

THE PROPITIATION OF THE LIGHTNING SPIRIT IN A LAHU NYI (RED LAHU) COMMUNITY IN NORTH THAILAND

Four Lahu texts with an ethnographic introduction

ANTHONY R. WALKER

Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang

Introduction

In this paper I present, both in the original Lahu and in English translation, four texts associated with the propitiation of the Spirit of Lightning in a community of Lahu Nyi or Red Lahu I studied in the hills of north Thailand.¹ This article is one of a series of papers (some already published and several more envisioned) through which I wish to introduce—and preserve—that part of the rich corpus of Lahu Nyi oral poetry which it was my good fortune to record during my stay with these people.² Because religious poetry can be properly understood only within the context of its use, each paper includes a brief ethnographic background to the texts recorded. I hope in time to publish a more complete analysis of the ethnography than is possible in these papers.

The Lahu people, who number some 280,000 (cf. Walker 1975b: 111), are scattered through the hill country of southwestern Yunnan, the Burmese Shan State, the far northwestern corner of Laos and the northwestern provinces of Thailand. Particularly

¹ My fieldwork among the Lahu Nyi was carried out from 1966 to 1970 in the districts of Phrao (Chiang Mai province) and Wiang Pa Pao (Chiang Rai province). Further ethnographic data on the Lahu people as a whole and the Lahu Nyi in particular can be found in Walker 1969, 1970b, 1975a, 1975b, 1975c. Thanks again to my wife, Pauline Hetland Walker, for her help in preparing this article.

² Other examples of Lahu Nyi ritual poetry can be found in Walker 1970a, 1972a, 1972b, 1974a, 1974b, 1974d, 1975d, 1975e, 1975f, 1976a, 1976b, 1976c, 1976d, 1976e, 1976f, 1978.

because of this wide distribution, I suggest, there is a considerable range of socio-cultural traits within this single ethno-linguistic group. To begin with, there are more than twenty subdivisions of the Lahu people distinguished to a greater or lesser degree one from another by differing dialects, dress, and aspects of material culture and social organization (cf. Walker 1974c). Then, even within a single division there may be considerable differences resulting from the various ethnic milieu—including both hill and valley neighbours—in which the people find themselves. I cannot, therefore, determine how widespread among Lahu (even of the same Lahu Nyi division) are the beliefs, practices and oral texts recorded here. I present these data as specific to a particular Lahu village community living, at the time of my fieldwork, in Phrao district in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai.

A Note on Spirits and Spirit Specialists

Within the Lahu Nyi community I studied, people were at pains to explain to me the distinction they make between G'ui_↓ sha, their supreme and creating divinity, on the one hand, and the *ne'* or spirits, on the other. G'ui_↓ sha they view as a wholly good, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent divinity, capable of punishing people for their misconduct but invariably a force for moral good. The spirits are conceived in a very different light. Some are usually beneficial to man, like the guardian spirit of the house, the *yeh_↓ ne'* (*yeh_↓* 'house'), and G'ui_↓ fu_↓, the protector of the village, its people, livestock and all other property. But even such protective spirits are a capricious lot and can never really be trusted. Easily offended, they are quick to show their displeasure by bringing misfortune on those who have inadvertently crossed them. Other spirits are not particularly beneficial to man, but neither are they invariably harmful provided that one respects their domains and propitiates them on prescribed occasions. In this category fall what I term the "topographical spirits". Each hill and stream is said to have its resident spirit which the villagers address by the name (often Thai) of the particular hill or stream which the spirit is said to "own". Collectively, all hill spirits are known as *hk'aw ne'* (*hk'aw* 'hill') and all stream spirits as *law_↓ ne'* (from *i- ka' law_↓* 'stream'). Provided one takes care, so the villagers say, to

propitiate the relevant hill spirit before clearing a new field (cf. Walker 1978) or siting a new village in his domain, and the relevant water spirit before using water from his stream, one is unlikely to be troubled by these supernaturals. But again, one can never be sure.

Some spirits are invariably malicious, always out to bring misfortune to human beings. Notable in this category are the *jaw* and *meh* spirits (cf. Walker 1976b), who must be regularly exorcised, and spirits of demoniacal possession who, having entered their victims' bodies, must be expelled without delay if certain death is not to follow. Then again there are spirits who need no regular attention, but who are propitiated when people suffer certain sicknesses attributable to them. Among these are the Sun Spirit (cf. Walker 1976c), the Rainbow Spirit, and the Lightning Spirit with whom this paper is concerned.

Spirits bring misfortune to their victims in a variety of ways. They may attack or "bite" (*che_h ve*) a person's *aw_h ha*, that is his spiritual counterpart or "soul". Alternatively they may capture that *aw_h ha*, first enticing it from the body of its owner. The spirits of demoniacal possession are thought to actually enter a person's body, causing insanity. In the case of an attack on or capture of the *aw_h ha*, the visible symptoms are sickness. Sometimes the sickness is specific to a particular spirit, which simplifies the task of identification and subsequent propitiation. At other times, however, the sickness itself offers no clue and the victim must consult a medium who will try to discover, through trance, the identity of the spirit and the reason for its attack.

In order to cope with their spirits which must be variously propitiated or exorcised or both, Lahu village communities usually have at least one, and frequently several, specialists called *ne^h te sheh_h hpa^h* (*ne^h* "spirit", *te* "to do, to be concerned with", *sheh_h hpa^h* "master, expert"). Such men (and occasionally women too) are usually addressed by the Shan and Thai title *maw^h*, which is commonly translated into English as "doctor", hence "spirit-doctor". Frequently a spirit specialist is expert at the performance of several exorcistic and propitiatory rites, but seldom the whole range. If a village does not have its own specialist for a required rite (my study village had none who could propitiate the Lightning

Spirit), an expert from a neighbouring Lahu community will be called.

Spirit specialists usually learn their art by attending many propitiatory and exorcistic rites, until they have thoroughly mastered the prescribed prayers and manual actions. I was also told, although I never met such a person, that some practitioners derive their powers directly from a great spirit called *Pi ya*[˘] (cf. Walker 1976b), the patron supernatural of spirit specialists. In such cases, my informants said, *Pi ya*[˘] possesses the person he has chosen and that man (or woman) has no option but to conform to *Pi ya*[˘]'s will.

Spirit specialists frequently exact a small charge for their services. This may be cash, usually five or six Thai *baht* (25–30 U.S. cents), but more often the fee is raw opium since most spirit specialists seem to be addicted to the drug. As Lahu say, who but an opium addict—who fears nothing but the wind which may blow out the flame over which he roasts his opium pellets—would be so foolhardy as to deal regularly with the spirits?

If a specialist's propitiation or exorcism fails to effect a cure for his client, this does not shake the community's belief either in spirits or in the power of spirit specialists. The failure may be attributed to the inexperience or impotence of the particular practitioner or to the spirit's refusal to accept the offerings. Sometimes the people decide that the rites have been directed to the wrong spirit. Thus when a rite fails to produce a cure, it is usual not to abandon ritual but to try another rite or another specialist.

The Lightning Spirit

The Lightning Spirit or *Mvuh[˘] hteh[˘] ne[˘]* (*mvuh[˘] hteh[˘]* "lightning") is particularly associated with metals as well as with lightning. One of my better informants, himself a proficient spirit specialist, referred to this supernatural as *Ca li-lon⁻* "the Great Blacksmith" (*ca li-* "blacksmith"). Another well-known spirit specialist in my study area told me that the *Mvuh[˘] hteh[˘] ne[˘]* and the *Sho ne[˘] kui[˘] ne[˘]*, the Spirit of Iron and Copper (*sho* "iron", *kui[˘]* "copper"), were one and the same spirit, although not all my informants agreed with him. An earlier ethnographer of the Lahu also noted the association of the Lightning Spirit with iron

and copper: J. H. Telford (1937:155), a Baptist missionary who worked among Lahu in Burma, recorded that this supernatural "is closely related to the spirit of iron and copper, which the Lahus call Sho Ne Kui Ne and the home of all three³ is believed to be at Peking, China." Telford's note on the supposed geographical location of these spirits is of interest. One of the specialists who frequently came to my study village to propitiate the Lightning Spirit also told me that this supernatural "lives in China". It is tempting to surmise that the Lahu, whose homeland is in southwest China, obtained their supplies of metal in that country from their Chinese neighbours, and that for this reason Lahu who have moved to Burma and Thailand continue to associate metal with the Chinese, and thus locate their spirits of metal in China. But another specialist in my study village told me that the Lightning Spirit's home was in the celestial regions above the sun and the moon.

The physical symptoms of an attack or "bite" by the Lightning Spirit are a swelling of the hands and feet and an itchiness of the skin. I was told that people might contract this sickness if they happened to pass a tree recently struck by lightning, for the "vapours" (*aw sha*) of the spirit remain for some time around the tree until they eventually dissipate.⁴ So when a villager suffers from swelling and itchiness, he may consult a specialist who knows how to propitiate the Lightning Spirit. There are two distinct propitiatory rites, but the second is not performed unless the first fails to effect a cure. The first rite is called *Mvuh^h hteh^h ne^h cai^h ve* and the second *Mvuh^h hteh^h ne^h shaw^h ve*. Both verbs, *cai^h ve* and *shaw^h ve*, seem to have the general meaning of "making offerings to a superior in order to obtain a boon from him", but I could not elicit more specific meanings.⁵

³ Telford implies that there are two distinct spirits of iron and of copper. Among the Lahu I knew this was not the case. The name "iron spirit copper spirit" is a couplet, denoting one spirit.

⁴ The statement of one informant was as follows: "*Mvuh^h hteh^h ne^h chi yaw^h suh^h ceh^h hta^h hteh^h leh aw^h sha^h ma^h peh^h she^h hta^h, chaw ya^h ca g'aw k'o na^h ve yo^h. Yaw^h hta^h ya^h kui^h ti^h k'o ma^h caw^h.*" "After the Lightning Spirit hits a tree, its vapour remains there until it dissipates, and a person who passes by will get sick, even though he has not offended the Lightning Spirit consciously."

⁵ I was told, in connexion with the propitiation of the Hill Spirit, that the

The Propitiatory Rites

1. *Mvuh[˥] hteh[˥] ne[˥] cai_˩ ve*

The first and minor rite of propitiation may take place at any time of the day but must be performed at the foot of a tree in the vicinity of the village. Preferably, this tree should be one which has actually been scarred by lightning. But if there is no such tree nearby, then it must be one of the species known in Lahu as a *yaw*, a variety of chestnut (*Lagerstroemia cylindrica*). Lahu associate the tall, straight *a yaw* tree with the Lightning Spirit because, they say, it is particularly prone to being struck by lightning.⁶ (The Lahu I lived with would never use this wood in the construction of their houses.) Another reason for selecting this tree is that the *a yaw*, according to Lahu belief, is one of four original trees created by the supreme supernatural G'ui_˩ sha, honoured by the title *A yaw suh[˥] jaw[˥] maw[˥]*, "A yaw, Lord of the Trees" (*suh[˥]* from *suh[˥] ceh_˩* "tree", *jaw[˥] maw[˥]* "lord"). Since the spirit of lightning is a great spirit, I was told, it is appropriate that offerings be made at the foot of one of the four great trees.

The preparations for the rite are fairly simple. The specialist fashions four pointed bamboo sticks, each about ten centimetres long, and attaches a strip of coloured paper or cloth to the blunt end of each stick. The four streamers, according to one specialist, should be white, red, black and blue (or green)⁷ respectively. Known as *ca_˩ ca_˩*, these decorated sticks are offerings to the spirit, who is said to appreciate the variety of colours. Two of the *ca_˩ ca_˩* are used to affix leaf cups called *u- cu_˩ lu[˥]* to the tree trunk and the other two are simply stuck into the trunk. Inside each leaf cup the specialist puts a couple of beeswax candles (*peh[˥] haw_˩*), some puffed rice (*ca_˩ hpu shi_˩*), and three lengths of cotton thread

verb *shaw_˩ ve* connotes the presentation of cooked rice—rather than uncooked—to the spirit. But since no cooked rice is given to the Lightning Spirit, I remain confused.

⁶ One informant put it like this: "*A yaw chī suh[˥] jaw[˥] maw[˥] yo_˩. Mvuh[˥] hteh[˥] ne[˥] yaw[˥] na[˥] caw kul_˩ yo, chī pa taw a yaw ceh_˩ hta_˩ te pi[˥] k'o yaw[˥] ha leh_˩ ja[˥].*" "This *a yaw* tree is the lord of the trees. The Lightning Spirit always tests his gun on this tree, therefore he is very happy if we make [the ceremony] at the *a yaw* tree."

⁷ The Lahu language makes no distinction between blue and green. Both are *naw[˥] eh_˩ ve*.

(g'o_Λ hkeh): red, white and black. I was told by one specialist that these are the colours one sees when lightning strikes a tree.

This completes the preparations, but I should note that the above represents a general pattern whose details may vary with the whim of the officiating specialist. Thus there may be more or less than four *ca*_Λ *ca*_Λ and two candles, and the colours of the streamers and thread may depend on what is available.

When everything is ready, the spirit specialist will recite the propitiatory prayer. The sick person is not present at the rite; he has nothing to do but wait for the spirit to remove his affliction. If he fails to recover he must recall the specialist to perform the second, major rite of propitiation.

Below are two versions of the prayer for this rite as I recorded them from different spirit specialists.

Text 1-A⁸

1. O⁻, O⁻, ya[˘] hpu zuh_Λ g'a hpaw[˘] ma[˘] sha, ca[˘] g'a meu[˘] ma[˘] meh_Λ, hteh^ˆ leh mvuh[˘] ka_Λ fui_Λ sheh_Λ hpa[˘], hteh^ˆ leh mi_Λ ka_Λ fui_Λ sheh_Λ hpa[˘], hteh^ˆ leh hk'aw ka_Λ law_Λ ka_Λ fui_Λ sheh_Λ hpa[˘], jaw[˘] maw[˘] hteh^ˆ leh mvuh[˘] ka_Λ fui_Λ ta_Λ, jaw[˘] maw[˘] hteh^ˆ leh mi_Λ ka_Λ fui_Λ ta_Λ, hteh^ˆ peu hk'a peu shu ma[˘] peu_Λ, hteh^ˆ peu hk'a peu le_Λ ma[˘] peu_Λ.
2. Chi[˘] beu_Λ chaw ya[˘] law k'o zuh_Λ g'a hpaw[˘] ma[˘] sha, taw[˘]

⁸ Lahu has no traditional script and the people among whom I studied were not literate in any language. The orthography used here was developed by members of the American Baptist Mission in Burma and China; a short general description of it is given in Matisoff 1970. Lahu has seven tones: five open (long vowel) and two checked (short vowel, ending in a glottal stop). In the Baptist orthography the open mid-level tone is left unmarked (*ca*), and the other tones are indicated at the end of syllables by the following symbols:

superscript straight line (*ca*⁻): high-rising open tone
 subscript straight line (*ca*_Λ): very low open tone
 superscript wedge (*ca*[˘]): high-falling open tone
 subscript wedge (*ca*_˘): low-falling open tone
 superscript circumflex (*ca*^ˆ): high tone, checked
 subscript circumflex (*ca*_ˆ): low tone, checked.

Once again, I have broken the texts presented here into verses in order to facilitate rapid reference and comparison between the original and the translation. No such verse structure is recognized by the Lahu themselves.

- g'a te[˥] ce[˥] hkui ka[˥] g'aw, hkui meu[˥] la[˥] meu[˥] che[˥] na[˥] teu[˥] na[˥], haw na[˥] chi[˥] na[˥] na ve.
3. Ya[˥] nyi law k'o hk'e yo[˥], de u[˥] g'a[˥] law sheh[˥] chi sheh[˥] po ca leh da meh[˥] g'a[˥] hk'a k'aw[˥] chi k'aw[˥] po ca leh hto[˥] hpu hto[˥] shi ca leh peh[˥] hpu peh[˥] shi ca ve.
 4. Jaw[˥] maw[˥] hkui meu[˥] ya[˥] g'a, hkaw[˥] leh hkui meu[˥] cai[˥] shu[˥] yo[˥], la[˥] meu[˥] ya[˥] g'a, hkaw[˥] leh la[˥] meu[˥] cai[˥] yo[˥], ya[˥] nyi a yaw hkui ka[˥] la[˥] ka[˥] k'aw[˥] cai[˥] k'aw[˥] hkaw[˥] la[˥].
 5. La[˥] meu[˥] law k'o hk'e yo[˥], ya[˥] hpu la[˥] meu[˥] peh[˥] ve[˥] hkeh ve[˥] ha[˥] la[˥], peh[˥] hpu hkeh hpu ha[˥] la[˥], hto[˥] hpu hto[˥] shi ha[˥] la[˥].
 6. Ya[˥] nyi law k'o hk'e yo[˥], hto[˥] ma htaw[˥] ya[˥] hpu la[˥] meu[˥] de u[˥] chi hkeh[˥] sheh[˥] chi sheh[˥] hpu ha[˥] la[˥], de meh[˥] g'a[˥] hpu k'aw[˥] chi k'aw[˥] po ha[˥] la[˥].
 7. Peh[˥] hpu peh[˥] na[˥] te leh hkeh hpu hkeh na[˥] te leh jaw[˥] maw[˥] hkui meu[˥] ya[˥] g'a, hkui meu[˥] hkaw[˥] leh cai[˥] la[˥], la[˥] meu[˥] ya[˥] g'a, hkaw[˥] leh la[˥] meu[˥] cai[˥] la[˥].
 8. U[˥] law hpu g'o[˥] ju[˥] g'a, hpu g'o[˥] g'aw[˥] la[˥], sho g'o[˥] ju[˥] g'a, sho g'o[˥] g'aw[˥] la[˥] hto ma htaw[˥] hk'e yo[˥], sho sha[˥] kui[˥] sha[˥] hto[˥] ma htaw[˥], geh[˥] sha[˥] na[˥] sha[˥], k'aw[˥] suh[˥] k'aw[˥] shu leh no[˥] g'a sho baw[˥] k'aw[˥] baw[˥] hk'o[˥] hta[˥] k'aw[˥] ta[˥] la[˥], k'aw[˥] suh[˥] k'aw[˥] shu leh kui[˥] baw[˥] k'aw[˥] baw[˥] hk'o[˥] hta[˥] k'aw[˥] ta[˥] la[˥].
 9. Chaw ya[˥] g'aw[˥] ka[˥] na[˥] ka[˥] hk'o[˥] hta[˥], g'ui[˥] ka[˥] sheh ka[˥] k'aw[˥] suh[˥] k'aw[˥] shu leh no[˥] g'a maw[˥] bvuh k'aw[˥] bvuh hk'o[˥] hta[˥] k'aw[˥] ta[˥] la[˥].
 10. Hteh[˥] leh mvuh[˥] ka[˥] fui[˥] sheh[˥] hpa[˥], hteh[˥] leh mi[˥] ka[˥] fui[˥] sheh[˥] hpa[˥], mvuh[˥] hta[˥] law k'o fai[˥], mi[˥] haw[˥] law k'o fai[˥].
 11. Chaw ya[˥] law k'o ho[˥] tf[˥] ma[˥] caw[˥], ya[˥] nyi jaw[˥] maw[˥] hkui ka[˥], a yaw hkui haw[˥] la[˥] haw[˥] k'aw[˥] cai[˥] k'aw[˥] hkaw[˥] la[˥] ve yo[˥], la[˥] meu[˥] hkaw[˥] lu[˥] hkaw[˥] tan[˥] ha[˥] la[˥].

Text 1-A Translation⁹

1. Oh this man cannot sleep soundly, his food does not taste good to his lips; you who strike [with your lightning] and

⁹ Lahu prayers are couched in a complex and rather "flowery" poetic language. Much use is made of couplets, more for their pleasing sound than for additional

separate the sky from the earth, you who strike [with your lightning] and separate the hills from the dales; Lord who strikes and separates the sky from the earth and keeps [each in its own place]; you have not finished taking back the lightning you have sent, you have not finished rolling up¹⁰ the lightning you have sent.

2. Now this man cannot sleep soundly; when he was coming and going you struck him on the feet; his feet and his hands [suffer from] a biting sickness and a deadening sickness, a hot sickness and a burning sickness.
3. Today on this upper altar I offer you thirty-three baskets of fowl, on this lower altar I offer you ninety-nine baskets of fowl;¹¹ I offer to you white flags and yellow flags, I offer to you white candles and yellow candles.¹²
4. Lord, if the offence [was committed] at the top of your feet, I beg your forgiveness and make offerings at the top of your feet; if the offence [was committed] at the top of your hands, I beg your forgiveness and make offerings at the top of your hands; today I once again make offerings at this *a yaw* tree and I once again beg your forgiveness.
5. Receive these beautiful beeswax candles, these beautiful

meaning (cf. note 20 below). Thus in verse 1 here, instead of simply telling the spirit that he has "not yet taken back the lightning he has sent," the specialist says "you have not yet finished taking it back, not yet finished rolling it up." "Taking back" and "rolling it up" constitute a poetic couplet. So do "biting sickness . . . deadening sickness", "hot sickness . . . burning sickness" (verse 2), and numerous other paired phrases throughout the texts. Some of these will be noted. In attempting to preserve the flavour of the original Lahu, I have given as literal a translation as possible within the framework of the English language. Where in Lahu a word or phrase is understood but its omission in English would render the text meaningless, I have added that word or phrase in brackets.

¹⁰ To "roll up" (*le ve*) as one rolls a mat before carrying it away.

¹¹ In this rite there are no altars and no offerings of fowl, but only the *ca_ ca_* and two leaf cups containing rice, candles and thread. The specialist may have inserted phrases which properly belong to the second, and major, rite of propitiation (see part 2 below). "Lying to the spirit" in order to flatter and fool him into compliance is a frequent practice among the Lahu. See also verse 6 and note 14.

¹² "White and yellow", a couplet, is in both cases here a poetic device rather than a description of actual colours. "Flags" refers to the *ca_ ca_*, streamers of various colours. Beeswax candles are dull yellow-brown.

candlewicks, made by my own hands, receive these white beeswax candles, these white candlewicks,¹³ receive these white flags and these yellow flags.

6. Today receive on this upper altar these thirty-three different kinds of offerings, all these gifts made by this man with his own hands,¹⁴ receive on this lower altar these ninety-nine baskets of white fowl.
7. I make these white candles and these black candles; I make this white cotton thread and this black thread;¹⁵ Lord, if the offence [was committed] at the top of your feet, at the top of your feet I beg your forgiveness and bring for you these offerings; if the offence [was committed] at the top of your hands, at the top of your hands I beg your forgiveness and bring for you these offerings.
8. If you have stabbed [this man's] head with your silver needle, draw out your silver needle; if you have stabbed his head with your iron needle, draw out your iron needle; once again take back everything—your spear vapour and your gun vapour—take them all back and keep them up there in your nine wells of iron, keep them again in your nine wells of copper.¹⁶
9. Take back once again the sickness from this man and once again keep it in your nine groups of cannon.
10. You who with your lightning separate the earth and the sky: your lightning flashes through the sky, your lightning flashes into the earth.
11. We people have no truth;¹⁷ today, Lord, between your feet

¹³ "White candles, white candlewicks" is another couplet indicating the yellowish beeswax candles.

¹⁴ This is another case of poetic license. The specialist himself, not his client, has made the few simple gifts being offered. The numbers 33 and 99 are used because they sound nice; they have no symbolic significance.

¹⁵ "White and black" is a couplet; see note 12 above.

¹⁶ This verse, in particular, emphasizes the Lightning Spirit's association with metals. But "silver needle, iron needle" is not meant literally, even at a supernatural level; it is simply a poetic way of referring to the spirit's attack. "Nine wells" of iron and copper suggests that the spirit owns a great quantity of the metals.

¹⁷ Showing humility, the specialist implies a contrast between the community

and between your hands, under this *a yaw* tree, I once again make offerings to you and beg your forgiveness; receive these offerings made by my own hands.

Text 1-B

1. Ma- ha- sha- hti- g'oe sha- hti- kao, hk'aw tan- hk'aw baw^ hk'aw che^ ve, law, tan- law, baw^ law, che^ ve.
2. Shan- suh- cao, g'aw no^ ve, ya, nyi sho ba^ kui^ ba^ sho- g'a, sho ba^ kui^ ba^ sho la^, sho baw- kui^ baw- ta- la^.
3. Chaw ya^ va^ ya^ hkui na, la, na, ve, sho- la^.
4. Hk'aw hk'a, law, hk'a, la, ve, hk'aw che^ law, che^ la, ve, ha- baw^ ha- che^ ve, shaw^ baw^ shaw^ che^ ve, ma baw^ ma che^ ve.
5. Shan- suh- cao, g'aw naw, hk'a deh, sho- la^, naw, hk'a deh, le, la^, ma^ da, ma^ na k'aw^ chi k'aw^ ceu, naw, taw- leh po, la^.

Text 1-B Translation

1. You possessor of great wealth, when you shoot at the hill, the hill splits into two; when you shoot at the river, the river splits into two.
2. Ruler up there,¹⁸ today if you can take back your iron and copper, take back your iron and copper¹⁹ and keep it in your well of iron and your well of copper.
3. Take away from this man the sickness of his feet, the sickness of his hands.²⁰

and the "all-true" spirit. This is nothing but flattery to extract a boon; Lahu do not attribute truth to spirits such as this.

¹⁸ Here the spirit's title is given as *shan- suh- cao, g'aw*. The specialist from whom I recorded this text opined that this was *heh^ pa lon- hkaw^* "Chinese language", but could elaborate no further. *Shan-* and *suh-* seem to be the numerals 3 and 4 in Chinese, but this makes little sense here. *Cao,* is Shan for "prince" and *g'aw* may mean "to strike" (cf. below, Text 2 v. 1: "*u- law g'aw . . .*" "you strike [his] head . . ."). So we probably have here some kind of reference to a "Striking Prince," a reasonable enough title for the Lightning Spirit.

¹⁹ The Lightning Spirit's power is here described metaphorically in terms of the metals with which he is associated.

²⁰ Here each part of the couplet "hands, feet" does have a particular significance, since both hands and feet are affected by the Lightning Spirit's sickness.

4. When you come between the hills and the streams, the hills split in two, the streams split in two; when you shoot at the rocks, the rocks split in two; when you shoot at the trees, the trees split in two.
5. Ruler, carefully take off [this sickness], carefully roll up [this sickness], protect [this man] from the ninety-nine kinds of bad thing.²¹

2. *Mvuh^h hteh^h ne^h shaw- ve*

As noted above, if the minor rite of propitiation proves ineffective, the spirit specialist is resummoned to perform the major *Mvuh^h hteh^h ne^h shaw- ve* rite. This too must take place at the foot of an *yaw* tree or a tree scarred by lightning. Again, it may be performed at any time of the day, and the person for whom it is intended need not be present.

The paraphernalia required for the major rite are somewhat more complex than those for the first. On this occasion, so one specialist told me, he constructs two small altars (*hti-*) of bamboo mats at the foot of the chosen tree, one slightly in front of and lower than the other. The higher of the two altars he walls on three sides, leaving only the front side open. To these three walls he affixes eight bamboo sticks with pieces of coloured cloth or paper tied onto them. I was told that two of these *ca, ca-* should be red, two black, two white and two blue (or green). Next he takes three lengths of cotton thread: red, white and black, and winds them around the eight *ca, ca-* and around the girth of the tree. If the tree is too big, he cuts a piece of bark from it and binds the threads around this. As at the minor rite, the first set of colours—so I was told—is simply to please the spirit, while the second set is said to reproduce the colours seen when lightning strikes.²²

This brings up one of the problems of translating Lahu poetry. Sometimes one part of the couplet (frequently the second) has no meaning whatsoever, being used simply to sound nice. In other cases both parts of the couplet are translatable but still the words of one part are given for sound effect and not for their meaning (see note 23 below). The third type of couplet is the present one in which both parts are translatable and each has a specific and relevant meaning.

²¹ "99 kinds" means "all kinds".

²² I must emphasize again that there is considerable flexibility in all these

Now the specialist places on the upper altar four pairs of beeswax candles, a chicken's egg, two miniature bamboo tubes containing water and uncooked rice grains respectively, and finally a number of imitation blacksmith's tools which he has made from bamboo and the root of a wild banana tree. These tools include bellows (*yo k'o*), anvil (*pi teh*), hammer (*hta tu*), tongs (*sho nu*), axe (*ce ce*) and knife (*a hta*). While candles, rice and egg are common Lahu offerings to their spirits, the replica blacksmith's equipment is made specifically for the Lightning Spirit, symbolizing his close association with metals.

This completes the preparations, the lower altar remaining quite bare during the first part of the propitiation. If he has not already got them, the specialist will now probably return to the village to collect a cock and a hen from his client's house. Once he has these, all is ready for the rite to begin. Holding a fowl in each hand, the spirit specialist begins to pray. The text of his prayer as I recorded it in my study village is as follows:

Text 2

1. O-, O-, jaw[˥] maw[˥] law k'o ho[˥] ti[˥] caw[˥] sheh[˥] hpa[˥], jaw[˥] maw[˥] ka ti[˥] caw[˥] sheh[˥] hpa[˥], hteh[˥] leh myuh[˥] ka[˥] mi ka[˥] fui[˥] sheh[˥] hpa[˥], hteh[˥] leh hk'aw ka[˥] law ka[˥] fui[˥] sheh[˥] hpa[˥], ya[˥] hpu zuh[˥] g'a hpaw[˥] ma[˥] sha, neh hpu ca[˥] g'a meu[˥] ma[˥] meh[˥], u[˥] law g'aw, u[˥] law che[˥] na[˥], k'aw[˥] law g'aw, k'aw[˥] law haw na[˥] chi[˥] na[˥], jaw[˥] maw[˥] hteh[˥] peu hk'a peu shu ma[˥] peu[˥], hteh[˥] peu hk'a peu le[˥] ma[˥] peu[˥].
2. Chaw ya[˥] taw[˥] g'a te[˥] ceu[˥] g'a[˥] nu[˥] hk'o[˥] hta[˥], u[˥] law g'aw, u[˥] law che[˥] na[˥] tchuh na[˥] la[˥], k'aw[˥] law g'aw, k'aw[˥] law haw na[˥] chi[˥] na[˥].
3. Chi[˥] beu[˥] law k'o hk'e yo[˥], neh hpu ya[˥] hpu law k'o la[˥] meu[˥] pui[˥] hpufuh pui[˥] ma ca leh hti[˥] ngeu[˥] hti[˥] hka[˥] taw[˥] leh hti[˥] ngeu[˥] hti[˥] hka[˥] te leh hpu hti[˥] shi hti[˥], hti[˥] ngeu[˥] hti[˥] hka[˥] te leh law mai[˥] hti[˥] ngeu[˥] hti[˥] hka[˥] te leh teh ngeu[˥] teh hka[˥] te ve.

arrangements, depending on the individual specialist. When I witnessed this rite there was only one altar, without walls, and the *ca* *ca* were stuck into the tree. Colours and other details of offerings may also vary.

4. Ya_Λ nyi law k'o a yaw hkui ka_Λ la_Λ ka_Λ hti- ngeu^ν hti- hka^ν
te leh teh ngeu^ν teh hka^ν te leh hto^ν hpu hto^ν shi, peh^ν hpu
peh^ν shi, hkeh hpu hkeh nyi, ca leh hkeh hpu hkeh na[^] ca
leh hto^ν hpu hto^ν ma- ca ve.
5. Naw_Λ hkui meu^ν ya_Λ g'a, hkui meu^ν k'aw_Λ hkaw⁻, la_Λ meu^ν
ya_Λ g'a, la_Λ meu^ν k'aw_Λ hkaw⁻ k'aw_Λ cai_Λ g'a.
6. Ya_Λ nyi yo_Λ law k'o hk'e yo_Λ, ca^ν suh⁻ daw_Λ suh⁻ taw[^] leh
naw_Λ hta_Λ ga_Λ-o, ya_Λ nyi law k'o hk'e yo_Λ, ca^ν suh⁻ daw_Λ
suh⁻ k'aw_Λ ha_Λ la^ν.
7. Ya_Λ nyi law k'o hk'e yo_Λ, jaw^ν maw^ν law k'o ho- ti_Λ caw_Λ
sheh⁻ hpa^ν, jaw^ν maw^ν ka ti_Λ caw_Λ sheh⁻ hpa^ν, chi te^ν paw[^]
law k'o ca^ν suh⁻ daw_Λ suh⁻ hto_Λ ma htaw^ν hk'e yo_Λ, la_Λ meu^ν
law k'o chaw ya^ν la_Λ meu^ν hkaw⁻ lu⁻ hkaw⁻ tan^ν ha_Λ la^ν,
peh^ν ve[^] hkeh ve[^] ha_Λ la^ν, chaw ya^ν g'aw^ν hk'o[^] na_Λ hk'o^ν
k'aw_Λ ha_Λ la^ν.

Text 2 Translation

1. Lord, you who are all-wise, Lord, you who are all-true; you who strike [with your lightning] and separate the sky from the earth, you who strike [with your lightning] and separate the hills from the dales; this man does not sleep soundly, this woman's food does not taste good to her lips;²³ you strike [this person's head] and his head suffers from a biting sickness, you strike [him] on the neck and his neck suffers from a hot sickness, a burning sickness; Lord, you have not finished rolling up the lightning you have sent.
2. This man when he is coming and going has no strength; you strike him on the head, and his head suffers from a biting sickness and a deadening sickness; you strike him on the neck and his neck suffers from a hot sickness and a burning sickness.
3. Now this woman, this man, with his own hand searches for²⁴ a male fowl and a female fowl, he brings for you a silver altar and a golden altar, a silver altar and a golden altar he

²³ There is one patient, who is male. "This man . . . this woman" is a poetic couplet.

²⁴ Although the verb *ca ve* "to search for" is used, the meaning is "this man brings for you . . ."

makes for you, a silver altar and a golden altar, he makes a silver altar and a golden altar, a silver altar and a golden altar he makes for you, he makes for you a silver altar and a golden altar.²⁵

4. Today, between the feet and the hands of this *a yaw* tree,²⁶ he makes a silver altar and a golden altar; he makes for you a silver altar and a golden altar, he searches for [and brings to you] white flags and yellow flags, white candles and yellow candles, white cotton thread and red cotton thread; he searches for white cotton thread and red cotton thread, he searches for white flags [to give to you].
5. If the offence was committed at the top of your feet, at the top of your feet we once again beg your forgiveness; if the offence was committed at the top of your hands, at the top of your hands we once again beg your forgiveness and make offerings to you.
6. Today I bring for you new food and new drink, I reach out to you, so today once again receive this new food and new drink.
7. Today, Lord, you who are all-knowing, Lord, you who are all-true, at this time receive this new food and new drink, all these things; receive these offerings made by this man with his own hands, receive these beautiful beeswax candles; once again take back the sickness from this man.

At the conclusion of this prayer, the specialist places the hen under the lower altar and ties it there. He sacrifices the cock by cutting its throat with a knife, and smears blood on the poles of both altars. He then deplumes, guts, cleans, cuts up and cooks the sacrificial bird, and places the prepared carcass on the lower altar. The two fowl are offered for distinct purposes. The hen is for the spirit to "keep" (*hu ve*), to do with as he pleases, the Lahu say. As he may wish to breed from it, it must be a hen. The cock, on the other hand, is killed and cooked for the spirit so he may

²⁵ The repetition of "silver and golden" is alleviated in Lahu by using first the Shan forms *ngeu*^ν and *hka*^ν and then their Lahu equivalents *hpu* and *shi*.

²⁶ This is a poetic way of saying that the altars are between the spreading buttress roots of the tree.

feast on its immaterial essence (*aw, sha-*). When the specialist has finished preparing the cock, he recites a second prayer, the principal purpose of which is to offer the two fowl to the spirit. This prayer, as I recorded it from one specialist, is as follows:

Text 3

1. Chi te^v paw[^] law k'o[^] k'o[^] hk'e^o yo^o, hteh[^] leh mvuh^v ka^o fui- sheh- hpa^v, hteh[^] leh mi^o ka^o fui- sheh- hpa^v, hteh[^] leh hk'aw ka^o law^o ka^o fui- sheh- hpa^v, hteh[^] peu hk'a^o peu shu ma^v peu^o, hteh[^] peu hk'a^o peu le^o ma^v peu^o, jaw^v maw^v law k'o[^] hk'e^o yo^o, hteh[^] peu hk'a^o peu shu ma^v peu^o.
2. Chi^v beu^o chaw ya^v taw[^] g'a^o te^v ceu^o, hkui ka^o g'aw, hkui- law che^o na^o teuh na^o la^v, la^o law g'aw, la^o law haw na^o chi[^] na^o la^v, u- law g'aw, u- law haw na^o chi[^] na^o la^v.
3. Jaw^v maw^v law k'o[^] ho- ti^o caw^o sheh- hpa^v, jaw^v maw^v ka ti^o caw^o sheh- hpa^v, hteh[^] peu hk'a^o peu shu ma^v peu^o, k'aw^o suh- k'aw^o shu leh hk'e^o yo^o, no^v g'a^o sho bvuh k'aw^v bvuh hk'o[^] hta^o k'aw^o suh- k'aw^o shaw g'a^o leh no^v ta- la^v, no^v g'a^o kui^v bvuh k'aw^v bvuh hk'o[^] hta^o k'aw^o suh- k'aw^o shaw k'aw^o ta- la^v.
4. Neh hpu la^o meu^v law k'o[^] sheh[^] hk'aw^o g'a[^] hpu taw[^] leh teuh- sheh- mi^o ce- naw^o hta^o ca- la^v yo^o k'o[^], ya^v hpu la^o meu^v law k'o[^] hk'e^o yo^o, hto^o ma htaw^v chi hk'aw g'a^o maw^o law k'o[^], u- ceu- mi^o ceu- naw^o hta^o ca- la^v, sheh[^] hk'aw^o g'a[^] hpu te^v hkeh, sheh[^] hk'aw^o ma hpu te^v hkeh naw^o hta^o ca- la^v, sheh[^] hk'aw^o g'a[^] maw^v te^v leh sheh[^] hk'aw^o lo[^] meu^v te leh naw^o hta^o ca- leh hto^v hpu hto^v shi, peh^v hpu peh^v shi, pch^v hkeh law k'o[^], te^v hin- ca- leh ca^o ca- te^v hin- ca- la^v.
5. Ya^o nyi, a yaw hkui ka^o la^o ka^o law k'o[^] hti- ngeu^v hti- hka^v, teh^v ngeu^v teh^v hka^v, pa^o mai^o teh^v ngeu^v teh^v hka^v te leh hti- nyi[^] ca^o te leh hk'a^o deh^o naw^o hkui meu^v ya^o g'a^o, hkui meu^v hkaw- leh cai^o la^v, la^o meu^v ya^o g'a^o, la^o meu^v hkaw- leh cai^o la^v.
6. Zuh^o g'a^o hpaw^v ma^v sha hk'o[^] hta^o, sho sha- kui^v sha- k'aw^o suh- k'aw^o shaw hk'aw^o la^v, geh^v sha- na[^] sha- k'aw^o suh- k'aw^o shaw hk'aw^o, a hto^o ma keu g'a^o htaw^v k'aw^o suh- k'aw^o shaw leh no^v sho baw^o k'aw^v baw^o k'aw^o suh- k'aw^o.

shaw leh no^ˋ maw^ˆ bvuh k'aw^ˋ bvuh hk'o^ˋ hta^ˆ k'aw^ˆ ta^ˋ
la^ˋ, k'aw^ˆ suh^ˋ k'aw^ˆ shaw leh no^ˋ kui^ˋ baw^ˋ k'aw^ˋ baw^ˋ
hk'o^ˋ hta^ˆ k'aw^ˆ ta^ˋ la^ˋ.

7. Lu^ˋ g'a she^ˆ g'a ta^ˋ te la^ˋ, hki^ˋ g'a kui^ˋ g'a ta^ˋ te na^ˋ la^ˋ na^ˋ
g'aw^ˋ g'a ta^ˋ te la^ˋ, chaw ya^ˋ la^ˆ shaw hkaw^ˋ htai^ˋ g'a law
k'o^ˋ, ya^ˆ nyi tan^ˋ leh jaw^ˋ maw^ˋ hkui^ˋ meu^ˋ ya^ˆ g'a, hkui
meu^ˋ hkaw^ˋ leh cai^ˋ la^ˋ, la^ˆ meu^ˋ ya^ˆ g'a k'o^ˋ, hkaw^ˋ leh la^ˆ
meu^ˋ cai^ˋ la^ˋ yo^ˋ.
8. Lu^ˋ kui^ˋ she^ˆ kui^ˋ ta^ˋ caw^ˋ, hki^ˋ kui^ˋ keh kui^ˋ ta^ˋ caw^ˋ, la^ˆ
meu^ˋ hkaw^ˋ lu^ˋ hkaw^ˋ tan^ˋ sheh^ˆ hk'aw^ˆ g'a^ˆ hpu g'a^ˆ ma
tcuh^ˋ sheh^ˋ mi^ˋ ce^ˋ naw^ˋ hta^ˆ ca^ˋ la^ˋ, u^ˋ ce^ˋ mi^ˋ ce^ˋ ca^ˋ la^ˋ,
hpu chi sheh^ˆ tcuh sheh^ˆ law sheh^ˋ le sheh^ˆ tcuh taw^ˆ leh
hk'e yo^ˋ, naw^ˋ hta^ˆ ca^ˋ la^ˋ, a^ˋ paw^ˋ k'aw^ˋ ceh^ˋ ca leh pa^ˋ
lao^ˋ k'aw^ˋ ceh^ˋ ca leh jaw^ˋ maw^ˋ naw^ˋ hkui^ˋ meu^ˋ hkaw^ˋ
leh cai^ˋ shu^ˆ yo^ˋ.
9. Lu^ˋ g'a she^ˆ g'a ta^ˋ te, hki^ˋ g'a kui^ˋ g'a ta^ˋ te la^ˋ, chaw ya^ˋ
law k'o^ˋ meh^ˆ maw^ˋ ca^ˋ suh^ˋ maw^ˋ, daw^ˋ suh^ˋ caw^ˋ, ho^ˋ ti^ˆ
ma^ˋ caw^ˋ leh ya^ˆ nyi naw^ˋ hkui^ˋ meu^ˋ ya^ˆ g'a, hkui^ˋ meu^ˋ
hkaw^ˋ leh cai^ˋ la^ˋ, la^ˆ meu^ˋ ya^ˆ g'a, la^ˆ meu^ˋ hkaw^ˋ leh cai^ˋ
la^ˋ yo^ˋ, la^ˆ meu^ˋ hkaw^ˋ lu^ˋ hkaw^ˋ tan^ˋ ha^ˆ la^ˋ, peh^ˋ ve^ˆ hkeh
ve^ˆ ha^ˆ la^ˋ—sha^ˋ!

Text 3 Translation

1. This time I pray like this: You who strike with your lightning and separate the sky from the earth; you who strike with your lightning and separate the hills from the dales; you have not finished taking back the lightning you have sent, you have not finished rolling up the lightning you have sent.
2. Now you strike this man between his feet when he is coming and going, and his feet suffer from a biting sickness and a death sickness, you strike his hands and his hands suffer from a hot sickness and a burning sickness; you strike his head and his head suffers from a hot sickness and a burning sickness.
3. Lord, the all-knowing, Lord, the all-true, you have not finished taking back the lightning you have sent, so once again take back [this lightning], take it back and keep it up

- there on your nine piles of iron, take it back and keep it up there on your nine piles of copper.
4. With her own hand this woman brings for you a three-year-old fowl, the whole fowl she gives to you to eat; with his own hand this man gives to you everything you can see on this [altar];²⁷ these many kinds [of offering] he gives to you to eat; this three-year-old fowl, this three-year-old big fowl he kills and gives to you to eat; white flags and yellow flags, white beeswax candles and yellow beeswax candles, candles and wicks, one thousand of them he gives to you; and one thousand *ca, ca-* he gives to you.
 5. Today at the foot of this *a yaw* tree I make a silver altar and a golden altar, a silver altar and a golden altar, a silver altar and a golden altar; these two altars I make for you; and if the offence was committed at the top of your feet, at the top of your feet I carefully beg your forgiveness and bring offerings to you; if the offence was committed at the top of your hands, at the top of your hands I beg your forgiveness and bring offerings for you.
 6. [This man] cannot sleep soundly, so once again take back your iron vapours and your copper vapours; once again take back your dagger vapours and your gun vapours; everything you have put inside [this man] once again take back; take back [these vapours] once again and keep them in your nine wells of iron up there, take them back once again and keep them on your nine groups of cannon up there, keep them in your nine wells of copper up there.
 7. Do not destroy [this man], do not bring him trouble, do not cause him to decay, do not give him sickness; this man brings offerings to you; and from today and hereafter, oh Lord, if the offence was committed at the top of your feet, at the top of your feet he begs your forgiveness and brings offerings for you; and if the offence was committed at the top of your hands, at the top of your hands he begs your forgiveness and brings offerings for you.
 8. Do not destroy [this man], do not bring him trouble; these

²⁷ "This woman . . . this man" is again a couplet meaning "this man"; and the man is not present.

offerings made by his own hands, this three-year-old white hen, all of this hen, he gives to you to eat,²⁸ he brings for you silver to the amount of three *tcuh*, silver to the amount of three *law*,²⁹ silver to the amount of three *le*,³⁰ three *tcuh* of silver he brings to you; he gives to you nine banana trees and nine *pa lao*;³¹ oh Lord, at the top of your feet he begs your forgiveness and gives you all these offerings.

9. Do not destroy [this man], do not bring him trouble; see the new food and new drink this man has [for you]; he cannot know all things,³² so today if the offence was committed at the top of your feet, at the top of your feet he begs your forgiveness and brings offerings to you; and if the offence was committed at the top of your hands, at the top of your hands he begs your forgiveness and brings offerings to you; receive these offerings made by his own hands, receive these beautiful candles, these beautiful candlewicks.

With the conclusion of this prayer, the propitiatory rite is over. The specialist now releases the hen which has been kept tied under the lower altar. In theory it may wander off into the jungle as it pleases, for it now belongs to the Lightning Spirit and no longer to the sick man.³³ In practice, because the rite is performed near the village, it will find its way back to its owner's flock. The specialist takes the sacrificed cock home where he and his family eat it. As the *aw-sha*, the immaterial essence or "vapour", has already been consumed by the spirit, so Lahu

²⁸ The text here clearly says "hen" (in v. 4 above the fowl's sex was unspecified), although the specialist claimed that a cock was sacrificed. See also note 33 below.

²⁹ One *tcuh* is $\frac{1}{4}$ Indian silver rupee, one *law* is $2\frac{1}{2}$ Indian silver rupees. Indian silver coins came to be common currency in the hills between Burma and Thailand when Burma was administered as part of British India.

³⁰ *Le* is not a real measure as are *tcuh* and *law*; it is inserted only for sound effect.

³¹ *Pa lao* is a type of long grass. The number 9 has no significance here beyond its pleasing sound. Why either *pa lao* or banana trees are mentioned here is uncertain, as neither is used in the ceremony (although some of the blacksmith's tools are made from the root of the banana tree).

³² The implication is "he has offended you quite unintentionally."

³³ One informant put it like this: "*Hpeh^h fa⁻ ve g'a^h, ne^h yaw^h ti^h ca^h ga^h k'o, ma^h ti^h ca^h k'o, hu ve yo^h."* "The hen which we release, the spirit may kill and eat; otherwise he may breed from it."

say, it is in order that the material remains be eaten by the spirit doctor.

If the specialist's client still fails to recover after the minor and major rites of propitiation have been performed, my informants said that nothing more could be done on his behalf in terms of ritual. My own observations suggest otherwise. As there are several supernatural beings whose attack is not identifiable by specific symptoms, it is likely that the sick person would consult a medium to discover if some spirit other than that of lightning had caused his discomfort. If so, he would probably request the performance of a rite to propitiate that spirit.

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