land for their expanding population, or fleeing domination and persecution. Even though the first Hmong arrived in Laos as long as eight or nine generations ago, their

legends and ritual texts still remind them of the Yellow River (Hoang Ho, in Hmong *Dej Dag*) they left behind them in China thousands of years ago. Migration, oppression, and treachery are recurring themes in their popular songs that evoke nostalgia for a golden past. Likewise, their funeral rites advise and guide the dead to rejoin their ancestors (*cuag poj cuag yawm*) in China. During these rituals, the Hmong master of the funeral rites warns the Hmong dead not to trust the Han Chinese who will try to steal their clothes—the funeral clothes—and to take their money and belongings by force.

The following verses of sung poetry (*kwv txhiaj*) about leaving Laos for America are typical of songs of exile that have been composed since the first flights in search of freedom:

1

*Hnub caj puag thaum i, peb yeej koom zej koom zos
nyob.
Vim lub niaj xyos tsis zoo, peb thiaj tseg tau peb me
zej me zos npheb.*

In the past, we used to live together in the same
village.
Because of the bad years (war), we were forced to
leave our village to nature.

2

*Txiv leej tub tuaj nyob rab teb tuam rooj ntug no,
Tsis hnov tus niaj liab me cuam quaj.
Txiv leej tub tuaj ua lub neej seev yuj yees,
Tsis muaj kwv muaj tij, muaj neej muaj tsa nyob qhov
twg tuaj.*

I, son of the Hmong, came to live in this faraway
country,
Not hearing monkeys and gibbons call.
I, son of the Hmong, suffer a life filled with longing,
Having no brothers and relatives to come visit me.

3

*Noj ib cim paj tsiab nyob luag teb tuaj mus luag chaw,
Txiv leej tub yuav nco kwv nco tij sawv ntxuj ntxaim
tuaj nruab plawv.*

In celebrating new year in this foreign country,
I, son of the Hmong, really miss younger and older
brothers to the depth of my heart.

4

*Luag muaj kwv muaj tij, muaj neej muaj tsav,
Noj ib cim paj tsiab, luag nim muaj lub ntsej muag
luag tej sis nqhoob.
Txiv leej tub tsis muaj leej kwv leej tij, leej neej leel tsa,
Noj ib cim paj tsiab, txiv leej tub tsis muaj leej twg
yuav mus laug tuaj ib hnoob.*

Others, who have brothers and relatives,
Celebrate new year with a face smiling and roaring
with laughter.

I, son of the Hmong, have no brothers and no relatives,
Celebrating the new year, I, son of the Hmong, have
nobody to visit and spend the day with.

5

*Luag muaj kwv muaj tij, muaj neej muaj tsav,
Muab cim paj tsiab noj tej sis nrho,
Luag nim nqua tej sib lug mus ua noj.
Txiv leej tub tsawg kwv tsawg tij, tsawg neej tsawg
tsav,
Muab cim paj tsiab noj tas tej sib nrho,
Yuav zoo puav tam tus me noog kaub kim yaj kau luj
laws tej npoo toj.*

Others, who have brothers and relatives,
After having celebrated new year,
Go in groups working with joy for their living,
I, son of the Hmong, who have no brothers and no
relatives,
After having celebrated new year,
Am like the solitary bird "kao kee ya" that longs in
the hills.

6

*Txiv leej tub xav zoj los chim siab.
Txiv leej tub nce hlo lub toj nto,
Tsis hnov tus niaj fuab tuaj me cua nroo.
Txiv leej tub tuaj tau ntev niaj nqis ntev xyoo,
Tsis hnov leej kwv leej tij, leej neej leej tsa tuaj ib ntsug
moo.*

The more I, son of the Hmong, think, the more I am
sad.
I, son of the Hmong, climb up the hill,
Not hearing the clouds and winds murmur.
I, son of the Hmong, have come (to live) here for long
years,
Not hearing from younger and older brothers and
relatives one bit of news.

Tsav chim lub laj xeeb tsis txawj tas,
Tas nrho tuaj lawm tej dej rov ntshua ntaub.
Chim kuv siab tus luaj twg los nej nrog tsis paub,
Tsav chim lub laj xeeb tsis txawj tas,
Tas nrho tuaj lawm tej dej rov ntshua xov.
Chim nej siab tus luaj twg los kuv txhoj nrog tsis
hnov.

I cannot cease to be sad in the depth of my heart,
 Profoundly sad while recalling the springs where
 Hmong cleaned their hemp cloth.

How deeply sad is my heart you do not know.

I cannot cease to be sad in the depth of my heart,
 Profoundly sad while recalling the springs where
 Hmong cleaned their hemp thread.

How deeply broken is your heart I cannot fathom.

(Sung by Yang My No, 1978)

Loss of writing

According to historians of China, the Hmong once had a writing system (Tapp, 1991). Legends tell that Hmong fugitives, pursued by Han Chinese troops, threw their books into the Yellow River, but kept their weapons to fight and to defend their families. Those who were captured, but spared, by the Han Chinese were forbidden to use, teach, or learn the Hmong system of writing. But the Hmong devised a trick—they used embroidery and batik to write the Hmong characters in the designs of their women's skirts, collars (*dab tshos*) and other textile creations. With the creativity of the Hmong women, the erosion of memory over time, and the dispersal of the Hmong throughout the southern provinces of China, the Hmong writing system was gradually altered to become completely incomprehensible. The Hmong writing system disappeared from human memories, leaving only the Hmong *paj ntaub* ('flower cloth') as its legacy.



Hmong embroidery, applique and batik—are characters from a forgotten writing system encoded here?



Thai Hmong girl sewing on a new skirt, 1986, Bua Chan, Thailand.

The Hmong in Laos

Continuing a migration that began 180 generations ago, the Hmong first arrived in Laos around 1810 or 1820. Their coming was a slow and peaceful process. They settled on the highest slopes of the mountains, where they did not confront the lowland Lao population.

Although the Hmong often looked for remote lands rather than confront those who would challenge them for use of the land (Yang, 1976), relations with others were not always peaceful. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Hmong newcomers challenged the Khmu, who had for centuries lived on the plateau of Xieng Khouang, for rights to farm land there. In the end, the flintlock rifle, brought from China, gave the Hmong the crucial advantage. The Khmu, armed only with sabres and crossbows,

were defeated and since then the Hmong and the Khmu have lived as highland neighbors in wary peace.

In 1893, France extended its protectorate over Laos, forming with Cambodia and Vietnam what was known as French Indochina. Three years later, the Franco-Lao authorities established a tax system—payment for each “head” in the village. The Hmong chiefs refused to collect the taxes from their people. The Franco-Lao authorities sent the *Gardes indochinoises* into the mountains to enforce the law. The Hmong organized themselves and attacked the soldiers. A cease-fire was ordered by the higher French authorities and was accepted by the Hmong chiefs. Negotiations led to a compromise. The Indochinese Guards went back to their lowland barracks and the Hmong returned to their mountain villages.

In 1918, another Hmong political revolt began. It was after this three-year uprising, known as the “Madman’s War” (*Rog*



Hmong from the Nam Tha region, late 1950s.



Hmong from Nam Tha, Laos, in the late 1950s.

Vwm or *Rog Paj Cai*) that the French government granted a special administrative status to the Hmong in northern Laos and North Vietnam. After that, the Hmong, who had lived under Lao and Vietnamese jurisdiction, were allowed to elect their own *tasseng* (district chiefs). Hmong representation in the governmental process lessened the autocratic and often unjust rule they had endured in the past.

In March, 1945, the Japanese troops who had occupied Indo-

china arrested most of the French in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Some French survivors took refuge in Hmong villages. Later, French commandos from India parachuted into the Plain of Jars, the heart of "Hmong country" in Xieng Khouang province. They asked Touby Lyfoung, a young educated Hmong chief, to help them organize resistance against the Japanese occupation forces in Laos.

After World War II, the Hmong in the plateau of Xieng Khouang gained reputation and respect from both the French and the Lao. In March, 1947, Toulia Lyfoung, the younger brother of Touby Lyfoung—the only ethnic minority representative—joined the Lao National Constitutional Assembly to help define the future status of the Hmong and other ethnic minorities as part of

the new Laotian nation. After that time, the Hmong and other ethnic groups were recognized as an legitimate part of the kingdom of Laos.

At about the same time, a war of revolution began in Vietnam. It would last almost thirty years, eventually involving Laos and Cambodia, and drawing the Soviet Union, China, and the United States into a struggle of influence in Southeast Asia. In Laos, the majority of the Hmong remained loyal to the royal family of Luang Prabang. In 1961, urged by the King and the Royal Lao government, to whom the United States had promised support, the Hmong participated *en masse* in the fight against the communist Pathet Lao and the communist North Vietnamese army that invaded northern Laos.

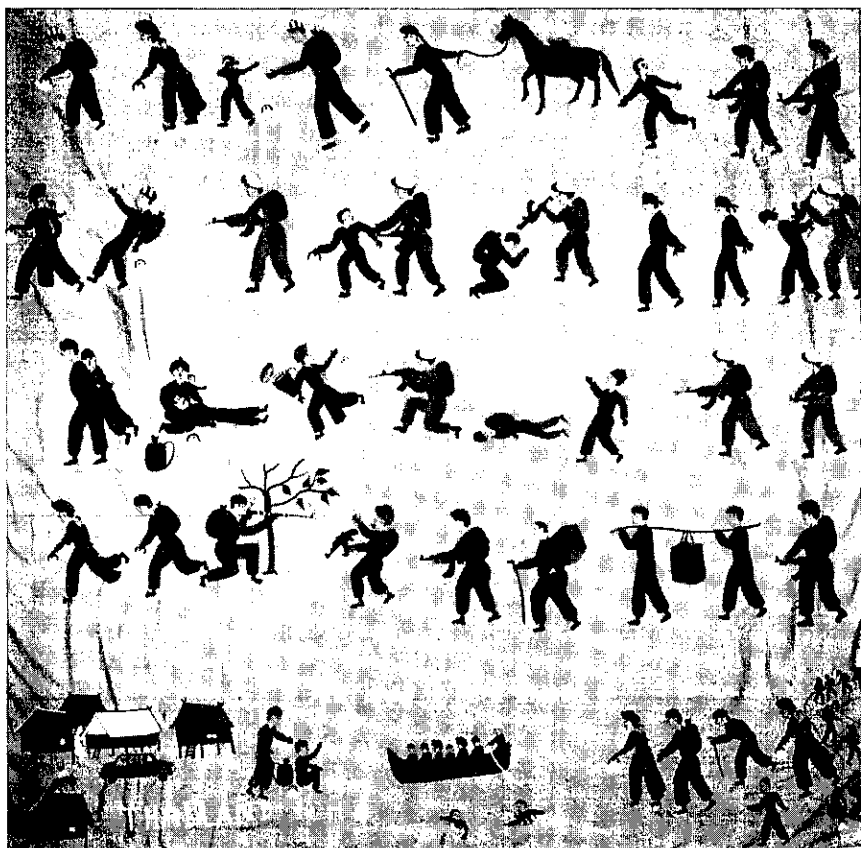
From 1961 to 1973, thousands of Hmong were involved in a "secret war," financed and equipped by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. More than 15,000 Hmong soldiers died in the fighting, while a third of the Hmong population left their village fields to become displaced persons dependent on the assistance of the Royal Lao government and the United States Aid for Interna-



Hmong soldiers in the "secret army," along with civilians during a New Year gathering, 1964, Sam Thong, Laos.

tional Development (U.S.A.I.D.) for survival. The Hmong and other ethnic groups fought, under Royal Lao Army leadership and with U.S. air support, to protect their freedom and defend their rights to the land. By opposing communist expansion in Laos, they contributed to the protection of U.S. interests in the region. Within a framework of Laos-U.S.A. friendship, they helped rescue American pilots whose planes were shot down on bombing raids over northern Laos and North Vietnam. It was this association with the United States that eventually brought the Hmong, Khmu, Mien, and Lao groups to America as refugees.

On February 21, 1973, the Vientiane Accords were signed



A "story cloth" documenting the refugees' experiences during flight to safety.

by the Royal Lao government and the communist Pathet Lao, calling for peace and national reconciliation. A new government was formed, joining communists and non-communists with a view towards national unity. But right after the fall of Cambodia to the Khmer Rouge and the fall of South Vietnam to the Vietnamese communists in 1975, the Pathet Lao violated the political agreement they had signed. They arrested anti-communist leaders and sent thousands of Royal Lao government officials and officers to the political re-education camps near the Vietnam border. Those who could secretly left Laos.

The following single verse from another sung poem about becoming national orphans, recalls the panic of those left behind when those who had the means managed their escape in 1975. It was sung by *Nruas Hawj* (Doua Her), a Green Hmong woman, and the variations in spelling reflect the spoken differences between the dialect groups (Vang and Lewis, 1984).

Side 1

...*Os caages*

*tswv-fuab tsiv teb tsaws chaws moog txug nam maab
 quas suav teb yuav moog pum taag nam puj
 maab, miv pub suab tsev tsuj, tsev vuag-ci-quas-voog,
 los ntshai tshuav taag tswv-fuab tug laj-meej-pej-
 xeem fuab fwm quaj ua zeeg ua zog ntuj sua teb tom-
 qaab, zoo puav taam le kws puj-
 qab tseg nyuas-qab quaj ua zeeg ua zog, twb tsi xaav
 moog ncoo luas cooj huam...*

...Oh why does

Jeu Fua flee his homeland to arrive in a foreign
 country, where he will go to see the whole
 place, with buildings of all sizes, sparkling in a
 distant group, but without all his people,
 crying here, crying there, in the country so remote,
 just like a hen
 who leaves her chicks behind, crying here, crying
 there, that they don't want to live in the other
 peoples' chicken coop.

Side 2

*Tswv-fuab tsiv teb tsaws chaws txug nam maab quas
suav teb, yuav moog pum taag nam puj
maab, miv puj sua tsev tsuj, tsev vuag-ci-quas-npuag
nua
os caag es tshuav tau
tswv-fuab tug laj-meej-pej-
xeem fuab fwm quaj ua zeeg ua zog ntuj sua teb tom-
qaab zoo puav taam le kws puj-
qab tseg nyuas-qab quaj ua zeeg ua zog, twb tsi xaav
moog ncoo luas nkuaaj.*

Jeu Fua flees his homeland to arrive in a foreign
country, where he will go see the whole
place, with buildings of all sizes, like reflections from
a mirror.
Oh why is he able to leave all his people,
crying here, crying there, in the land far away, just
like a hen
who leaves her chicks behind, crying here, crying
there, that they don't want to live in the other
peoples' chicken enclosure?

Abandoned and isolated in their mountains, the Hmong became a target of reprisal. The Pathet Lao charged the Hmong with being "mercenaries of the CIA" during the war, and they were well aware that the Hmong throughout history took up arms in the face of oppression. The Pathet Lao began a policy of genocide; some Hmong *chao fa* ("sky soldiers") used abandoned weapons to defend themselves against the communists, but more than 100,000 Hmong fled to Thailand over the next fifteen years. Many of them died of hunger and disease. Others were killed in Pathet Lao ambushes or died crossing the Mekong River. The Thai camps of first asylum became a turntable for Hmong dispersal around the world. Today, nearly 50,000 Hmong are still in Thai refugee camps, one camp for those who have chosen to go to a third-asylum country or another for those who must return to Laos.

Since 1989, the Royal Thai government (RTG), the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have

undertaken a series of talks on the problem of Laotian refugees who still remain in the refugee camps in Thailand. According to the report of UNHCR and LPDR officials who visited Laos and Thailand in March and April, 1991, ten thousand Laotian refugees, mainly lowlanders, lived in Ban Napho camp; twenty-one thousand Laotian refugees, mainly Hmong, lived in Chieng Kham camp; and twenty-four thousand Laotian refugees, mainly Hmong, lived in Ban Vinai camp.

These figures do not include those Laotians who are classified as illegal economic migrants ("asylum-seekers"). They number five to six thousand, and face forced repatriation to Laos. The fourth session of the Tripartite Meeting (LPDR, RTG, and UNHCR) held in Luang Prabang, Laos, in June, 1991, concluded with the issuing of the *Outline of the Plan for a Phased Repatriation and Reintegration of Laotians in Thailand* in February, 1992.

It is too soon to evaluate the repatriation plan. However, it is possible to put the Laotian refugees' current situation into its national and international context.



Hmong village in Thailand, 1986. These Hmong are not eligible to come to the U.S.; the Laotian Hmong who were associated with the anti-communist military during the war qualify as refugees. This is a relatively poor village, and villagers are faced with the challenge of entering the Thai workforce and economy.

The exodus of 400,000 Laotians (Lao, Hmong, Khmu, Mien, etc.), who have fled Laos since 1975 represents more than ten percent of the Laotian population and constitutes an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of Laos. The search for a permanent solution requires, above all, the participation of the Laotian refugees themselves in the decision-making process and a strong commitment on the part of the current Laotian government to social, economic, and political reforms. The restoration of a democratic system in the country seems to be the *sine qua non* for the hundreds of thousands of Laotian refugees, who still wait in the first and second countries of political asylum to consider their return to their homeland. Any refugee repatriation plan, to be realistic, must seek to resolve the complex roots of the refugee problem, and must involve all the interested Laotian parties (current government of Laos and refugee community) as well as the international community.

Spiritual Life of the Hmong

The Hmong are fundamentally animist. They live in a world of good and evil spirits. They believe in a vague superior being with undefined powers, called *Ntuj* ('sky').

The Hmong believe that there are many souls (*plig*). The two principal ones are the "soul guardian of the tomb" (*plig zov rooj ntxa*) and the "soul of reincarnation" (*plig thawj thiab*). The soul guardian of the tomb will wander on Earth as a spirit living on offerings and sacrifices. The soul of reincarnation will return to the location of its birth to put on its "silk shirt" (the placenta of its birth, buried at the base of the main post in the house), and go to the Country of the Ancestors for a new reincarnation cycle.

Death

Right after the death of a Hmong, one of his relatives steps outside the house and fires three rounds into the air. One shot is fired after the previous shot's explosion has dissipated completely in the mountains around and valleys below the village. The gun shots are the first notice of the passage of someone in the region, preceding the official notice carried by a messenger.

Relatives help one another to bathe and dress the deceased with new clothes. If it is an elderly person, the relatives will also clothe him with a *tsho tshaj sab*, which is a set of funeral garments. For the rich and affluent, the garment is an elaborately embroidered and appliqued long robe, similar in style to the Chinese mandarin robe. For the ordinary person, it is a long gown. The deceased wears curved Chinese-style shoes, tied with hemp strings, which will help him cross the "Valley of Caterpillars" (*Hav Kab Ntsig*). The deceased's mouth is covered with a piece of red fabric that symbolizes a fan. This fan protects the deceased in several ways during the long journey to rejoin his ancestors.

The deceased is laid on his "horse" (*tus nees*), a kind of bier

made with wood and bamboo, in the main room of the house. The man with the gun approaches him and warns: "Now I am going to fire three rounds. You need not fear anything. The sound of the gun will accompany you and protect you on your journey." He then steps outside the house and fires three additional rounds into the air.

Relatives and friends in the village start to arrive and mourn over the corpse. Later on, others leave their dwellings in the surrounding areas to go to the mourning family's house. Still others cross mountains and valleys, and sometimes walk several days to share their condolences. A misfortune is never the concern of only the family and friends but of all the Hmong who are related somehow to one another in the same community. In this way, a funeral serves to renew the social ties that bind individuals into groups, and link groups together.

The master of the funeral ceremony (*kav xwm*) is chosen. He then assigns duties and responsibilities to others. One (*txiv txiag*) will be selected to take care of cutting down a large tree with which to make a coffin. Another (*tshwj kab*) will oversee and supply sufficient food to feed the large crowd of people over several days. A man (*txiv txiav taws*) will make sure there is enough firewood, and a woman (*niam ris dej*) will be responsible for fresh water. Some mourners come representing only themselves, while others are delegates from neighboring or distant villages. They all come to pay their last respects to the deceased, to morally support the bereaved, and to bring financial contributions or food to the mourning family.

The master of the funeral ceremony also has to choose the drummers and windpipe (*qeej*) players. The *qeej* is a musical instrument whose notes carry the words of the prayers and rites. History is passed on to the living, who can understand the message by listening to the tones. Most important is the *qhuab ke* ('show' 'way') man whose responsibility it is to signal the departure of the soul of the deceased and guide it with songs through the long journey to rejoin its ancestors.

While the *qhuab ke* man is in the process of leading the soul towards reunion with the ancestors, his assistant is folding a large sheet of paper money into the form of an umbrella. Cautiously, he lays it down beside the deceased, near the head. This will protect the soul against heat and rain during the journey. Next, the assistant soaks a small towel with warm water and uses it to wipe the deceased's face so that he is shining before meeting his ancestors. Offering a hard-boiled egg, rice and a cup full of rice alcohol also is part of the ceremony. Finally, a young rooster is killed in sacrifice to the deceased.

The rooster's spirit will guide the soul of deceased through the "Saddle of the Mountains," through the "Valley of Diseases and Groans," to the "Crossroad of Three Paths." The rooster's spirit will also help the soul cross the "Doorstep of Heaven" where traps are set by *Poj Ntxoog* (a female witch-like spirit, whose feet face backwards, and who protects the tiger with whom she lives). The little girl spirits climb "Tigers' Steep Rocks" and then they lead the soul freely into the village of the ancestors. Lastly, once inside the village, the rooster's spirit will help the soul of the deceased to recognize his ancestors by crowing and listening for familiar answering crows from the ancestors' roosters. This soul of reincarnation will ask for a "permit" (*thov ntawv*) that allows it to proceed through the reincarnation cycle. It may be born in whatever shape or form or being it wishes, if its destiny has not already been set.

The soul guardian of the tomb, on the other hand, is imprisoned in the grave and can be freed only on the thirteenth morning following the burial. The ritual starts with an invitation from the husband, the father, or the son, whoever is the most appropriate, to invite the soul back home to have a final feast. It is entertained with rice, meat, fruit, and rice alcohol.

By three o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, a ceremonial assistant invites the soul to go out of the house. It is symbolized by a figure wearing clothes that belonged to the deceased, sitting on a tray full of food and other offerings. The soul

is enticed to bring with it all sorts of misfortune that has fallen upon the house. The tray is then rolled down the slope of a hill. The action indicates to the soul that it is now freed forever from the human world to enter spirit life. It is no longer allowed to come home to ask for daily food. However, occasionally the living descendants (sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons) will offer sacrifices to the soul.

Birth

The Hmong believe that the birth of a child is but an aspect of the mysterious reincarnation cycle. A man or woman shaman officiates at a ceremony that takes place on the third morning following birth.

Standing in front of the house facing the rising sun, the shaman holds a pair of chickens that he offers to the ancestors. The latter are represented by burning incense sticks, planted in a bowl of rice, and placed on a small altar. The shaman thanks the ancestors for guiding the soul of the child to its new family and requests them to entrust this soul to the care of the parents. Then he calls the soul to enter the child's body. The ceremony (*hu plig*, 'call' 'soul') ends with the child receiving a name.

Children's names usually consist of one syllable, sometimes preceded by *Maiv* (a general reference for a girl) or *Tub* ('son'; 'boy'). The names are drawn from the natural world or represent valuable and hoped-for personal qualities.

Figure III. Typical children's names

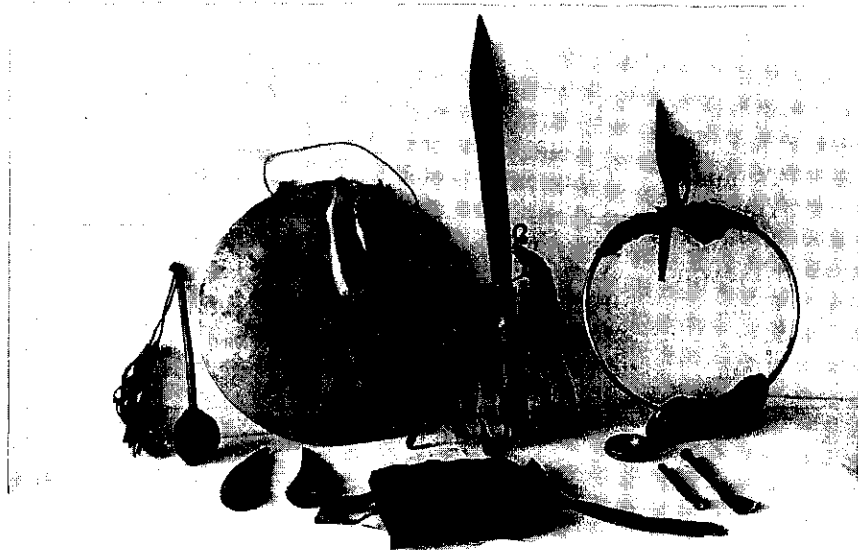
Name	English	Gender	Meaning
Ceeb	Cheng	boy	important
Cib	Chee	girl	basket
Dawb	Der	girl	white
Hnub	Nou	girl	sun
Huab	Houa	girl	cloud

Iab, Ab	Ia, Ah	girl	bitter, shiny
Kub	Kou	either	gold
Neeb	Neng	either	spirits
Ntsuab	Joua, Youa	girl	green
Teeb	Teng	boy	lamp
Thoob	Tong	boy	bucket
Tswb	Chue	either	bell
Tub	Tou	boy	son
Txiab	Chia, Xia	either	scissors
Yeeb	Ying, Yeng	either	opium
Choj	Chao, Xao	boy	bridge
Npauj	Bao	girl	insect
Nplooj	Blong	boy	leaf
Ntaaaj	Dang	boy	sword
Tooj	Tong	either	copper
Txiaj	Xia, Chia	either	valuable
Yeej	Yeng	either	win
Paj, Paaaj	Pa, Pang	girl	flower
Diav	Dia	girl	spoon
Nuv	Nou	boy	fishing hook
Pov	Pao	boy	protect
Teev	Teng	boy	weigh-scale
Cai	Chai	boy	rule, custom
Ci	Chee	either	shiny, bright
Cua	Chua	girl	wind
Chu, Chou	Tsu	boy	steam pot
Mos	Mao	girl	young, soft
Npis	Bee, By	boy	stout, strong
Nplias	Blia	girl	grasshopper
Tsuas	Choua	boy	rocky
Tshaus	Chao	girl	basket
Yias	Yia	either	pan
Ntxawg	Yer, Ger	boy	last son
Ntxawm	Yer, Ger	girl	last daughter
Foom	Fong	boy	blessing
Lwm	Lue	boy	next
Riam	Tria, Chia	either	knife

Illness

A soul (*plig*) sometimes leaves the body to wander in the field or jungle. During its journey outside the body it is vulnerable to predatory evil spirits (*dab*). Illness occurs when one of the souls is lost or captured by evil spirits. Curing rituals are performed to entice the soul back into the body or to battle the evil spirits that are holding the soul captive. It is the shaman who conducts these curing ceremonies.

Once the shaman is invited to the patient's residence, he arrives and erects his sword on the ground in front of him. He covers his face with a piece of red fabric. He puts his ritual bells (*tswb neeb*) on his fingers and grips his metal ring strung with metal discs (*txiab neeb*), then sits on a bench that serves as his ritual horse (*nees huab cua*, literally, 'horse' 'cloud' 'wind'). The shaman then enters into a trance. First he invokes Shee-Yee (*Siv Yis*), the forefather of all shamans, and his auxiliary spirits to



Shaman's equipment, *cuab yeej ua neeb*.

gather and be ready.

Then, like a cavalry general, the shaman gives the signal for departure. The drummer halts banging the gong. The shaman starts his horse off at a full gallop, followed by his brave soldiers, the *dab neeb*, who run and fly behind him, ready to defend their general and to attack the evil spirits that hold the patient's soul captive.

The evil spirits are defeated and flee, leaving the weak captive soul, which the general—the shaman—brings back home triumphantly. If the evil spirits win, the patient dies, sometimes prior to the end of the trance. The shaman signals his return by shaking his bells at a slower and slower rhythm before making a complete stop to end the ceremony. There is always a diagnostic announcement at the end of the ceremony that may last from one to three hours. The shaman may determine, for example, that the ancestors or the evil spirits demand the sacrifice of a cow, a pig, or a chicken, depending on the seriousness of the illness.

Hmong beliefs in spirits and souls have endured across centuries, requiring shamanic practice, traditional rituals and ceremonies. However, wars, migration, missionary activity, and assimilation have attenuated their importance. The introduction of modern medicine, wider availability of education with its emphasis on scientific cause-and-effect explanations, exposure to Christianity, and contact with Western civilization have affected the peoples' faith in ancestor worship and shamanism.

The "religion" of the Hmong is in reality a total view of how the world operates—it is their science, mythology, genealogy, history, and penal code. Without knowledge of these systems of belief and explanation, Hmong lose an important source of information about themselves and their place in history.

Social Organization

Hmong society is formed of groups, not individuals. There are two kinds of people: one's clan mates and those of all other clans. This can be seen when a Hmong addresses a group; rather than saying, "ladies and gentlemen," he says, "*kwv tij neej tsa*" (clan mates and potential in-laws). The family, the clan, and the lineage group are the three fundamental pillars of Hmong society. The importance of family, clan, lineage group, and the interrelationships with in-law clans continue to be important in the United States. It is this network of reciprocal obligation that underlies the Hmong social unity.

The family

The *tsev neeg*, or nuclear Hmong family—husband, wife, and their children—is the basic social unit of Hmong society. The family's average size is 6.5 persons.³ The father is the household head, and every Hmong male can expect to be a leader in at least this small arena. He makes the major decisions regarding family life style, economic activities, and community involvement. He learns the lineage-specific ritual details, and memorizes the genealogy of the lineage group for four to five generations. He serves as household arbiter of disputes, and ambassador to neighboring families and allied groups. He does the most arduous agricultural work, fixes the house, and takes care of the family's horses and cattle.

The woman provides clothing and meals for the family's members. She is responsible for the family purse, and thus forms an executive-financial team with her husband in carrying out family activities.

Husband and wife each contribute to the rearing and education of the children. Generally, child rearing is gender-specific: father teaches the sons, mother teaches the daughters.

The boys learn social patterns and techniques of agriculture from their father, while the mother teaches the girls about household duties and woman's role in the extended family. Both sons and daughters are valued, for they each play a role in linking the family to other groups in the society. However, it is the sons who bring home their wives, who ideally become life-long daughters to the mother-in-law. It is the sons who are responsible for taking care of the elderly parents until their "journey to the Country of the Ancestors." Daughters are raised for another family, because they go to live with their husband's family upon marriage.

Hmong marriage rites are an important part of Hmong cultural heritage. Two families and two clans are joined together in a new alliance that strengthens the Hmong community. The rites are performed by four *mej koob* ("go-between" persons, pronounced "may kong"): two represent the bride's family and two represent the groom's family. Step by step they conduct the complicated, subtle and rich marriage customs with cleverness, wisdom, and common sense. These verses, taken from the sung poetry of the *mej koob*, incorporate various myths and beliefs that pass on important social values:

1

*Nkauj Mog Mim, xyoo no
 Koj niam koj txiv lub rooj tag
 Pua pluaj mus ntaub pag.
 Koj niam koj txiv lub rooj txuas
 Pua pluaj mus ntaub sua.
 Koj tsis mus ua nyab
 Los vim Xeev Txwv Laus ntshais ua nyab tas,
 Xeev Txwv Laus ntshais ua nyab txhua.
 Koj sawv li tsees muaj ua nyab.*

Ngao Mo Mee, this year
 Your mother and father's front door
 Is covered with hemp cloth.
 Your mother and father's back door
 Is covered with Chinese cloth.
 You do not want to be a bride,
 But all the daughters of Lord Seng Dzeu Lao are

already married,
All the daughters of Lord Seng Dzeu Lao have become
brides.
Go resolutely toward being a bride.

Comment: Nkauj Mog Mim is a symbolic name given to the Hmong bride by the mej koob. The cloth is a metaphor for the seriousness of the negotiations and the magnificence of the new alliance that will be established between the two families. The two mej koob try to explain to Nkauj Mog Mim that every girl becomes a bride sooner or later.

2
*Mus txog koj pog koj yawm tej ntug zej,
Koj pom txoj kev du li dais ces yog
Nkauj tshiab txoj kev tuaj mus ris dej.*

Arriving at the edge of your mother and father-in-
law's village,
You see a clean path that is
The new bride's path for carrying water.

Comment: The two mej koob show the young bride the way to be a good wife: she must go to the spring to carry water for the whole family's use.

3
*Koj mus txog,
Koj tsis tim mus pw leej pog leej yawg daim pam tuab,
Nyob tsam txiv lau qaib cooj qua ces koj tsis hnov
suab.
Koj tsis tim mus pw leej pog leej yawg daim pam sov,
Nyob tsam txiv lau qaib cooj qua ces koj tsis hnov.*

When you arrive (at your husband's house),
Do not sleep covered with your mother and father-in-
law's thick blanket,
You might not hear the crow of the rooster.
Do not sleep covered with your mother and father-in-
law's warm blanket,
You might not hear the rooster crow.

Comment: The bride should not be a lazy wife sleeping in a comfortable bed and waking up whenever she wishes. A good bride must get up when the rooster first crows at about 4:30 a.m. to carry water, clean the house, prepare meals for the family and food for the pigs, and get things ready to go to the rice fields. She is not supposed to stay in bed and let her mother and father-in-law do all the work.

4

*Koj mus tau poj tau yawm zoo
Ces qav num ntau ci ua ntau laim txuj txias xws ntab
ntoo.
Luag qhuas koj ib txhia los luag yuav qhuas txog
Koj niam koj txiv tom no hais tias yeej yog yim Hmoob
zoo.*

You are going to have a good mother and father-in-law
Their house activities will involve you like a bee of the
tree.

They will praise you (for your work) as they will
Praise your own mother and father a good people.

Comment: The bride must be a hardworking wife, busy like a bee. Through her industriousness, she and her birth family will be judged. She must defend its reputation by her example.

5

*Koj mus tau poj tau yawm zoo
Ces daim teb tiag luj lias tuaj nram tiaj
Qab vag tsib taug yeej kaw zoo txiv tsiaj.*

You are going to have a good mother and father-in-law.

Their agricultural fields stretch across the plain.
In the front and back yards (of their house) there are
enclosed in stables beautiful male animals.

Comment: The bride will go to live with her mother and father-in-law who have a good reputation for being hardworking people; the proof is their large fields and many animals.

6

*Koj mus,
Zog txeej zog ntos koj paub tsis tau txhua,
Zog txeej zog ntos nyob ntawm koj duav,
Koj ua tib zoo ua.*

You are leaving (the family house),
Weaving skills you do not have enough,
(But) weaving skills are around your hip,
Do weaving carefully.

Comment: *The bride is a young woman without life experience. She must learn everything by practicing carefully with perseverance. Her mother-in-law will teach her to do things as they are done in this lineage group.*

7

Koj sawv kev lij tsees mus ua nyab.

*Koj mus tuav txhuv tsis txhob ntshai luj lawm koj
taw,*

Koj ris dej tsis txhob ntshai luj lawm koj duav.

*Leej pog leej yawg pom thiaj hais koj yog leej nyab
nquag.*

Go resolutely toward being a bride.

When you pound rice, do not be afraid of harming
your feet,

When you carry water, do not be afraid of harming
your hip.

Mother and father-in-law will praise you for being a
hardworking bride.

Comment: *To be a good wife, the bride must not be lazy. She must do her chores energetically and without excuses. She will then earn praise from her new family.*

Then the two *mej koob* convey the bride into the care of her mother and father-in-law, but remind them that the bride is still tied to her birth family. This means that her clan will continue to watch carefully over her. The following verses use the rope as a metaphor for this idea:

*Kuv niam kuv txiv ntshais Nkauj Mog Mim txoj hau
hlua*

*Muab rau kuv niam kuv txiv pog yawg nraug vauv
tooj,*

*Kuv niam kuv txiv ntshais Nkauj Mog Mim txoj qab
hlua*

Tseem luag luas kuv niam kuv txiv tus taw rooj.

We, the parents of Ngao Mo Mee, give one end of the
rope

To you, parents of the groom, to hold.

We, parents of Ngao Mo Mee, hold the other end of the
rope

Still tied to the door of our family house.

*Kuv niam kuv txiv ntchais Nkauj Mog Mim mus ua
 neej
 Pab tsis taus kuv niam kuv txiv tom ub lub teej cuab,
 Kuv niam kuv txiv yuav vam nej plaub tug txiv tuam
 mej koob
 Thiab lwm mej koob txav tuaj nrog qhuab.*

Our daughter Ngao Mo Mee goes to make a new life,
 Not much help for the parents of the other side.
 We, parents of the bride, would ask you, the four *tuam
 mej koob*
 And *lwm mej koob*, to give her advice and guide her
 life.

Comment: The two mej koob of the bride's family remind the two mej koob of the groom's family that the bride has no experience and is unable to take care of the groom's family. If a conflict occurs between the bride and groom, or a misunderstanding between the bride and the parents-in-law, the four mej koob have a moral duty to meet together to discuss the problem and find a solution. This means that the groom or the parents-in-law have no right to repudiate the bride without first consulting her parents and family.

Note: Hmong marriage tradition requires that two persons, the Tuam Mej Koob and Lwm Mej Koob (tuam means 'first' or 'principal,' and lwm is 'second' or 'vice') be the go-betweens for the two sides involved in the marriage negotiations. The parents are not involved directly in negotiating the marriage, but are consulted by their mej koob at every juncture.

Finally, the *mej koob* from the bride's family give the last advice and express their wishes to the young married couple in the following verses:

*Niam ncoo txiv puab,
 Txiv ncoo niam pu.
 Niam mloog txiv qhuab,
 Txiv mloog niam hu.
 Niam noj nqaij, txiv kaws txha,
 Niam puag tub, txiv kho lav.
 Niam coj toog, txiv coj nplhaib,
 Mus lwm xyoo ris me nyuam tuaj rau peb saib.*

The wife stays close to the husband's legs,
 The husband stays close to the wife's shoulder.
 The wife listens to the husband's advice,

The husband listens to the wife's call.
The wife eats meat, the husband gnaws bones,
The wife holds the son, the husband puts the bed in
order.
The wife wears bracelets, the husband wears rings.
Go (and) next year come back carrying a baby to show
us.

(Marriage chants by Yang Bliathao and Yang Ka Houa)

Comment: *The two mej koob from the bride's family advise bride and groom to be united. They must listen to one another; the groom must show his love by letting her eat the best parts; letting her do the easy work; and letting her wear what is most valuable.*

Hmong typically marry young by Western standards, where education delays marriage well past the age of physical maturation. Hmong boys usually marry at eighteen to twenty years of age, to girls who are fourteen to sixteen years old. In a society that had no written records of birth, chronological age was not very important in making life's decisions. A person's age was assumed from observed behavior—"he's old enough to walk"; "she's old enough to have three or four children"; "he's old enough to find a wife"; "he's old enough to take the family leadership from his father." In traditional Hmong society, children learned to take on responsibility as soon as they were able, and they rapidly became involved in the family's social and economic activities. It was not unusual to see a seven-year old girl taking care of her younger brother or sister, or a ten-year old boy working in the fields alongside his parents. Social maturity came early in Hmong villages.

As refugees in the United States, Hmong youth have come to know a much easier life. Their only responsibility is to study. They have no important part in economic activities. Their involvement in the Hmong community is insignificant. Hence, they mature much later than their peers in Laos. A girl of fifteen is still a child without responsibility, and a boy of eighteen is often incapable of dealing with the adult world. Hmong must now add the concept of "teenager" to their reckoning of the life cycle, but

they have no experience with this period of life that comes between childhood and adulthood for people in this country. Marriage between American Hmong teenagers often turns to disaster. Divorce, which occurred very rarely in traditional Hmong society, has become a serious social problem in the American



A grandfather stays in the village with the children while the parents are off in the fields working.

Hmong community. American social expectations hold that personal independence should precede marriage and setting up a household. On the other hand, traditional Hmong society does not expect full decision-making independence until after the children are born.

It is the extended family and cross-generational child rearing that allow this pattern to succeed. The grandmother and grandfather, with their workload lightened, help tend the young children while the mother and father begin to carry the full weight of work. If parents die and leave young unmarried children, the older son takes the orphaned brothers and sisters into his household. Hmong tradition also requires that the married youngest son of the family take care of the elderly parents for their remainder of their lives. However, more and more parents choose to live with any one of their sons, choosing the one whose wife is the most gentle, the most generous, and the most dedicated.

The clan

The second pillar of Hmong society is the patrilineal clan (*lub xeem*). Children are members of their father's clan and take its name. The clan is made up of a male ancestor, his sons and unmarried daughters, and the children of his sons, presumably going back 160 or more generations. In Laos, there are more than 25 Hmong clans, those with the most members being Chang (*Tsab / Tsaab*), Hang (*Haam*), Her (*Hawj*), Lee or Ly (*Lis*), Moua (*Muas*), Thor or Thao (*Thoj*), Vue (*Vwuj*), Xiong (*Xyoqj*), Vang (*Vaj / Vaaj*), and Yang (*Yaj / Yaaj*). A person is known as "Cheng, clan Vang" (*Tseeb, xeem Vaj* or *Tseeb, Hmoob Vaj*). When Hmong left the Thai refugee camps, they adopted their clan names as their last names.

Hmong clans resulted, according to Hmong legend, from the union of a brother and a sister.

Once upon an immemorial time, a blood-thirsty dragon was put in chains by a small chopstick-genie that could become as big as a mountain. The dragon was punished for eating all the first sons born into a single family of a village, located on the banks of the Yellow River in China. The powerful genie promised that the child-eating monster would be freed only when the rocks, which emerged from the water of the river, came to blossom.

The nasty dragon impatiently waited day after day, month after month, for its liberation. One afternoon, while it was complaining of its misfortune to its dragon wife, a group of Pu-Yi merchants, with large straw hats, passed by the Yellow River and climbed onto the rocks for a rest. When they had finished their lunch, they left the place and continued along their route. But one of them had forgotten his large straw hat, left lying on the rocks.

The female dragon was the first to see it and, thinking it was a large yellow flower, immediately alerted her dragon husband. The child-eating monster jumped for joy and broke the chain that had been tied to

its entrails deep in its body. It ran in all directions, churning up waves in the river. It demolished entire mountains with its long horns, precipitating violent thunderstorms.

Torrential rain began to fall, and fell for seven days and seven nights without interruption. Floods soon devastated the earth and swept away all of humanity. A brother and a sister were the only survivors. To insure the continuity of humankind, they were forced by circumstance to marry. A baby was born, having no head, no arms, and no legs. Then they went to ask *Saub* (a divine oracle); he instructed the parents to cut the baby monster into pieces and throw each piece in a different location.

By the next morning, the pieces had been transformed into young married couples, each the original couple for one of the clans.

(Yang My No, 1978)

Since that time, Hmong custom has proscribed marriages between people of the same clan. Even though they have no common ancestors, two persons with the same clan name are considered brother and sister, and cannot marry. Therefore, a Hmong man has to take a wife from one of the other clans. The inter-clan marriage system has developed, and these relationships contribute to harmony and unity among the Hmong. A common proverb sums it up this way:

<i>køj</i>	<i>qaib</i>	<i>pw</i>	<i>kuv</i>	<i>cooj</i>
your	chicken	sleep	my	coop
<i>kuv</i>	<i>os</i>	<i>pw</i>	<i>køj</i>	<i>nkuaaj</i>
my	duck	sleep	your	stable

Your chicken sleeps in my coop;
 My duck sleeps in your stable.
 (Our families are linked by marriage.)

Lineage groups

People who are related to one another through an unbroken male line of descent are called *kwv tij*, or patrilineal relatives. The two words characterize the relationship: *kwv* ('younger brother') and *tij* ('older brother'). The lineage group, or *caj ceg* ('branch' 'root'), includes brothers, their sons, and male grandchildren—all of the males in each generation going back as far as memory allows. Members of the same generation call each other *kwv* or *tij*, while their children refer to them as *txiv* ('father'), *txiv hlob* ('older father'), or *txiv ntxawm* ('younger father'). They have specific duties towards one another and they share the same ancestral spirits traced to an original male founder of the lineage group.

The *kwv tij* concept is extended to members of the same clan. Though they have no blood connection, clan members believe that they are the descendants of the ancestral pair, born from the baby monster. They often have similar taboos and ritual practices. They consider each other as members of the same family. Their obligations towards one another are the same as within the *caj ceg*. However, if their sense of clan membership is not strong, their obligations toward one another are vague and often weak, and their duties are limited to occasional visits and assistance.

The *neej tsa* are those who are related to a man through the blood line that includes at least one woman connected to him. This woman may be his wife, his mother, or grandmother, the wife of his son, or that of his son's son, as well as the wife of his brother or that of his brother's son, and so on. All the persons who are related to the linked woman through a blood line are called *neej tsa* by the man. There is no English equivalent term, and "relatives-in-law" is not exactly right. In the Western way, "in-laws" would include the brother's wife. In the Hmong kinship system, the brother's wife is not an in-law, because she becomes an integral part of her husband's family, adopting his ancestor spirits as her own. Her

relatives, however, are *neej-tsa*.

The two types of relatives form a *kwv tij-neej tsa* alliance. These inter-clan ties provide mutual assistance, often the sharing of economic and political efforts. Tradition requires that a young man, in looking for a wife, must take into account his new *neej tsa*, on whom the future of the new alliance partly depends. The bride's physical beauty and intellectual ability alone do not determine his choice of a wife; the good reputation of her family will be the decisive factor. Factors that weigh heavily in decisions are the presence of thieves, opium-users, or leprosy in the family tree. This practice of considering wider inter-clan ties through marriage choices continues today in the United States. The importance of reputation in determining marriage choices is one important factor in controlling inappropriate behavior of members of the *caj ceg* group.

There are other significant identity groups as well. Dialect groups (*Hmoob Dawb* and *Moob Ntsuab*), regional groups (Xieng Khouang, Sam Neua, Luang Prabang, Sayaboury), and village groups are the most important, but Christian groups, school groups, and women's groups are emerging in the United States. For women, this is a new experience: learning to associate with and cooperate with individuals outside the circle of family.

Language and Oral Traditions

Language and culture are intimate reflections of one another, and the loss of one makes the continuation of the other problematic. That Hmong still speak their unique language after 45 centuries of assimilation pressure is in itself a remarkable accomplishment.

The Hmong language belongs to the Miao-Yao branch of the Sino-Tibetan "tree" of languages. From that branch are three "limbs": Miao, Ho-Nte (She), and Yao. From the Miao limb are four or more "twigs": Krohsiong, Hmou, Hmong, and Bunu. Green

Mong and White Hmong are considered one “leaf” of perhaps sixteen leaves that come from the Hmong twig. Their leaf is called the *Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan* (*miáoyǔ chuānqíandiān cìfāngyán*) subgroup.

Like many other Asian languages, Hmong is monosyllabic without final consonants. This characteristic makes necessary the use of tones to differentiate similar words. There are seven tones and one variant, differing from each other in both pitch and contour. Hmong differentiates some 56 consonant initials and 14 vowels. Matisoff (1983/86: 74) says: These languages [Miao-Yao] have extremely complex phonologies, with elaborate tone systems, prenasalized obstruents, preglottalized sonorants, post-velar stops, dentally, palatally, and laterally released affricates, voiceless nasals, central and back unrounded vowels...Such features are also to be found in other language families of the area—but it is as if Miao-Yao has developed all of them to the *n*th degree.”

The tones and countours of words can be represented by notes played on musical instruments, allowing two Hmong to communicate with the leaf of tree (*nplooj*), a bamboo flute (*raj*), a windpipe (*qeej*), or mouth harp (*ncas*). Sung poetry and instrumental music are but one form, one sung with consonants, vowels and tones, and the other produced solely with tones.

In Laos, there are only two dialects of Hmong: White Hmong (*Hmoob Dawb*) and Green Mong (*Moob Ntsuab* or *Moob Leeg*). The two dialects differ by a very slight variation in the consonants and vowels. They share a vocabulary, borrowing items when necessary, so it is relatively easy for a White Hmong and a Green Hmong to understand one another.

By identifying words borrowed for new concepts, it is easy to trace the path of migration: Chinese (*phooj ywg* 朋友 ‘friend’); Vietnamese (*leem*, *linh* ‘soldier’); French (*xa npu*, *savon*, ‘soap’); Lao (*lej*, ຄຳ ‘number’); Thai (*xun*, ขุณ ‘camp’); English (*ti vi*, ‘TV’).

Those few Hmong who attended school in Laos, China, or Thailand learned the national language, not Hmong. At the beginning of the century a missionary named Pollard created an

alphabet for the Hmou in China. The Pollard script is widely used today in Guizhou province. In 1956, under the government of the People's Republic of China, the Hmong in Yunnan province were allowed their own writing system, one based on the roman alphabet. In Laos, at about the same time, the Romanized Practical Alphabet (RPA) was developed and refined by William Smalley, Linwood Barney, and Yves Bertrais. This writing system is with no doubt the one most widely used by the Hmong. In 1961, at the official request of Lysao Lyfoung, a Hmong intellectual and then chairman of the Hmong literacy committee in Vientiane, the Royal Lao Government wrote a letter—with some reticence—allowing the use and teaching of the RPA in Laos. But, most of the Hmong leaders, under political pressure, did not openly support its development. The reading and writing system was taught around family fireplaces, and it gradually gained followers in northern Laos. By 1975, however, less than five percent of the Hmong population was able to read and write Hmong.

Recently, the remarkable accomplishments of Shong Lue Yang have been documented in a book by Smalley (1990). This non-literate, unschooled villager devised a series of characters by which the sounds of Hmong could be written. (He created a second system for writing Khmu, the language of his mother.) His life was surrounded by political intrigue, and his writing system has become associated with a religious movement that counters traditional Hmong beliefs.

The Hmong exodus to the refugee camps in Thailand after 1975 offered as never before an opportunity to hold a pen or a pencil and to read and write Hmong. During the last two decades, the Romanized Practical Alphabet has spread to the Hmong villagers living in the kingdom of Thailand. More recently, it was adopted by the Hmong in Yunnan and Guangxi provinces in southern China. It is now officially taught along with the Hmong Chinese writing system at the Central Institute of Nationalities in Beijing. Today in the United States, Hmong can be studied for college credit in several cities. Hmong speaking Mandarin, Lao,

Thai, English, and French are creating a global community by using the RPA. This alphabet appears in Hmong correspondence, newsletters, magazines, classbooks, and novels.

Although the Hmong society has only recently been able to record its knowledge in written form, a strong oral tradition kept the knowledge alive, transmitted from one generation to another. Inside each family home, around the evening fire, children listened to the elderly tell about the history of their people. Sometimes with excitement, sometimes with sadness, they learned about the country where their ancestors originated, why they moved to Indochina, and how they arrived in Laos.

They heard about the beautiful Ngao Zhua Pa (*Nkauj Zuag Paj*), who symbolizes sweetness and generosity, and the nasty Ngao Kou Ker (*Nkauj Kub Kaws*) who personifies greed and maliciousness. They met Mua Nya Lue (*Muam Nyaj Lwj*), a poor boy with exceptional intelligence who outwits the most learned Chinese. They heard about Ngao Nao (*Nkauj Nog*), who is the Hmong Cinderella, and Nou Shee Long (*Nuj Sis Loob*), a musician who enchanted all who heard him play. Njua (*Ntsuag*) the orphan has always been a favorite; what follows is but one of numerous adventures that punctuated his legendary life.

He was named Njua the Orphan. He was just an infant when his parents passed away. As he grew up, he was told that they had gone back to the country of the ancestors. His brother and sister-in-law, who had taken him into their house after the death of his parents, did not like him and made his life a true hell.

At an early age, Njua the Orphan began to wash dishes, clean the house, and carry water from the spring in bamboo tubes. He never learned how to read and write. He did not even know that there were schools for other more fortunate children.

Years passed by and Njua the Orphan became a young man. His nasty brother and sister-in-law ordered him to go to the hill, cut down the trees in an area of forest, and hoe it into a corn field. He did what they wanted without a murmur of protest. At the edge of the

field, just at the pass between two high mountains, he constructed a little hut from some branches, and covered it with thatch.

When spring came, Njua the Orphan was delighted to see a couple of swallows building their nest under the roof of his little hut. Soon three birds were born. The parent birds flew back and forth without pause to bring the babies food.

As the young birds grew up, one of them fell out of the nest and snapped his spindly legs. Njua the Orphan took care of the little bird. He rushed into the forest, found some wild herbs and plants, and proceeded to cure the bird. When the bird was completely healed, Njua the Orphan put the bird back in its nest.

In the summer, the swallows came to thank Njua the Orphan for helping their young bird and rewarded him with a pumpkin seed. Surprised, the young man put the seed in the ground of his small garden. Three days later, a stalk appeared. Three more days passed; a blossom appeared on the stalk. Three more days went by; the blossom became a large pumpkin, filled with gold and silver coins. Njua the Orphan became very rich.

The brother and sister-in-law saw what he had, and Njua the Orphan, always good and generous, told them what had happened. Njua's brother wanted to become as rich as he was.

Njua's brother cleaned an area of the forest, built a little hut, and waited. In the spring, two swallows came to nest under the roof of his hut. Soon three little birds were hatched. They grew up but none fell out of the nest.

The greedy brother picked up a stick and pushed at one of the baby birds. It fell to the ground and broke its legs.

Just like Njua, the greedy brother went into the forest, found some plants and herbs, and took care of the young bird. When it recovered, Njua's brother put it back into its nest. As a reward, he received a pumpkin seed that he immediately planted in his garden.

Soon the seed became a big pumpkin. But, it did not contain any silver coins—it contained the chopstick genie.....

(The story goes on. This genie is the same one who punished the blood-thirsty dragon in the origin tale about the great flood that devastated the earth.)

Verses

Hmong *kwv txhiaj* or sung poetry is one of the most lively of the Hmong oral traditions. Marriageable youth and adults challenge one another in song contests during marriage feasts or New Year festivals. Each has to show not only his or her most beautiful voice, but also knowledge and cleverness. The singer must improvise and adapt songs to the particular circumstance presented by the challenger—orphandhood, courtship, exile experiences, and so on. They alternately sing to each other, throwing a verse to be caught and returned,⁴ just as they throw and catch a cloth ball (*pov pob*). They challenge and answer one another with flowery words, rhythm, and rhyming poetry. The song contests can go on for hours or even days before one of the singers gives up and accepts defeat in front of the appreciative crowd.

The *txiv xaiu* ceremony is a funeral rite during the last evening deathwatch. Before the body of the deceased leaves the family home in Laos or the funeral home in the United States, the one who died, through the mouth of an old and wise man, addresses his or her children and grandchildren in a rhyming chant:

1
Nej niam nej txiv khwv iab tu nej tuaj thaum yau.
Nej ntiv tes luaj lub cej, ntiv taw luaj lub taum.
Nej niam nej txiv ncaj npab ua nej hau ncoo rau,
Nej niam nej txiv ncej qab ua nej tog zaum.

Your mother and father worked bitter to raise you
Your fingers were big like sarrasin seeds, your toes big
like bean pods.
Your mother and father's arms were your pillow,
Your mother and father's legs were your chairs.

2

*Nej niam nej txiv tu nej hlob:
Caj npab pub tes tsho,
Ncej puab pub ceg ris.
Nej thiaj hlob ciaj cuab ciaj yig;
Nej txawj xav, nej ua tau ib pluag pub nej niam nej
txiv noj.*

Your mother and father took care of you until you
became an adult:
Arms fill the sleeves of your shirt,
Legs fill the legs of your pants.
You then grew up having households, having families
You were grateful, you prepared meals and invited
your mother and father to eat.

3

*Nej niam nej txiv khaws tau txoj kev ces yuav nrog
luag ntoj.
Zaum no nej niam nej txiv yuav tso tes tso taw ploj,
Tseg niaj txhiab ib txhis yuav tsis tau nrog nej noj.*

Your mother and father have encountered the way (of
death) and have to follow it.
This time your mother and father will resolutely
disappear.
Leaving you for a thousand years and forever, will
never eat with you again.

4

*Nej niam nej txiv cev pluj ceeb mus tuag tas tseg nej
nyob,
Nej tij ncoo kwv puab,
Kwv ncoo tij pu;
Tij mloog kwv qhuab,
Kwv mloog tij hu.*

Your mother and father's bodies have died, leaving
you alone,
You, the eldest, stay close to your younger brothers'
legs,
You, the youngest, stay close to your older brothers'
shoulders;

You, the eldest, listen to your younger brothers'
advice,
You, the youngest, listen to your older brothers' calls.

5

*Nej niam nej txiv tseg lawm nej nyob,
Nej tsis txhob mus nrog luag ua tub sab coj tub nyiag.
Luag tsis pom ces nej tau noj dawb mus haus do;
Luag pom ces luag muab nej ntes mus kaw
Rau Suav meej mom meej tsw lub nkuaj tso
Ces nej lub ntsej muag yuav poob tas lawm tej sib
nrho.*

Your mother and father are leaving you,
Do not be involved in robbery nor be the head of
thieves.
(If) you are not seen, you will be able to eat and drink
freely;
(If) you are caught, you will be put
In Chinese authorities' prisons,
And you will lose face completely.

6

*Tij hlub kwv ces rub zog tuaj ntawm npab,
Kwv hlub tij ces rub zog tuaj ntawm tes.
Ua neej nyob tij tsis txhob nyiam kwv nyab,
Kwv tsis txhob nyiam tij se.*

You, the eldest, love your younger brothers and bring
them into your arms,
You, the youngest, love your older brothers and bring
them into your hands,
In your life, you, the eldest, do not fall in love with
your younger brothers' wives.
You, the youngest, do not fall in love with your older
brothers' wives.

7

*Tij hlub kwv ces tij zov kwv tub tuaj nruab vaj;
Kwv hlub tij ces kwv zov tij tub tuaj nruab tsev.
Nej thiaj ua tau lub neej huaj vam xws xub ntab,
nroo ntws xws xub mu.*

You, the eldest, love your younger brothers and
protect their children in your home;
You, the youngest, love your older brothers and
protect their children in your house.
You all then will be able to make a prosperous life like
a swarm of bees,
(a life) filled with activities like that of the bees.

8

*Muaj neej muaj tsa tuaj, nej thiaj tiam tau dab,
Muaj nom muaj tswv tuaj, nej thiaj tiam tau qhua.*

When relatives come, you will be able to welcome
them adequately,
When leaders come, you will be able to serve them
appropriately.

9

*Muaj txoj hmoo,
Tij tau ua nom los kwv tuaj mus pab,
Kwv tau ua tswv los tij nco ntsoov tuaj mus xyuas.*

If you have good fortune,
You, the eldest, become leaders, you, the youngest,
have to support them,
You, the youngest, become headmen, you, the eldest,
do not forget to assist them.

(Yang Ka Houa)

The *txiv xaiv* is the most touching part of the Hmong traditional funeral ceremonies. Chanted by one or several male "experts", the *txiv xaiv* rites usually begin around midnight, the night before the day of the burial, and lasts three to five hours. The above *txiv xaiv* verses are only a small part of the complete ritual texts.

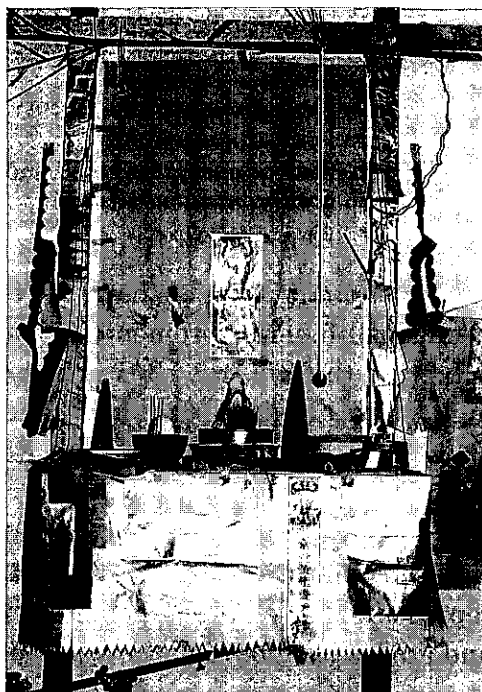
Bowed down before the deceased's body, children, grandchildren, and close relatives listen in silence to the man who represents the beloved father or mother, sending them knowledge and advice from beyond the world of the living.

Hmong New Year, *Tsiab Peb Caug*

While the marriage and funeral are important events in maintaining the Hmong social bonds, it is the New Year that is the most exciting and colorful tradition. It is an annual reminder of Hmong cultural identity. With people gathering from all over, it serves to strengthen social ties, allows new ones to be forged, and provides widespread sharing of information about how best to survive and prosper in the mainstream society. It also serves as a bridge linking the past to the future.

On the thirtieth day of the twelfth month of the Hmong lunar calendar, equivalent to November or December on the Western calendar, and after storing away the last bushel of harvested rice, the Hmong organize the *Tsiab Peb Caug* celebration. All agricultural and household activities come to a stop—the only time during the year that this happens—and various ritual ceremonies begin. Ceremonies serve to exorcise disease and ill fortune, to remember the ancestors with a special meal, to bless the whole community with good luck for the coming year. Each family kills tens of chickens and a *npua tsiab* ('pig' 'new year'). Then, each household in turn invites relatives and friends from the whole village to share its feast.

On the first day of



The household altar (xwm kab) is renewed at the new year.

the first month of the new year at about four o'clock in the morning, when the roosters crow for the first time, the youngsters rush to the oldest grandfather in the village to wish him good health and longevity and, in return, to receive his blessings for success and happiness in the new year. As soon as the sun rises, Hmong girls appear, wearing their most elaborately embroidered clothes, silver necklaces, earrings and bracelets. The boys, in their new outfits—baggy black pants, jackets tied with colorful cloth belts, embroidered skullcaps on their heads—seem to have just come from an ancient dynasty. These young people leave their family homes and make their way toward the common area of the village. The girls line up facing a row of boys, and begin to throw cloth balls back and forth, along with verses of complex extemporaneous courtship songs. Many visitors from other villages have come to join in the *pov pob* ritual, and the possibility of meeting one's future husband or wife heightens the excitement. The multicolored umbrellas that both boys and girls carry to shelter them from the sun resemble beautiful flowers bobbing in nearby fields.

The song that follows is a *phiaj fab* love song, improvised by a boy in an invitation to courtship, and by a girl in response to his advances.

Boy:

*Me Muam Nkauj Mim,
Nplooj taug vuam kav kaus,
Kav kaus doog tuam tej sib nciab.
Muab tsiab nraaj nraum ncig yuj yeev rov pom koj.
Hau kaus cia me dej ntaug,
Qab kaus cia wb ntaus nkawm me sim xeeb phooj ywg
Tham ntxuaj ntxog txoj me kev nqis lwj siab.*

Sweet Sister Ngao Mee,
The leaf of a tree has changed the color of the
umbrella's handle,
The handle of the umbrella becomes dark brown.
Walking around the new year I met you.
On the umbrella let the rain run down,

Under the umbrella let us establish a friendship
Talking with happiness about the way of the rotting
heart.

Comment: The way of the rotting heart means that when two young people love each other, and have to leave each other to go to live far away from each other, their hearts will break down and rot because they will miss each other.

Note: Me does not mean 'little' but 'sweet' in this context. Muam means 'sister.' Nkauj Mim is the symbolic name given to Hmong girls to avoid personalizing them in love songs. Muam Nkauj Mim, Ntxhais Nkauj Xwb, or Niam Leej Ntxhais all have the same meaning.

Girl:

*Me luag tub,
Dob tes nroj quas tes txiv suv hlav,
Muab tsiab nraj nraum ncig yuj yeev rov pom kaj,
Tham me lo lus lawm tej sis nyav.*

Sweet son of the Hmong,
One hand pulls up wild grass, the other pulls up dzee
shu grass.
Walking around the new year I met you,
Saying sweet words with a smile.

Comment: Me Luag Tub can be translated as "Sweet Son of the Hmong." Me Luag Tub is also a symbolic name, used for boys in Hmong love songs. It has the same meaning as Txiv Leej Tub or Suav Luag Tub.

Boy:

*Tshav ntuj nquab w yuj,
Los nag nquab w tsaws,
Tsaws ntua suav nrig nraj vaum tus ntsis ntoo.
Muab tsiab nraj nraum ncig yuj yeev rov pom kaj,
Cia wb ntaus nkawm me sim xeeb phooj ywg tuaj rov
laug xyoo.*

When the sun shines, wood pigeons and quail fly,
When rain comes, wood pigeons and quail come down,
Coming down on the top of the tree of the Chinese.
Walking around the new year I met you,
Let us develop a friendship during the year.

Girl:

*Me luag tub,
Noog w cuaj ntxuag tw, kaim kauj cuaj ntxuag plaub,
Txawj ya tsis txawj tsaws,*

*Tsaws ntuas suav nrig nraj vaum tuaj tus ntsis ciab.
Me luag tub,
Yog koj tsis muaj siab
Koj tsis txhob daj Muam Nkauj Mim sawv ntxuj
ntxaim txoj kev mus lwj siab.*

Sweet son of the Hmong,
The quail wags its tail nine times, the bird kai kao
shakes its feathers nine times,
They fly and seem never to come down,
Suddenly they come down on the top of the larch tree
of the Chinese.
Sweet son of the Hmong,
If your heart is not for me,
Don't lie to Sister Ngao Mee by asking her to wait for
you on the road of the rotting heart.

Boy:
*Me Muam Nkauj Mim,
Nplooj xyob sib lig koob,
Xoj xim xaus xi daim me nplooj txhia.
Yog wb tau ntaus nkawm me sim xeeb phooj ywg mas
Kuv yeej tsis tso lawm koj cia.*

Sweet Sister Ngao Mee,
Bamboo leaves interlace with each other,
Like two leaves of the tzee-ah tree.
If we develop our heart friendship,
I will never leave you.

Girl:
*Me luag tub,
Kuv tes soob tes koj koob,
Koj tes txawj tes sau ntawv,
Sau tau suav meej nom meej tswv daim ntawv mus
veej tsab lo lua suav npauj npaim raj.
Me luag tub,
Yog koj muaj siab lawm tuj tiag,
Koj mam mus hu vaj tsab xeeb lis tuaj txiaiv wb mus
ua xeeb yaj.*

Sweet son of the Hmong,
I have fine hands to hold needles,
You have skilled hands that write.

They are able to write official Chinese letters that
 they stick on the Chinese butterfly flute.
 Sweet son of the Hmong,
 If your heart is truly for me,
 You should go ask people from other clans to bring me
 together with you in your Yang clan.

Comment: Vaj Tsab Xeem Lis or "people of other clans" refers here to the Hmong mej koob who represent the boy's and girl's families in the marriage rituals.

Boy:

*Me Muam Nkauj Mim,
 Zaj txig sawv vij hli,
 Vij zoj zim zoov lug toj taim tuaj cev plaub oo.
 Me Muam Nkauj Mim,
 Yog wb muaj txoj hmoov rov sib tau,
 Wb mam ntim cev txiaj zam sis yeev tuaj lawm qab
 ntuj ntsoo.*

Sweet Sister Ngao Mee,
 A male dragon (rainbow) raises up and surrounds the
 moon,
 Slowly surrounding the great forested hill wearing its
 foggy feather coat.



Hmong New Year, 1968. These young people toss a ball back and forth as they exchange verses in courtship sung poetry. (Taken in the Long Cheng region.)

Sweet Sister Ngao Mee,
If we have the good luck to belong to each other,
We will wear silver clothes and with happiness walk
under the cool sky.

Comment: The boy compares himself to the beautiful rainbow (zaj, 'dragon'). The silver new clothes refer to the marriage clothing decorated with necklaces and coins. The sky here also means life. Ntuj ntsoo, literally 'cool' or 'fresh' 'sky,' can be understood as a happy life.

Girl:
*Me luag tub,
Kuv ua nkauj xwb tuaj sis yeev
Nrog kuv leej niam leej txiv nyob,
Kuv npuaj vab nrov tuaj mus tej sib nrawv.
Me luag tub,
Yog kuv muaj txoj hmoo rov tau koj,
Ntshai yuav tshav kuv cuaj quag ntuj mus haus cawv.*

Sweet son of the Hmong,
I live my single life filled with dreams
With my mother and father,
I work with a winnowing basket noisily.
Sweet son of the Hmong,
If I have the good luck to have you belong to me,
My life will shine all over nine stages of the sky
leading me toward our marriage toasts.

Comment: Tshav kuv ntuj ('shine' 'my' 'sky') means to "make me happy."

Boy:
*Me Muam Nkauj Mim,
Yog wb muaj txoj hmoo rov sib tau,
Kuv yuav noj kuv kom koj ua,
Kuv tsis noj ces kuv cia koj txhais me tes mos nyuj
nyoos nrhia lawm paj npuag.*

Sweet Sister Ngao Mee,
If we have the good luck to belong to each other,
When I am hungry, I will ask you to prepare a meal,
When I am not hungry, I will let your hands be soft in
embroidering flower silk.

Comment: The boy sings that if he has the chance to marry the girl, he will make her happy. All she will have to do is to prepare meals for him and to sew pa ndau. Her

hands will be soft—like those who never have to work in the fields.

Girl:

*Me luag tub,
Yog wb muaj txoj hmoo rov sib tau,
Phiab me dej ntxuav muag muaj kuv nga rau koj
ntxuav,
Nom tswv koob xwm tuaj muaj lawm koj tuav.*

Sweet son of the Hmong,
If we have the good luck to belong to each other,
The basin of water, I will bring it to you to wash your
face,
Official leaders who come, you will take care of them.

(Yang My No)

Comment: The girl responds that if they are married, she will serve him with devotion and love, and he will be able to take care of leaders and visitors according to traditional hospitality in Hmong society

The new year celebration, which lasts three or four days,



In Khek Noy village, Thailand, 1986, a girl and boy pov pob (throw the ball).



At 1987 Hmong New Year festivities in Sacramento, pov pob continues despite foggy temperatures and Western clothes.

is also an opportunity for adults to step back, assess the work they have done during the past twelve months and to think about the future. They organize bull fights and horse races; they listen to the flute players and watch the *qeej* dancer. With a discreet eye, they watch their sons and daughters tossing the cloth ball and singing traditional songs. The women gather in groups, looking at the young girls, and wondering which one will become their daughter-in-law. The men and women renew bonds with seldom-seen relatives, develop new relationships, exchange experiences, and plan together for a better life. They spend hours talking and drinking, forgetting the hardships of their existence and enjoying a period of relaxation.

This picture belongs to the past for thousands of Hmong who now live in the United States. Here they have tried to recreate the cultural atmosphere of Hmong New Year by organizing the *Tsiab Peb Caug* celebration locally, despite the unfamiliar cold weather typical of November and December. Hmong travel across

the country for *Tsiab Peb Caug*, and from city to city as the dates of various communities' celebrations are staggered on weekends from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day.

The young come to American *Tsiab Peb Caug* wearing mufflers and leg-warmers, trench coats and high heels, sunglasses and spiky hair, as well as more traditional Hmong clothes. That the Hmong still join in the New Year gatherings, no matter what style they wear, is significant—the most Americanized Hmong and the most traditional Hmong all look forward to the opportunity to be lost in a milling crowd of familiar faces, to hear the trademark Hmong melodies of the courtship songs and the *geej*, to throw the cloth ball, to compare lives, to meet new people, and to renew old bonds.

Conclusion

Hmong today are changing at a dizzying pace; which of their traditions will endure? When they find themselves in societies that value diversity, they learn to operate within that society, yet maintain aspects of their Hmong identity. Chinese Hmong, Thai Hmong, Lao Hmong, French Hmong, Australian Hmong, Canadian Hmong, American Hmong—interaction between these new subgroups of Hmong, made possible by travel and global communication, will help us identify those aspects of “Hmongness” that are most resilient.

We can, however, speculate about which Hmong traditions will continue into the future. The themes presented in this chapter are those that are considered central to Hmong identity. Social strength and adaptability depend on the three pillars—clan, lineage group, and family—and the building of alliances through exogamous marriage. We can expect Hmong surnames to be important even in the face of pressures to adopt a name that fits with the society at large—in the case of American society, one that is more “individualized.” We can expect the New Year to remain

important to Hmong, even though it is changed in form, because it plays a role in both marriage and religious observances. Religious beliefs—ancestor and spirit worship—help Hmong to remember lineages, and to solidify links between kin and non-kin alike. Those Hmong who follow traditional religion have a means of understanding events in the world, and a means for affecting their own lives. Traditions of oral learning and transmission of knowledge has produced art forms that are especially threatened today, but it is possible to identify individuals to specialize in these skills and pass them on to the next generations. The same can be said for textile and metal-working arts.

These, then, are most likely to be the enduring traditions of the Hmong.

Endnotes

1. China conducted a census in 1982; Wu (1991:1–2), associate researcher for the Central Institute of Nationalities reports 5,030,000 Miao (called *Hmong* in his article): 2,580,000 in Guizhou province; 760,000 in Hunan province; 750,000 in Yunnan; 350,000 in Sichuan; 410,000 in Guangxi; 180,000 Hubei; and smaller numbers in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Beijing. Wu comments that since 1982, the total Miao population has grown to 7,000,000.

Hu and Bain (1991:16) note that *Miao* is generally translated by Westerners as *Hmong*. However, this does not really tell us how many of the Miao are in the subgroup most closely related to the White and Green Hmong who have ended up in the U.S. It is necessary to look at linguistic affiliations, to find population figures for each linguistic subgroup, then apply the proportion to current census figures.

Strecker (1987:4–5), in an article about the linguistic categorization of Miao-Yao language groups, says: "...Hmongic, also called Miao, is extremely diverse.... In Chinese publications, Hmongic languages are subdivided into *miáoyǔ* ('Miao language') and *bùnyǔ* ('Bunu language'), according to whether the speakers are culturally Hmong (*miáozú*) or Yao (*yáozú*).” Thus, some subgroups (Pu-Nu, Nu-Nu, Pu-No, Nao Klao, Nu Mhou, Pa-Hng, Hm-Nai, Kiong Nai, and Yu-Nuo) speak a Hmongic language, but culturally are Yao. Grimes (1988: 453) states that the Punu are counted as Yao by the Chinese.

Strecker identifies *Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan* subgroup of the *Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan* group (*miáoyǔ chuānqiándiān cìfāngyán*) as the dialect group to which Green Mong and White Hmong belong (Strecker, 1987: 2, 44). In the chart on the next page, names and population estimates have been listed and compared.

To sum up: in 1982, there were approximately 2.2 million Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan Hmong, of a total Miao population of 5 million, located in Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and Sichuan provinces. This group includes Green Mong and White Hmong, along with other dialect/language groups: A-Hmau, Guiyang Hmong, Mhong, Mashan Mang, and 8 other groups.

Thailand has a Tribal Research Institute, whose major responsibility is to conduct village-by-village counts of the various hilltribe groups; the September, 1988, census (McKinnon & Vienne, 1989: Appendix I) counted 82,310 individuals (230 villages, 10,459 households). Also

Language vs. ethnic identification: China's Miao-Yao groups

Linguistic group (Strecker, 1987)	Ethnic designation (China) (Grimes, 1988)	1962 (Chinese Institute of National Languages)	Percentage of 1962 population	1982 Chinese Census
Hmongic languages		All Miao: 2,600,000		All Miao: 5,030,897
QoXiong (Krohsiong)	Xiangxi Miao	440,000	17%	estimate 855,252
Mhu (Hmou)	Qiandong Miao	900,000	35%	estimate 1,780,814
Sichuan-Guizhou- Yunnan: (Green Mong, White Hmong)	Chuanqiandian Miao	1,150,000	44%	estimate 2,213,595
Sichuan-Guizhou- Yunnan: A-Hmau	? Miao		All other Miao: 4%	All other Miao: estimate 201,226
Sichuan-Guizhou- Yunnan: Guiyang Hmong	? Miao		All other Miao: 4%	All other Miao: estimate 201,226
Sichuan-Guizhou- Yunnan: Mhong	? Miao		All other Miao: 4%	All other Miao: estimate 201,226
Sichuan-Guizhou- Yunnan: Mashan, Mang	? Miao		All other Miao: 4%	All other Miao: estimate 201,226
Sichuan-Guizhou- Yunnan: A-Hmyo	? Miao		All other Miao: 4%	All other Miao: estimate 201,226
Sichuan-Guizhou- Yunnan: Mhong	? Miao		All other Miao: 4%	All other Miao: estimate 201,226
Sichuan-Guizhou- Yunnan: 8 other dialect groups	? Miao		All other Miao: 4%	All other Miao: estimate 201,226
?	Red Miao		All other Miao: 4%	All other Miao: estimate 201,226
Bunu groups (9)	Yao: Punu	220,000		All Yao: 1,402,676
Ho Nte languages				
Ho-Nte	She			369,000
Mienic languages				
Mien-Kim	Yao: Iu Mien, Biao Min, etc.	740,000 (1976)		All Yao: 1,402,676
Mien-Kim	Yao: Mun (Lantien)			All Yao: 1,402,676
n/a	Yao: Laka (a Tai dialect)	6,000 (1977)		All Yao: 1,402,676

in Thailand are Hmong refugees from Laos, and those who are in the country illegally. Robinson (1992:22) estimates "50,000 Hmong and other highland ethnic groups" in Thailand. The UNHCR figures for the end of 1991 showed 53,400 Laotian refugees and 5,400 Laotian asylum-seekers in Thailand. The U.S. Department of State, in *Refugee Reports* (1991:5) gives a 9/30/91 figure of 49,464 highlanders and 7,316 Lao in Thailand refugee camps, along with 2,800 at Phanat Nikhom processing center. Thus, a credible figure for Laotian Hmong in Thailand, excluding illegals, is 50,000.

A figure for the number of Hmong in Laos remains problematic. The Lao government estimates that 4-5% of the current population (4 million) is Hmong: 200,000.

Dang, Chu, and Luu (1986) report more than 400,000 Hmong in northern Vietnam.

France in 1992 was home to 11,500 Hmong, with another 1,500 in French Guyana, South America (Father Rene Charrier, personal communication, June, 1992; Thion, 1988: 301).

656 Hmong lived in Canada as of December, 1989, according to a booklet "Ten Years Hmong in Canada (1979-89)," edited by the Hmong Association of Canada, Kitchener, Ontario, December, 1989.

344 Hmong lived in Australia in November, 1983, according to Dr. Gary Yia Lee (Hendricks et al., 1986).

In Argentina, 1982, the Hmong community reported that they were 113 persons (personal communication, 1982).

Estimates from Burmese Hmong range from 8,000 to 10,000 at the end of the 1980s (personal communication, 1987). Conversations with Hmong in Nan province (Lue Vang, 1992) indicate increasing migration—or talk of migration—from Thailand to Burma.

The 1990 census in the United States counted 90,082 who identified themselves as Hmong.

2. The population figures for the various states all come from the 1990 census (U.S. Census Bureau). States with more than 100 Hmong are: California 46,892; Wisconsin 16,833; Minnesota 16,373; Michigan 2,257; Colorado 1,202; Rhode Island 884; Washington 741; Virginia 708; Kansas 613; Oregon 438; Illinois 433; Pennsylvania 358; Georgia 320; Ohio 253; Massachusetts 248; Iowa 227; Oklahoma 207; Texas 176; New York 165; Nebraska 146; Utah 105. (Conventional wisdom estimates a 10% undercount, and in all probability a certain number of Hmong identified themselves as "Lao" or "other Asian.") Thus, these figures represents a conservative minimum.
3. Yang Dao, 1975. Surveys in Thai Hmong villages show that Hmong approach the upper limits of human reproduction, and that Hmong living in cities limit family size fairly quickly (Kunstadter, 1984).

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Appendix II. Hmong orthography

The following charts list the sounds of Hmong: the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) symbol, the phonetic equivalent in IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet), example words in White and Green Hmong, and the English meaning. The phonetic analysis is drawn from Annie Jaisser's upcoming textbook, *Hmong for Beginners*.

<i>RPA</i>	<i>IPA</i>	<i>White Hmong</i>	<i>Green Hmong</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
p	p	paj	paaj	flower
ph	p ^h	phem	phem	bad
np	mb	npua	npua	pig
nph	mp ^h	nphau	nphau	tip over
pl	pl	plaub	plaub	four
plh	pl ^h	plhu	plhu	cheek
npl	mbɭ	nplooj	nplooj	leaf
nplh	mpɭ ^h	nplhaib	nplhaib	ring
t	t	tub	tub	boy, son
th	t ^h	thov	thov	ask, beg
nt	nd	ntawv	ntawv	paper
nth	nt ^h	nthuav	nthuav	unfold
tx	tɕ	txiv	txiv	father
txh	tɕ ^h	txhiab	txhiab	thousand
ntx	ndz	ntxiv	ntxiv	more
ntxh	ntɕ ^h	ntxhw	ntxhw	elephant
c	c	cuaj	cuaj	nine
ch	c ^h	choj	choj	bridge
nc	ɲc	nco	nco	remember
nch	ɲc ^h	nchuav	nchuav	spill out
d	d	dev	[tɰ] dlev	dog
dh	d ^h	dhia	[tɰ ^h] dlha	jump
ndl	ndɭ		ndluav	throw out
ndlh	ntɭ ^h			(very rare)

ts	tʃ	tsov	tsuv	tiger
tsh	tʃ ^h	tshiab	tshab	new
nts	ntʃ	ntsuab	ntsuab	green
ntsh	ntʃ ^h	ntshai	ntshai	afraid
r	ɽ	rau	rau	six; put, place
rh	ɽ ^h	rhiab	rhab	tickle
nr	ɽɽ	nrov	nrov	sound loud
nrh	ɽɽ ^h	nrhiav	nrhav	look for
k	k	kab	kaab	insect
kh	k ^h	Khab	Khaab	clan Kha
nk	ŋg	nkoj	nkoj	boat
nk ^h	ŋk ^h	nkhaus	nkhaus	crooked
q	q	qab	qaab	delicious
qh	q ^h	qhia	qha	tell, teach
nq	ŋg	nqi	nqe	value
nqh	ŋq ^h	nqhuab	nqhuab	dried up
v	v	Vaj	Vaaj	clan Vang
f	f	Faj	Faaj	clan Fang
x	ʃ	xa	xaa	send
z	ʒ	zoo	zoo	good
s	ʃ	siab	sab	liver, "heart"
xy	ç	Xyooj	Xyooj	clan Xiong
h	h	hau	hau	head
m	m	mus	moog	go
ml	mɽ	mluas	mluag	sad
hm	m̥	Hmoob	(Moob)	Hmong
hml	mɽ̥	hmlos	(mlos)	dented
n	ɲ	niam	nam	mother
hn	ɲ	hnub	(nub)	sun
ny	ɲ	nyiaj	nyaj	silver
hny	ɲ	hnyav	(nyaav)	heavy
g	ŋ			(very rare)
l	l	los	lug	come
hl	ɭ	hli	hli	moon
y	j	Yaj	Yaaj	clan Yang

Consonant phoneme chart (RPA symbols)

p	pl		t	tx	c	d	ts	r		k	q	ʔ
ph	plh		th	txh	ch	dh	tsh	rh		kh	qh	
np	npl		nt	ntx	nc		nts	nr		nk	nq	
nph	nplh		nth	ntxh	nch		ntsh	nrh		nkx	nqh	
		v				z						
		f	x			s			xy			h
m	ml		n						ny	g		
hm	hml		hn						hny			
			l									
			hl									
									y			

Vowels

i	i	ib	ib	one
e	e	peb	peb	three; we
a/aa	a/ǎŋ	Vaj	Vaaŋ	clan Vang
o	o	ob	ob	two
u	u	kub	kub	hot; gold
w	i	nws	nwg	he/she/it
ee	ēŋ	xeem	xeem	clan
oo	ōŋ	Hmoob	Moob	Hmong
ia/a	ia/a	siab	sab	liver, "heart"
ua	ua	ua	ua	do, make
ai	aj	saib	saib	look, watch
au	aw	plaub	plaub	four; hair
aw	əi	dawb	dlawb	white

Tones

-b	55	high level	pob	lump
-j	52	high falling	poj	female
-	33	mid level, longer duration	po	spleen
-v	24	mid rising	pov	throw
-s	22	low level, shorter duration	pos	thorn
-m	31?	low falling, short, abrupt end	pom	see
-g	42	falling, breathy	pog	grandmother

Iu-Mien:
Highland Southeast Asian
Community and Culture
in California Context

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The Peoples of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia encompasses ten independent nation states with a population of 450 million people. The region is divided into insular Southeast Asia (the island nations of Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia) and mainland Southeast Asia (Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam).

The peoples of insular Southeast Asia speak languages that belong to the Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian) language family. This language group includes the languages spoken in Polynesia as far east as Hawaii and the many languages of the Philippines and Indonesia.

Mainland Southeast Asia is more linguistically, ethnically and politically diverse than the islands of the region. Peoples of Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam speak more than 700 mutually unintelligible languages grouped into the five language families of Austronesian, Miao-Yao, Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai and Tibeto-Burman.

Throughout Southeast Asia the distinction between the peoples of the lowland river valleys and those of the remote highlands is important. Lowlanders have for centuries had close contact with major world religions and civilizations from India, China, the Middle East and Europe. Great civilizations arose around fertile irrigated rice fields long before the dawn of the colonial age in the sixteenth century. The peoples of the plains lived in fixed village sites, constantly improving village irrigation systems and refining agricultural practices. The centers of these lowland civilizations were the monarchs, who were viewed as god-kings, rulers with divine mandate. The kingdoms of Angkor in

Cambodia, Pagan in Burma, and Ayutthaya in Thailand established monumental court centers, and fostered writing, classical dance and sculpture.

Mountain peoples, by contrast, lived far beyond the reach of the monarchs and the civilizations of the lowlands. The peoples of the mainland mountain ranges adopted shifting cultivation, which depended on rainfall rather than irrigation. Highland farmers planted their fields for only four or five consecutive years before heavy tropical rains washed away the topsoil or leached the nutrients from the rocky soils. These slash-and-burn farmers then moved their fields to fresh jungle land. Here they cut down the forest growth and burned the dry timber. When the rainy season arrived, the ash soaked into the ground, fertilizing the soil. When the fields were too far away from the village, the villagers abandoned the old village site and established a new village closer to the new fields.

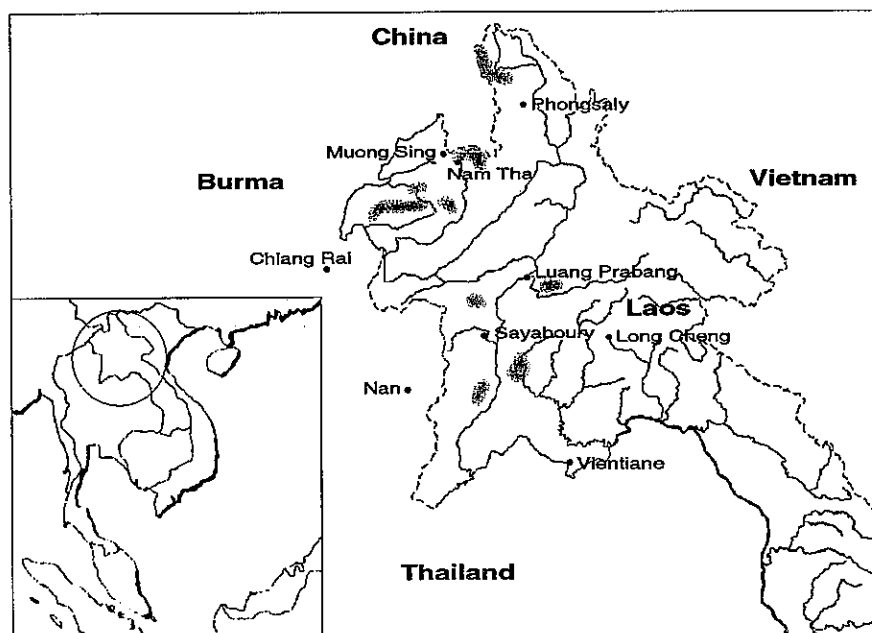


Figure 1. Shaded areas show Mien settlement areas in Laos.

There were—and are—many different ethnic groups who survived as mountain farmers in Laos, but this chapter will focus on one relatively small group, the Mien. The Mien are a people of the mountains, and yet at the same time they are a people of the book; they were villagers with a tradition of literacy, unlike their neighboring villagers. They are found throughout the northern tier of Southeast Asia, and yet they look to China as their ancestral homeland.

Mien culture reflects much that is characteristic of highland Southeast Asia. The Mien practice a complex religious tradition, and mark their ethnic identity with distinct costume. Their daily life is similar to that of other mountain peoples, but unlike almost all other highlanders of the region, the Mien had a writing system. They adopted Chinese ideographs to represent Mien words. Only a few Mien were literate in Chinese, and these specially gifted males formed an elite group within the village communities. They were the ones to interpret sacred books and to record the family and community histories. Mien religious practices also show the influence of Chinese culture: spirits characteristic of animism populate the world of the Taoist pantheon, producing religious beliefs and practices that are uniquely Mien.

Mien settlement in Southeast Asia

The Thai and Lao, among others, migrated to Southeast Asia from southern China six or seven centuries ago. Vestigial populations of Tai-speaking peoples can be found today scattered throughout the remote mountains of southern China.

The Mien also migrated from China to Southeast Asia. There are today approximately one and one-half million Mien (called *Yao* by the Chinese) living in seven provinces of China. The eldest generation of Lao Mien can still recall the treks of their parents as they made the journey from districts such as Meng-la in Yunnan to Nam Tha and Muong Sing in northern Laos. Mien in

America and France also look to China as their homeland.

The origin of the Mien is shrouded in mystery. According to an ancient myth the twelve Mien clans originated when a barren woman was impregnated magically by the Sky God *Nyutc Hung*. Of eleven brothers and a sister, only the sister (*Zeiv Muic*) and one of her brothers (*Fu Hei*) survived a great flood. Even though they were the last two people on earth, they resisted all temptation to marry and produce children.

Several things happened to convince them that the Sky God intended for them to marry. Their cooking fires were on opposite banks of a wide river, but the smoke from the two fires met and intertwined in the air. Then each cast a sword and its scabbard in different directions. The brother and sister found them united, sword in scabbard, at the base of a great mountain. These tests convinced the brother *Fu Hei* and the sister *Zeiv Muic* to marry.

Tsey Mui gave birth to a sweet melon. The brother was instructed by his sister to chop up the meat of the melon, cast the pieces to the lowlands (they would become the Mien), and to spread the seeds in the highlands (creating the other races). On his way, Fu Hey tripped on a tree stump and fell. When he recovered his composure and resumed his journey he became confused. He threw the seeds into the lowlands and scattered the meat of the melon in the highlands. So it is that the Mien now live in the less favorable uplands, while other peoples occupy the lowlands.

Other folklore tells of the origin of the Mien in China. The emperor of China declared that he would give his daughter in marriage to the one person who was courageous and skillful enough to bring him the head of his enemy. Many tried to find and kill the enemy of the emperor and all but one failed. A dog residing in the shadow of the imperial court, named *Pienh Hung*, defeated the enemy of the emperor and brought his head to the royal court. True to his word, the emperor betrothed his daughter

to *Pienh Hung*, but in the process, he banished the couple to the most remote mountains of the imperial realm. The union of this mythological dog and the daughter of a Chinese ruler produced the Mien people of China. They were destined to live in the most distant lands, farming the steepest slopes, and existing on the periphery of a great civilization.

During the last decades of the Ching dynasty (1880-1911), the Chinese population expanded. Feuding warlords challenged one another for control of new lands, including those occupied by the Mien. Villagers moved south towards the present-day borders with Southeast Asia. Late in the nineteenth century, the first Mien villagers crossed from Yunnan into northern Burma and Laos. Earlier migrants settled in the northern districts of Vietnam.

The Mien In Laos

Laos is the most geographically remote and isolated of the countries of Southeast Asia. It is the only landlocked nation in the region, and its population in 1990 slightly exceeded four million persons. Laos is the most heterogeneous of all the nations of Southeast Asia. The Lao are the majority group, yet they account for only about half of the total population, concentrated along the Mekong River, and in valley communities linked by navigable rivers. The Lao are Theravada Buddhists, and are tied by strong bonds of history and ethnic affiliation to the nation of Thailand. The Lao culture, like those of Thailand and Cambodia, is heavily influenced by the cultures of India.

The other half of the national population comprises some sixty different ethnolinguistic groups. The single largest minority group is the Khmu, whose language is related to Khmer. The Khmu are among the original people of Laos, displaced by the Lao and pressured to assimilate into Lao society. Khmu populations are widely dispersed throughout Laos. The second largest minor-

Historical connections between the Mien and the Hmong

Hmong and Mien are similar in their patterns of subsistence, adaptation, religious belief, and minority status. Yet they are distinct cultures, with mutually unintelligible languages, and with different patterns of kinship, leadership and social interaction.

Theories about an ancient relationship between the Hmong and the Mien come from the relationship between their languages. They are both subsumed under a special category (Miao-Yao) of the Sino-Tibetan language family of Southeast Asia. There are no other known groups in this category. Although the languages are different today, they show similarities that presume a close relationship in the ancient past. Both Hmong and Mien originated somewhere in northern China. Over the centuries both groups were pushed toward the southern frontier of the Chinese empire by the expansion of the Han Chinese population and political power. The Hmong entered Laos first, probably around 1830. The Mien followed later, around 1880.

The Mien have been influenced by the Chinese civilization and culture to a much greater degree than have the Hmong. Daily use of chopsticks is the most obvious indicator of Chinese influence. Of greater significance is the incorporation of Chinese script into the Mien ritual tradition. Mien priests of high rank follow the Taoist ritual practices, consulting texts written in Chinese for calendrical benchmarks, astrological omens, and procedures for ceremonial occasions. There is considerable tension in Mien culture because they have adopted certain features of Chinese culture, yet desire to maintain a separate and distinct Mien identity. Hmong culture has been much less influenced by Chinese civilization, although there are many words of Chinese origin in the Hmong lexicon.

In Laos, both the Hmong and Mien made their place in the highest mountains, grouped together as "Lao Soong" by the Lao. The Hmong, earlier settled and more numerous, developed lines of communication with the majority Lao and the French, and from that obtained opportunities for education for some of their youth. As a result, there was a small core of educated and political leaders by the time the refugees fled.

Both Hmong and Mien have patrilineal patterns of kinship, but kin relations of the Hmong are more tightly structured. In Hmong society, persons of the same clan are prohibited from marrying; Mien clans are not exogamous. Hmong identity is closely linked to clan organization, and clan membership requires obligation and responsibility toward others of the same group. In Mien society, the mutual obligations and shared identity is more loosely structured. Individual responsibility for actions is more characteristic of Mien than Hmong.

The Hmong population in the U.S. today is approximately ten times that of the Mien. Because of their greater numbers and lines of communication with Americans, the needs of the Hmong are usually better understood. As a group, the Mien are somewhat less prepared, in terms of prior education, life experience, and leadership development, to successfully compete in American society.

ity group in Laos is the Hmong, who reside in the northern part of the country. Of all the ethnic groups in Laos, only the Hmong and the Mien are related linguistically to one another. (See "Historical Connections Between the Mien and the Hmong.")

There are several groups of Mien in China, each one speaking a different dialect of Mien. The principal Mien-speaking group to settle in northern Laos was the Iu-Mien. A secondary and somewhat less economically successful Mien group was the Lantien Mien. The Lantien Mien were often employed as farm laborers by the more prosperous Iu-Mien, who arrived in Laos earlier.

Mien migrated from China in search of a place to live as Mien, to practice their religion and to maintain their social networks. Northern Laos provided high mountains, virgin jungle, and a non-intrusive government—favorable conditions for establishing prosperous communities. For over three-quarters of a century, Mien villages in northwestern Laos flourished. Mien villagers cultivated rice and corn, produced surplus crops of opium, and gathered wild jungle products such as resin and honey to trade with Lao merchants in the market towns and with itinerant Chinese traders who came to the villages.

The houses of the Mien were made of durable hardwood, with packed dirt floors. They were large enough for ceremonial gatherings and sturdy enough to withstand the strong hurricane-force winds and torrential rains that swept across highland Laos. Such homes were often roofed with sturdy wooden shingles crafted from jungle hardwoods.

The principal cash crop of the Mien was opium. The opium poppy thrived at high altitudes in the cool temperatures and mountain soil. Sown in the hundreds of thousands on hillside fields, poppy seeds ultimately yielded not only large white, red, and multicolored flowers, but also a black sticky substance of great value in trade to Chinese merchants. This poppy sap was collected after the ripe pods were slashed with a three-bladed

harvesting tool. The resulting “black tar” opium could be used in place of silver as money. For the Mien, without access to health services, opium was a strong medicine of last resort. Opium could cure a seriously upset stomach, a persistent headache or long term depression. Most importantly, opium was available to kill the pain of terminal illness and serious wounds. To have opium available for illness was important, but opium did not come without a price—those who regularized their use of this medicine found themselves addicted (See Westermeyer for more information).

Mien Society

Societies of lowland Southeast Asian reflected a high degree of social stratification. Such social divisions, in the case of Thai and Lao society, were marked by ranks and titles and specified in the linguistic choice of pronouns and referents. These titles and referents precisely defined the relative status of interacting individuals—high noble, middle ranking aristocrat, lowly peasant, or the descendant of slaves. In the mountain hinterlands the social order has no inherited ranks or castes among the Mien. Social status in this society was determined by behavior and accomplishment—generosity with other people and scholarship in the field of religion. Swedish scholar Peter Kandre (1967) described Mien society as characterized by “extreme etiquette and politeness.”

Gender, generation and names

People in Mien society are distinguished by gender, rather than by rank, wealth or knowledge. Mien naming procedures reinforce this gender distinction. Females are often named for their ordinal position in the family: Muang (*Muangh*, ‘first girl’), Nai (*Naaix*, ‘second girl’) and Fahm (*Faam*, ‘third girl’). Up to ten

female siblings can be named in this way before another naming system is used. Female names sometimes reflect a preference for boys, common in patrilineal societies. Gen (*Nqenx*, 'to separate'), Koi (*Goiv*, 'to turn') and Yien (*Yienc*, 'to change') embody the family's hope that the next child will be a boy. Some names are not gender-specific: Nai (*Naaix*) labels a second-born child of either gender; Lieuw (*Liuz*) and Lai (*Laai*) suggest that this child is the last baby that the family wants.

Daughters expect to use their childhood names only until marriage, at which time they are referred to by a term that specifies their relationship to the lineage of the husband: "wife of Yarn" or "Kao's mother." Sons, on the other hand, have as many as three names during their lifetimes: a childhood name (*fuqc-jueiv mbuox*); an adult name (*dom-mienh mbuox*); and a spirit name (*faq-mbuox*).

All the children in a family often have the same "middle name." As a rule, the second part of a child's name—boy or girl—is the same as the second part of the father's adult name. For example, the father is *Yao Fou*; the son is *Kao Fou*, and the daughter is *Meuy Fou*. However, if a child is born to an unmarried woman, the second part of the child's name would be the first part of the mother's name. For example, the unmarried mother's name is *Yien Sio*, the daughter would be *Meuy Yien*, and the son *Kao Yien*. Another exception is when a child is named after another older family member, the grandfather, the grandfather-in-law, and so on.

Figure II. Common given names

For females

Muang	<i>Muangz</i> __	first daughter of __	Muang Finh
Meuy	<i>Meix</i> __	first daughter of __	Meuy Fou
Nai	<i>Naaix</i> __	second daughter of __	Nai Choy
Fahm	<i>Faam</i> __	third daughter of __	Fahm Fow
Feuy	<i>Feix</i> __	fourth daughter of __	Feuy Ta
Manh	<i>Maanv</i> __	fifth daughter of __	Manh Tinh
Luac	<i>Luaqc</i> __	sixth daughter of __	Luac Seng
Chet	<i>Cietv</i> __	seventh daughter of __	Chet Seng
Pet	<i>Betv</i> __	eighth daughter of __	Pet Tsing
Chua	<i>Juaav</i> __	ninth daughter of __	Chua Chiem
Tsiep	<i>Ziepc</i> __	tenth daughter of __	Tsiep Sinh
Yien	<i>Yienc</i> __	"to change" of __	Yien Fou
Koy	<i>Goiu</i> __	"to turn" of __	Koy Txiang
Liew	<i>Liouh</i> __	"to save" of __	Liew Txing
Gen	<i>Nqenx</i> __	"to separate" of __	Gen Chiem

For males

(the childhood name, which will become one part of the adult name):

Kao	<i>Gaauv</i> __	first son of __	Kao Finh
Ton	<i>Don</i> __	first son of __	Ton Txing
Kouw	<i>Gouuv</i> __	first son of __	Kouw Seng
Nai	<i>Naaix</i> __	second son of __	Nai Ta
Sarn	<i>Saan</i> __	third son of __	Sarn Finh
Sou	<i>Sux</i> __	fourth son of __	Sou Fou
Ou	<i>Uv</i> __	fifth son of __	Ou Fow
Lu	<i>Luc</i> __	sixth son of __	Lu Fou
Se	<i>Ceec</i> __	eighth son of __	Se Ta
Pa	<i>Baac</i> __	ninth son of __	Pa Yarn
Ciep	<i>Ziepc</i> __	tenth son of __	Ciep Pou
Sew	<i>Sou</i> __	"book" son of __	Sou Chien
A	<i>Eix</i> __		A Choy

In the United States, the style of writing names varies. Some people write the name as a compound word—*Kaofou*—but others write the name as two separate words—*Kao Fou*. Even though writing two words makes pronunciation easier, both parts are necessary.

Generation as well as gender gives shape to Mien society. Identification with a group of patrilineal relatives across time is important, and provides people with a sense of continuity and history. The first part of a man's name is his generation name. For example:

	<i>Generation Name</i>	<i>Chosen Name</i>	<i>2nd. part of father's name</i>	<i>Clan</i>
1st	Saeng	Fou	Cho	(Sae) Phan
2nd	Yao	Ta	Wang	(Sae) Phan
3rd	Fou	Yarn	Linh	(Sae) Phan
4th	Vern	Ta	Seng	(Sae) Phan

In this example four men of the Phan (*Bienh*) clan are named, each of a different generation. All the sons (first generation) would carry the generation name of *Saeng*; all the grandsons would have the generation name of *Yao*, and so on. The second part of the name is chosen to symbolize some desirable trait or attainment, such as gold, money, or leader. The third part of the name is taken from the father's name. Within a group of men, then, it is easy to identify which ones are siblings, and whether a man should be respected as a "father," "grandfather," or "great-grandfather."

This pattern of naming reinforces the memory of ancestors. The ancestors are central to the many ritual ceremonies. In addition, literacy in Chinese allows the recording of genealogies in ritual books. Often Mien know the names of paternal ancestors eight or nine generations into the past.

Rituals reinforce the naming patterns at various times in a person's life. Each year a ceremony is held (*zoux wuonh*, 'calling the life-soul') at which an egg and a chicken are offered to the soul of a child. The soul of a child is referred to as the "flower soul"

(*biangh mienv*). At puberty, a special offering is made, with half a chicken and an egg offered to the flower soul, and half offered to the adult (clan) soul (*ja-fin mienv*). Finally, a special honorific title is given to males during the rite of passage ceremony, and it is this name by which they are addressed during ceremonies.

Figure III. Twelve Mien clans

盤	Bienh	(Sae) Phan, Pharn
馮	Bungc	(Sae) Fong, Pum, Pun
鄧	Dangc	(Sae) Teurn, Tang
李	Leiz	(Sae) Lee
劉	Lioh	(Sae) Liew, Lio, Leo
羅	Lorh	(Sae) Lo, Law
詔	Siouh	(Sae) Sio
唐	Tong	(Sae) Tong
黃	Yangh	(Sae) Yang, Wang
陳	Zanh	(Sae) Chin
趙	Zeux	(Sae) Chao
竹	Zuaq	(Sae) Chou

Each Mien is born to one of twelve clans. At some time in the past, marriage between persons of the same clan was forbidden, but this taboo has weakened over time. The clan affiliation became the "last name" when Mien refugees filled out identification papers in the Thai refugee camps. The Thai term *sae* was placed in front of their clan names, producing names such as *Saechao*, *Saepfan*, *Saeteurn* and *Saelee*. Looking in a telephone book in California cities with refugee populations under the "S" listing will quickly reveal whether or not a Mien community lives there. Some Mien are now dropping the Thai prefix, so that *Saechao* becomes *Chao* and *Saelee* is simply *Lee*.

Gender, generation and daily life

Life in remote mountain villages required close cooperation and clear definition of roles. Both gender and generation played an important part in defining social norms and expectations.

The basic economic unit in traditional Mien villages consisted of a man, his wife, their unmarried children, their married sons and daughters-in-law, their grandchildren, and possibly the mother or father of the man, or other relatives. Usually a woman moved into her husband's parents' house upon marriage, and a bride price to her family helped seal the contract of marriage. Exceptions to this rule of residence were sometimes made—for example, when the husband agreed to work for the wife's family for a period of time in lieu of bride price. Brides were generally young, and as in other societies organized around extended families, child-rearing was a cross-generational affair. The grandmother and grandfather, relieved of heavy work, took an active role in child care, allowing the young parents to learn child-rearing "on the job."

Within the household, each member had specific responsibilities



Yao Ching Saeteum (and grandson) begin to carve a ritual drum shortly after their arrival in the United States in 1980.

and individuals' roles changed very little from one generation to another. Individuals are not called by name, but rather by a kinship term such as "younger brother's wife," "husband's mother," "father's brother's son," "Nai's mother," and so on. These "tekonyms" embody the set of responsibilities and privileges that are associated with a particular member of the kin group. Well-defined roles for women and men, children, and adults resulted in a social system characterized by interdependence, cooperation, and conformity to role expectations.

In Laos, the women were generally responsible for the day-to-day essentials of life, while the men were concerned with the

welfare of the family over time and within the wider community. Men were also responsible for relations between the living family, their ancestors, and the world of spirits.

Gender distinctions in roles were clear during communal work and feasting. In village Laos men felled the jungle trees and conducted the burn of the dried branches and twigs just before the onset of the monsoon rains. The women planted, hoed, and harvested. The rice



Pieng Vang, shortly after her arrival in Oakland in 1980.



Portrait of a Mien grandmother.

planting process involved both men and women working together. Men advanced up the sloping hillside fields with an iron-tipped dibble stick, punching holes in the ground. Women followed behind, dropping several grains of seed rice into each hole and pressing the soil over the seeds with a quick twist of the heel.

Building a house or clearing a field required “labor exchange” between different households within a village, or even between villages. Major life crises—birth, the transition to adulthood, marriage, sickness, death—also required cooperation between households and villages. Each occasion required a significant outlay of family resources, in the form of a pig, cow or buffalo. To raise a pig to the point where it might serve a hundred guests required two years investment of labor. By inviting all the people in the village or region to share in the feast that followed the ritual sacrifice of a pig, cow or buffalo, individual households shared valuable resources and tied themselves into a wider network of

obligation and reciprocity. In this way, the occasions of crisis also served to strengthen the interdependence and cooperation between people.

An example of cooperation among villagers in labor exchange can be seen in the preparation of pork. One dish, *oh-tzang* (*orv zaang*), calls for pork that is finely minced, mixed with onions, lemon grass and garlic, and then steamed. This dish is prepared by a group of five to twenty men, each chopping the fresh meat into smaller and smaller pieces on individual wood chopping boards. Meanwhile, others are boiling water, preparing vegetables, cooking rice, and so on. Without refrigeration, the meat would have been wasted unless eaten soon after the slaughter. By sharing the meal, all the meat is eaten at once, and all the families add meat to their diet. On the next ritual occasion, another family will supply the pig for all the villagers to share.

Within each village community were specialists—silver-smiths, arbitrators, wedding negotiators, merchants, herbalists, shamans, and so on. This village self-sufficiency was typical of other hilltribe groups who lived far away from the lowland cities. Within Mien villages, however, there were a select few who gained prominence because of their literacy in Chinese. The most promising young boys from the most well-to-do families were instructed in Chinese calligraphy by contract teachers. Mien communities commissioned these teachers, paid them a wage and built them a house and school. They taught the young boys to read and write Mien by using Chinese characters to represent Mien concepts. Such skills were critical to the mastery of Mien religious traditions, a ceremonial system deeply influenced by Chinese Taoism. Taoist ritual frequently refers to rules of ceremony and calendrical instructions inscribed in sacred books. The elite male minority mastered the writing of ritual texts, family genealogies and even poetry in books made of bamboo paper bound together with loose stitches. Only the rare gifted individual was taught the intricate painting of the Taoist panels, or the meaning of the hundreds of deities

represented in the paintings. Several men in a village might read well enough to serve as assistants in the complex ceremonies, but only a few men gained a reputation for conducting ceremonies well.

Most men, however, and all women were illiterate prior to their recent contact with western schools. Women's access to literacy has produced significant changes in the traditional roles of women and men. In addition, the Mien have been introduced to the interchangeable and negotiable roles characteristic of American society. Greater self-reliance at the household level and easier access to non-Mien specialists reduces the need for close cooperation between households. It is the sharing of ceremonial feasts—continuing largely unchanged in this country—that tie together individuals and households in the American Mien communities.

Textiles and ethnic identity

Mien folk arts and costume design display and reinforce Mien ethnic identity. As is the case for most village peoples of Southeast Asia, textile arts are utilitarian as well as symbolic. Skillful men work as silversmiths, fashioning especially fine silver thread, bracelets, necklaces, dangles and earrings. A mark of Mien ethnic identity is the distinct earring design called *normh hiun*, a half circle pierced by an arrow. Mien reverse cross-stitch embroidery is similarly distinctive. Women sew complex designs from the backside of the fabric to decorate men's tunics and the elaborate women's costume. The Mien neither produced their own cotton nor weaved their black base cloth (*ndie jieqv*). They purchased the cloth from other ethnic groups and used indigo to dye it the proper blue-black color. Brightly colored threads—valuable because they could not be produced from natural products—were used to create the designs. (See Butler-Diaz for diagrams of embroidery patterns.)

The costume of the Mien woman consists of a tightly

wrapped black embroidered turban (*ngornv beo*), a long black tunic (*lui*), colorful embroidered trousers (*howx*), a sash, a ceremonial shawl or baby carrier (*suangx buix*), a silver neck ring and a bright red yarn ruff (*lui gwaan*). Visible from a great distance, the woolly red collar clearly distinguishes the women as Mien. In the United States, the shawl is often more heavily decorated with silver, the ruff thicker, and the trousers more densely embroidered with brighter colors, but otherwise, the costume has changed very little.

Male and female infants are provided with intricately embroidered caps (*muoc gwaan*). A new-born baby wears a simple woven cap. When the infant is just a few months old, the simple cap is exchanged for a more intricately embroidered cap. Female caps have a red ruff in a circular pattern, while male caps have dangling yarn balls. The caps serve to protect the infants from harm or illness brought by malevolent spirits such as the *heiz gwaai mienv* ("untamed spirits beyond the civilized realm"). Elders say that these malevolent spirits, flying about the sky, are particularly fond of defenseless youngsters. The caps serve to camouflage the youngsters, disguising them as flowers to the predatory spirits.

The baby carrier is perhaps the most beautiful and symbolically rich element of Mien folk art. It is used daily, tied to the back of parents, grandparents, or elder siblings who carry the babies about. At ceremonial occasions, especially at weddings, the richly decorated baby-carriers (now used as shawls) are worn by female wedding attendants. Serving as bridesmaids, four or five young unmarried women flank the wedding couple as they pay respects to their ancestors, and accompany them as they make their rounds greeting the guests. The ceremonial shawl here symbolizes the hope for children, who will carry on family religious traditions, care for elderly parents and produce a new generation of Mien.

Verbal dueling ('sing song')

The Mien people have an oral tradition of extemporaneous singing (or chanting) that has almost disappeared. The songs use a language that is different from ordinary spoken Mien, and follow a structure that takes time to learn. The verses of the chant alternate between sides, creating a duel of verbal skill. One of the major types of verbal dueling takes place between the bride's side and the groom's side during a marriage. Another type occurs when visitors come to a village, usually between male guests and female residents of the village.

There are three types of verbal dueling between guests and hosts: *naanc zingh*, or autobiographical; *gouv*, or story-telling; and *zingh gen*, or adolescent socializing. The singing takes place at a bonfire lit by the hostesses near the guests' house, and the guests are coaxed, even pulled, from their houses to meet the verbal dueling challenge. The duelers are teams, not individuals, even though one person sings at a time and the messages may refer to one of the hostesses and one of the guests who are attracted to each other. If one of the team members cannot respond with a verse, another team member can sing the verse instead. In a village, many people would gather around to listen, and duelers who were talented gained a reputation that spread from village to village.

One verse of a song contains four lines, each with seven meaningful words (many that belong to a "singing" language not known by everyone). The meaningful words are surrounded with nonsense sounds that made the song sound beautiful. What follows is an example of one verse, with all the words—meaningful and nonsense—transcribed (the meaningful words are boldface):

- 1—*Ei cor na oh hangh ei juov naaz ndaapv oh ei ma'dorng na yaang oh ei fouv ohx.*
- 2—*Jiem na ei yiem baaiv heix nauz oh yaang ei nah jaai (break, repeat) faa o ouix jiem na ei yiem baaiv heix nauz oh yaang ei nah jaai.*
- 3—*Ouix yaang nah oh doyc ah ouix ma'siu nah kiqv oh zei Ei ma'siem yaang ohx zaanv*
- 4—*Ei zaanv ouix yaamc nah eix dorng jiem yiex seix oui siem ei na baaic oh (break, repeat) ei faax ouix yaamc loh eix dorng jiem yiex seix oui siem ei na baaic oh.*

Now, taking just the first line, the singing language is written (a), followed by the spoken Mien equivalents (b), the word-by-word English translation (c), and the general meaning in English (d):

- 1(a)—Corh haeng juov ndaapv dorngh yaangh fouv
 1(b)—Co-hoqc yangh caaiv faaux dornghx njang da'boung
 1(c)—Begin walk step up place bright country
 1(d)—We have just arrived at this beautiful country.

What follows are excerpts from the third type of guest-hostess song, the adolescent socializing song.

I. Male guests sing:

- 1(a)—Corh haengh juov ndaapv dorngh yaangh fouv
 1(b)—Co-hoqc yangh caaiv faaux dornghx njang da'boung
 1(c)—Begin walk step up place bright country
- 2(a)—Jiemh-yiem baaiv heix nauc yaangh jaai
 2(b)—Jiemh-yiem baaiv hei nauc yaangh jauv
 2(c)—God of beauty display market make noise living area
- 3(a)—Yaangh doyh siu kiqu siemz yaangh zaanv
 3(b)—Da'bung dieh buov jienv camv hung zaanv
 3(c)—Country table bum many incense cups
- 4(a)—Yaamc domg jiem yiex siex-siem baaih
 4(b)—Mv domg ih mounh baaux nzung
 4(c)—Not right now night sing song.

- 1(d)—*We have just arrived at this beautiful country.*
 2(d)—*This village is filled with beautiful playful girls.*
 3(d)—*This country is full of burning incense in many cups on many tables.*
 4(d)—*It is not proper to disturb this country tonight.*

II. The hostesses sing in answer:

- 1(a)—Juov hyietv siuh yaang gengx zienh-singx
 1(b)—Juov hnuy bouv hung gengx mienv (gu'nyuoh)
 1(c)—In advance day bum incense pray spirit (household)

2(a)—Cui	dugv	jiemh	kwaa	taux	zinc	yaang
2(b)—Cui	dugv	jiem	biengh	taux	zaanc	domgx
2(c)—Help	get	gold	flower	arrive	cheap	place

3(a)—Waangh-cio		bouc	dauh	mouc	kwaa	hinc
3(b)—Waang		bouc	domgx	mv	maaih biengh	hinc
3(c)—Lonely place		station	place	no	have flower	shine

4(a)—Zingx	domg	jiemh	yiex	seix-siemh	baaih	
4(b)—Cingx	domg	ih	mounv	baauv	nzung	
4(c)—It's	right	now	night	sing	song	

1(d)—*We have been burning incense to pray*

2(d)—*To help present gold flowers to our poor (village) place.*

3(d)—*In our lonely country, there is no flower which blooms*

4(d)—*So we must commence the songs tonight.*

III. Guests sing again:

1(a)—Jiux-coi	meic	gaengz	ging	jiex	mbounx	
1(b)—Jiuc-coix	mv	gaengz	boungh	jiex	mbounx	
1(c)—Onion	not	yet	meet	never	fog	

2(a)—Cingz	cov	meic	gaengz	gingz	jiex	somg
2(b)—Maeng	miev	mv	gaengz	boungh	jiex	somg
2(c)—Green	plants	not	yet	meet	never	snow

3(a)—Miec	gaegz	ging	jiex	horqc-domgz	noic	
3(b)—Mv	gaengz	boung	jiex	horqc-domgz	gu'nyouz	
3(d)—Not	yet	meet	never	school	inside	

4(a)—Kaux	fin	yienx	daaix	zaanc	giu	yiaouz
4(b)—Kaux	siev	dorz	jouv	faaux	jiaoh	mingh
4(c)—Depend	girl	lead	way	up	bridge	go

1(d)—*Never before has the onion met the fog.*

2(d)—*Never have green plants encountered the snow.*

3(d)—*We have never been to school.*

4(d)—*We have to rely on you to show us the way.*

IV. Hostesses respond:

1(a)—	Jiux-coix	yaac	daaih	ging	jiex	mbounx
1(b)—	Jiux-coix	yaac	daaih	boungh	jiex	mbounx
1(c)—	Onion	be	come	meet	before	fog
2(a)—	Cingz	cov	yaac	daaic	ging	jiex
2(b)—	Maeng	miev	yaac	daaic	boungh	jiex
2(c)—	Green	plants	be	come	meet	before
3(a)—	Faix	fiuv	kauv	wum	taux	jiem
3(b)—	Faix	di'dien	hoqc	nzung	taux	ih
3(c)—	Small	little	learn	song	to	now
4(a)—	Siev	koi	jiemh	kouv	douc	nzauh
4(b)—	Siev	koi	jiem	nzuiz	jaev	nzauh
4(c)—	Please	open	gold	mouth	loosen	sad

1(d)—*The onion has met the fog before.*

2(d)—*Green plants have met the snow before.*

3(d)—*You have been studying songs from childhood until now.*

4(d)—*Please open your golden mouths, sing to help us escape our sorrow.*

V. After many more verses, the guests reveal that they like someone in the village:

1(a)—	Liepc	kiqv	zienz	fiem	waax	yunh
1(b)—	Liepc	jienv	zien	hyiaov	lorz	auv
1(c)—	Lift	-ing	true	heart	find	wife
2(a)—	Feix	coux	kwaa	hgoi	yaamc	ziux
2(b)—	Ha'dau	domgx	biengh	hgoi	mv	ziux
2(c)—	Where	place	flower	bloom	not	shine
3(a)—	Jiem	nhyietv	wuic	bwaangh	kuv	kwaa
3(b)—	Ih	nhoi	zuc	boungh	longx	biengh
3(c)—	Now	day	right	meet	good	flower
4(a)—	Feix	duqv	maaih	yunz	zeoc	duqv
4(b)—	Haih	duqv	maaih	maengc	zeoc	duqv
4(c)—	Possible	get	have	life	right away	get

1(d)—*My heart soars in search of a wife.*

2(d)—*No flower bloom shines on me.*

3(d)—*Today a good flower shines on me.*

4(d)—*Wish we can marry you right away.*

VI. Hostesses sing:

1(a)—Ceov setv zinc kwaa yaamc njaang laangc

1(b)—Gu'naaiv waaic zaanc biangz mv njaang aengv

1(c)—Thing broke worthless flower not light shine

2(a)—Yeoc-nziex luangz zou sienv sueiv hei

2(b)—Mz-nziex tom tom ginv siev piex

2(c)—Maybe boy boy picky girl useless

3(a)—Yorc waanz yaamc sienv baengz zinc setv

3(b)—Si gomgv mv ginv aiv zaanc yie-buo

3(c)—If talk not picky low worthless us

4(a)—Nyunc dunx ziangz somg meic dunx heo

4(b)—Funx tingc ziangz i-hmoungv mv dunx gwangc

4(c)—Count sure real couple not do break-up

1(d)—*We are ugly and worthless.*

2(d)—*We are afraid you don't like us.*

3(d)—*If you don't dislike us worthless persons*

4(d)—*You can count on us to marry you and not divorce you later.*

VII. Guests:

1(a)—Feix waac koih daaiz nziex sienv sueiv

1(b)—Feix waac gomgv daaiz nziex ginv m'buo

1(c)—Plain word say come worry picky you

2(a)—Faix faix siuh yaang zienh meic cui

2(b)—Faix faix buov hung mienv mv cui

2(c)—Small small bum incense spirit not help

3(a)—Bangc kaux fioh fim zoix seix zaangc

3(b)—Bangc kaux fio fim yiem seix lung-ndiev

3(c)—Depend on be good living life world

- 4(a)—Tinh pai ceix nzounx zingx faangh boungh
 4(b)—Lungz bun ceix daaiz cingx mingh boungh
 4(c)—Heaven give create come be able go meet

1(d)—*How can you say we don't like you?*

2(d)—*We have been burning incense since we were small to pray for your attention but the spirits have been of no help.*

3(d)—*Because we have been good living in the world.*

4(d)—*Therefore, our fate has brought us here to meet you.*

VIII. Hostesses:

- 1(a)—Tingx zuqc siemh zingh zien kwaax douv
 1(b)—Moungx haiz meih buo zien hnamv hnyioy
 1(c)—Listen hear you (plural) real love heart

- 2(a)—Nziex zingh jangv guov fiox maaih kor
 2(b)—Nziex meih jangv da'bung lorh maaih auv
 2(c)—Maybe you wide world find have wife

- 3(a)—Caqv cie lorgc maaz taux waang guov
 3(b)—Domgc jauv ndortv doic taux waang da'bung
 3(c)—Wrong way fall group get to lonely country

- 4(a)—Kungh kouy saah lorh wangv zwangx (zinc) yaang
 4(b)—Kungx nzuiz gomgv ha'nzyaauc nduov yie buo
 4(c)—Plain mouth say play trick l (plural)

1(d)—*We hear your words come from a very true heart.*

2(d)—*Maybe you have found someone elsewhere already.*

3(d)—*You just came to this place by accident.*

4(d)—*Only plain words to trick us.*

The verses continue on until one side cannot respond or gives up to go to sleep.

(Transcription and translation by Kaola Saeapham)

Mien Religion

Mien religion is closely bound to the natural environment and reflects centuries of Chinese influence. Mien religion is more than a component of the culture; it is the total belief system, the way in which natural events are explained. This system of explanation addresses fundamental mysteries of life: birth and death; illness and health; differences in ability and success; fortune and misfortune; happiness and sorrow. It provides answers for the unexplainable, and provides a way to gain control over events in life.

All Mien are influenced by their ancestors, as well as the actions of benevolent and malevolent spirits in the river, tree, field, house, and so on. The living devote time and resources to communication with the ancestors and spirits, to do what they can to ensure content ancestors and pacified spirits. In addition to the ancestors and spirits, there are hundreds



Baby Ey Choy in mother's baby carrier.

of deities in the Taoist pantheon, each of which plays a role in an individual's well-being.

***Leiz Nyeic*, rules of ceremony**

Leiz nyeic ('rules of ceremony') combines Taoist belief and practice with ancestor and spirit worship. The Taoist overlay makes Mien religion distinct from other hilltribe religious systems. The rules of ceremony are inscribed in ritual texts and can be interpreted only by a highly trained ritual specialists, Mien leaders who enjoy an unusual degree of respect and status in a society that is largely without class distinctions.

Rituals are normally conducted by *saaï mienh*, priests trained in the rules of ceremony and adept at interpreting the calendrical instructions of the sacred texts. There are three ranks of priest, each attained only after long years of study as apprentices to religious specialists. Mien priests study not only writing and reading of Chinese characters, but also the chanting of prayers and the organization and execution of rituals that may require two or three days to complete.

At major Mien rituals the sacred paintings of the Mien, the *faam cing fangx*, are taken from their black cloth wrappings. These meticulously illustrated icons reveal the structure of the spirit government, show the three principal mythological ancestors, and depict the migration of the Mien from central to southern China. At great rituals that call for the sacrifice of several pigs, two or three priests and numerous apprentices carry out prayers and offerings for as long as seventy-two hours. During this time the sacred paintings are hung from the walls of the house. It is thought that the spirits of ancestors temporarily reside in the vicinity of the spirit paintings, allowing the priests to communicate directly with them during the ritual process. At the close of the ceremony, the scrolls are carefully rolled up and hidden in their cloth containers until the next ceremony.

Two of the major rituals initiate men as “true Mien,” able to participate fully in the rituals and ceremonies. The first ceremony is the *kua tang*, or the “ceremony of lights.” During this two-day ordination ceremony, young men are introduced to the Taoist pantheon and given a name by which they will be known to the ancestors. Huge free-standing candelabras are constructed from bamboo, one for each initiate. The second ceremony, the *tou sai*, is for older men, and takes up to seven days to complete. The faamcing fangx are also taken out for funerals and other major life events.

The *jaaxjiouh* (‘to build a bridge’) ceremony is used to cure infertility, long-term unresponsive illness, and for older couples who wish to secure good health for their final years. The bridge

ritual requires the sacrifice of at least one pig and the participation of a *saai gong*, the highest-ranking priest. It centers on the construction of a small wooden bridge outside the house of the ritual’s subject. Prayers and offerings begin early in the morning and conclude when the subject is carefully guided across the bridge, passing from a state of illness or malaise to a state of health and well being.

Infertility is a critical problem in a society that is focused on ancestors and descendants. The “flower bridge rit-ual” is performed



Baby-carrier in use. In the unmarried girl's costume, the baby-carrier is worn as a shawl, usually made heavy and musical with silver ornaments and coins.

for a barren wife who wants to conceive. In this ceremony, the bridge is decorated with cut-out paper flowers. The goal of this ceremony is to summon the souls of children yet to be born to the childless couple. Small paper images of infant souls (white for male babies, red for female) are affixed to the bridge. Fashioned so that the arms of the cut-out babies are raised above their heads, the images flutter in the wind and appear to be calling the unborn spirits to the home of the childless couple. Dark and light threads are drawn from the bridge, extended across the walls of the house and into the bedroom of the couple. At the climax of the ceremony hundreds of multicolored paper "seeds" are scattered into the ceremonial baby-carrier of the prospective mother, which is spread wide in front of the woman's abdomen. She clutches the baby-carrier close to her body, crosses the bridge and follows the threads from the bridge into her bedroom. She will keep the paper seeds until conception occurs. Mien villagers say that the prayers of the priest allow the souls of the unborn children "to see into the stomach of the mother."

Many other rituals are commonplace events within the home. An ancestral altar (*mienv baaiz*), is the focus of family religious activities. Events that mark the beginning of the planting or the harvest are carried out in the fields. Annual thanksgiving rites to the "spirits of the land" (the original settlers on land currently occupied by Mien villagers) are carried out in the forest. Almost all Mien religious occasions involve the offering of foodstuffs to nature spirits, ancestors, or both, followed by a communal feast.

Common Mien rituals called *sipv mienv* ('offering to the spirits'), are conducted by the heads of household. These small-scale rituals involve the offering of an egg and perhaps a chicken. They are carried out when a minor illness remains unresponsive to treatment, or when a person is depressed, anxious, or generally weak and tired.

Several days after a baby is born the infant is formally presented to living relatives and to ancestor spirits at a large



The faam cing tangx—sacred religious paintings depicting the pantheon of Taoist deities—are exposed only on important ritual occasions.

family dinner. This ritual, *tim mienv kuv* ("adding a name to the family register"), performed by *asaaimienh* priest, is carried out in the morning, as this is the time of blooming flowers (*biangh nqoi*) and thus most appropriate time of day for a young infant. After prayers are chanted each male guest blesses the youngster by tying a thin string around the wrist of the baby.

A common feature of Mien ritual is the participation of

all members of the kin community to ensure the well being of the subject of a ritual. Mien believe that within each individual is a life soul (*wuonh*). If an adult is in an automobile accident, even if no injury takes place, or if there is a sudden startling noise, the life soul may be frightened out of the body. The symptoms of this temporary loss of *whuen* are persistent headache, sickness and a sense of psychological unease. A priest is summoned to conduct the *heoc wuonh ndoh suix* ("summon the life-soul, bind with threads") ritual. For this ritual (in the United States) a pig is purchased, offered to the spirits, slaughtered at the farm site, and then brought home and prepared for the large feast. After prayers are offered by the

priest, each person comes forward to tie a string around the wrist of the afflicted person. The strings help keep the life soul in place, and are not removed until they disintegrate. This ceremony is also conducted on the birthday of an adult to forestall health problems during the coming year.

The world of the supernatural (*yiem gen*, 'dark realm') and the world of the living (*yaangh gen*, 'light realm') coexist in close proximity in the Mien belief system. Most important of these relations is the bond between ancestors and their living descendants. Ancestors are thought to remain in close contact with the

living; their needs and concerns are communicated to the living in dreams. Mien believe that the well-being of family is assured by providing for ancestors at important rituals. It is within the power of their ancestors to cause good health and prosperity for their descendants. The people who neglect ritual obligations to the deceased invite unexplained illness, sudden accidents, or other misfortune. The events are interpreted as signs that ancestors are displeased with the living. The priest



Red and white paper cut-outs flutter during the Flower Bridge ceremony.

will communicate with the ancestor spirits to determine the cause of their displeasure—if they are “hungry,” a chicken, pig, or cow will be presented to them. Sometimes the priest will bargain with the spirits, promising a cow if the person’s health is regained, for example. At other times, spirit money is burned, carried to the supernatural realm on the wisps of smoke.

Mien religion is the core of Mien culture; it is their understanding of the way in which the world operates. It is not possible to understand the Mien living today in American communities without understanding how they view the world. Each decision and every priority is governed by their belief system. Although their belief and ritual is blended with Chinese Taoism, it reflects much that is indigenous to the mountains of Southeast Asia—a concern for the spirits of wind, water and mountains; a belief that ceremonial action influences the well-being and fortunes of the living; and a high priority placed on garnering the resources necessary for the elaborate rituals. Mien reli-



A Mien priest taps water buffalo horn to communicate with those in the spirit realm.

gion and communal feasts bind the members of the community together in a network of reciprocal obligation and responsibility. These bonds function to assure people in need that the ancestors, friends and relatives are actively involved and can help in times of need.

Mien—Refugees from a Distant Land

Although the nation of Laos is remote, it is also strategically situated, sharing borders with Burma to the west, China to the north, Vietnam to the east, and Thailand to the south. The most remote villages, in the most remote districts of this most remote nation are located in the northwestern portion of the country where the borders of China and Burma meet. Here is the birthplace of most adult Lao Mien-Americans, although scattered communities of Mien existed in the vicinity of Luang Prabang, and in the province of Sayaboury near the Thai border.

Early political involvement

The Mien have never been strangers to international political developments. Their arrival in Southeast Asia from southern China was largely instigated by actions of local Chinese government authorities, who forced minority peoples from prime farmlands during westward expansion.

During the struggle for independence in French Indochina (1945-54), the Mien were recruited by the French to fight with them in their struggle to maintain colonial control in Laos. The recruitment of ethnic minorities characterized the divide-and-rule policies of colonial regimes during much of their administration of Asia and Africa. Although Lao Mien were involved in such struggles, the long-term impact on their home communities in the vicinity of Muong Sing and Nam Tha was negligible.

The French departed Laos by 1954, at which time this small landlocked kingdom was declared to be neutral by participants in the 1954 Geneva Conference.

The American connection

The Central Intelligence Agency recruited the sons of missionaries, fluent in several highland languages, to make contact with Mien community leaders in Nam Tha. Arms, advisors and funds were flowing into the region by 1958. Mien recruits were given the task of crossing the border into southern Yunnan, China, to tap military phone lines and provide intelligence on Chinese troop movements. By 1961, the Nam Tha region briefly became the focus of world events when President Kennedy called attention to the threat of communist takeover in Indochina. In that same year, the United States sent a small force of Marines to the Mekong border with Thailand to demonstrate concern about events in northern Laos.

Several years before Hmong General Vang Pao formed his "Secret Army" in Laos with American support, the Mien were already committed to the anti-communist struggle. CIA agents reminded the Mien that the Chinese had forcibly evicted them from their farms in southern Yunnan five decades earlier—well within the living memory of Mien clan leaders—and told the Mien leaders that by opposing the communist Pathet Lao and their allies, the Chinese, they would be able to secure their homeland in northern Laos.

Internal refugees

In March, 1967, American advisors organized a temporary migration of the Mien for tactical purposes. The plan called for American aircraft to heavily bomb in the vicinity of Mien villages in northwestern Laos, to dislodge the Pathet Lao from their



Mien girls from Nam Tha area of Laos, late 1950s. (Photo by Joel Halpern.)

positions. Before the bombing campaign could begin, Mien and other tribal allies had to temporarily evacuate their homes. Helicopters flew out some older people. Most of the others walked two to three months over rough terrain to temporary camps erected in the foothills of the Mekong watershed near Hwei Oh and Nam Keung. The advisors told the leaders that once the bombing campaign was completed, they could return to their highland valleys. The Mien abandoned their granaries that had been filled with the recent rice harvests; cash crops that had been stored in anticipation of itinerant Chinese merchants; and livestock, a rough indicator of families' accomplishments.

Scores of villagers died during the trek to the south. Chao Mai, the senior Mien leader, died suddenly during the evacuation, leaving no one to coordinate the effort between American advisors, the Royal Lao government, and the large groups of Mien villagers making their way to protected areas. Scheduled airdrops of food

did not materialize or could not be found, enemy soldiers ambushed weary villagers along the way, and illness took its toll. The promise of return to their homes in the north was never fulfilled—the Mien had become refugees within Laos.

The Mien rebuilt their communities in the foothills of Laos. Their new lowland homes were infested with malaria-carrying mosquitoes and were built from bamboo or whatever timber was available. Supplementary foodstuffs were provided by American foreign aid workers. Once prosperous in Nam Tha, the Mien had become poor.

Because of the ever-growing conflict, the forces of Hmong General Vang Pao recruited at least one son from every family to join the Secret Army. The mission of Vang Pao's forces was different from the earlier intelligence gathering. They directly engaged the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese regulars along the Ho Chi Minh trail in eastern Laos and western Vietnam. Vietnamese troops and their Pathet Lao allies attacked Hmong strongholds in northern Laos. Many thousands of highlanders were killed. By the end of the conflict, boys thirteen and fourteen years old were recruited to fill the depleted ranks.

May, 1975

On April 17, 1975, communist forces swept to victory in Cambodia. On April 30, 1975, the city of Saigon was taken by communist Vietnamese forces. In early May, General Vang Pao and a few hundred family members and trusted aides departed by plane from the secret CIA airbase at Long Cheng.

For the many highland villagers left behind, there were pressing issues of survival. Throughout the long conflict in Laos the highlanders had maintained a strategic advantage, occupying mountain and ridgetop positions, surviving with the help of supply airdrops. This support allowed the men to fight rather than farm.

Between 1900 and 1975, Mien communities in northern Laos had undertaken migrations for both economic and political reasons. Economic migrations were tied to the swidden, or "slash-and-burn," agricultural system that required that entire villages move to find new fields when the soil became exhausted. Such migration was both ecologically and culturally prescribed—part of the enduring lifeways of the mountain peoples of tropical Asia. Political events—eviction from village farms by the Chinese and the evacuation of Nam Tha under American guidance—had caused disruption, death and relocation trauma. But the eventual consequences of this political involvement could have been neither predicted nor imagined.

After the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, a coalition government came to power in Laos. The communists then had jurisdiction over many areas inhabited by the Mien who had earlier fled from Nam Tha and Muong Sing. Communist officials were suspicious of the Mien—almost all of whom had been committed to the alliance of the Royal Lao Government and the United States. Government officials had few Mien translators. No Mien had reached positions of influence within the Pathet Lao communist army. Heavy taxes were imposed on the Mien—families were asked to divide their pigs, half to the government, half for themselves. Permission was required to slaughter pigs for ceremonial feasts. Some Mien soldiers and their families were directed to report to government military posts for transport to re-education camps. When, in the spring of 1975, Vang Pao fled and all American assistance to non-communist forces in Laos ceased, the Mien found themselves in an untenable position. They were a relatively small ethnic minority, easily identifiable by language, dress, religious practices and village of residence. They were suspect because of their past alliances, and became an easy target. In May, 1975, the first groups of Mien began to filter across the border to Thailand. These few represented the first of thousands who would flee over the next ten years.

Fleeing Laos

The journey to Thailand was filled with danger. The Mien were mountain people unfamiliar with swimming across rivers as wide as the Mekong River. The refugees entered the river under the cover of darkness, grasping giant sections of bamboo as floats, crowded into boats, or hanging on to inflated inner tubes. Family members were lashed together and frightened children were tied to their panicky parents' backs. Many drowned, and many were shot by Pathet Lao soldiers. During the day people were ambushed by Pathet Lao soldiers; travel was most often at night, picking a path through the dense jungle step by step. Illness and exhaustion took members of every traveling group, and survivors today live with the horrible memories of abandoning those too sick to continue on. Fleeing Laos was not a decision easily made.

Some Mien knew about Thailand. The borders between the countries of Southeast Asia were porous, and had allowed Mien migrations into the hills of northern Thailand for several decades. Many Lao Mien had Thai Mien relatives living in remote Thai villages. Those families that could reach the homes of relatives in Nan, Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son provinces did so, and live there today in villages similar to the ones they left behind. No one knows how many escaped the notice of the Thai border police and United Nations refugee officials, but most people were detained as soon as they staggered ashore.

Those who wanted to stay in Thailand had to prove that they were refugees—outside their country of citizenship and unable to return due to a reasonable fear of persecution because of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or group membership. Once determined to be refugees, they were sent to camps to await resettlement in a country other than Thailand.

Inside the crowded refugee camps, life took on a decidedly different pace. Refugee camps were maintained through dona-

tions to the United Nations from many countries, but the camps were under the authority of the Thai military. Refugees were allotted rice and water, and were housed in barracks shared by many families. Each family had an area approximately twelve feet square, and all the families in the barracks shared outdoor cooking fires and trench latrines. They were crowded into living conditions denser than they had ever previously experienced, and for the first time, lived shoulder to shoulder with strangers. There were no fields to farm, no livestock to raise; daily life changed from strenuous productive work to idle waiting.

In the early years (1975-77), the world largely ignored the plight of Laotian refugees. Many refugees succumbed to infectious disease and poor nutrition. As camp life became more organized, some refugees were encouraged to work as farm laborers outside the camp. Women were encouraged to produce crafts that could be sold to the burgeoning tourist market in nearby Chiang Mai. For the first time in the experience of many Mien families, schooling became universally available for their children. Instruction was in Thai, French or English, provided by teachers paid by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or one of the numerous international aid agencies. Adults who expressed an interest in resettling in the United States began the study of English, vocational skills, and American culture.

Vern Ta Seng's Story: Resettlement in America

The person speaking now is me, Vern Ta Seng. I thought I could not stay [in the Thai refugee camp]. We had been taking care of our many small children. It was very difficult. We just wanted to go somewhere. We just wanted to go. We decided to do the paper. But my older son with his family was split from the family. He had his family of three persons. The remaining three sons and three daughters came with us. Not too long, about four, five, six months, after we did the paper, our name came out. We had to get ready. When we got ready, we did *hyo when do swee* ["calling the soul, binding with strings"]. Relatives, friends, and community leaders came to help call souls and tie threads. My brothers and relatives all cried. "This time we brothers are going to be separated." We cried. There was nothing else we could do. We did all the paper work. Whether we were going to meet again or not, we didn't know.

When we came out, we became handicaps. From over there, we shook hands with all our brothers as we left. We all cried. When we arrived in Bangkok, we slept there two nights. Then our name came out to come to America. There were many Cambodians and Vietnamese as well. The Thai called our names but we could not go up on time, because there were so many Cambodians and Vietnamese. So we had to stay back until the fourth night before our names came out again. We did all the paper work. Then we were brought to the airport at about eight o'clock. We waited until nine o'clock when the plane arrived. The plane could not come, so we had to be brought to the plane by bus.

When we got in the plane, we were traveling with business people and travelers. We did not know anything. We did not speak the language. Some Cambodians spoke Thai. They told us that we needed to put on seat belt. They told us that when we reached a certain place where the plane goes down, we had to put on seat belt. Six of us just came with them. We could not cry. We just came. We came until we arrived in San Francisco. We became handicaps. We did not know anything. We could not tell if we were alive or not. We waited for them to take us to the hotel. We waited until five, six, seven, eight, nine o'clock when Fou Tse went to pick us up to go to their house.

We lived at their house. We could not go anywhere. We lived until we had to find our own house. We could not find a house. We recorded a cassette to our relatives in Thailand to tell them to come. We thought America was a good country. The next year, more people decided to come. Even the retarded people were brought along.

At first, we could not even find a house. Wherever we looked for a house, they said that they did not let many people stay in one house in America. They only let four, five people live in a four, five bedroom house. They only allowed one, two children or one, two pets. Our family was too big. We had six, seven, eight persons. They would not rent to us. We looked for a house for one month and twenty days, we still could not find a house. We were giving up. "We are handicaps. We cannot do anything. Let it be. We just have to die wherever it is." Finally, Ai Inh, a Khmu, asked if we had found a house. We told him that we did not because our family was too big. If all of our family members came together, we would have had eleven, twelve persons. Our family was too big. He said, "You did not tell me!" We told him, then he took us to find a house. We found one from a white American. It was all the way on the top. We went up, it was like swaying. We did not like it. He said it was okay.

Then we found another one. It was a four bedroom. Outside looked like it had been a long time since people lived there. The garbages pile up all over. It was stinky all over. But we had no choice, so we decided to stay. After we moved in, we found a person to help us clean up the place. It took us four, five days to clean. When we first moved in, they did not turn on the electricity. We lived four, five days without light. Finally, they came to turn on the light. But we could not speak any English. We could not say anything. We just eat and live.

After we lived there three, four months, we thought that we needed to go to school. Even though we might never speak the language, our children could learn. So we asked our relatives to enroll us in school. We did not know anything they said. Our children did not understand either. Eventually a black lady, Mrs. Ford, worked in the school. She is still there. She took us to cash checks, to hospitals, and other errands. Later, there was a Vietnamese lady who married an American. She moved to Thailand and married an American. The American brought her to America, she said. She worked in the school. She said, "I can speak Chinese and Thai." The children did not speak too well, but they could understand some. So it was very good. She helped to teach the children for two years. After two years,

the children learned how to speak a little. From then on, we sent letters to relatives to come to America. They needed not to worry. So the people began to come to America.

So now there are a lot of Mien in America. We are all over America. It is good here. There are not too many problems. But the children are grown up, and they have to marry. In Mien tradition, during the New Year, we had a new year spirit ceremony. In time of sickness and other events, we needed to do other rituals and ceremonies. When a person got married, we needed to have a wedding. In Laos, we could either do a big wedding or a small wedding. But now we are in America. We could not throw away our traditions. We still have to carry on our religion. In religion, we got the permission paper. As long as we did not do anything that was harmful, it was okay. As long as we did not burn the house, we could do our ritual. We agreed to control the burning of paper spirit money. When we had a big ritual, we used garbage cans to burn the paper. We controlled the burning. With all the paper work completed, we could continue to do our rituals. We did *sipv mienv*, the bridge ritual, *tziuc woun* (looking for soul) and other rituals. If we don't do it, sometimes even the hospital could not help. Sometimes your hospital could not help us heal. So we had to do our religious healing ritual. Now some people have converted to Christian. But some people still believe in *mienv* (spirits). Some people re-convert back to *mienv* when they did not get well after converting to Christian.

That's how our story is. It is not that we wanted to do. It is a tradition that we carried from the past. It started in the past. However difficult it is, it is part of our culture. No matter how much we change, we cannot change all. Now we are here living in your country, many of us Asian people have come to America.

About our Mien things, it is not something that we wanted to do. But it is something that began in the far past. Fou Hey and Tse Mui, a brother and sister, created traditions for us to carry on. So wherever we go, we must carry our tradition with us, one generation after another. Doing religious rituals and weddings, we have to carry on our tradition. If we change it, I don't think we will be called Lu Mien anymore. That is why we have to teach from one generation to another. But we cannot really set up a school to teach because there is no one to teach and no one wants to. But if we do not teach and do the rituals, then the spirits would come to bother us. We have to do the rituals. That is how it is.

Now we are living in this country. When people go to "talk girl" (to find

a daughter-in-law or wife], the son is not allowed to go to the girl's side in our custom. If we have a son, we have to pay bride price for the people's girl then take her to join our family. Now in America, we still have to "talk and buy". After we talk, we need to do a big feast. We need to rent a church to do the wedding. It is very expensive. To do it in a house, it is too small. We are afraid the community members would not like it. We are afraid that we might disturb the neighbors. So today, we do not do our ceremony as long. We only do it two days and two nights. We start on Saturday and finish on Sunday. We still talk big, but we do smaller today. We prepare big amounts of food, meat and rice, and have feasts.

The next thing, now we have come to America. We Mien lived in the mountain, forest, jungle, we did not know anything about school. We had never seen school before. Boy and girl alike, when you are born and get a little bigger, the parents pick vegetables and cook rice to feed us. When we get old enough, we brought our axes and machetes to go farm. When we harvested the rice, we took it home. We milled it, then cleaned it. That is how I know about foods and cooking. In the old time when we were in Laos, I knew about going to plow the land to grow opium, vegetables, beans, and spice to eat.

About opium, we got some to sell to the chan [*janx*, "non-Mien"] such as Chinese and Lao. We used the money to buy clothes to wear and salt and oil to eat. Now in this country we cannot really do it. We want to do it, but we cannot do it. It is a tradition from the past. If we do, it is illegal.

In Laos, we went to hunt for deer, monkey and big birds. We did not need license. We hunted bear and porcupine and squirrels. No one arrested us. We knew how to hunt. We made our own guns. We used a black, flat steel. Then we made it into a barrel. It was similar to the ones that Indians used here. We used gunpowder to shoot. Later when you Americans brought the bullet there, we put bullets in to shoot squirrels. When we got a deer, we took it home to dry the meat and eat. Whatever we hunted, we ate. Going to fish, we did not have to get license. We built nets and other things to catch fish. We used traps to catch fish. We lived like that in the past. We did not know about schooling.

Now in this country, we learned that we have to go to school. The government told us that we have to go to school. Go to school, learn to become intelligent and become somebody. That is how we know about school and education. In our country, no one told us about this thing.

School and education: in our country no one told us about these things.

We only knew how to farm. We cut down the trees, burned them, then we planted and harvested rice to eat. We grew roots, corn and yams to eat. We know about those. In the morning and evening, we cut banana trees to cook to feed the pigs. When it was the New Year, we killed the pigs to eat. We invited people to come eat with us. Then they would invite us to eat with them.

Now I have talked this far. I hope you can make a story out of it to let the Americans know about it.

Now I would like to talk a little about my personal life. In the past, my parents were able to live in the world. I had many brothers, sisters and relatives. But because of the trouble in the world, I decided to come first. In Laos, I was also the first person to escape down south. Later at the Mekong River, I was also the first one to come across, leaving all my brothers, sisters, and relatives behind. Coming to America, I was the first one to come. Stupid, I was the most stupid, but I came first. When I got here, luckily the Americans were good-hearted. The church people came to see us. They even put us in the newspaper. They brought food and other stuff to give to us. The children did not know how to study, but the Vietnamese lady that I mentioned earlier helped us. She helped our children. We stayed there for three years, then my oldest son came. He spoke some English. My son-in-law also came, and he spoke some English as well.

Now I have lived here for ten years. My children can work now. Three are working now. One works in the welfare office. One works in the school. One daughter also works in the school. Now one of my son-in-law also is working and studying. My daughter is also working. Now I still have two daughters and two sons. Four of them still have not married yet. Here, we found one girl for one of my sons. The girl's parents wanted a big wedding, but there was no place to do it. We also didn't have money like in the past. Now the good government gave us only enough to live on. The oldest son bought a house, but it was too small for the wedding.

I don't know what they will become in the future. But this is what I have to say. In the future, people can read and understand about our experience. Some parts are happy, some parts are sad, some parts are suffering, and some parts are happy. Three times, we were happy. But we have also suffered, three, four times. This time, the American government has a long, wide and good heart. They let our children go to school. The government also is able to give them jobs.

The oldest son now has bought a house already. The middle daughter

has also bought a house already. I have nine children, four sons and five daughters. Three daughters are married already. Two more daughters have not married yet. Two sons are single as well. Working, the oldest son and his wife are working. The oldest daughter and her husband are working. The second son-in-law is working in the factory, and the daughter is working in the hospital. The third son-in-law is also working. The daughter is working in a factory. The small son is also working. The young daughter-in-law is not working. She is still in school.

My story is like this. I recorded it here to let you translate it and let the Americans read about it.

Vern Ta Seng Saephan

(Transcribed and translated by Kaota Saepham, Albany, CA.
Part of a longer oral history collected by
the Laotian Handcrafts Center of Berkeley, CA)

Resettlement in America

The first Indochinese refugees reached the United States in May, 1975. The earliest arriving groups included members of the Vietnamese and Cambodian elite, former military officers, bureaucrats, business people and their families. The only Laotian highlanders to qualify as refugees in this "first wave" were a few of the Hmong closely connected to Vang Pao, or those who had been in the United States previously. A few Hmong had received advanced military training at American bases in Thailand and a very few had studied in America during the years before 1975. These first arrivals from highland Laos were a select group.

The Mien had not enjoyed the same benefits from association with the Americans as the Hmong. No Mien student had been brought to the United States for education, and very few Mien students had been sponsored through high school in the Lao capital of Vientiane. However, a handful of Mien, close associates of CIA operatives during the war, were resettled in the United States between 1975 and 1978. By early 1978, the Mien population rose from zero to approximately one hundred. Within the next two years, thousands of Mien left Thai refugee camps for America.

No people so traditional, so lacking in educational background or economically relevant skills, from so geographically and cognitively remote a homeland had ever been brought *en masse* as refugees to the United States. Yet the Carter administration was committed to the principal of asylum for former American allies in Indochina. As tribal refugee populations expanded in northern Thailand and as Cambodian refugee populations expanded along the eastern Thai border, the Thai government grew increasingly uneasy as an unwilling host to hundreds of thousands of uninvited foreign guests. Thailand wanted no increase in its domestic minority population, already regarded as a threat to both national security and to integrity of its dwindling forest

reserves. The Thais threatened to forcibly repatriate Lao and Khmer refugees; the United States and other western countries agreed to find them permanent homes outside of Thailand.

Mien heads of household were interviewed by American officials. Initially many Mien villagers were reluctant to depart for an unknown land so far away. The American refugee workers and embassy personnel reminded some villagers of the legendary *hieh Mienh*, the wild, hairy cannibals of the deep jungle. Many wondered what fate might await their families in land peopled by such large, hairy people speaking an unintelligible language. What was this place, America? To an unschooled Mien farmer, America was a new village, free from war and persecution, where life might proceed as in the peaceful times of the past.

American officials expected the political refugees from highland Southeast Asia to make the same sort of rapid transition to American life that previous waves of Hungarian (1956) and Cuban (1960s) refugees had made. No special orientation or educational courses were designed to meet the needs of Mien and other tribal Laotian refugees. American refugee policy required that the refugees be spread out all over the United States. Mien from the same extended family or same village were sent to cities thousands of miles apart.

Before embarking on the trip to the United States, Mien refugees gathered up what few significant belongings they had salvaged from Laos to transport to their new homes. Many Mien families carefully wrapped seeds of rice, corn and vegetables in swatches of cloth to be planted in American farms. They brought with them their rice harvesting sickles and dibble sticks, planning to apply their skills to the familiar business of subsistence. Mien refugees also packed their ritual books. *Saai gong* priests brought pewter inlaid staffs that are the mark of religious accomplishment and the sacred paintings necessary for rituals. Many women brought their most precious textiles, embroidered shawls and trousers. Small bamboo seats, knives, and wooden mortars were

packed for the long trip to America.

In the space of eighteen months between 1979 and early 1981, nearly 5,000 Mien refugees arrived in America. Preliterate mountain villagers hailing from the most remote districts in far-off Southeast Asia were transported in less than twenty-four hours to the post-industrial social and cultural environment of urban America. Both the host society and the newcomers were unprepared to meet the challenges of this unusual encounter. Because most Mien adults had no formal education, received no significant orientation to life in America (before 1981) and had little concept of urban life beyond the small market towns of rural Southeast Asia, life in America came as shock.

Most Mien adults had never before ridden in a passenger car, visited a large city, entered a bank, or been in a building more than two stories in height. Most adult Mien had never used locks and keys, dialed a telephone, cooked on a stove, kept food in a refrigerator, eaten with a knife and fork, or seen a person of African descent. Many, if not most, Mien adult women over the age of forty arrived in San Francisco airport clad in traditional dress—turban, tunic and embroidered trousers. Babies were brought to America in the beautiful *suangx buix* carriers in which they had always been carried. Mien refugees carried their new lives in plastic bags—names spelled with roman letters, alien registration numbers, birthdates invented for the paperwork, immunization records and chest X-ray films.

However, they carried with them something more useful than seeds and agricultural implements; something more precious than heirloom textiles or silver jewelry; something more relevant than their identification papers. They brought with them four thousand years of Mien social order. It is virtually impossible to live as a Mien family and sustain religious belief in isolation from a Mien community. Even though the government policy called for dispersal, for the Mien, the first and only priority was to locate their kinsmen and friends and reunite with them. Only

then could the traditional religious ceremonies, social responsibilities and community bonds be resumed. By 1982, Mien communities had been established in Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon, and the San Francisco Bay area, Sacramento, Merced, Visalia and Long Beach in California. Mien scattered throughout the country soon learned to use the telephone to contact their relatives, saving the Greyhound bus fare in as short a time as possible to join relatives on the west coast.

The American resettlement agencies were prepared to provide Mien refugees with housing, refugee cash assistance, and introductions to the schools, medical facilities and employment offices. American voluntary agencies' staffs were unprepared to understand a village culture, assess the training requirements or even to evaluate the educational needs of this extraordinary group of reluctant migrants.

The Mien were placed in poverty-stricken, crime-ridden urban neighborhoods. In Oakland, where the largest Mien community in the United States came into existence in 1980, Mien found housing in the uniformly black neighborhood of West Oakland and into the largely Hispanic neighborhood of East Oakland. Mien villagers planted their corn crop in November, 1980, in the front and back yards of their dilapidated rental homes. But cold weather withered the young plants. Mien refugees had no knowledge of the seasonal variation of temperate climatic zones. Their crop failure was symbolic of the end of their farming existence.

To disoriented and bewildered Mien refugees, the government of the United States offered housing, educational opportunities for both children and adults, and cash payments—this was initially beyond the dreams of the most radical Mien village visionary. In the past, Mien refugees inside Laos had from time to time been offered food assistance (rice or bulgur wheat). Sometimes such assistance was contingent on sending their sons to war. In the Thai refugee camps where most Mien resided for at least

five years prior to departure for America, food rations were also distributed. In America, the Mien were introduced to Refugee Cash Assistance. After the time limit was reached for Refugee Cash Assistance, family heads who had not yet acquired the language and vocational skills necessary for working qualified for Aid For Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

To the astonishment of Mien refugees, the government would pay cash to those unable to find a job. The more children one had, the more cash one would receive. Medical benefits and food stamps were provided as well. When the states of Washington and Oregon restricted cash assistance to unemployed *one-parent* households, the Portland Mien joined Mien communities in California, greatly enlarging the community in Sacramento that would grow to be the largest in the United States by the late 1980s.

Social issues confronting Mien refugees

Approximately 12,000 to 15,000 Mien currently (1991) reside in the United States; at least two-thirds of them live in California. Principal communities include Oakland-Richmond-San Pablo (2,800), Sacramento (4,000), Merced (1,000), Visalia (1,200), and Redding (1,000); another 500 live in Fairfield, Stockton, Long Beach and San Francisco. A decade has passed since the Mien migration to the United States began. As the Mien villagers confronted a society radically different from any they or their ancestors had ever known, they have encountered many problems in adjusting to American life. The Mien are still struggling to find answers that will allow them both success in American terms and retention of what it is to be Mien.

Intergenerational conflict

A generation of Mien youngsters is now reaching adulthood with little recollection of life in village Southeast Asia. These

Mien teenagers and young adults have eaten breakfast and lunch in school cafeterias, jockeyed for position in lines, listened to English-speaking peers compare material acquisitions, and struggled to understand a world view that has no parallel in their own language. Even at home, their Mien conversations are peppered with English words. They begin to see their parents as old-fashioned and superstitious. They learn to read English at school, but never see books or magazines at home. Without practice, their reading and writing skills lag far behind their oral skills. They look around for a group of friends to understand and give them social support, a makeshift family to help them negotiate the hazards of urban life. An increasing number find their support in loose associations with other alienated youth, turning to intimidation and theft as alternatives to respect and competence. Those youth who find an area of competence within the school, athletic, work or community environments, as well as a positive mentor, find themselves making remarkable progress in a short period of time.

In this context, maintaining respect for parental authority is probably the most vexing issue confronting Mien families. Children, with their rapid language acquisition, quickly take on the roles of translators and cultural intermediaries for parents bewildered, intimidated and unaccustomed to the ways of American society. Parents who have never stepped inside a school in Laos are unable to guide their children's education in America. In fact, the changes that make the children virtual strangers seem to be rooted in their school experiences. Traditional child-rearing techniques—showing, guiding, correcting, conforming—don't work when children spend so much time with outsiders. Disciplinary techniques that were seldom necessary in isolated homogeneous communities are necessary in this society, but are subject to approval by outside government agencies. Children have learned that teachers and Child Protective Services will intervene on their behalf in cases of corporal punishment at home. There are

no programs for teaching parents new parenting techniques, and Mien parents have yet to read the many "how-to" manuals on effective parenting, setting limits, taking control, and "tough love." In sum, parental authority has been weakened, and the freedom and independence of Mien children has increased. Fissures have developed within many Mien multigenerational families, powerful immature children on one side and fearful unacculturated parents on the other.

Early marriage

In traditional Mien villages, early marriage for young women (14-16 years of age) was encouraged. The goal of marriage was the creation of a new household and, of course, the presentation of a new generation of Mien to the parents, the grandparents and the ancestors. When families produced all they ate during a year, labor was a critical issue. Mien farmers with small families had to contract with workers from other tribes or adopt infants from other ethnic groups to increase the family labor force. High infant mortality was also a problem, and during the war years, many able-bodied workers were killed. Finally, the life span in Laos was much shorter; people expected to "retire" from hard labor when they had several grandchildren. Grandparenthood could begin as early as the mid-thirties.

The age-old priority on early marriage and many children is in conflict with the educational requirements in an urban industrial society. In addition, raising children to make responsible choices in a society based on freedom of choice takes a great deal of parental time and energy. American cultural expectations are that children should be mature, educated or trained for a vocation, and able to establish an independent household before they marry and have children. In Mien society, the children arrive before parental maturity, and grandparents are actively involved in child-rearing. Establishment of separate households occurs after the children are born, if at all.

It should not be surprising, then, that the values of the Mien village world and those of American society clash, particularly on the issue of appropriate social age for marriage. Junior high school teachers are aghast to learn that Mien eighth grade girls are to be married. Pregnancy before marriage does not carry a strong stigma in traditional Mien society, but in American secondary schools teen-aged pregnancy is seen as a problem. The pulls and strains between the culture at home and the culture in school place Mien youngsters at the center of conflicts that have no easy resolution. The concerns and advice of parents seem irrelevant to young Mien-Americans.

Parents have little understanding of the importance of their daughters' education. At school, teachers, counselors, books and films show women as doctors, astronauts, company presidents, and tell the girls that they can be anything they want to be. Girls have been raised to see themselves as mothers, wives and daughters-in-law, and their home social group reinforces this view. The Mien girls who venture outside tradition have few relevant role models, and are faced with the probability of "not belonging"—to either American or Mien society.

School personnel who understand the nature of the conflict and how it affects the adolescent Mien girls (and their parents or parents-in-law) can help them find their way between the two cultures. For example, married and pregnant teen-aged girls can complete a high school diploma in special programs designed for adolescent parents. By realizing that the girl most likely lives with her parents-in-law, counselors and teachers can work with the girl within her family rather than isolating her from it.

Entering a wage economy

Most Mien have no prior experience with jobs that pay money on a weekly or monthly basis, by check, with deductions for various things. The idea that one sells his knowledge or strength and in return buys food, clothing, housing, transportation and

medical care from others is a new idea. Life in the old villages was one in which people produced what they needed. The problem was how to obtain the cash (or silver) necessary for buying iron, salt, colored thread, and so on. Some grew excess crops or livestock and bartered for what they needed; some became entrepreneurs, traveling from village to village buying and selling; others provided essential services and were paid in livestock. During the war years, Mien received food and essential implements in return for military service. In the refugee camps, they received rice, water, and limited medical care in exchange for idleness. The American welfare system is more familiar to them than is the world of work in a wage economy.

However, Mien have found their way into interesting occupational niches. Mien mothers have successfully put their child care skills to the test of economic viability in programs that train Mien women as professional in-home day care service providers. The International Institute in Oakland began a program called "Care-Givers" that provides training and employment leads to independent Mien entrepreneurs. Other women have taken up housecleaning and factory work; the extended family takes care of the children while the mothers work. Older Mien (over 35 years) have difficulty in finding any type of work in American society, but younger men and women work in factories, service stations and electronic assembly plants.

The rate of Mien welfare dependency remains extremely high. In California, welfare benefits—including the all-important health coverage—are withdrawn if clients report more than one hundred hours of work per month. To re-enter the welfare system means hours of frustration with case-workers and paperwork. Each household head has to determine the best course for the family's survival in this new society. Welfare assistance provides a meager security. For many older Mien, a lifetime of independent farming and trading has been replaced by dependence on monthly cash payments.

While the high welfare dependency is a concern, policy-makers might keep in mind that it took Americans five or more generations to move from the self-sufficient farm of the 1800s to the industrial city of today. That any Mien has made that transition in less than twenty years is remarkable.

Education

Access to education has generated extraordinary changes in Mien society. Arrival in America has meant that for the first time there are females who read and write. Adult women and men attended English as a Second Language classes together after their arrival in the United States and found themselves on an equal footing in an educational environment. In many cases women found employment first, because opportunities for child care and housecleaning were more readily available, and because their language learning skills were at least equal to those of men of similar age and educational background. Equal access to education has also altered the asymmetrical nature of Mien gender relationships. Women were at first hesitant to enter the labor force, drive a car and deal with the outside world, but they increasingly assert their equality in a social environment that supports such values. This shift in roles has led to conflict within the family.

Special programs to assist Mien students succeed in the American educational system have been difficult to devise. Mien students are respectful, willing and able. But without guidance from sensitive and knowledgeable teachers and counselors, very few continue to higher education. Among the obstacles are the quality of the inner-city schools, the influence of non-college-bound peers, the lack of role models, the expectations of parents or parents-in-law, and early drop-out. The basic academic challenge is for Mien students to read and write English well.

Despite the obstacles, some have made it. In California today (1991), six Mien students attend the University of Califor-

nia and 25 are enrolled in the California state universities. Three Mien students have already attained bachelors' degrees: two from the California State University system, and one from the University of California. But for every Mien teenager who enters higher education, ten will marry and start a family. Educators have yet to find culture-specific strategies that will build upon the tradition of scholarship and love of learning in the Mien world.

The issue of Christianity

No issue has ever divided the Mien community as much as evangelical Christian missionary work among the Lao Mien. Upon arrival in 1979–1980, fewer than ten percent of the Mien were Christian converts, and almost all of those had already converted while in Laos or in the refugee camps. Since that time, more than half the community in Portland and approximately forty percent of the Mien in Seattle have become Christians. In California, respected community leaders have remained almost universally committed to *leiz nyeic*, the ancient faith of the Mien. Yet a recent survey in Richmond found that thirty percent of the 900 Mien there and about twenty percent of those in Oakland have recently converted to Christianity.

Indigenous Mien missionaries preach that the ancient religion is “worship of satan” and demand that the ancient genealogical books and implements of ritual be destroyed before conversion. Some missionaries also preach that America is a Christian country and that all who live here should convert to the majority faith. Organized, well-financed, and committed to saving souls through Christianity, Mien missionaries backed by American evangelicals have split the community. The split between Christian and non-Christian divides families. Some Christian Mien are instructed to interact only with other Christian Mien and not to marry, fraternize with or assist even close relatives who remain believers in the ancient religion. Dissension, suspicion and tension has resulted from this situation.

Conclusion

Thirty years ago a handful of American government agents engaged Mien villagers in northern Laos in a fateful international conflict. Within a decade all the Mien in the northern part of Laos were forced to flee their natal villages, leaving behind fertile fields, full rice granaries and well constructed villages. A decade ago, the Mien entered the long and distinguished roster of oppressed minority peoples who have come to the United States. The largest Mien community came to be established in California. Within the living memory of the oldest surviving members of their community, the Mien have trekked across the Chinese border to Laos, have fled from the hills of the north to the banks of Mekong, have escaped across the Mekong to Thai refugee camps and have been flown to safe haven in the United States.

Here their rice harvest sickles, cloth seed packets and iron-tipped dibble sticks have been stored away, never to be used again to provide subsistence for their families. Here also the ancient system of learning and ritual that is the essence of Mien culture is threatened by aggressive missionaries. The Mien have migrated far in their long history as a people. Always they have maintained their language, their religion, their costume and their cherished identity as a separate and proud people. The next decade will tell whether the migration to America will lead to the disintegration, revitalization, or redefinition of *Mien-ness* in the newly established North American community of Mien.

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Appendix I. Roman Orthography

Seven orthographies have been developed to write Mien. Purnell (1987) discusses the various methods. The Mien communities in the U.S., China, and Thailand have met to settle on one system, and to regularize spelling conventions. The association of a westernized spelling system with Christian missionaries (who developed an orthography to translate the Bible) makes it unacceptable to some Mien. The system listed here was developed in 1984, and includes consonant symbols that are in line with the Chinese pinyin system.

<i>Mien</i>	<i>IPA</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Approximate English</i>
b	p	biauv	house	piao
c	t ^h	camv	many	tsharm
d	t	dieh	table	tia
f	f	fauux	go up, climb	fao
g	k	gorx	older brother	kor
h	h	hungz	king	hung
hi	yh	normh hiun	earrings	hyun
hl	lh	hlang	high	hlang
hm	mh	hmeiv	uncooked rice	hmei
hn	nh	hnamv	love, think	hnam
hng	qh	hngagv	cut, chop	hnga
hny	ph	hnyaa	open claws	hnya
hu	hw	huin	turn to face	hwin
j	c	juv	dog	ju
k	k ^h	kuv	delicious	khu
l	l	lueic	be lazy	lwei
m	m	maa	mother	ma
mb	b	mbuox	name	bua
n	n	norqc	bird	no
nd	d	ndiangx	tree	diang
ng	ŋ	ngaate	bite	ngat
nj	j	njaaux	teach	jao
nq	g	nqun	rooster combs	goon
ny	ɲ	nyorng	crawl	yorng
nz	ɗ	nzox	wash clothes	zo
p	p ^h	pui	dry in the sun	pui
q	c ^h	qiouv	stir	chio
s	s	siang	new	siang

t	t ^h	to	beg forgiveness	to
w	w	wangc	be healthy	wang
z	ts	zaang	steam, chapter	zarng

Consonant phoneme chart (Mien orthographic symbols)

(Purnell, 1987: 138; 140)

b	d	z	j	g	-q
p	t	c	q	k	
mb	nd	nz	nj	nq	
f		s			h
m	n		ny	ng	
hm	hn		hny	hng	
	l				
	hl				
w			y		
hu			hi		

Vowels

Vowel phoneme chart (Mien orthographic symbols, IPA in brackets)

i [i]			u [u]
e [e]			o [o]
ae [æ]	a [a]	aa [aa]	or [ɔ]

uea, *er* have been created to spell loan words

Vowel diphthongs include: [ei, ai, aai, ui, oi, ɔi, iu, eu, au, aau, ou, ia, ua]

Tones

The final ‘c’, ‘h’, ‘v’, ‘x’, or ‘z’ are tone markers.

-	mid
c	low falling
h	high falling
v	high, short
x	rising
z	rising-falling

Thus, *Mienh*, the name of the people, is produced on a high falling tone, like an exclamation in English. *Mbuox*, meaning ‘name’, sounds like “bua,” and is produced with a rising tone, similar to a question in English.

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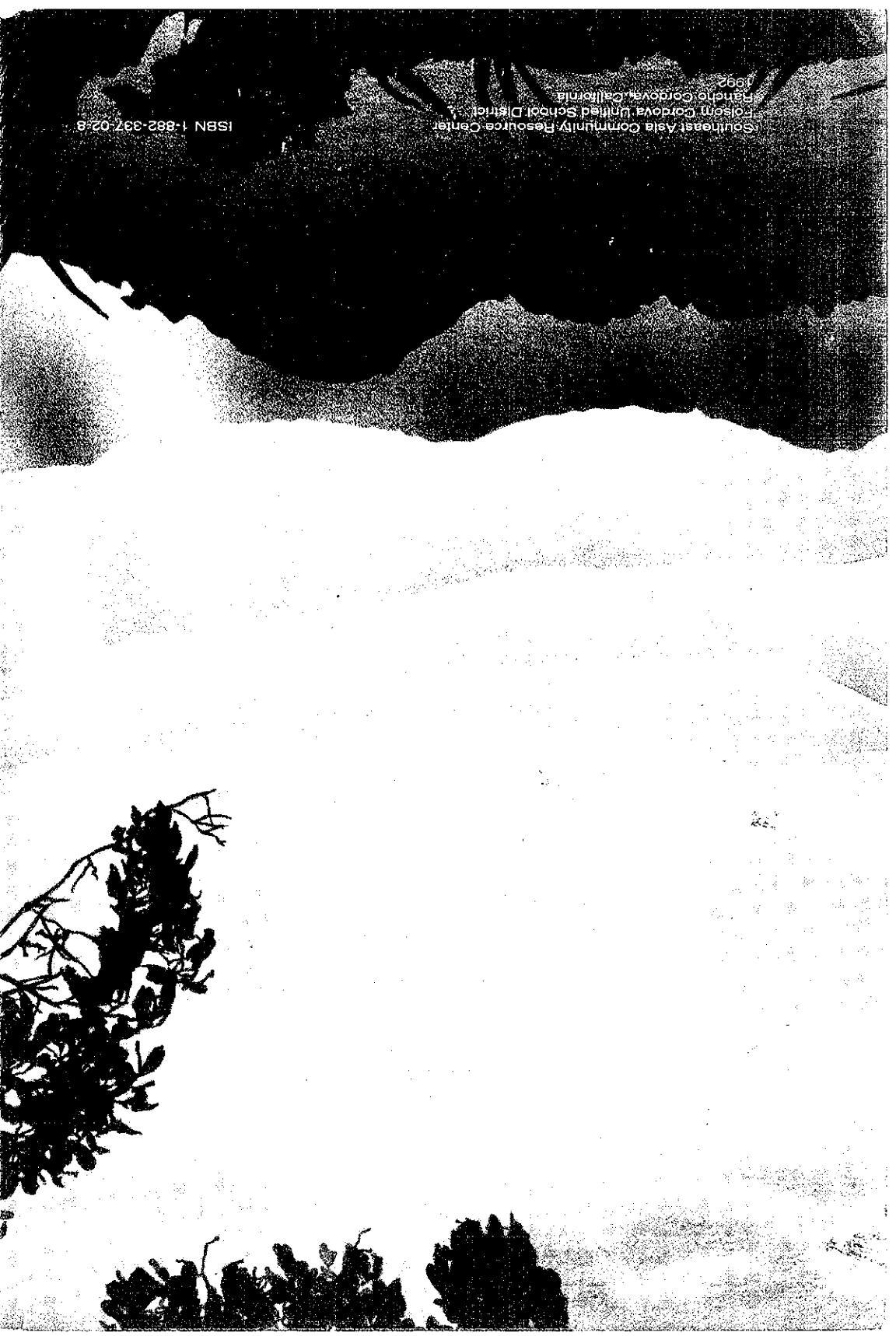
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