

A LAHU NYI (RED LAHU) PURIFICATORY RITE
Two Lahu Texts and an Ethnographic Background

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present, both in the original language and in English translation, examples of prayer texts which I recorded in the course of my anthropological investigations of the Tibeto-Burman-speaking Lahu people in the hills of north Thailand.¹ Following the style of my earlier contributions to this journal (*cf.* Walker 1974b, 1975g, 1976g),² the texts presented are associated with one particular rite—this time the purification of wrongdoers by the village headman—and they are preceded by a few ethnographic notes on that rite. But as before, the principal purpose of my paper is to record the texts rather than to analyse the ethnography.

The two texts here came from the headman of one of the three Lahu Nyi villages I studied in north Thailand. The Lahu Nyi, or Red Lahu, are one of several important cultural-linguistic groups into which the Lahu people are segmented (*cf.* Walker 1974c; Bradley 1975: 47–55, 99–134).³ Lahu are found in four national states: China's Yünnan province, the Burmese Shan

¹ My research among the Lahu was carried out from 1966–70. I am indebted to Khun Wanat Bhruksasri, the Director of the Tribal Research Centre, Chiang Mai, and all his staff for their assistance during the course of my fieldwork. For her help in the preparation of this paper I thank my wife, Pauline Hetland Walker.

² Other papers containing Lahu texts are Walker 1970a, 1972a,b, 1974a,b,d, 1975d,e,f; 1976a,b,c,d,e,f,g; 1977a,b,c,d,e; 1978a,b,c,d; 1980.

³ Further ethnographic data on the Lahu people as a whole, and the Lahu Nyi in particular, can be found in Walker 1970b, 1975a,b,c and the literature cited therein.

State, northern Laos and north Thailand; but Lahu Nyi are confined to the most southerly areas of Lahu settlement: the Burmese Shan State and north Thailand.⁴

Ritual purification by the village headman

Among the several duties which befall a Lahu Nyi village headman are the arbitration of disputes between villagers, and the administration of penalties to those who have infringed community norms. These, of course, are commonly the tasks of village headmen the world over. But the Lahu Nyi village headman's role is more than just secular. He possesses priest-like qualities which enable him to cleanse from their misdeeds those who have offended against village norms. This cleansing is accomplished by a short rite known as *pa[^] keh₋ ve* (from *pa[^] ve* "to order" and *keh₋ ve* "to cleanse"; thus "the ordering [by the village headman] of purification").⁵

In order to show the sequence of events which leads up to a *pa[^] keh₋ ve* rite, I shall take a fairly typical case from my field

⁴ The total Lahu population is probably somewhat over a quarter of a million (cf. Walker 1974b:210n4). The Lahu Nyi number more than 9,000 in Thailand and perhaps (at a guess; no trustworthy data are available) twice that number in Burmese territory.

⁵ Lahu words in this paper are transcribed according to an orthography developed by American Baptist missionaries in Burma and China, for Lahu has no traditional script and the people among whom I studied were not literate in any language. The missionary orthography, though used almost exclusively by Christian Lahu, is the most widely used Lahu script outside Yünnan, where a "reformed" romanization has been introduced by the Chinese government (cf. Giljarevskij & Grivnin 1964: 151). Matisoff (1970) gives a short general description of the missionary orthography, and the definitive work on the Lahu language is Matisoff 1973.

Lahu has seven tones: five open (long vowel) and two checked (short vowel, ending in a glottal stop). In the missionary orthography these tones are indicated at the end of each syllable, as follows:

- superscript straight line (*ca⁻*): high-rising open tone
- subscript straight line (*ca₋*): very low open tone
- superscript wedge (*ca[^]*): high-falling open tone
- subscript wedge (*ca_^*): low-falling open tone
- unmarked (*ca*): mid-level open tone
- superscript circumflex (*ca^ˆ*): high tone, checked
- subscript circumflex (*ca_ˆ*): low tone, checked

notebooks (changing only the names of those involved). A man called Ca_∨ G'a[^] (Mr. Chicken) has been accused of sleeping with Na Va_∧ (Ms. Pig)⁶ while the latter's husband was away. There can be no doubt as to the guilt, for Ca_∨ G'a[^]'s wife happened upon the couple *in flagrante delicto*. She of course was furious, but being too ashamed to bring a formal charge against her own husband she complained instead to her father. He reported the matter immediately to the village headman. The latter listened carefully to the charge and, receiving no denial from the culprits, ordered them to pay the traditional fines: twenty silver rupees from Ca_∨ G'a[^] and ten from Na Va_∧.⁷ These fines, he said, amounting to 120 baht and 60 baht, respectively, were to be brought to him on the next *shi⁻ nyi* or lunar festival day.⁸

On the evening of the lunar festival day, Na Va_∧'s husband brings the fine on behalf of his wife, and Ca_∨ G'a[^]'s wife on behalf of her husband. The guilty parties themselves do not appear, for they are expected to be "ashamed" of their wrongdoing. Besides the cash fine, each representative brings a ritual object known as a *li[~] tsuh* (*li[~]* from *aw_∨ li[~]* "custom", *tsuh_∧* from *tsuh_∧ ve* "to bind together"). This is a small bundle of bamboo sticks, about 20 cm long and 10 cm. in diameter, with cotton wool on

⁶ Ca_∨ G'a[^] and Na Va_∧ are common Lahu personal names (these people carry no family names), indicating the birth day of the bearer. Lahu follow the Chinese calendar, in which each day of a twelve-day cycle takes the name of a particular animal. *Na* indicates a female; there is no title to show whether a woman is married or not.

⁷ The male, as the active partner during sexual congress, must pay double the woman's fine. Indian silver rupee coins, minted for the British *raj* in India from the reign of Queen Victoria to that of George V (thereafter the rupee coin ceased to be of silver), were once the chief form of currency in the hill country between Thailand and Burma. Lahu Nyi in Thailand still state their traditional fines in terms of these coins, although actual payment is now made in modern Thai currency (one Thai baht = five US cents). The rate at which fines are calculated is six baht per rupee, although the Lahu Nyi know that silver rupee coins are worth more than twice this amount. The coins themselves are now kept mostly as jewellery, but also for sale in time of need.

⁸ *Shi⁻ nyi* literally means "day (*nyi*) of merit (*shi⁻*, from *aw_∨ shi⁻*)". Such days are observed twice monthly on the occasions of the new and full moon, when the community is required to abstain from major work activities and to devote a certain amount of time to the propitiation of *G'ui_∨ sha*, the supreme and creating supernatural (*cf.* Walker 1970b: 213-24).

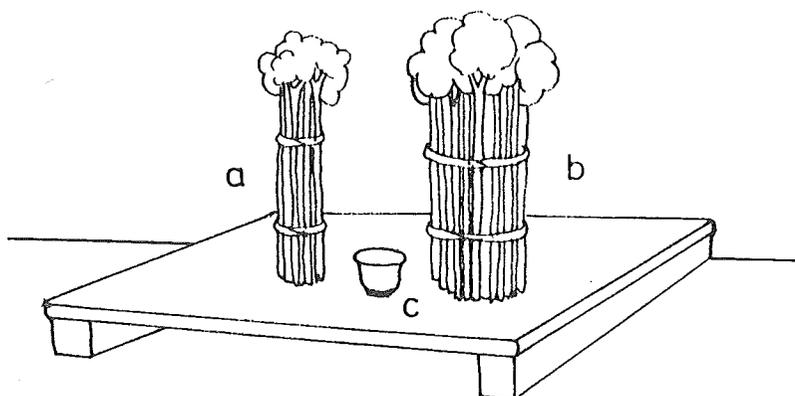


Figure 1. Headman's altar to *G'ui, ma a daw*^v.

a. *li^v tsuh_h*. b. *li^v pui*. c. porcelain cup.

top. Such *li^v tsuh_h* are common ritual offerings among the Lahu Nyi, but beyond this I was unable to elicit their symbolism.⁹ The headman accepts the *li^v tsuh_h* and fine money and places them on a small altar in his house. This altar, consisting of a wooden bench some 5 cm. high and 30 cm. long, is used exclusively for offerings to *G'ui, ma a daw*^v (Fig. 1). Literally the "divine (*g'ui, ma*) thinker (*a daw*^v)", this supernatural is the divine prototype headman.¹⁰ Now the village headman utters a prayer for the purification of the two culprits. The following texts are

⁹ It is my hunch that much of the Lahu Nyi ritual paraphernalia is copied from Shan Buddhist prototypes, whose symbolism has been lost or altered by the Lahu villagers. But I have not as yet been able to substantiate this theory.

¹⁰ According to Lahu Nyi cosmology, everything on earth has a divine prototype in heaven. As it was explained to me, nothing can exist on earth unless it be a replica of a heavenly prototype. Thus, as there is a headman of the village community, so in heaven there is a divine headman, or *G'ui, ma a daw*^v. The divine prototypes partake of the diffused divinity of the supreme Lahu supernatural, *G'ui, sha*. As for the title *G'ui, ma a daw*^v, my notes have *g'ui, ma* appearing only in attribution to a following noun; it thus seems to be merely an automatic variant of *G'ui, sha* in certain grammatical contexts. The term *a daw*^v for headman is frequently used among Lahu Nyi in place of *hk'a[^] sheh₋ hpa^v* (*hk'a[^]* "village", *sheh₋ hpa^v* "master"), the more common designation among the Lahu peoples as a whole. The verb *daw^v ve* means "to think", so *a daw*^v is "he who thinks" on behalf of the community, *i.e.* its leader.

two versions of this purificatory prayer, recorded on different occasions from the same headman.

Text one¹¹

1. O-, O-, ya, pui- hk'a^ ma aw^ ce, chi haw-, ya^ chi nyi^ ma,, a, ya, pui- hk'a^ ma aw^ ce, chi haw, hi, ceh, k'aw^ ceh, ti g'a hpaw^ haw-, ya^ chi nyi^ ma,, ka ba, ka ma^ ka ve^, hpi- cu^ na, cu^ chi ve.
2. O-, O-, k'aw, sha^ leh no^ g'a g'ui, ma a daw^, hi, ceh, k'aw^ ceh, ti sheh- hpa^, chi ceu, chi yan, u- hta,, hpa- g'a je^ g'a sheh- hpa^, ka ba, ka ma^ ka ve^, g'aw leh shi^ leh keh- lao^.
3. Hku- co-e na^ co-e chi ma ve ka,, g'a ceu,, g'a taw^ leh shi^ pi^.
4. G'ui, ma a daw^ te^ peu, pa^ g'a, suh tcuh- na, tcuh- le, g'a sheh- hpa^, te^ peu, pa^ leh tu, tcuh- hka- tcuh- le, g'a sheh- hpa^, g'ui, ma a daw^ meu^ law pa^ ngeu^, pa^ hka^ ka sheh- hpa^, te^ peu, pa^ leh tu, meh^ hka- meh^, shi^ leh keh- pi^.
5. Chaw ca, chaw law^ ma^ g'a, ne^ ca, ne^ law^ ma^ g'a, chi bon pa^ leh g'a pi^.
6. Yu^ ka, du, ka, chi ma, te^ yeh, te^ k'a, ma^ g'a daw^ ha-, ma^ g'a daw^ hki-, ya^ ka, du, ka,, a^ maw^ a^ ha-, a^ hpe^ a^ la,, chi co k'aw, g'aw leh g'a pi^.
7. A pa sha- ca^ la, law la, sha na- pu- co ceh,, te ha- k'aw^ suh^ k'aw, bvuh, leh ga pi^, a pa la, meh- na- pu- shi- ceh, nga^ ceh, nga^ sheu^ k'aw, bvuh, leh g'a pi^.

Text one - Translation¹²

1. Oh, this evening, within the four corners of this village, these two people, oh, this evening within the four corners of

¹¹ See note 5 above concerning this orthography. As in previous papers, I have here broken the texts into verses to facilitate reference and comparison between the original and my translation. No such verse structure is recognized by the Lahu themselves.

¹² Lahu prayers are usually couched in a rather complex and "flowery" poetic language. Much use is made of elaborate phrases and metaphors which are not

this village, these two people plant the nine custom trees here,¹³ they have sinned, [they have been tempted by] these lying spirits.¹⁴

2. Oh, oh! [I] once again pray [to you] up there, divine headman, you who plant the nine custom trees,¹⁵ you who divide [us from] the ten kinds [of misfortune],¹⁶ count,¹⁷ sweep away and cleanse the sins [of these people].
3. All you spirits of former headmen,¹⁸ [you] also watch over, shield and purify [these people].
4. Divine headman, order but one time,¹⁹ you who remove [from us] the time of death and the time of sickness, order but one time, you who remove [from us] the time of poverty, divine headman, whose words are as silver and gold, order but one time and sweep away, cleanse [these people from] all poverty.
5. Let them be neither killed by men nor bitten by malicious spirits; this boon order [upon them], and grant purification.

part of everyday speech. To "plant the nine custom trees", for example, is a poetic phrase capable of more than one interpretation. In verse 1 it means that the offenders have made the prescribed recompense for their misdeeds, and in verse 2 it means that the divine headman is considered the keeper or preserver of the village customs. Couplets are another hallmark of Lahu ritual poetry. Thus we find in verse 4 "the time of death, the time of sickness", and in verse 6 "never grow old, never die". In attempting to preserve the flavour of the Lahu original, I have given as literal a translation as possible within the framework of the English language. Where in Lahu a word or phrase is implied rather than stated, but its omission in English would seriously reduce the sense of the text or render it meaningless, I have added that word or phrase in brackets.

¹³ That is, they make the customary recompense for their misdeed by presenting a cash fine and a *li^v tsuh_h* at the village headman's house.

¹⁴ The couplet *hpi⁻ cu[^] na_v cu[^]*, which I have translated "lying spirits", derives from the Shan *hpi⁻* "spirit" and the Lahu *cu[^] ve* "to tempt".

¹⁵ That is, "you who uphold the village norms".

¹⁶ That is, "all misfortune".

¹⁷ "Count" here means "take note of".

¹⁸ This idea is expressed by the couplet *hku⁻ co-e na^v co-e*. *Hku⁻* is a Shan title of respect, "Mr."; *co-e* means "life". *Na^v* in the second half of the couplet has no meaning by itself but is used purely for sound effect.

¹⁹ The idea here is that it is a simple task ("order but one time") for a Being as powerful as the divine headman to order the removal of affliction.

6. Let all these children of the households [of these two people]²⁰ suffer no troubled thoughts, may the children never grow old, may they never die, once again grant to them long lives.
7. Father Sha- Ca²¹, you who hold in your right hand the eternal tree of life,²² nine times in one night again cry out [your blessings on these two], oh father, holding in your left hand the five eternal golden trees,²³ once again cry out and grant [your blessings].

Text two

1. O-, O-, ya, pui- hk'a^ ma aw^ ce, chi haw-, ya^ chi nyi^ ma, hk'aw, na- ta^ hki-, a, hk'aw, na ta^ hki- chi ve, hpi- cu^ na, cu^ chi ve.
2. Ya, pui-, a, hk'a^ ma aw^ ce,, hk'a^ bon chi haw-, k'aw, ga, la ve, nga, te^ peu, k'aw, pa^ leh hk'a^ ma aw^ ce, chi haw- yo, law k'o^ k'o.
3. Ya, nyi ya^ chi nyi^ ma, yo, law, hk'aw, na- ta^ hki- g'aw^ ka,, nga, ka, g'aw g'a ve, hpi- cu^ na, cu^ chi ve.
4. A, nga, te^ peu, k'aw, sha^ leh no^ g'a g'ui, ma a daw^ hpaw^ meu^ k'aw, ta- g'a leh g'ui, ma a daw^ chi pa^, chi keh- sheh- hpa^, chi pa^ chi che^ sheh- hpa^, a, hpa- g'a je^ g'a sheh- hpa^, aw, law aw, hk'a^ chi ve te^ ceu, ve yo, law k'o^ k'o, te^ nyi sheh^ yan^ k'aw, pa^, k'aw, je^ la^.
5. Chi nga, ta^ te^ cu-, ka ba, ka ma^ ka ve^ chi ve, hk'aw, ve^ na, ve^, meu^ ve^ ha ve^, hkui ve^ la, ve^ chi ve, k'aw,

²⁰ Because a sin has been committed, the supernaturals are angered and may, in their wrath, bring misfortune not merely to the guilty but also to innocent members of their households. The headman prays that this may not happen.

²¹ Father Sha- Ca²¹ is a name commonly used in prayer for *G'ui sha*, the supreme supernatural of these Lahu people. Here it seems to refer rather to the divine headman who, as we have seen (note 10), partakes of *G'ui sha*'s divinity. Lahu also recognize by this name, Sha- Ca²¹, a cultural hero quite distinct from *G'ui sha*.

²² This seems to be no more than a poetic way of expressing the eternity of the divine headman.

²³ This phrase has no particular meaning in itself but constitutes the second half of the couplet "you who hold in your right hand the eternal tree of life . . . you who hold in your left hand the five golden trees".

- pa^ˆ, k'aw_ˆ fui- sheh- hpa^ˆ, a, pa^ˆ g'a fui- g'a che^ˆ g'a sheh- hpa^ˆ, nga_ˆ k'aw_ˆ sha^ˆ leh naw_ˆ haw⁻ ta- g'a.
6. Ya_ˆ nyi hk'a^ˆ ma aw^ˆ ce_ˆ, hk'a^ˆ ma fu- bon chi haw⁻, ya^ˆ chi nyi^ˆ ma_ˆ yo_ˆ law k'o^ˆ k'o, ka ba_ˆ ka ma^ˆ ka ve^ˆ, suh teuh⁻ na_ˆ teuh⁻ u⁻ hta_ˆ g'aw leh, a, g'aw g'a nga_ˆ k'aw_ˆ pa^ˆ, k'aw_ˆ fui- g'a yo_ˆ law k'o^ˆ k'o.
 7. Meu^ˆ law pa^ˆ ngeu^ˆ pa^ˆ hka^ˆ ka sheh- hpa^ˆ, a, pa^ˆ ngeu^ˆ pa^ˆ hka^ˆ ka sheh- hpa^ˆ, pa^ˆ ngeu^ˆ pa^ˆ hka^ˆ ka sheh- hpa^ˆ, chi pa^ˆ chi fui-, chi che^ˆ g'a ve, fui- g'a keh- g'a che^ˆ g'a sheh- hpa^ˆ, no^ˆ g'a g'ui_ˆ ma a daw^ˆ.
 8. A, a, g'ui_ˆ ma a daw^ˆ te^ˆ nyi sheh^ˆ yan^ˆ k'aw_ˆ ce_ˆ, te^ˆ ha- sheh^ˆ yan^ˆ k'aw_ˆ ce_ˆ, hk'a^ˆ ma aw^ˆ ce_ˆ, a, hk'a^ˆ bon hk'a^ˆ teh, hk'a^ˆ ya^ˆ u⁻ hta_ˆ k'aw_ˆ ce_ˆ la^ˆ.
 9. Hk'a^ˆ ma aw^ˆ ce_ˆ chi haw⁻, mi_ˆ ma ya^ˆ hpu a daw^ˆ, hk'a^ˆ ma aw^ˆ ce_ˆ te^ˆ ce_ˆ meu^ˆ hta_ˆ, daw^ˆ pui daw^ˆ g'aw^ˆ k'aw_ˆ ta- g'a, a, a, keh- pui keh- g'aw^ˆ k'aw_ˆ ta- g'a, chi u⁻ hta_ˆ haw keh- g'a, fui- g'a pi^ˆ, chi ce_ˆ u⁻ hta_ˆ fui- g'a le_ˆ g'a pi^ˆ.
 10. No^ˆ g'a g'ui_ˆ ma a daw^ˆ la_ˆ sha na- pu- taw⁻ ma_ˆ tan^ˆ kaw⁻ a ka sheh- hpa^ˆ, hpa- g'a je^ˆ g'a sheh- hpa^ˆ yo_ˆ law k'o^ˆ k'o, chi ce_ˆ u⁻ hta_ˆ pa^ˆ leh shi^ˆ pi^ˆ, ma^ˆ daw^ˆ ma^ˆ hki⁻, ma^ˆ daw^ˆ ma^ˆ ha- ve, tu_ˆ teuh⁻ hka⁻ teuh⁻, suh teuh⁻ na_ˆ teuh⁻, k'aw_ˆ shi^ˆ leh keh- pi^ˆ, te^ˆ nyi sheh^ˆ yan^ˆ, te^ˆ ha- sheh^ˆ yan^ˆ.

Text two – Translation

1. Oh, oh! This evening, within the four corners of this village, these two people have trouble, this trouble [brought upon them by] these lying spirits.
2. This evening, oh, within the four corners of this village [these people] have again come [to the headman's house]²⁴ and I once again order, within the four corners of this village, [that these people] be cleansed of their misdeed.
3. Today these two people have trouble, I also know of this trouble [brought about by] these lying spirits.

²⁴ That is, representatives of the guilty couple have come to the headman's house, bearing the fine money and ritual offerings, in order to request the headman to perform the purificatory rite.

4. Oh, I again make offerings one time and put [my offerings] to the side of the divine headman up there,²⁵ this divine headman who orders and who cleanses, who orders and who separates,²⁶ oh he who can cut [us off from our sins], concerning this matter, three times in one day again order, again separate.
5. [About] this I do not lie, you who can order, can separate, oh you who can order, can separate, can cut off these sins of every kind, these sins of sickness, these lip sins and tongue sins, these feet sins and hand sins,²⁷ I once again make offerings, I put [my offerings] under you.
6. Today, within the four corners of the village, these two people have sinned; from the time of death and the time of sickness, I once again order that they be separated.
7. You whose voice is as silver and gold, as silver and gold, as silver and gold, once again grant this order, this separation, this division, you who can separate, purify and divide, you up there, the divine headman.
8. Oh, oh! Divine headman up there, three times in one day again watch over, three times in one night again watch over the whole village, all the villagers.
9. Within the four corners of the village, this earthly headman once again puts the *daw[˘] pui* at this corner of the village, once again puts the *keh[˘] pui* here,²⁸ [so please grant] purification and separation, grant separation and removal of the ten kinds [of misfortune].
10. You up there, the divine headman, you who hold in your

²⁵ That is, the village headman places the offerings on the divine headman's altar inside his house.

²⁶ The divine headman "separates" people from their troubles, sickness, misdeeds, etc.

²⁷ The couplets "lip sins and tongue sins, feet sins and hand sins" are a poetic way of saying "all sins" and are not to be taken literally.

²⁸ *Daw[˘] pui keh[˘] pui* is a couplet referring to a ritual object known as a *li[˘] pui* (from *aw[˘] li[˘]* "custom", *pui* "foundation"), which is similar to but larger than the *li[˘] tsuh[˘]*, already mentioned. The headman always keeps a *li[˘] pui* on the divine headman's altar in his house (see Fig. 1). I was told that it is an offering to the divine headman, given with the request that he purify the sins of all the villagers.

right hand the eternal axe,²⁹ you who divide [us from our sins], order that the ten kinds [of misfortune] be swept away [from these two people], let them not be wracked by troubled thoughts, once again sweep away [from them] the time of poverty, the time of death and the time of sickness, three times in one day, three times in one night grant purification.

After his recitation of the purificatory prayer, the headman divides the fine money. His office as village leader entitles him to a tenth of the total. Of the remainder, half is divided between the injured parties (the spouses of the guilty pair) as "face-washing money",³⁰ a recompense for the shame they have suffered in the eyes of the community. The other half is shared equally among the households of the village. The case is now closed and the wrongdoers readmitted to the society of the village. Nobody must raise the subject of the wrongdoing again, even in jest, on pain of themselves being fined.

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²⁹ That is, the axe with which the divine headman "cuts off" their sins from the villagers.

³⁰ *Meh[^] hpfuh^v* "face", *tcuh^v pi^v ve* "washing for him", *hpu* "money".

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