

A LAHU NYI (RED LAHU) RITE OF DIVORCE

A Lahu text with ethnographic notes

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Introduction

My principal purpose in writing this paper is to record both in the original Lahu and in English translation a Lahu text recited by a village headman when pronouncing the dissolution of a marriage in his community. The text is just one small example of a vast body of Lahu ritual poetry, some of which I was able to record during my anthropological investigations among these people in north Thailand.¹ In order to set the text in its proper ethnographic perspective, I also present a few notes on divorce in this society.

The Lahu Nyi or Red Lahu are one of several important cultural subdivisions of the Lahu people (cf. Walker 1974c). These Tibeto-Burman-speaking hill folk are scattered in rather small village communities through the highlands of southwestern Yunnan, western Laos, the Burmese Shan State and north Thailand. The Lahu Nyi are found only in the southern areas of Lahu settlement.² Altogether the Lahu people number around 280,000 (cf. Walker 1974d:210n4). No figures are available for the total Lahu Nyi population. In Thailand they number some 10,000 out of a total of about 16,000 Lahu, making them the most significant Lahu division in that country (cf. Young 1974:89). Traditionally the Lahu people are slash-and-burn hill farmers

¹ Other examples of Lahu Nyi ritual poetry can be found in Walker 1970a, 1972a, 1972b, 1974a, 1974b, 1974d, 1975c, 1975d.

² For further ethnographic data on the Lahu see Walker 1969, 1970b, 1975a, 1975b.

who move their villages in search of new soils roughly once in eight to ten years.

This article refers specifically to three Lahu Nyi communities in the northern Thai districts of Phrao (Chiang Mai province) and Wiang Pa Pao (Chiang Rai province). These were the villages I studied closely.³ Whether or not my remarks can be generalized to all Lahu Nyi, let alone to all Lahu (excluding the Christian Lahu community to whom they are certainly inapplicable⁴) I am unable to determine.

Divorce: A note

Among the people I studied, divorce is frequent, especially among young couples without children, and may be initiated by either partner. Little or no stigma attaches to a man or woman who has divorced, whether once or many times. I interviewed 60 informants (30 men and 30 women) of the village in which I was living and found that 52 % of my sample had at one time or another divorced a spouse. On the other hand, only 8 % had divorced after the establishment of a family (cf. Walker 1970b: 132-3). While nobody bothers much about the breakup of a childless young couple, after they become parents the community places considerable psychological pressure on them to remain together.

Whatever the circumstances, if either marriage partner wishes to break up the union the case must be brought to the village headman. If the headman fails to reconcile the partners, he will allow the dissolution of the marriage after payment of the customary fine. Whichever partner initiates the divorce proceedings must pay the fine. This is traditionally stated as twenty Indian silver rupees (once the principal form of currency among these hill people),⁵ but the money actually handed over is modern Thai

³ My fieldwork was conducted from 1966 to 1970 while I held the position of research officer at the Tribal Research Centre in Chiang Mai. I am much indebted to the director of the centre, Khun Wanat Bhruksasri, and his staff.

⁴ I would guess the Lahu Christian population (including those in the People's Republic of China whose present religious affiliations are difficult to determine) to be around 40,000.

⁵ These coins were minted for the British Raj in India from the reign of Queen

currency, calculated at six baht (U.S. 30 c) per rupee.⁶ Of the money he receives, the headman gives half as compensation to the partner who has not sought the divorce. Of the remaining ten rupees (60 baht) he takes for himself his traditional tithe of one rupee (six baht) and distributes the other nine rupees equally among the households of his village.⁷ (If both partners equally desire the divorce and so inform the headman, each pays half of the 20-rupee fine; the headman takes two rupees as his tithe and distributes the remaining 18 rupees among the households).

Once the fine has been paid, the headman performs a simple rite inside his own house in which he announces both to the community and to the guardian spirit of the village locality that the marriage is dissolved. I have not had the opportunity to see this rite for myself, but my Lahu informants tell me that the headman simply lights two beeswax candles and chants the formal announcement, an example of which is recorded below. It is not usual for the parties to the divorce to be present. The use of beeswax candles is significant.⁸ In general, Lahu Nyi light such candles before an act of prayer in order, they say, to give light so that the supernaturals may see their way to attend. In the divorce rite a special symbolism is involved, as the candles remain separated instead of being twisted together as they are for the marriage rite (cf. Walker 1974 b: 45).

The text⁹

1. Ya^ˋ chi nyi^ˋ ma^ˋ ya^ˋ pui^ˋ ba^ˋ da^ˋ che^ˋ da^ˋ ve ce^ˋ meh^ˋ!
2. Cho^ˋ ka^ˋ Cao^ˋ ui^ˋ Cao^ˋ yaw^ˋ, Cao^ˋ pa^ˋ Cao^ˋ keh o cho^ˋ ka^ˋ ve
ka^ˋ, la^ˋ meu^ˋ peh^ˋ ve^ˋ hkeh ve^ˋ taw^ˋ leh peh^ˋ tu^ˋ hkeh tu^ˋ che^ˋ
da^ˋ ve ce^ˋ, hk'aw^ˋ htaw^ˋ ta^ˋ daw^ˋ ha^ˋ ta^ˋ daw^ˋ hki^ˋ pi^ˋ law^ˋ meh^ˋ.

Victoria through that of King George V, after which Indian rupee coins were no longer made of silver. Their use in the hills of Burma and Thailand stems from the fact that Burma was administered as part of British India until 1937.

⁶ The Lahu Nyi are well aware that the market value of the old Indian silver rupee is much more than this.

⁷ For further details of Lahu Nyi fining practices, see Walker 1970b: 149–55.

⁸ In distinguishing themselves from Buddhists and Christians, the Lahu Nyi often call themselves *peh^ˋ tu^ˋ pa^ˋ* ‘beeswax burners’ (*peh^ˋ* from *peh^ˋ haw* ‘beeswax’, *tu^ˋ* from *tu^ˋ ve* ‘to light’, *pa^ˋ* male suffix).

⁹ The text is recorded in a romanized orthography developed over the last 60

3. Yaw^ˈ nyi^ˈ ma^ˈ k'o^ˈ k'o^ˈ chaw^ˈ yu^ˈ che^ˈ ma^ˈ he^ˈ, yaw^ˈ hk'a^ˈ
yaw^ˈ che^ˈ da^ˈ ve.
4. Ya^ˈ nyi^ˈ nyi^ˈ te^ˈ mo^ˈ te^ˈ cu^ˈ ve la^ˈ meu^ˈ peh^ˈ ve^ˈ hkeh^ˈ ve^ˈ
taw^ˈ leh^ˈ hk'a^ˈ hpfuh^ˈ ka^ˈ nyi^ˈ hteh^ˈ htai^ˈ ve yo^ˈ meh^ˈ.
5. Haw^ˈ hk'a^ˈ ma^ˈ heu^ˈ k'o^ˈ, haw^ˈ hk'a^ˈ htai^ˈ ve; ya^ˈ mi^ˈ ma^ˈ
heu^ˈ k'o^ˈ, ya^ˈ mi^ˈ htai^ˈ ve, chi^ˈ htai^ˈ k'o^ˈ peu^ˈ ve yo^ˈ meh^ˈ.
Hk'aw^ˈ htaw^ˈ cheh^ˈ sha^ˈ pi^ˈ meh^ˈ.
6. Te^ˈ hk'a^ˈ te^ˈ law^ˈ ve, ya^ˈ chi^ˈ nyi^ˈ ma^ˈ che^ˈ da^ˈ o ce^ˈ meh^ˈ,
te^ˈ mo^ˈ te^ˈ cu^ˈ ve o^ˈ, ya^ˈ nyi^ˈ leh^ˈ ba^ˈ da^ˈ che^ˈ da^ˈ ve yo^ˈ;
u^ˈ hpu^ˈ ka^ˈ, u^ˈ na^ˈ ka^ˈ chi^ˈ ma^ˈ ve, ya^ˈ neh^ˈ sha^ˈ nu^ˈ sha^ˈ ka^ˈ
chi^ˈ ma^ˈ ve ka^ˈ, g'a^ˈ leh^ˈ che^ˈ pi^ˈ o meh^ˈ.
7. Che^ˈ O-! Che^ˈ O -!

Translation

1. This evening these two people divorce, they break up.
2. Great Ruler, pure Ruler here at this place,¹⁰ I bring for you
these beautiful beeswax candles made by my own hands;
with the lighting of these two candles, the marriage is dissolved;
let neither party suffer misfortune.
3. We people do not break up this couple, they themselves break
up.
4. Today we of this community give you these beautiful beeswax
candles made by our hands; the village fine has been exacted.
5. If the man wishes the divorce, the man must pay the fine; if
the woman wishes the divorce, the woman must pay the fine;
with this fine the marriage is dissolved. Let both sides enjoy
good health.
6. Let all the villagers witness that these two people break up,
let the whole community today witness that this couple
divorce, they break up; you elders and young people, and all
you children, witness that this marriage is dissolved.
7. It is dissolved! It is dissolved!

years by American Baptist missionaries working in Burma and southwestern Yunnan. For further details of this orthography see Telford and Saya David 1938, Matisoff 1970, and Walker 1974d:210n2. The most complete study of the Lahu language is Matisoff 1973. I have versified this text to facilitate comparison with the translation; no versification is recognized by the Lahu themselves.

¹⁰ Addressed to the guardian spirit of the locality.

Concluding comments

The text, as already noted, calls upon both the supernatural world, in the person of the guardian spirit of the locality, and upon the human community to bear witness to the dissolution of a marriage. But it does more than that. The headman is anxious to retain harmony between the villagers and their supernaturals and among the villagers themselves. Lahu Nyi consider that if harmony is disturbed sickness may be expected. Thus the headman is at pains to inform the Locality Spirit that the community as a whole should not be held responsible for the breakup of the marriage. It is the couple's own choice. He also informs the spirit that the customary fine has been exacted according to prescribed tradition and requests that neither party suffer sickness as a result of any possible disharmony they may have brought to the natural or supernatural world.

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