



Title	Myth and Ambiguous Identity among the Lahu of North Thailand: Legends of the Loss of Letters
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Citation	金沢大学日中無形文化遺産プロジェクト報告書= Report of the International Workshop, 3: 25-42
Issue Date	2009-03-31
Type	Research Paper
Text version	publisher
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2297/17874">http://hdl.handle.net/2297/17874</a>
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# **Myth and Ambiguous Identity among the Lahu of North Thailand: Legends of the Loss of Letters**

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## **1. Introduction**

Human beings cannot live without order. The world in which human beings find themselves is originally a continuum and like a blank piece of paper without any lines drawn upon it, but human beings set about to segment and classify the world into various categories. We give meanings to the things we have cut up and classified, and, by doing this, we establish some kind of order upon the world.

What we call “Self” and the “Other” are products of this process. As well as time and space, human beings segment people into different categories, of which the most primary classification is made by a dichotomy between “us” and “them.” Like other classifications made by human beings, drawing lines between people and classifying them into “us” and “them” is an arbitrary act. Thus, the categories established, the “us” and the “them,” are relative, not absolute, and arbitrary artifacts.

In the world, there are different groups with different interests and each of them segment the world, classify and categorize the things that they are able to distinguish. In the course of this process, each group identifies people as either “us” or “them.” For “us”, “them” are those who live in the territory of the unfamiliar “Other.” Lines between “us” and “them” drawn on the continuum introduce classifications of people into different human groups. Familiar “us”, being here, view the unfamiliar “them”, being there, as quite different, or more often, view the latter in the former's reverse image. In such a dichotomous view, human beings tend to perceive the “others” in terms of a few stereo-typical and superficial attributes.

This study takes up the case of the Lahu of northern Thailand and explores the classification and categorization of the world by the Lahu as opposed to lowlanders and moreover by two Lahu groups with different religious interests. This study assumes that the Lahu perception of the world is reflected in the myths or stories told by them. I regard identity as a product of human beings' classification and categorization of the world, which should have originally been a continuum without segmentation and like a blank piece of paper on which any number of different classifications and categorizations could have been introduced by human beings. More specifically, this study examines the Lahu myths of the loss of letters in order to understand their worldview and their perception of “Self” and the “Other.”

This study will show that the Lahu exist in relation to several dichotomous categorizations and that their identities are based on these dichotomies. Yet it will also

be pointed out that their identities and classification of the world are not clear-cut, but ambiguous, involving contradictions and conflicts.

## **2. The Primary Classification of the World and the Myth Concerned with Ethnic Relations.**

The Lahu are a highland dwelling ethnic minority in mainland Southeast Asia and southwest China and speakers of Lahu, a language in the Tibet-Burmese linguistic group. The Lahu call themselves “Lahu” and are called by others, such as by the Thai, “Musue.” Historically, the Lahu practiced swidden agriculture and for many generations lived and migrated around areas under the political, military and economic force of diverse valley dwelling peoples. But, due to the increasing scarcity of cultivatable land and the extension of stricter administrative controls of lowland governments toward the hill areas, the high degree of autonomy that these people formerly enjoyed has been significantly reduced. These days, many Lahu, especially those without paddy fields, become wage laborers in lowland towns. In the sphere of religion, the majority of Lahu believe in a creator and transcendental god, called *G'ui sha*, along with innumerable spirits, to both of which are directed many kinds of rituals. Since the early twentieth century, Christianity has been expanding among the Lahu and it is estimated that at present upwards to one fourth of the Lahu population in Thailand are living in Christian communities.<sup>1</sup> The total Lahu population, which is living within the territories of diverse states such as China, Burma (Myanmar), Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand, is estimated as exceeding 700,000. However, in any of these states where the Lahu reside, they do not constitute the majority, but remain an ethnic minority, living in the geographical and social periphery.

The area where the Lahu have resided and conducted shifting cultivation is the southeast part of the Himalayan mountain range which covers southwest China and upper mainland Southeast Asia. The area is mostly comprises of mountains of 500 to 2,000 meters high above sea level and a number of small rivers cut into the hills, forming many small valleys. From the natural environmental viewpoint, this area is comprised of valleys and hillsides, which have been occupied by lowlanders and highlanders, both of whom have adapted to the niches of the environment where they live. Traditional ethnic relations in this area are those both of contest and symbiosis. Historically, the Lahu have been one of the highland dwelling peoples, who have been moving from Yunnan of China through northwestern Laos and the eastern Shan State of Burma (Myanmar) into northern Thailand, as they fled from the domination and pressures of lowlanders while seeking new lands for cultivation. The interactions

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<sup>1</sup> For details, please refer to Nishimoto (2004: 29-30). Lewis and Lewis (1984:197) once asserted that “one third of the total Lahu population in Thailand lives within Christian communities.”

between lowlanders and highlanders in the history of ethnic relations in this area have formed Lahu identity, which is mainly based on the relations between “us” (highlanders) and “them” (lowlanders).

In anthropological studies, Leach (1964) and others have long discussed such ethnic relations as comprised both of the contest and symbiosis between lowlanders and highlanders. Ideally speaking, lowlanders are speakers of Tai languages who live permanently in valleys, conduct wet rice farming, are Buddhist, have a large population, have long literal tradition, and have developed large-scale complex political systems. On the other hand, highlanders are speakers of non-Tai languages who move about the highlands, practice shifting cultivation, are non-Buddhist (often called “animist”), have small numbers, are illiterate, and only possess small-scale simple political systems. As civilization has been linked with Buddhism, the lowlanders have been viewed as civilized while the highlander peoples as uncivilized. More importantly, this dichotomous view has been shared not only by the lowlanders but also by the highlanders, both of whom have stereotyped views on Self and the Others and perceive the world as comprised of contrasting and contesting lowlanders and highlanders (Takemura 1981, Tapp 1989).

Stories, usually called “myths”, are often expressions of people's worldview. Myths concerned with the contest and comparison between the lowlanders and the highlanders, which are often retained by highland dwelling peoples, are an expression of their dichotomous cognition of the world as comprised of the territories occupied by the lowlanders and the highlanders.

Interesting is the fact that of these myths about ethnic relations, many highland dwelling peoples in southwest China and upper mainland Southeast Asia retain stories that long ago they had been powerful and prosperous but their power and prosperity were lost (Obayashi 1966: 127-128). In such myths, their fall from power and prosperity is a result of incidents, in which due to carelessness and thoughtlessness highland peoples have lost such good things as their country, king, land, and letters, as well as the blessings of God. Below are two examples of the Lahu myth of the loss of good things.

When *G'ui sha* (God) gave seeds of fertility, *Khon Muang* (Northern Thai, a lowland dwelling people) received them in a tightly woven basket, while the Lahu in a loosely woven one. During the trip back home, the seeds of fertility were kept in the basket of *Khon Muang*, which is why they can eat enough rice every year today. Places on which many seeds of fertility dropped from the Lahu's basket became the fertile land, places on which fewer seeds of fertility dropped from the Lahu's basket became the less fertile land. (Tribal Research Center 1976: 4)

Once again, *G'ui sha* called the ancestors of all the peoples to Him in order to give precepts concerning letters and knowledge. All other peoples went up (to *G'ui sha*) before the Lahu. *G'ui sha* gave diverse knowledge and culture to them by writing on

paper made of mulberry. The ancestor of the Lahu were the last one who went up (to *G'ui sha*) like in the previous times. *G'ui sha* saw the Lahu ready to receive letters and knowledge, yet the paper made of mulberry had just been used up. *G'ui sha* therefore grabbed rice cakes (pounded sticky rice with sesame) and wrote letters and knowledge on them and gave them to the Lahu. During the trip back to the village, the Lahu got hungry and forgot himself, and ate them up. (Tribal Research Center 1976: 4)

These myths which are concerned with the comparison between the Lahu and other peoples have innumerable versions which are different in the details. Yet, even though the people compared with the Lahu is varied and consists of the Northern Thai, the Shan<sup>2</sup>, the Han, and the Burmese, these myths remain constant in that they speak about the contrast and contest of highlanders and lowlanders. All these myths are concerned about inferiority, weakness, and the lack of civilization of highlanders and describe the highlanders in comparison with the powerful lowlanders. In the myths, lowlanders and highlanders are described as having opposing attributes and the predicaments that the Lahu are now facing are attributed to their loss of those good things that are possessed by the lowlanders. Here, based on the contrasting and opposing categories of lowlanders and highlanders, the Lahu themselves describe “the Lahu” in terms of the absence of what lowlanders possess (Nishimoto 2000). As their myths show, the Lahu generally classify the world into “plains” (*mi taw hkui*) and “mountains” (*hk'aw hko*), which generally accords to a geographical classification, and define “the Lahu” in the reverse image of the “town people” (*mvuh hk'aw chaw*). The “town people” constitute the Others in a comparison with whom the Lahu define who they themselves are. What is peculiar here is that because the Lahu themselves also regard many of the positive attributes as possessed by the “town people”, “the Lahu” have come to be (at least literally) negatively identified in terms of the denial of the possession of good things.

### **3. Re-classification of the World and the Myth of the Loss of Letters.**

As discussed above, the Lahu perceive the world as comprised of “mountains” and “plains” and “mountain peoples” and “town people” who have contrasting and opposing attributes. Identification of “the Lahu” is made by the denial of several good things that the “town people” are thought to possess. In addition to this primary classification of the world into the “mountain” and “town” peoples, the Lahu perceive “the Lahu” as divided generally into two groups, according to their religious attributes.

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<sup>2</sup> “Shan” in this study denotes people who called themselves “*Tai*.” They are called “*Pi Chaw*” by the Lahu and “*Thai Yai*” by the Central Thai.

Since the early twentieth century, there has been Christianization among the Lahu, which has introduced a new division of the Lahu into two general categories; Christian and traditionalist Lahu. Now it is estimated that upward to one fifth of the Lahu are belonging to Christian communities. Christianity has a more than one hundred year history among the Lahu and has had a deep and penetrating influence on those Lahu who are Christian. Since the early twentieth century, Christian missionaries have developed a Roman script for the Lahu language, that had traditionally been a spoken language without letters, and this Roman script is used now by a part of the Christian Lahu in Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand. On the other hand, traditionalist Lahu have responded to the expansion of Christianity in the hill areas by mounting religious revitalization and reformation movements (Nishimoto 2008). As a result, there are apparent differences between the traditionalist and Christian Lahu groups now, especially in terms of formality and discipline (Matisoff 1988: 10, Nishimoto 2000: 70).

Myths of the traditionalist and Christian Lahu groups show remarkable differences. To be sure, their myths have common frameworks and the general stories are the same, because of which we can say that both Lahu groups have a similar view on the world as comprised of territories of the “mountain peoples” and the “town peoples.” Yet, with regard to the classification within “the Lahu” made by a difference of religious affiliations, both groups view the group with the other religious identity as “them” (*yaw hui*), and in comparison they define themselves as “us” (*nga hui*). Although both groups seem in agreement with the boundaries of the two groups, they attach different attributes and values to the two Lahu groups, for both traditionalist and Christian Lahu tend to regard the group with the other religious identity as someone quite different from themselves and often lay claim to the rightness of their own religious practices.

It has been long argued in socio-cultural anthropology that myths or stories vested in a distant past are more concerned with the present than the past and that myth is not a static story without change, does not exist by itself but within a social context, and, as an ideological tool, is subject to manipulation by its narrators who, consciously or unconsciously, use the myth to enhance their power. Based on long-term fieldwork and with a general understanding of the people’s life, anthropological studies of myth have put more emphasis on the social meanings and functions of the myth with context rather than on the myth as stories or texts deprived of context. Scholars of this school of myth studies (hereafter called the “politics of myth” school) focus on the different versions of the same stories and functions of these versions to serve the interest of groups of narrators with differing interests. Scholars of the “politics of myth” school argue that individuals or groups with different interests tell generally the same stories but with different emphases and minor changes in the details so as that the myths told would serve their interests (Malinowski 1954). Studies of the “politics of myth” school do not search for the “authentic” version of a myth but study the differences between diverse versions of the same myth and the interests of the narrators that these differing versions should serve. Myth here is not considered as a text without change, but telling

a story is a “ritual” act by the narrators in their pursuit for power (Leach 1964).

The fact that there are two groups of different religious interests among the Lahu provides an interesting case for the study of the “politics of myth”, as both traditionalist and Christian Lahu retain the myth of the loss of letters. But, although the two groups tell the myth in generally the same way, they tend to put different stresses and implications on the story.

As mentioned above, the main plot of the Lahu myth of the loss of letters is that *G'ui sha* called all the peoples to receive letters, but that as the Lahu came late and there was no paper to write the divine letters on, *G'ui sha* wrote the letters on rice cakes, which the Lahu hungrily consumed on the way back home. The story relates the carelessness and thoughtlessness of the Lahu in comparison with other peoples, because of which the Lahu lost the letters given by *G'ui sha*. Recounting such stories, traditionalist Lahu conclude that this is why the Lahu do not know letters, thus they are ignorant. And this is why they recite ritual prayers that “*G'ui sha* let them remember by heart (*G'ui sha nyi ma hk'aw daw keu la ve*).” They usually no longer continue to say that the lost letters may be restored in the future. The myths of the loss of letters told by the traditionalist Lahu are simple and short, made up only of one causal relation, and paint a picture of their experienced predicaments in which the Lahu are poor, just like the stories depict, and that this is what the world of the Lahu is like (Lienhardt 1961: 53-55, Geertz 1973: 107). Many other myths by traditionalist Lahu are similar in that they are comprised only of one simple causal relation that long ago there had been such and such incidents – and that this is why the Lahu are like they are now.

On the other hand, myths of the loss of letters retained by Christian Lahu are more complex. Surely, the stories, such as the ones referred to in their daily life are made only of one simple causal relation like the ones by traditionalist Lahu that long ago a thoughtless ancestor had ate up the divine letters so that the Lahu are without wisdom (*cu yi*) and are poor. However, in longer stories and ones printed in booklets<sup>3</sup>, the myth of the loss of letters more often appears with many other stories, all of which together constitute a large mythological universe. As shown in the story told by an elder at my field site in 1997, the myth of the loss of letters and many other stories are put together in a large scheme and constitute one long story.

They say, long ago there was a Lahu country. It was in China. The Han king<sup>4</sup> was called *Po U Lu*. The Lahu country was called *Mvuh Meh Mi Meh*, they say. Because the Han wanted to take it, there was a war. There was a war and the Lahu defeated the Han. The Han escaped into a cave, they say. The Lahu could not attack them. The Lahu waited for as long as three years and six months. The Lahu waited, but the Han did not come out. The Lahu could not wait anymore. Wondering whether the

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Lahu in Burma and Thailand have been publishing booklets in Romanized Lahu script, although the number of those who are fully literate in Lahu is limited.

<sup>4</sup> This should be read as “the Lahu king.”

Han were already dead, the Lahu did not guard anymore. The Lahu had quivers for arrows (*hka hpui*) and crossbow triggers (*hka le*). The Lahu had nine baskets of *hka hpui* and nine winnow baskets of *hka le*. The Lahu set up seven leveled traps, thinking that if the Han came out, they would be killed by the traps. Then the Lahu went hunting. In the meanwhile, seven Lahu girls came and eavesdropped on and looked at the Han in secret. The Han were making Jew's harps (*a hta*) and waited. The Han were making gourd pipes (*naw*) and waited. When the Han played the gourd pipes, they sounded very beautiful, they say. When the Han played the Jew's harps, they sounded very beautiful, they say. The Lahu girls were infatuated. The Han said, "Here, we'll give you" and the seven Lahu girls went to take the harps and pipes. The first girl went and was killed by a trap. The second went and was killed by a trap. The third went and was killed by a trap. Finally, the seven girls were all killed, they say. Then the Han came out. The Han came out and took the *hka hpui*. The residence of king *Po U Lu, Mvuh Meh Mi Meh*, the town, which was probably as big as an *amphue* (district office) today. The Han took the Lahu's nine baskets of *hka hpui* and nine winnow baskets of *hka le*, assembled crossbows, and shot and expelled the Lahu. As the Han shot and expelled the Lahu, the Lahu country was lost. The Lahu don't have it and won't get it. The Lahu fled faraway. The Han took it, took this country. That is why today there is no Lahu country. There is no Lahu country. Because we don't have a country, we made the gourd pipe (*naw*), for remembering once a year, at the Lahu new year, we made *naw*. Lahu *naw*. There is no Lahu country. Yes, we play *naw* and dance the new year dances. It is for the Lahu to remember (the Lahu country) once a year. The Lahu new year. We play *naw*, they say. And, when the Lahu play *naw* now, I tell you what it sounds like. It only sounds *Mvuh Meh Mi Meh, Mvuh Meh Mi Meh*. We are missing *Mvuh Meh Mi Meh*, they say. We remember *Mvuh Meh Mi Meh*. *Mvuh Meh Mi Meh* is a Lahu country, the Lahu country. *Mvuh Meh Mi Meh*. And, when the Lahu play the Jew's harps (*a hta*), I tell you what it sounds like. It sounds like, the Lahu are "*cu e leh, cu e leh*" (thoughtless, thoughtless), because we are thoughtless. Because long ago the Lahu were thoughtless. This is why when we play *a hta*, it always sounds *cu e leh, cu e leh*. That is why there is no Lahu country. That is why the Lahu, this stupid Lahu, only live in the "forest" (*heh pui hk'aw*). *G'ui sha* reproved the Lahu, "The Lahu have no honor. Today, the Lahu have become servants of others. Today, I bring you Lahu letters. I have already given [letters] to the Shan. The Shan brought mulberry paper, thus I gave it to them on mulberry paper. I gave it to all the people. White men ground rice and brought it. I have already given [letters] to the White men on ground rice", they say. But the Lahu had nothing. The Lahu pounded rice cakes and were about to eat them. When the Lahu were about to eat them, they heard that *G'ui sha* would give them letters, and came to receive them. Where to write the letters, the letter given by *G'ui sha*? Nowhere, nowhere to write. The Lahu gave the palm of their hand and said, "Here." But *G'ui sha* said, "No, the letters would disappear."

And the Lahu said, it would be good to write upon the rice cakes. The Lahu said, they had brought rice cakes, they say. The rice cakes. Because the Lahu said they would bring back the letter written on the rice cakes, *G'ui sha* wrote the "silver & gold book" (*li hpu htan hpu*) on the rice cakes. The Lahu were going home, but they didn't arrive home. The Lahu got hungry, they say. The Lahu grilled and munched the rice cakes. Saying, "I will remember by heart", the Lahu grilled and munched them, poor thing! That is why the Lahu, regardless of *Lahu Nyi* (Red Lahu<sup>5</sup>) or not, or of what Lahu, said, "I will remember by heart", and, even when they prayed, the prayers (*bon ku bon k'a*) were remembered by heart. The Lahu had become like this and *G'ui sha* was not pleased. Because *G'ui sha* was not pleased, the Lahu sought a blessing again. Then, when they were seeking a blessing, there emerged a man called *A Te Fu Cu*. *A Te Fu Cu* sought a blessing every day, every year. *A Te Fu Cu* hollowed out a staff and sought a blessing, they say. But he did not find a blessing. He threw the staff away and hollowed out a new one, and sought a blessing again, but in vain. He threw the staff again. When he then gathered the staffs together in heaps and tied them into knots, there were nine knots of staffs, they say, nine knots. .... But he still could not find a blessing. Never mind. *G'ui sha* gave it again, gave it to him. And *A Te Fu Cu* told (to people), "A blessing is not to be found (no matter how we seek it). A blessing is a thing that *G'ui sha* will give us one day. It will appear in the white clouds in the southern country of the end of the world. And when it comes up to us (in the north), the 'silver & gold book' will be brought to us. The 'silver & gold book' will come from the white clouds in the southern country of the end of the world. *G'ui sha*'s power, what we call airplane, the airplane ..... yes, airplane (*ca po*). When an airplane emerges, when it emerges in the white and black clouds and comes to us, we will be given the book. The time of *G'ui sha* will be fulfilled, they say. When the time comes, we will be able to see *G'ui sha*'s face and eyes. We will hear *G'ui sha*'s voice too." *A Te Fu Cu* said, "If mountains block it, it will fly from the mountain, if rivers block it, it will fly from river to river, and will build a bridge, drive a car, carry the 'silver & gold book', build roads and come to us. When the day comes, make *peh k'aw sha k'aw*<sup>6</sup> from the old nine knots of staffs of *A Te Fu Cu*, burn them, and wait. On the day when the 'silver & gold book' arrives, we shall exchange with the 'silver & gold book'." Today, it is fulfilled. It has come true. The Lahu have no country but it has come true. And today the time of *G'ui sha* is fulfilled. If we obey *G'ui sha*'s words, if we obey *G'ui sha*'s words when *G'ui sha*'s time is fulfilled, if we seek a blessing, there will be as small a Lahu country as a leaf of gooseberry. It is said so. That is the teachings of the ancestors, teachings of the Lahu, teachings of *A Te Fu Cu*. They taught this. There is no Lahu country. Thus, on the day when the time of *G'ui sha* is fulfilled for the Lahu, the Lahu county, the

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<sup>5</sup> This denotes the traditionalist Lahu in this study.

<sup>6</sup> Bundles of candles and incense which are used in traditionalist Lahu rituals.

letters (*li meh htan meh*), ..... if we obey *G'ui sha*'s words, "seek wisdom" (*cu yi ca ve*), we will have a country to govern for as short a time as daybreak. The time in which the Lahu will be the ruler will be like daybreak, the ruler to govern the Lahu country, a country as small as a gooseberry. The Lahu will be king (*jaw maw*) in a time as short as daybreak. On the day, there will be a short a time as daybreak. And there will be a short time when the Lahu will gain a Lahu country as small as a gooseberry. The Lahu will gain a Lahu country, and the Lahu will become the king. If the time of *G'ui sha* is being fulfilled, it is coming nearer and nearer. (author's question: "When will it come?") It will come, for sure. The day is arriving gradually. If it will arrive when the time fulfills 2000 years. I don't know. ....

Like the above story, Christian Lahu myths that are concerned about inter-ethnic relations include such themes as the loss of the right to rule, the loss of the Lahu country, the loss of the letters, and the wondering and scattering of the people (Nishimoto 2000). These myths of the loss and fall from prosperity, put together, constitute a larger story. Although some things are only implied in the oral story cited above, Christian Lahu myths generally develop as follows: (1) Long ago *G'ui sha* gave the seal of the king to the Lahu and the Lahu were the master of all people. The Shan were cunning and let girls wear coarsely woven clothes and work as servants. The Lahu master nudged her round breast with his elbow, and for compensation the Lahu master gave away the seal. That is why today the Lahu are servants of others. (2) Long ago there was a Lahu country. As the Lahu were brave and strong, the Han could not beat the Lahu. So, the Han used a trick and made useless the weapon of the Lahu. When the Han attacked the Lahu again, the Lahu were beaten and the Lahu country was destroyed. (3) When long ago *G'ui sha* gave letters to all peoples, He wrote letters on a rice cake and gave it to the Lahu. Hungry, the Lahu ate up the divine letters, because of which the Lahu lost their letters. (4) Without a king or a country, the Lahu were left wondering. The Lahu could not live in harmony. The 'brother' group and the 'sister' group had had a quarrel over a distribution of meat and split and went separate ways.

If told individually, these stories are comprised of one simple causal relation that because long ago the Lahu lost a good thing due to their own carelessness or by the tricks of other people, therefore the Lahu do not possess the good things now. In fact, traditionalist Lahu usually tell these stories individually and do not put them together. On the other hand, Christian Lahu more often tell these stories in a plot developing from (1) blessings from God and prosperous Lahu in the beginning of history, (2) contest of thoughtless Lahu and cunning other peoples, (3) Lahu's loss of the good things, to (4) the wondering and scattering of the Lahu people. In the larger story, incidents told are put in a linear line and have relevance to one another.

The story continues. (5) After having lost the divine letters, the Lahu sought the blessing of *G'ui sha* by oral prayers, which, however, displeased *G'ui sha*, (6) Yet, there appeared a great Lahu religious leader named *A Te Fu Cu*, who prophesized that the

“silver & golden book” would be soon brought to the Lahu, until which the Lahu should wait for it by burning candles and incense, yet after which the Lahu should exchange *peh k’aw sha k’aw* (meaning here the traditionalist Lahu religious practice of burning candles and incense) with the “silver & golden book”, (7) and the prophecy was fulfilled as White men brought about the “silver & golden book”, with which the Lahu exchanged *peh k’aw sha k’aw* and became Christian.

Despite innumerable small variations on the details, the stories told by Christian Lahu have a common pattern which describe their past, present, and future in a large historical scheme; original prosperity, the loss of power, wandering and splitting, seeking the true God, the prophecy by *A Te Fu Cu*, and encounter with the true God or Christianity (see also Kya-Leh 1994). The larger story implies that the Lahu were uplifted (*a ci hkeh la ve*) by the encounter with Christianity. The story continues to tell that if the Lahu people can live in harmony and can study wisdom (*cu yi*), some day they will be able to become large and prosper again. The prosperity in the future is sometimes symbolized by the restoration of the lost Lahu country (*La Hu mvuh mi*).

Compared with the traditionalist Lahu myths, Christian Lahu myths comprise more events and the events are put in a linear fashion from the past through the present to the future. The sequence of the events is organized in a way that a former event constitutes the cause of a later event, and all events are ordered in causal relations. Moreover, this sequence of events describes progress. Unlike the traditionalist Lahu myths, in which events projected into a distant past constitute the direct causes of the present condition, Christian Lahu myths describe a gradual development of the ethnic history from the past to the present and then to the future. Christian Lahu myths speak about the people’s destiny as if it were already prescribed in a larger historical scheme. The *A Te Fu Cu* story stands on the turning point where the history of Christian Lahu changed from those of regress to those of progress.

In the stories told by Christian Lahu, *A Te Fu Cu* was one of the great Lahu religio-political leaders (often called *paw hku* in Lahu), yet he himself never became Christian. *A Te Fu Cu* was a burner of incense and candles similar to the present traditionalist Lahu. However, he had been taught by God that the ‘silver & golden book’ was soon to be brought to the Lahu and that on its arrival the Lahu should exchange *peh k’aw sha k’aw* (religious practice of burning incense and candles) with the book, which he told his people. The ‘silver & golden book’ told in the stories is now usually understood by Christian Lahu as the Christian Bible.

Among traditionalist Lahu, *A Te Fu Cu* is little known and even those who know him usually know only that *A Te Fu Cu* was one of the great Lahu *paw hku* in the long past. On the other hand, Christian Lahu regard *A Te Fu Cu* as a great hero of the people who prophesied the arrival of Christianity to the people. Today, there are many variants among the stories told by Christian Lahu, but the different versions have a common pattern which describes the Lahu’s encounter with Christianity as the fulfillment of the old Lahu prophecy, thereby describing the advent of Christianity as if

it were a prescribed historical event. Functionally, the *A Te Fu Cu* story serves as a bridge between pre-Christian and Christian histories, as it justifies the new religion of foreign origin by describing its arrival as a historical necessity. Such historical understanding endorses the view of Christian Lahu that they have been uplifted by the encounter with Christianity and rank higher than traditionalist Lahu groups. Christian Lahu regard traditional Lahu as a people who are ignorant of the arrival of the teaching about the true God and thus are in need of evangelism by Christian Lahu. Christian Lahu perceive traditionalist Lahu as more backward and lower than themselves, which supports their historical view that they are gradually progressing towards a prosperous future. Christian Lahu describe the arrival of the Christian Bible as if they finally acquired a key to exit from the predicaments and often speak that if they study the wisdom kept in written letters (*cu yi*), they may be able to prosper again and restore the lost Lahu country in the future.

The new mythological universe of Christian Lahu shows that they have reclassified the world into another dichotomous pair. In addition to the primary classification of the world into the “lowlands” and the “mountains”, Christian Lahu have introduced another criterion of being or not being Christian. The Lahu have been categorized into Christian and non-Christian Lahu groups, the latter of which Christian Lahu regard as more backward and underdeveloped, while perceiving themselves as better than traditionalist Lahu but not having caught up yet with the civilization and prosperity of the “lowland peoples.”

#### **4. Values Put on Possession and Non-Possession of Letters**

As stated above, in the large mythological universe which includes many smaller myths, Christian Lahu myth of the loss of letters is considered as a negative story about themselves, as it attributes the people’s fall from the original prosperity to their own shortcomings. Christian Lahu myth of the loss of letters described how that because of the people’s carelessness and thoughtlessness, the Lahu lost the divine letters, leaving the Lahu without wisdom (*cu yi*) or power. Another Christian Lahu version describes how the Lahu lost the divine letters in a similar fashion.

Because *G’ui sha* wrote on rice cakes, the Lahu said, “If we leave them like that, they will soon disappear. If we eat them and store them in the belly, they will not disappear. We will remember by heart” and so they ate them up. That is why the Lahu do not have letters (Kya-Leh 1994: 5).

One day in my field site, *Sa La Ma* (the village pastor’s wife and my teacher of Lahu language) and I were reading this story. When she finished reading the above part, she sighed for the stupidity of the Lahu, saying “Oh, how stupid the Lahu are!” *Sa La*

*Ma* also has a negative perception about her own people, as the people deprived of wisdom (*cu yi*). On the other hand, I was rather impressed by the humor of the excuse made by the Lahu, for I vaguely thought that a stupid man could not have had such a sense of humor.

The booklet by Kya-Leh, a Lahu pastor in Burma, has morals (*tawn tu*) attached to the story cited above. After writing, "Because they ate up, the Lahu and Akha<sup>7</sup> do not have letters", Kya-Leh warns against the Lahu traditional religion and thoughtlessness. Citing Colossians 2: 21-23 of the New Testament, Kya-Leh impeaches the traditional Lahu belief and practices as only "human commands and teachings", not those of God (Colossians 2: 22). For Kya-Leh, the lost divine letters are something like the Christian Bible and Lahu traditional religious practices centered on oral skills are ones which the Lahu had to follow only temporarily until their lost letters that inscribe the eternal truth are restored. For Kya-Leh, Lahu traditional religious practices are only human acts with their own methods and do not accord to God's teachings. Further, he cites Hebrews 12: 15-17 and compares the Lahu to "Essau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights," thereby condemning the people's thoughtlessness.

Such a negative view about their ancestors' carelessness and thoughtlessness is not confined to written sources by those Christian Lahu who have education and are well exposed to outside world. As showed above, a poorly educated elder in my field site once told stories in a similar manner. The negative view of the storyteller is shown in his description that after the hungry Lahu had eaten up and lost the divine letters, they were chanting prayers by memory and improvisation, which, however, displeased *G'ui sha*.

Christian Lahu versions of the loss of letters put negative values on the Lahu thoughtlessness which made them eat up the divine letters and chant ritual prayers in their own ways. Christian Lahu authors and storytellers describe the traditional Lahu prayers as only "human commands" and not in accordance with God's teachings. They contemptuously cite a word of pre-Christian Lahu, "I will remember by heart" and, by this, they link pre-Christian traditional Lahu religious practices with orality.

Because, for Christian Lahu, the absolute truth should be written in the Bible as letters, traditional Lahu religious prayers and practices based on oral tradition are only human ways and do not accord with the teachings of God. However, Christian Lahu do not only view traditional Lahu religious practices as wrongdoing in contrast to their own correct ways. Christian Lahu today usually condemn the traditional Lahu religious practices as the "works of Satan", but they sometimes say, "Long ago we were like them and once did the same things." For Christian Lahu, traditional Lahu religious practices are the ones that they themselves once followed when they were ignorant, "not knowing the true God yet." Therefore, Christian Lahu now say that traditionalist Lahu are "the

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<sup>7</sup> Another highland dwelling ethnic minority in the area covering southwest China and upper mainland Southeast Asia.

ones who are still continuing the old wrong ways” and that it is their mission or “duty for God” (*G' ui sha ve kan*) to “bring and tell the good news to those brother Lahu who do not know the true God yet.” In other words, in the evolutionist historical view of Christian Lahu, traditionalist Lahu are put on the previous and savage stage and considered as someone left behind.

Because they also “once did the same things”, Christian Lahu know well that the traditionalist Lahu religious practices are centered on burning candles and chanting prayers by memory and improvisation. Christian Lahu also know well that traditionalist Lahu think that because “God let the prayers come up in our minds” (*G'ui sha nyi ma hk'aw daw keu la ve*), they can chant their poetic and difficult prayers in a ritual language. However, for Christian Lahu, such practices are only temporary ones to be continued until their encounter with the true God. These traditionalist Lahu practices would have to be “exchanged” (*pa da ve*, as Christian Lahu myths depict) with the new true ways of worship when they acquire the Bible. Christian Lahu regard the oral tradition once so prosperous among them as something in the previous stage of their history and now, with the authority of the Bible that they possess, try to deny the values of these oral traditions. Christian and traditionalist Lahu have different perceptions about truth and wisdom, for the former truth and wisdom are inscribed in the book in written form, therefore absolute and changeless, while for the latter they are given by God as something that they “remember by heart”, therefore subject to changes by memory and improvisation.

## 5. Contradiction, Conflict, and Ambiguity in Myth

However, Christian Lahu's denial of prayers by memory and improvisation makes us infer the extent to which traditionally the Lahu were prosperous in oral tradition. Still today, among traditionalist Lahu, who are generally not literate in Lahu, religious priests chant sacred words in poetic style and by improvisation. They also have an unwritten set of “teachings of the elders” (*chaw maw hkaw*), to which their customs and law, which regulate their everyday lives, are centered. Traditionalist Lahu put less value on the letters than on their skill in oral tradition that they regard as a gift from God.

After reporting the traditionalist Lahu myth of the loss of letters cited above, the Thai author put a comment, by which we understand that the same myth of the loss of letters has different meanings and implications according to who tells it.

Using this parable story for an excuse, the (traditionalist) Lahu tend to say that they do not have to learn letters and knowledge and that they know them without learning because letters and knowledge are in their belly. For example, they can speak Northern Thai without learning, while *Khon Muang* (Northern Thai people)

have to learn Lahu to be able to speak it. This parable may refer to the subject of formal education, too. We can observe that, in Lahu villages with schools, there are few children who really want to study (except Lahu who are Christian). (Tribal Research Center 1976: 4)

Here, at least in its face value, the Lahu are described as exceptionally clever and even cleverer than *Khon Muang*. The same myth of the loss of writing presents a positive picture of the Lahu by avoiding accepting the authority of wisdom in written form. It describes that the Lahu might themselves have chosen to eat the divine letters to become clever in oral tradition. It seems that the Lahu here are more content with what they have.

Returning to the Christian versions, it is interesting that the speakers seem well aware of the power of the Lahu oral tradition. Although the myths generally reflect a negative self-definition in terms of the absence of writing, they also suggest how successful the Lahu prayers by improvisation once were. If the story was only concerned with Lahu inferiority, it could have simply omitted the part describing the prayers by improvisation, for the omission would not change the general picture of the story. It looks as if the narrators are conscious of their own oral tradition, which, however, must be denied by and subjugated to the authority of wisdom found in writing. We may find this in the comment by Kya-Leh, which seems trying, rather unnaturally, to arbitrate between the power of oral tradition and the absolute truth allegedly kept in the Bible.

But, note that some of the stories, which (pre-Christian) priests (*paw hku*) recalled in the heart and told, accord with what the Bible says (Kya-Leh 1994: 5).

Despite my discussion above that myth can be manipulated and the same myth leave rooms for different interpretations, many people would still consider that the main theme of the Lahu myth of the loss of writing is their own inferiority. At least in the increasing marginalization of the people as a result of the expansion of the market economy and the penetration of state power today, few would really believe that the Lahu were superior to *Khon Muang* in wisdom. Even the above non-Christian Lahu speaker arguing for their cleverness may simply have used the myth to talk back to civil servants who stressed the importance of education. As I was often impressed during my fieldwork, stories by traditionalist Lahu which emphasize the power of their oral tradition may rather be an uncertain attempt to protect and maintain what they themselves consider the true Lahu tradition passed down from their ancestors.

Yet, the problem is not for us to choose between the two: the negativeness of not possessing letters and the positiveness of oral tradition. Even Christian Lahu who seem to have accepted the absolute truth of the Bible and deny their traditional religious practices are not completely indifferent to the power of Lahu oral skills. In addition to

the comment by the Lahu pastor (Kya-Leh 1994: 5), I sometimes heard Christian Lahu villagers say, "Well, there are many common things in what the Lahu 'teachings of the elders' and the Bible say." On the other hand, as a result of Christian expansion and penetration of the Thai government's control in the hill areas, traditionalist Lahu practices based on oral tradition are becoming more and more overwhelmed by the authority of writing. Yet, despite the general situation in which the authority of writing is more powerful and becoming more so, the practices centered on the oral tradition still retain some power, which sometimes become more apparent in certain myth versions.

In short, an analysis of the Lahu myths of the loss of writing reveals that in many versions told both by Christian and traditionalist Lahu values attached to orality and writing are stressed differently. It depends on the situation and context, which of them become more apparent. Even one version of the myth of the loss of letters involves in itself both the values attached to orality and literacy, which contest and conflict with each other. The Lahu myths of the loss of letters reflect ambiguous identity of traditionalist and Christian Lahu, both of which are comprised both of affirmation and negation.

## **6. Conclusion**

Myths that the Lahu long ago had divine letters but have lost them due to their ancestors' thoughtlessness are broadly found among the highlanders of southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia. This study examined this myth of the loss of letters told by the Lahu of north Thailand and analyzes different versions told by traditionalist and Christian Lahu groups.

Lahu myths of the loss of letters are concerned about ethnic contrast and contest between lowlanders and highlanders and define their own identity in terms of the absence of several positive attributes that the lowlanders possess. The Lahu Myth reflects their dichotomous view of the world that is comprised of territories of strong lowlanders and of weak highlanders.

Analysis of the different versions of myth of the loss of letters told by the traditionalist and Christian Lahu groups shows that myth has political function. Myth is subject to manipulation by its narrators and different versions serve the interest of the groups to which the narrators belong.

Yet, more detailed analysis reveals that narrators are not always able to manipulate myth at will. Even a version told by one narrator involves ambiguity comprised both of positive and negative definitions about his/her own group. Despite the manipulative nature of myth, it is not under the complete control of the narrators but always leaves room for ambiguity, which is a reflection of ambiguous Lahu identity, constituted both by negation and affirmation.

Myths or stories about a distant past are less concerned with the past than with

the present, and more especially with the interests and identity of the narrators who continuously make changes to them.

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