

Anarchists of the Highlands? A Critical Review of a Stereotype Applied to the Lisu

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“It is difficult now, back in civilization, to evoke the sense of freedom that comes upon a man when he stands on a mountaintop and looks out over tens of thousands of acres of fertile and unexplored land in the valleys below. It is only then that a man knows that, given the wit and will to survive, he need not bow his head to any government, to any ideology, to any small-minded men who feel that they control the essentials of his existence. I understood more fullythe Lisu.”

Eugene Morse Exodus to a Hidden Valley

[1974: 64–65]

The Lisu are often characterised as strong individualists, to the extent even of labelling them as anarchists. This paper will find out where such a decidedly provocative stereotype originated and its basis in fact, briefly touch on the problem of pejorative labels used in reference to the hill tribes and discuss at some length why the nature of Lisu culture and social structure does not lend itself to such a description.

I will argue that while the Lisu display an individuality which is typical of highlanders, it is difficult to take this

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observation much further. Like all highlanders, their households are relatively independent and provide the foundation for a socio-economic and political framework which mediates day to day activities. They may meet Spencer's definition of an anarchist in that they are proud of a long standing tradition which, "denies the right of any government....to trench upon [their] cultural ideology [which could in difficult circumstances place] them in opposition to the rule of law and central government" but opposition is not a position they prefer to adopt: they are much too pragmatic.

In fact the stereotype becomes dangerous when, because of their long association with the Yunnanese (a few of whom make their living trading in opium and manufacturing heroin), they are seen to be engaged as partners rather than employees in illegal activities. Lisu villages appear to have been the hardest hit by deliberately intimidating or poorly disciplined, punitive army raids on opium growing communities.

Such a misunderstanding, built on years of cultural development marked by a high level of mistrust between lowlanders and highlanders, can do little good today. The ironic truth of the matter is that most Lisu, like hill people in general, are anxious to become Thai citizens. How then to reconcile the image imposed on them and the identity or legal status to which they aspire?

Stereotypes and stereotyping

It is quite normal for people to form impressions of the places they visit. We are often advised that first impressions count, that they mean something which is worth remembering. Visitors to Lisu villages most often first remark on the fierceness of the dogs and then on the proud egalitarian bearing of the people. Once it is discovered that others hold to a similar opinion the observation takes on a weight that makes it acceptable. Once part of an acceptable body of popular or consensus knowledge, the information and

the labels used appear to take on a life of their own. People entering a Lisu village come expecting to see fierce dogs and a proud people so much so that they do not see the sleeping dogs but remember the one dog in a hundred that leaps, teeth bared in display; they do not see people sitting quietly in the shade of their houses embroidering or mending tools but only the well dressed man proudly leaving the village with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

Where does this take us? A broad discussion of the labels and mythology promoted by tour companies would make a study in itself. The type of advertising which appears on bill boards around Chaing Mai (See Plate) are enough to illustrate this. However the broader problem of the sociology of knowledge concerning the highlands and addressed in one way or another by most contributors to this book is perhaps best left for a more academic publication. Here let me limit myself to labels attached to the Lisu.

Forming a popular opinion about a highland group is not just something left to wide-eyed travellers. Missionaries returning to the USA and elsewhere explaining their work to congregations, who provide them with the means to continue their work in their field, indulge in romantic terms to describe "their people".

Paul Lewis, for example, is a Baptist missionary who has worked in Burma since 1947 and northern Thailand since 1968. His colourful book, *Peoples of the Goden Traingle*, is one of the most popular and frequently cited studies of the highland people, and its accounts often resort to stereotypes to distinguish the six different groups he describes. The chapter on the Lisu is headed "Desire for Primacy" and first describes children competing to wear the most beautiful New Year costumes. He concludes the section by saying "A Lisu always wants to be first" [Lewis, 1984: 241] and develops

the theme into a portrayal of a people predisposed to a strong sense of competition and assertion of individual rights which can lead to violence. Lewis says it has been reported that village headman have been killed after adjudication against an aggrieved party and asserts that killings are probably more frequent among the Lisu "than any other tribal group" [Lewis, 1984: 270] although he gives no evidence to support this. The chapter concludes "For every Lisu wants to excel" [Lewis, 1984: 271].

The missionary, Eugene Morse, in his account of his family's adventures in the fascinating journal *Exodus to a Hidden Valley* presents very few generalisations about the Lisu and these are quite different from those of Lewis. Morse sees the Lisu as "a very independent people" [Morse, 1974: 39] and rather than given to violence writes that to avoid offence "The Lisu do not hold with the common democratic concept of majority rule. They feel that the losing minority is bound to be unhappy.... problem(s are) discussed and discussed until an obvious answer emerges". In the following paragraph Morse goes on to note,

It seems only logical that, in a situation where man almost literally holds his life in his own two hands, each individual should be granted as much participation as possible in the decision-making process.... there is no set prerogative, status or authority among individuals. Many times Robert and I — and our wives as well—had to instantly obey orders from our children unquestioningly and instantly (Morse, 1974: 199-200).

The extent of the identification of Lisu ways as a functional and natural response to the environment is also reflected in the quotation offered at the beginning of this Chapter. It is remarkable how closely it approximates to Spencer's definition of an anarchist.

The picture which is built up by exposure to such observations may largely depend on what one thinks of the writer rather than who the Lisu really are. Missionaries are notoriously defensive of "their" people and it is interesting to note that Lewis has specialised on the Akha and Lahu. How to get out of this opinion trap? To what extent can anthropologists lead us to a more objective view?

In fact the anthropologist Dessaint offers comments not too dissimilar to those of Morse when he states that the Lisu highly value the exercise of equal rights [Dessaint, 1972: 96]. Durrenberger also points out that "There are no headmen to make decisions for the villagers, and Lisu loath assertive and autocratic headmen and that this amongst other characteristics are hallmarks of an egalitarian society" [Durrenberger, 1983: 218].

It is in the work of anthropologists that we are most likely to meet ourselves coming the other way. As outsiders do we foist an identity on ethnolinguistic groups or do we merely promote behavioural cultural characteristics of which we approve? One Lisu adage which has always appealed to me is the enigmatic saying that all people are the same height at the knee. I have observed that young people are encouraged to speak at meetings and a strong response must be expected from anybody slighted by word or deed.

However, it is a long behavioural leap from egalitarianism to anarchism. When the government asks a Lisu village to appoint a village headman, the community will readily respond even though they might not feel the need to make a formal appointment in the absence of a request. Their sense of social order runs deep and their pragmatism is readily mobilised to maintain peace. For a society with a reputation for independence, we should not be surprised to learn how remarkably obedient they are and how strictly they

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maintain the rules which support their social structure. Let me review the main institutional components of their society.

The Family and Lineage

Both the nuclear and extended family are known in Lisu society. When young people marry and bring their spouse into their family of origin, the household becomes an extended family. When a married couple decide to set up their own house, the process begins again.

Lisu are largely monogamous. Although they do not forbid a man to have more than one wife, the practice is uncommon. If a man has enough money to pay the bride price and the first wife allows it, he may take a second wife. This only works for men - women are not allowed to take another husband.

Lisu prefer to marry within their own society with lineages maintained through the male line. After marriage the husband usually lives with his wife's parents until he has paid off the bride price when he usually moves back into his own parents' house, bringing his wife with him.

Each of these changes provides an opportunity for the couple to set up their own house but this wish for independence cannot always be fulfilled. The husband must discharge his matrimonial debts before he is free to do as he chooses. Even when a couple set up their own household, they usually choose to make their home in the village of their parents. Parents continue to provide support for their married children and it is advantageous for the couple to remain in a village in which lineage support is available and reciprocal labour exchange easy.

The lineage is by far the most important broader matrix of Lisu social structure. Although according to the stated

ideal that any one lineage is supposed to be the equal of all others, it is considered best to keep numbers up by encouraging cross cousins to marry and remain. This helps to maintain their strength and therefore their bargaining position within the community.

There are more than 30 Lisu lineages but the Lisu claim that only five to six of these are strictly of Lisu origin, the remainder are considered to have been initiated by Chinese marrying into their society. These are still however regarded as equally valid and operate along the same lines. Although lineages are important, within lineages the relationship between sister and brother is much closer than that between cousins. All relatives have to some extent an obligation to help and care for one another.

In small villages perhaps only two to three lineages will be represented but in a big village it is not unusual to have more than ten resident lineages.

The difference between lineages is most clearly marked by the spirits worshipped at the household shrine. Each family maintains its own offering bowls and the number varies from household to household.

Family names are important in indicating whom one can court. Those with the same family name (lineage) or who are in the same sub-lineage cannot, in strict terms, even consider marriage. However, although this is a taboo held to quite strictly, even this can be negotiated if the man has wealth enough to purchase an exception.

In summary we can say that relationships between sisters, brothers and close cousins are strongest. Second order relationships include all other members of the same

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lineage. Last in order of priority come one's obligations to the community.

Educating Children

Lisu train and encourage their children to use their ability to reason and express themselves in front of elders. Children are expected to speak in a forthright manner, not to give in easily and if they feel they are right, to keep after a point until it is accepted or shown to be suspect or false. Both boys and girls speak their minds especially on matters concerning values and rights. They do not readily admit that one of their peers is more important than they; everybody is supposed to be equal. Within the family children are taught not only to which lineage they belong but what they can expect from it as well as their duties towards others. They learn who belongs to their lineage and to treat these people as family and give support where needed.

Social hierarchy: Headmen and Elders.

Lisu are expected to show respect for their elders, especially those within their lineage, but village headmen and administrators are less likely to be treated in the same manner. Like most highlanders, their relationship with holders of administrative offices is much more circumspect. Senior villagers of good reputation will be shown respect regardless of their lineage but a young headman with whom they have few dealings will largely be ignored. If they experience difficulties, they will in preference turn to their family first. This is always the case. Although they know a headman has an important relationship with the government, the family comes first.

Whether they hold the position formally as a government headman or informally by consensus, community leaders are accepted more for proven personal qualities than wealth, trading connections or government friends. Such

people must be knowledgeable, competent and trusted both to respect and exercise the rights and concepts of freedom held by Lisu society as a whole. They are ethically bound not to hold themselves higher than others. Acceptance of headmen neither makes it necessary to show respect towards them at all times nor to listen to and follow all the orders they might give. Each office holder must establish his own community credentials.

Each lineage in a village has one or two senior people, usually older men who are acknowledged for their wisdom and ability to influence others. As many as five to eight elders may make up a traditional village committee. When conflicts arise, this group has the duty of arbitrating and settling the dispute through consultation. If they believe it will help, they do not hesitate to approach government officials or development workers who may be asked to help out by offering another opinion. This committee is also expected to schedule and participate in cultural activities such as the new year ceremony, new rice festival, new corn festival and burial ceremony.

Mo muang.

Ideally each village also has a *mo muang*, a religious leader. It is only in Christian villages that such a person cannot be found. Lisu believe in spirits, as do most Buddhists, but their belief system demands that greater respect be shown to them than in lowland society. To become a *mo muang*, a man must pass a selection test conducted in front of the village spirit shrine. The candidate is expected to throw two sticks to the ground three times in a row and have them both land face up each time. If he is able to do this he is acknowledged as a *mo muang*. In fact the selection process is not quite as casual as this. Candidates are usually married men with children and have other family responsibilities. Before they become candidates they must already have a good knowledge of ritual. The position cannot

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be inherited and for as long as a *mo muang* is resident in the village where he was "chosen" he cannot give up the post. His duties only end when he leaves the community.

The *mo muang* is responsible for fostering religious knowledge, playing a leading role in the performance of ritual and looking after the spirit shrine. He must go to the village spirit shrine every 15 days to change the water and it is he who announces what days are auspicious and hence when people should stop work. The *mo muang* is also a member of the senior committee. If the village does not have either a village headman (*phu yai ban*) or an assistant headman, the *mo muang* is expected to fill this role.

Nei pa.

The *nei pa* medium is a kind of spirit doctor who acts as a contact between the spirit world and the everyday world in which we live. People have many reasons to contact spirits, whether to seek out reasons for sickness or to have their fortunes told. Lisu respect spirits because they believe that they know the rhyme and reason of life which is hidden from humans. When consulted about the cause of sickness or other troubles, the *nei pa* usually indicate that some form of propitiation is necessary to secure their support. Those who follow his advice believe it will solve their problems.

Only men can be mediums, and although there is no rule regarding this, a disproportionate number of the sons of spirit doctors become *nei pa*. The expectation placed on him is stronger than that placed on *mo muang*. Once a medium, always a medium. The spirit doctor cannot quit or withdraw even if he moves away from the village where public acknowledgement was first made of his skills: he remains a *nei pa* until the end of his life. When he grows old, he becomes a very special person, whose knowledge is greatly revered.

Disputes and Nepotism

If two sides in a dispute cannot reach a settlement, the case is brought to the generally acknowledged leader of the village for a hearing. If his judgement is considered to be unfair and the litigants are not satisfied, it is usually because the successful party is closely related to the village committee of elders or that the village leader has a family interest in the affair. People in positions of authority usually help their relatives first, a bias which is strong in all highland minority communities and reflects the importance of kinship.

Even though Lisu have a first obligation to those in their family or the same lineage, they are also expected to respect and cultivate relationships with others. When they feel slighted by an unfair judgement, they resort to speaking their minds in private or gossiping against those who won the case or provided the judgement. Although they usually attempt to save the face of the leader by not making their opinion too public, they will nevertheless have much to say of an unflattering nature: that the committee was made up of people with little intelligence and less than average common-sense and so on. This response and manifestation of discontent, sometimes described as "anarchistic", is clearly not a monopoly of the Lisu.

Migration and Settlement

Oral tradition has it that throughout history the Lisu have been brave warriors. Their oral history records numerous battles fought against enemies, especially Chinese. Their defeat and movement south is also remembered. Their independence has been tested.

Not all migration has been forced upon them by war. The way in which Lisu move to a new village site is quite different from other mountain people. The matter is discussed fully with other members of the lineage and relatives. The

arguments for moving must be convincing and the purpose clear because people will only choose to move if more fertile land is available for settlement or greater economic opportunities can be secured. When a group moves, it is not a follow-the-leader affair but a matter well thought through. New villages are usually set up with lineage clusters in which each hamlet can keep to its own tradition and style of life.

When Lisu come into lasting contact with the Thai administrative system, they are quite willing to accept more formal government guidelines. Their cultural ideology for all its strong statements of independence is distinguished by its pragmatism.

Attitude to other mountain people

The Lisu rank each of the ethnic groups with whom they have contact on a vertical scale. For instance they consider the Hmong and Mien as intelligent, diligent and possessing an admirable ability to make money. The Lisu say that the Meo (Hmong) are particularly clever when it comes to finding new land to cultivate. Many of the sites occupied by the Lisu were formerly worked by the Hmong. They admire the Yao for their literacy.

The Lahu, Akha and Lisu are linguistically closely related, classified as Lolo speakers in the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. They usually communicate with each other in Lahu and it is the Lahu with whom the Lisu seem closest, regarding the two groups as related. While many Lisu can speak Lahu, few Lahu speak Lisu.

Many Lisu men marry Lahu women and bring them home, the brideprice being much less expensive than when marrying a Lisu.

Their attitude towards the Lahu, then, is usually friendly; the economics of the two groups are very close and in some villages Lisu and Lahu live quite happily side by side. Although there are many differences in tradition and culture, their style of cultivation is the same.

As for the Karen and the Akha, they are considered by the Lisu as being less than diligent and are seen as being on a lower level than themselves. Nevertheless, the Akha are acknowledged as people with linguistic ability, largely because they can speak Lahu. Some Lisu men marry Akha girls and some buy Akha children for adoption. Lisu do not choose to marry Karen women because of the considerable differences in tradition and custom. Many Karen opium addicts work for Lisu and this does little for their reputation.

In contrast the Chinese Yunnanese, or *haw* as they are known in Thai, are held in high regard as a people who belong to a much higher culture. Again literacy is a quality much admired and many Lisu are interested in learning to read and write and also to speak Yunnanese, the highland lingua franca. Most Lisu welcome Chinese Yunnanese who choose to set up houses in their villages. As traders and farmers they bring scarce skills and new knowledge. Many Yunnanese marry Lisu women and when children are born they may take their father's family name but perform the rituals necessary to remain within Lisu society. Many of the children of such unions become fully Lisu within a generation or two.

There are Chinese Yunnanese in most Lisu villages and if we trace back family lineages far enough, we eventually find that most have Chinese ancestors. Although we might expect a spiritual rift between Lisu animism and *haw* Taoism, the beliefs are not incompatible and can complement each other quite well. This is in fact one of the reasons why Chinese Yunnanese are able to live peacefully in Lisu

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communities. The Yunnanese are even more pragmatic than the Lisu and it is usually they who adapt to the Lisu way of life.

A few Thai, especially Northern Thai, also live in Lisu villages, working as traders and farmers. A few have married Lisu partners.

This ethnic openness is not so much tolerance in the sense that they consciously put up with outsiders they would rather not accept, but is an established way of life.

Although in their rating system some ethnic groups are given high marks and others low, individuals must first and foremost be themselves. Nobody is accorded a dignity which rests on their ethnic origins any more than their political affiliations. This respect for individuality and independence is what is interpreted by some as a deeply structured anarchism but it is not an explicit part of Lisu ideology. Observers may project an image they want to see but for the Lisu individuality is commonplace, something that most sensible human beings are expected to exercise. Their deep suspicion of individuals who enjoy the exercise of authority and seek power over others may not be held in high regard by some but hardly constitutes anarchism.

The term "anarchist" then must be regarded with suspicion. Clearly, the cultural ideology of the Lisu occupies an important place but a strong sense of individuality and independence should not be confused with Spencer's "opposition to the rule of law and central government". They do not seek to place themselves in opposition to government, to the contrary, as is pointed out by the French social anthropologist Yves Conrad in this book Chapter 8, they are exceptionally pragmatic even in matters regarding identity. Only if their survival were placed at risk by the state would

they embark on the dangerous course of defensive action. The problem with the term "anarchist" is that it is so often used in a pejorative sense, as a synonym for irrational opposition to all authority, that it has become a word of abuse. Strong emphasis on the negative aspect as opposition to all authority is taken as its sole meaning. As such, its use is misleading and dangerous. Lisu culture acknowledges authority in many forms and there are quite specific role responsibilities attached.

Lisu participation in development work

When compared with the enthusiasm expressed for ritual celebrations, the support given to development work is relatively muted. This is especially so in such cases where projects are initiated by outsiders on the understanding that village labour will be "volunteered" to carry out the work. Communal activities of this nature are new and the formal relationships that command such participation are not well developed. Although social arrangements exist which make it possible to call on cooperation from villagers, the response is usually poor.

The Lisu attitude towards being called to help is to ask who is doing the requesting. Development workers should eschew any hint that an order is involved which admits the right of one member of the community to exercise authority over another. It is here that the stronger ideological content of Lisu individualism is evident. Any activity of a formal nature that may involve communal work always faces problems. It is a quality development workers ought to understand rather than too readily label as uncooperativeness. A task well prepared and well understood by the participant-beneficiaries will receive full support. A task for which cooperation is demanded will always fail.

Pejorative terms are commonly used by development workers when talking about highland ethnic minorities. Chupinit (Chapter 3, this volume) reports Karen being called

“asphalt,” to describe them as “slow and sticky” and Baffie (Chapter 15, this volume) shows that in comic strip form hill tribes come off rather badly when used as objects onto which writers and artists project unconscious content for readers’ entertainment. Is the term “anarchist” then just another projection, a more intellectual version of a well established bad habit?

In practical terms we should know that if we would like to work with the Lisu, we ought to know their customs, beliefs and character and also the traditional style of village administration. If an approach is made which is sensitive to Lisu practises and culturally informed, the consequence of any request is likely to be successful. Whatever the rules a people might state, their pragmatism and willingness to contribute to a common beneficial end will easily bypass cultural ideology and lineage differences. If cooperation or participation is not forthcoming it is usually not because they are in principle opposed to working together but because they do not see how the undertaking can be useful to them.

In such a situation we need to come to development work ready to ask such questions such as, “How many lineages are there in the chosen villages? Are there any outstanding conflicts between them? What are the causes of disputes and how entrenched are they?” We ought not set our expectations too high. The important idea of popular participation will only work on the basis of trust and a good cultural understanding. We ought also to be aware of the overall political structure of the village and beware of nepotism so that outside resources are made available to those who will serve community needs and not divert assistance to their kin’s exclusive use.

The essence of the Lisu heart is a deeply held spiritual perception of the natural order, and the family has a central place in this. Their perception of Thai government intervention

is still being formed but they are strongly aware that they can fit if given the chance to belong within the Thai milieu. Modern lines of communication, education and development make it much easier for them to accept that they are part of the Thai family.

Development workers and researchers are always made aware that they are agents of change: representatives of the outside world. When we understand the Lisu, it is not difficult to come to terms with their individualism and pride. The formal demands of modern administrative systems can annoy us all and arbitrary demands made by officious or patronising officers leave a bad taste in the mouths of all who must deal with them. The Lisu rejection of such people is a reminder of how we should behave. Lisu beliefs and behaviour are not cast in a mould which places them in permanent opposition to either contemporary bureaucratic procedures or life in a democratic state but they have yet to accept obligations and duties which lowlanders take for granted.

The term "anarchist" when applied to the Lisu without clarification is very misleading. Their own social structure allows for some to exercise more power than others: The authority of elders and village leaders is recognised everywhere. The Lisu are indiscriminately opposed neither to government intervention in their communities nor to being incorporated into the Thai state: on the contrary most are anxious to acquire Thai citizenship. Lack of participation in development related project activities is not evidence of lack of loyalty but of lack of understanding as to how they will benefit. Age old ceremonies which accompany such calendric events as the new year or which mark births and deaths, for example, have a stronger cultural context and meaning than the mysteries of contemporary development ideology. Lisu ideas regarding egalitarianism, individualism and pride should not be viewed as negative qualities but rather as positive characteristics of a people who, if given the chance, will easily find a place in Thailand's plural society.

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