

# A Cultural Anthropological Study of the Lahu Ethnic Group in Thailand

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## Abstract

This paper aims to explore the origins and migration history, and to study subgroups, population, distribution, socio-cultural changes, and the reasons behind these aspects within the Lahu ethnic group in Thailand. It agrees that the “Hill Tribe Development Plan” policy implemented by the Thai government has brought about profound transformations in the Lahu’s socio-cultural structure, economic livelihood, and religious beliefs. In the midst of the collision between tradition and modernity, as well as the decision-making process regarding development models and cultural heritage, the Lahu people in Thailand have chosen a “unique pattern” and lead a life characterized by equality and harmony.

**Keywords:** Thailand, Lahu Ethnic Group, Cultural Traditions,  
Anthropological Study

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## **Introduction**

The Lahu ethnic group is a cross-border ethnic group primarily distributed across countries, including China, Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. The formation of the Lahu's distribution pattern is primarily attributed to factors such as war, politics, livelihood, epidemics, and natural disasters. Throughout history, the Lahu people have been compelled to migrate for survival and development. Some Lahu people have chosen to coexist peacefully with indigenous ethnic groups in specific regions, ceasing further migration, while others continued to move due to interethnic conflicts and other factors. This migration has led to the separation of the Lahu people into distinct region-based cross-border ethnic group, and geopolitical borders have given rise to different variants of the Lahu people in different countries. This study aims to elaborate the social-cultural aspects of Thai Lahu ethnic groups in three sections as follows:

- 1) To explore the origin and migration of the Lahu ethnic group in Thailand.
- 2) To study subgroups, population, and distribution of the Lahu ethnic group in Thailand.
- 3) To study social and cultural traditions and changes of the Lahu ethnic group in Thailand.

## **The origin and migration of the Thai Lahu ethnic group**

The migration of ethnic groups is influenced by both natural and human factors, primarily including political, warfare, livelihood, epidemics, natural disasters, among others. The migration history of the Lahu ethnic group in Thailand is also related to the aforementioned factors.

The Lahu ethnic group in Thailand traces its origins to Yunnan Province in China and the Shan State in Myanmar. Prior to 1880, there were already Lahu people

residing in the Jingdong area of Myanmar, although they scattered in small numbers. Later, Lahu people living in Yunnan of China encountered the “exterminate all who resist” policy of the Qing government, leading to a significant migration into the region that is now the northern part of the Lanna Kingdom, present-day northern Thailand.

In 1885, Myanmar became a British colony, resulting in the abolition of the monarchy. Five years later, the British government officially dispatched administrative officers to govern the Shan State, introducing a new tax system that required payment in currency instead of goods, which impacted the local farmers.

In 1934, a Lahu uprising occurred in Mengsa region under the leadership of Mahaeosa. The Lahu forces, armed with outdated weaponry, fought fiercely against the modern-armed Mengsa colonial government. The battle ended with the valiant death of Mahaeosa, leader of the Lahu army. Following their defeat, survivors of the Lahu people fled to the mountains, and some Lahu individuals settled in areas along the Thailand-Myanmar border, specifically in the Mae Chan County of Chiang Rai Province, and the Mae Ai County and Fang County of Chiang Mai Province, where they remain to present day.

In March 1950, the Battle of Yuanjiang in China, also known as the “last battle for the liberation of the mainland China,” saw the People’s Liberation Army of China decisively defeating the remaining Kuomintang forces. As a result, the remnants of the Kuomintang forces were forced into the territory of Myanmar. Many Lahu people, due to the war, moved with their families to settle in Myanmar. In 1953, a significant group of these Lahu migrants entered northern Thailand, settling in these counties of Chiang Rai Province: Mae Sai, Mae Chan, Mae Fa Luang, Chiang Saen, Mae Sui, and Wang Bao; as well as these counties of Chiang Mai Province: Mae Ai County, Fang County, Chai Prakan County, and Chiang Dao County; and the Ban Mapa County of Mae Hong Son Province.

In the 1950s, in the midst of the ongoing conflict between minority ethnic armed groups in Shan State and the Myanmar government, Lahu people living in the Wa State and Jingdong areas received assistance from American personnel and migrated to settle along the Mekong River in Thailand, particularly in the Mekong River Basin. Some Lahu individuals were trained as soldiers by the Americans and participated in combat operations in Laos.

In 1975, after the victory of the Lao People's Revolutionary Army defeated the U.S. military forces and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Lahu armed forces were forced to retreat into Thailand. Some sought asylum in the United States, while others settled in Chiang Rai Province and Chiang Mai Province, where they have since received Thai citizenship.

Another significant Lahu subgroup, the Lahu Na, migrated to Thailand over 50 years ago, with their migration history deeply influenced by religions. Nowadays, they are primarily settled in Chiang Rai Province, Chiang Mai Province, Mae Hong Son Province, Nan Province, and Tak Province.

In 1893, American missionary William M. Young arrived in Myanmar's Shan State to spread Christianity and first made contact with the Lahu people. In 1901, he moved to Jingdong in Myanmar to work at a church, where he encountered many Lahu people and began preaching Christian doctrine among them. In 1904, the first Lahu person, Zaxie Phu Thao, converted to Christianity and underwent a baptism ceremony. After that, many Lahu people began to believe in Christianity, and they established a church in Mipyang Village, marking the birth of the first Lahu church in Myanmar. With the efforts of Western missionaries like William M. Young, Christianity temporarily extended to Banna Village in Lancang County of Lincang Prefecture, in Yunnan Province, China. The number of Lahu people who converted to Christianity reached over tens of thousands.

In 1954, the Lahu people who had converted to Christianity in Myanmar for the first time migrated to Thailand. In 1963, following the expulsion of missionaries by the new government in Myanmar, some Lahu Christian believers fled to Thailand with missionaries, settling in Chiang Mai Province and Chiang Rai Province. After 1963, due to continuous pressure and military strikes from the Myanmar government against minority ethnic armed groups in the Shan State, many Lahu people from Shan State migrated to Thailand. Lahu Na and Lahu Nyi, consisting of over ten thousand people, migrated to Chiang Rai Province, settling in the counties of Mae Sai, Mae Chan, Mae Fa Luang, Mae Sui, Wang Bao, and the counties under the jurisdiction of Chiang Rai Province. In 1970, seven Lahu households from Ban Wa settled in the Mae Sai County of Chiang Rai Province, specifically in the Raedongshan area. In 1972, 28 Lahu households from Ban Wa's relatives also moved there, leading to a population exceeding 100 people in the village at the time. From 1973 to 1975, the Shan State conflict resulted in significant hardships for local residents, prompting the migration of 1,000- plus households, consisting of both Lahu and Wa ethnic families, to settle in Raedongshan, dispersing across villages such as Mei Mo Village, Pa Ya, Si La, Pa Gui, Lo Zai, and Ah Lu. From 1975 to 1985, as the conflicts in Shan State and Wa State persisted, hundreds of Lahu families moved to join their relatives, predominantly concentrating in counties of Raedongshan, Mae Sai, and Mae Fa Luang.

When the Lahu people from Shan State and Wa State migrated and settled in Thailand, the majority initially settled in the Mekong River Basin, Mae Chan River Basin, Mae Salong, and the Raedongshan area in Mae Sui County. They subsequently relocated to the Mekong River Basin in counties under the jurisdiction of Chiang Rai Province and further upriver to Mae Ai County, Fang County, and Chai Prakan County of Chiang Mai Province. Additionally, some Lahu people moved to Wawi Township in Mae Sai County, Mae Da River Basin in Tha Guao Township, and the Mae Phu River Basin in Wang Bao

County. Others settled in counties of Phao, Chiang Dao, Mae Lim and Mae Thai, under the jurisdiction of Chiang Mai Province, and nearby counties, including Hang Long, Sam Kamphaeng, and San Sai.

In 1968, American Christian missionaries Paul Lewis and Elaine Lewis came to work in Chiang Mai. They had previously been missionaries in Shan State for 19 years, giving them significant knowledge about the Lahu people. With the assistance of Paul Lewis and Elaine Lewis, the Lahu people established their own ethnic cultural organization known as the “Thailand Lahu Baptist Convention” (TLBC), and later established a new Christian institution named the “Thailand Lahu Christian Convention” (TLCC). The Lahu people have established over 100 Christian churches, with an estimated 16,000 followers.

Since the 1980s, Lahu people from Myanmar have continuously migrated to Thailand in search of better livelihood opportunities, leading to ongoing migration patterns.

## **Study on subgroups, population, and distribution of the Lahu ethnic group in Thailand**

The Lahu ethnic group is the third-largest ethnic group among the mountainous tribes in Thailand. According to statistics from the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security in 2002, the Lahu population in northern Thailand numbered 102,876, residing in 385 villages across a total of 18,057 households. They are distributed across six provinces: Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Tak, Kamphaeng Phet, and Nakhon Sawan. The majority of Lahu people settle in these provinces, such as Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, and Mae Hong Son.

The Lahu people in different regions of Thailand belong to different subgroups. These subgroups have distinct self-designations or are referred to differently by non-Lahu people

based on their clothing styles, origins, and other characteristics. The major Lahu subgroups in Thailand are: Lahu Qi La, Lahu Na, Lahu Nyi, Lahu Ba La, Lahu La Ba, Lahu Phu, and Lahu Khu Lao. These seven subgroups are introduced separately below.

### 1. Lahu Qi La

This subgroup is distributed in Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, and Tak provinces. Local Thai people refer to them as “Moo Sae Leng,” which means “Black Hunter” in English. The term “Moo Sae” denotes “hunter”, and “Leng” means “black”. The name originates from the fact that both men and women of Lahu Qi La wear black clothes, distinguishing them from another subgroup known as “Red Lahu”, a reference to their clothing color. In the Lahu language, “Na” means “black,” so Lahu Qi La also refers to themselves as “Lahu Na”.

### 2. Lahu Na

Lahu Na means “Black Lahu”, where “Na” signifies the color black in the Lahu language. Lahu Na is primarily distributed in Lancang Lahu Autonomous County in Puer Prefecture of Yunnan Province, China, as well as in the Shan State and Wa State in Myanmar. In 1954, the first group of Lahu Na people relocated to the Thai-Myanmar border in places like Mengyong and Mengfang (now located in Mae Ai County, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, specifically in the Sang Dong Du Village of Thai Dong Township). In the late 1950s, they moved again to Ban Hui Dang Village in Chiang Dao Shan of Chiang Dao County, Chiang Mai Province. After 1954, the number of Lahu Na migrating to Thailand steadily increased. Upon their arrival, many initially settled in Mae Sai County and Mae Chan County of Chiang Rai Province, particularly around the Mekong River basin in Mae Fah Luang County. Few years later, they moved further to the administrative counties of Chiang Rai Province, including Mae Sai County and Wang Bao County, as well as into Mae Ai County and Fang County of Chiang Mai Province.

### 3. Lahu Nyi

Lahu Nyi means “Red Lahu,” where “Ni” signifies the color red. This subgroup constitutes the largest population of Lahu in Northern Thailand, primarily concentrated in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai provinces. Besides, some Lahu Nyi are distributed in Mae Hong Son, Lampang, Tak, and Phayao provinces. Lahu Nyi often chooses to settle near abundant mountain springs, within dense forests, where many traditional cultural practices and customs are preserved. However, with development of the society, the traditional culture of the Lahu people has been influenced by external cultures, leading to certain changes over time.

### 4. Lahu Si

Lahu Si in Thailand is divided into two small subgroups: Lahu Si Bago and Lahu Si Bala. Initially, Lahu Si resided in the upper and middle reaches of the Mekong River Basin (now within the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture and Puer Prefecture in Yunnan Province, China). Later, they migrated to Shan State in Myanmar, the northwestern region of Laos, and northern parts of Thailand. During their time in Shan State, they settled near Jingdong and were converted to Christianity in religion belief. In Laos, most of the Lahu Si people settled not far from the Mekong River, such as in areas like Bokeo Province, including places like Mueang Do Peng, Mueang Long, and Mueang Meng. The majority of Lahu Si in Thailand moved from Myanmar’s Shan State and are concentrated in the administrative counties of Chiang Rai Province, such as Mae Sai County, Mae Chan County, and Wang Bao, and in Chiang Mai Province, particularly in Mae Ai County, Fang County, Chai Prakan County, Phao County, and Chiang Dao County. Except for Lahu Si in Laos, Lahu Si in other regions have largely converted to Christianity.

### 5. Lahu Laba

Lahu Laba is quite similar to Lahu Nyi in terms of traditional culture, such as in language, culture, attire, beliefs, and customs. Their religious beliefs and social structures show no significant distinctions. In Thailand, there are only two Lahu Laba villages: Mu Se La Ba

Village in Rai Dong San area of Mae Fah Luang County of Chiang Rai Province, and Zha Lie Village in Mae Yao Township of Chiang Rai Province. Sixty years ago, the inhabitants of the two villages lived together in Rai Dong San area. Later, some Lahu Laba, seeking better living conditions and economic opportunities, relocated and settled in the administrative counties of Chiang Rai Province.

#### 6. Lahu Phu

The term “Phu” in Lahu Phu means “white,” signifying “White Lahu.” They and Lahu Ku Lao live in Chiang Khong County and Pa Yao Meng Lai County of Chiang Rai Province. In 1937, they crossed the Mekong River from Meng Meng County, Meng Xing County and Meng Long County of Namtha Province in Laos to Chiang Rai Province of Thailand.

#### 7. Lahu Kula

In the past, Lahu Kula resided in Mae Ai Township of Mae Ai County in Chiang Mai Province, with a population of over 200 and more than 30 households. Due to the relatively good relationship between Lahu Kula in Thailand and leaders of the Lahu ethnic armed group in Myanmar, some Lahu Kula moved to the Myanmar, and they never returned to Thailand. Besides, some Lahu people from Meng Fang and Mae Ai also relocated back to villages in Myanmar, such as Pawkak Village, Mekha Village, Huiwai Village, and Dosan Village in Mengsa.

From an ecological-cultural perspective, Lahu culture was once both diverse and unified. However, due to wars and widespread displacement, they became scattered. The natural environments in each location where they settled differed, leading to variations in customs and social culture. The Lahu people had to adapt to the conditions of their natural environment, giving rise to numerous subgroups. From a linguistic perspective, based on the degree of dialect divergence, historical origins, distribution, self-designation, external designation, attire, customs,

and other factors, the Lahu people in Thailand can be broadly classified into two major dialect groups: Lahu Na and Lahu Si.

## **Study on social and cultural tradition and changes of the Lahu ethnic group**

Since the migration of the Lahu ethnic group to Thailand, they have experienced prolonged movement and resettlement within the highland regions of Northern Thailand, with minimal interaction with the mainstream society. However, the implementation of the Thai government's "Hill Tribe Development Plan", aimed at ethnic assimilation, has brought about unprecedented changes in the social and cultural traditions of the Lahu people. Two sections are covered, including social and cultural structure of Lahu people, and traditional modes of production and economic livelihood.

### 4.1 Social and cultural structure

Concerning about social and cultural structure of the Lahu ethnic group, two dimensions are presented as follows.

#### 4.1.1 Lahu Nyi and other Lahu subgroups settling in Thailand before the establishment of Thailand as a nation

It appears that the largest social structure among the Lahu people in Thailand does not extend beyond the village level, with family and village leadership as the primary components. Fifty years ago, although notable leaders within the Lahu community, such as Bu Chong Long and Pa Ya Zaen, briefly established a social and political organization spanning multiple villages, these efforts were short-lived and are no longer a focal point for the Lahu people. In the oral tradition and legends of the Lahu people, there is no record of a dominant political center established by the Lahu people that would have held sway over other ethnic groups.

Traditional Lahu villages place great importance on their leadership groups, which play a crucial role in village affairs. They make decisions regarding matters like the relocation of settlements, changes in religious beliefs, village management, and the resolution of disputes and conflicts within the village. Individual leaders do not possess decision-making authority; significant decisions are made collectively by the village leadership group with the participation of all villagers. Nevertheless, any decision, regardless of its nature, is challenging to implement without the consent of the village leadership. Thus, the village leadership group serves as the “social organization” within the Lahu community. Three areas refer to social and cultural structure are presented below.

#### 4.1.1.1 Traditional administrative structure of Lahu villages

Traditional Lahu villages have a clearly defined administrative structure and system. It primarily consists of three key components:

(1) Leaders in the Administrative Aspect, referred to as “Ado” or “Kache”. Their main responsibilities include leading, organizing, and managing the village, handling relations within and outside the village, as well as liaising with government authorities and relevant departments. As village leaders, they should meet three criteria: a. being the founders of the village or their descendants; b. understanding and being familiar with Lahu customs and traditions; and c. being able to communicate in Thai or other languages with local government officials.

(2) Leaders in Religious Beliefs, such as Dabo, Dara, Sara, Aza, and Laso, among others. They are primarily responsible for organizing ceremonies related to “Esha” (the supreme deity worshipped by the Lahu people), aiming to bless the village with peace and prosperity. They also provide guidance on Lahu customs, cultural norms, and ethical matters.

(3) Elders, highly respected elderly individuals within the village or elder members of the clans, including village blacksmiths and shamans. Their primary role is to offer advice for managing the village.

Nowadays, those known as “Ahdo” or “Kache”, serving as village officials, hold significant roles in the Lahu community. From a political management perspective, the village is named based on the name of the village head or leader. This signifies that the village head is responsible for resolving and handling both private matters of Lahu villagers and any issues affecting the village as a whole.

#### 4.1.1.2 Religious leaders and traditional management structure in villages

The selection of religious leaders, such as “Dabo” and “Dara”, is not based on personal or public preferences but is determined by Esha (the supreme deity) and Aima (the deity governing daily affairs). They are required to guide and assist the villagers according to the will of the deities and villagers’ needs. They believe that if they do not follow the will of the gods, their lives will be unsettled, leading to various issues such as frequent illness, psychological troubles, and challenges in daily life.

The primary responsibility of “Dabo” is to organize ceremonies related to Esha. They must be ethical individuals, principled in their actions, willing to help villagers, and honest, in order to earn the affection and respect of the community. Some “Dabos” are well-known, even respected by Lahu people outside their own village, such as Mahadabo, Numadabo, and Payaza Nu and so on.

The selection of “Dara” is determined by Aima. Their main role is to assist Lahu people. If villagers face problems or illnesses, Aima comes down to assist, but the help is facilitated through “Dara”. The positions of Sara, Aza, and Laso can be voluntarily applied for or requested by the villagers. The main function of these positions

is to assist “Dabo” and “Dara” in managing all matters related to the gods. Villagers typically choose individuals who enjoy helping others for these roles.

In the past, before Thai government policies and management entered the mountainous village areas, the traditional management structure of the Lahu people was quite effective. Villages were harmonious, with mutual assistance and shared ideologies. If conflicts arose among villagers, the village leadership could typically resolve them using the traditional management structure of the Lahu community. Generally, most issues were resolved without significant problems. However, in the present day, many issues involve external factors, which means that some conflicts or problems cannot be resolved using the traditional management mechanism, as this might exacerbate the conflicts.

#### 4.1.13. Impact of government management and organizational changes in Lahu villages

Following the direct management of Lahu villages by government departments, led by the Ministry of Interior, the role of the existing village leadership groups has been weakened significantly. They can hardly manage the villages according to the traditional village rules and agreements. The village rules and agreements, once universally understood by all villagers, regardless of age or gender, have now transformed into national laws that are only known to the village head, county-level leaders, and police officers. As a result, the village head, village committee, township chief, township leadership team, county-level leadership team, and police play crucial roles within the village.

The old village rules and agreements are seen as outdated and not keeping pace with societal development. This lack of understanding, especially among the older generation, has led to difficulties in the cooperation between the old and new management structures within many villages. However, it cannot be denied that the old

village rules and agreements still play a positive role in maintaining harmony and promoting development within the villages.

#### 4.1.2 Lahu Na and other recently settled Lahu clan branches

Lahu Na, Lahu Nyi, and other Lahu clan branches that have embraced Christianity have integrated their social organizational structures into the Christian organizational system. These structures are categorized into village, county, and regional levels. In 1992, with the assistance of American missionary Dr. Paul Lewis, the “Thai Lahu Baptist Church” was established, with its headquarters in Chiang Mai, responsible for managing Lahu Christian affairs.

At the village level, there is a religious organization in each church with a preacher responsible for conducting relevant religious ceremonies. Some villages also have smaller church-affiliated groups, such as women’s associations, youth groups, and grain banks, etc.

The social management structure of the Lahu people is organized in a hierarchical manner based on village, county, and regional levels, managed through religious committees. Representatives from lower-level committees form the higher-level committees, and all these bodies are under the umbrella of the 18th District of the Thai Christian Association. Other Lahu clan branches have similar social management structures affiliated with organizations such as the Thai Christian Coordination Committee, albeit with minor variations in their management forms.

In Lahu villages where Christianity is practiced, the village organizations are generally newly established, and they are either government-backed institutions or related to Christian organizations. These organizations can typically be divided into two parts:

(1) Government-Related management. It consists of the village head, village management committee members, and town management committee members.

(2) Moral, faith, and cultural aspects. The responsibility for these aspects lies with the Christian members in the village. They are responsible of managing the moral and faith-related aspects of the village culture.

Nowadays, the traditional social management structures in all Lahu villages have been replaced by the government's new management institutions. The new generation of leaders in Lahu villages has limited understanding of traditional ethnic customs and practices. However, in some villages, the traditional social management structures continue to function, often led by the older generation of leaders.

In summary, approximately 20 years ago, as part of the Thai government's "Hill Tribe Development Plan", including the inclusion of the Lahu people, each Lahu village established new management structures, known as village committees. The committee is chaired by the village head, with other village leaders serving as committee members, responsible for various aspects such as security, social development, finances, and cultural arts. Besides, each village has two representatives on the township committee, acting as representatives of the villagers and contributing to local development. As a result, each village now has at least two or more social management institutions, collectively maintaining the harmony and sustainable development of Lahu villages.

#### 4.2 Traditional modes of production and economic livelihood

Regarding traditional modes of production and economic livelihood of Lahu people in Thailand, two aspects are introduced below.

##### 4.2.1 Dryland shifting cultivation system and semi-monetary economic model

The Lahu people in Thailand primarily rely on agriculture as their main economic source. They cultivate crops such as upland rice, corn, wheat, watermelon, winter melon, pumpkin, potatoes, tomatoes, as well as various fruits and vegetables,

including bananas. In the past, they also cultivated opium poppy. Besides, they engage in gathering, hunting, and livestock raising as supplementary activities, constituting a self-sustaining economic model. The traditional farming methods include the dryland shifting cultivation system and the slash-and-burn cultivation known as “swidden” or “slash-and-burn” agriculture.

This type of farming involves cutting down a portion of the forested land, burning the dried wood for use as fertilizer, and then planting crops based on the seasons. After three years of cultivation, the land is left to fallow, and a new piece of land is cleared for cultivation. After 10 to 15 years, they return to the previously cultivated land. This shifting cultivation system reflects three main characteristics of the Lahu economic system: (1) slash-and-burn cultivation, (2) shifting of cultivation areas every 2-3 years, and (3) allowing abandoned land to naturally recover fertility. The dryland shifting cultivation system includes processes such as land use management, land selection, land preparation before planting, cultivation of various crops, crop management, harvesting, and labor management.

The traditional economic system of Lahu people is primitive, heavily reliant on natural resources. Their grain yields are low, and they face uncertain harvests, particularly during droughts. Consequently, they must cultivate additional fruits and vegetables to sell or exchange for rice from lowland areas. In the past, opium poppy was a significant source of income, giving rise to a semi-monetized economic model referred to as the “semi-monetary economy”.

#### 4.2.2 From landowners to low-wage laborers

The dryland shifting cultivation system once reflected the Lahu people’s status as the owners of the land, where they enjoyed the freedom to utilize it. However, since the implementation of Thailand’s “Hill Tribe Development Plan” by the government since 1990, the Lahu people’s economy, primarily based on shifting

cultivation and opium poppy planting, has become unsustainable. The illegal logging of forests has been strictly controlled, with fines or imprisonment as penalties. As a result, they've been forced to settle down, rely on existing resources for cultivation, and expand the cultivation of cash crops in accordance with national policies. In addition, a significant portion of surplus labor has migrated to lowland areas to work, becoming a new economic resource. The transformation of the Lahu people's way of life is an undeniable reality.

Taking the example of the O Phu Sewen Lahu Village in Mueang Yao Town, Chiang Rai Province, the village encompasses a forest area of 1,000 rai (1 rai □ 1,600 square meters), with a natural conservation area of approximately 1,200 rai, upland cultivated areas covering 786 rai, and paddy fields covering 150 rai. Numerically, the per capita land area seems substantial. However, due to the enforcement of the national forest law and the designation of natural conservation areas, they've lost access to the forests they once relied on for survival, and they can now only cultivate fields along the riverbanks and foothills. The hilly terrain and limited availability of paddy fields force them to grow crops such as corn, ginger, chili, lychee, and a small amount of upland and wet rice. The land is less fertile than in lowland areas, leading to lower yields, making self-sufficiency difficult. Consequently, a significant portion of surplus labor has joined the workforce in lowland areas.

During the off-season, nearly all young laborers work in lowland areas or towns, and some even migrate with their entire families, returning only during holidays. During our surveys in Lahu villages, it was found that 14 households from the village had all their family members working outside. Migrant labor has become the primary source of income for the O Phu Sewen Lahu Village. Similarly, in Li Khai Village of Nan Lie Town, when the Lahu people initially settled, they had the freedom to use land and forests, but later the government implemented forest protection policies,

prohibiting private land cultivation. As a result, the average land per household in the present Li Kai Village is less than two acres, with only a little over 10 households having paddy fields. Except for those households with relatively more cultivated land, most families need to seek off-farm labor to sustain their livelihoods. The change in their way of life caught them off guard, leaving them confused and uncertain, but their diligent and courageous ethnic character helped them weather the storm and proactively respond to the changing socio-political and economic circumstances.

Overall, as Thai citizens, the Lahu people receive significant support from the Thai government. This includes establishing permanent residences, cultivating paddy fields along riverbanks, growing year-round fruits, highland vegetables, flowers, constructing roads, setting up power lines, new irrigation systems, as well as building schools and healthcare facilities. In terms of economic foundations, improvements in living conditions can be observed from the quality of residences, ownership, and the provision of various conveniences such as cars, tractors, motorcycles, household appliances, mobile phones, etc. The Lahu people's living standards have markedly improved. They are in the process of adopting a new way of life, or one could say, a new socio-economic and cultural lifestyle.

#### 4.3 Religious Beliefs

The religious beliefs of the Lahu people can be categorized into two main faiths: a blend of indigenous religious practices influenced by Lamaism, and the Christian faith.

The Lahu people residing in Thailand adhere to the indigenous religious beliefs, utilizing Lahu customs and traditions as a guiding principle in village management to maintain harmony and stability. There's a religious ritual called "Huoye" (translated as "Fire Field") that takes place in the village on the 14th and 15th days of each month. On these days, villagers refrain from farming, hunting in the mountains, and

consuming meat. They rest at home during the day. As night falls, the villagers, including priests of the village, come together at the designated site for the “Huoye” religious ceremony, singing and dancing, while praying for the protection of the people, crops, and livestock by the “Esa” deity.

The Lahu Nyi, who have settled in Thailand for over 150 years, worship the Esa deity, whom they regard as the creator of God. They believe that Esa created all things in the world and that Esa can help humanity overcome difficulties and suffering. Esa selects devout individuals as surrogates to come and assist humanity. These chosen individuals, known as Dobo, must possess qualities such as compassion, refraining from taking life, no stealing, no lying, no deceiving, practicing chastity, abstaining from alcohol and opium, and adherence to the Lahu customs. The main responsibility of a Dobo is to teach the villagers to uphold moral values, adhere to Lahu customs, and act according to the will of Esa. If a village has a Dobo, the villagers are expected to show mutual respect and love, fostering unity, leading to the establishment of a religious venue called “Huoye”. On the 1st and 15th of every month, all villagers gather at the “Huoye” to perform rituals, praying to Esa for the well-being of the village, continuing the ceremony until the early hours of the next day. During these ceremonies, they play reed instruments, beat gongs and drums, sing and dance, all while seeking blessings for a happy life. A similar practice exists among the Lahu Sira, and their designated area for such ceremonies is called “Gakege”, with similar content and pattern.

Due to their prolonged residence in predominantly Buddhist countries such as Thailand and Myanmar, the Lahu Nyi, who originally practiced a blend of indigenous religious beliefs and Lamaism, have undoubtedly been influenced by Theravada Buddhism. Many aspects of Lahu faith, customs, and culture, including taboos, behavioral norms, and various rituals, share similarities with Buddhism. For example, they observe a Buddhist holy day called “Visakha Bucha” which they refer to as “Si Yi”

in their own tradition. They also have their versions of the “Enter Rains Retreat” (beginning of Buddhist Lent) and the “Leave Rains Retreat”, known as “Khao Si Yi” and “O Si Yi”, respectively. These similarities highlight the diverse nature of Lahu religious beliefs.

Among the Lahu people who have adopted Christianity, there are two main branches: the followers of Jesus Christ (Protestantism) and the followers of the Roman Catholic Church. Both Lahu Na and Lahu Nyi have embraced Christianity for over a century, with the transition occurring during their residence in Myanmar. Obviously, villages like O Phu Sewen and Hui Lu in Mae Yao County of Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, are typical examples where the inhabitants have transitioned from their original indigenous beliefs to Christianity. As for the Lahu Laba residing in Fang County and Mae Ai County of Chiang Mai Province, they predominantly adhere to Roman Catholicism. The religious diversity among the Lahu people indicates the complex interplay of faith, culture, and historical factors in shaping their religious landscape.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conclusion, in the process of integrating into the mainstream Thai society, the Lahu people of Thailand have encountered challenging circumstances regarding their development models and cultural heritage. They have experienced confusion and uncertainty, but have never retreated. Faced with adversity, they have continuously adapted and persisted. Here are some discussions about it.

Over the past two decades, Lahu villagers, particularly those of the Lahu Nyi branch, have spontaneously established their own organizational structures. For example, the “Improvement of Lahu Quality of Life Association” was founded in 2008. This association serves as a platform for external engagement and aids the Lahu Nyi in addressing practical challenges in their lives, such as poverty, human rights violations,

and the preservation and dissemination of Lahu culture. Thus, it promotes understanding of Lahu culture both domestically and internationally.

The establishment of the new institutions by the Lahu people complements their traditional culture. They seek to use traditional culture to address various issues within Lahu villages, such as drug problems, the spread of Christianity and Buddhism, and issues related to loss of autonomy.

Among the Lahu people who follow Christianity, a significant portion have fully embraced Jesus Christ, abandoning traditional beliefs and customs. Those customs that remain are often aligned with western culture, such as shifting the New Year ceremony from the Lunar New Year to January 1st and incorporating corresponding ceremonies on December 25th, Christmas Day. Even daily ritualistic language has been adapted to prayers to God.

On the other hand, the Lahu people who follow the indigenous faith, particularly those who worship Esa, have in recent years actively revitalized their traditional culture. Nearly every village has established its own religious organization and reinstated the venue for village ceremonies known as the “Huo Ye”. All activities related to religion have been restored. For instance, days like the first and fifteenth of each month are designated as fasting days, prohibiting alcohol, drug use, and gambling in the village. Moreover, important festivals require a collective gathering to conduct ceremonies, such as the Sand Piling Festival, the Start of Rains Retreat, and the End of Rains Retreat.

To sum up, the Lahu people in Thailand are attempting to embrace a new way of life, demonstrating their ability to adapt and continuously adjust to new societal and environmental changes. They are blending traditional and modern cultures, striving for an equitable and harmonious new life.

## Recommendations

This is a study on the collision between traditional and modern cultures among the hill tribe ethnic groups in Thailand. It primarily conducts anthropological research on the Lahu ethnic group, exploring aspects such as their origin, migration, subgroups, population and distribution, as well as the changes in socio-cultural traditions over time. Regarding such studies, it is recommended that future research extend to other hill tribe ethnic groups in Thailand, such as the Akha, conducting relevant anthropological research to provide additional research samples from the perspective of cultural anthropology.

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