Lisu Identity in Northern Thailand: A Problematique for Anthropology

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This paper presents a contemporary case study of the problematique of ethnic identification and identity in the multi-ethnic context of the highlands of north Thailand. Some of the theoretical and methodological issues explored here were first raised a few decades ago by Leach in his study of the Kachin. Since then a handful of scholars have made significant contributions to our understanding of what is a difficult and controversial matter.

Here I will attempt a brief and balanced synthesis of the main ideas and suggestions concerning the definition and use of ethnicity in an "ethnically" heterogeneous society. Because some of the "same" ethnic groups are represented in Burma, South-West China and Thailand, my discussion will rest on the literature dealing with this region.

With this outline in mind and with reference to both my own fieldwork and existing literature I will explore the question of Lisu identity in Northern Thailand.

The Root of the Problem

The following considerations stem from a basic empirical fact: the readily noticeable cultural diversity of the peoples in-

habiting the mountainous border area between Thailand and Burma.

Apart from Thai and Chinese highlanders, six main "hill tribes" live in the uplands and are distinguished from each other by language, dress, customs, rituals and beliefs, art forms and economic and social organization.

An inventory of their distinctive characteristics can be found in the compilation of Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave's *Ethnic Groups in mainland Southeast of Asia* (1964). A remarkable photographic illustration of the cultural distinctiveness of some of these groups is also provided in Paul and Elaine Lewis's *Peoples of the Golden Triangle* (1984)

Some authors, going beyond the conventional dichotomy between lowland and highland societies and cultures, have associated the various groups with distinct ecological niches and subsistence systems. (e.g. A.Y. and W.Y. Dessaint 1982).

Still other levels of differentiation can be found in the structures and forms of social organization; some are said to function with patri, matri or bilineal kinship systems; some to have strong leadership, others to be rather egalitarian (eg. Durrenberger 1971; Prasert, Chapter 7).

This cultural multiplicity and diversity raises a methodological problem with profound theoretical implications: how to account for it?

The very enterprise of attempting to differentiate peoples in a systematic way rests on the implicit postulate that they are significantly different from one another. This focus on differences ensures that differences will be found and implies that their relevance should be taken for granted. This logic leads to an incorrect interpretation and understanding of empirical reality.

To record the existence of cultural differences between units of population is one thing. To attempt to list for each group an inventory of unique, distinctive and characteristic traits is another. This latter approach is the outcome of a particular conceptualization of a given society and its culture seen as an immutable historical entity with clear cultural boundaries. (On this issue, see Leach, 1954 and 1960; Maran La Raw, 1967; and particularly Lehman, 1967 and 1979; but also Keyes 1979; and Kunstadter 1979). It is only one step further along this road to consider the members of a group as having a common ethnic origin, a view that happens to be very much in agreement with the mythologies of these groups. (About the confusion between scientific classification and native category usage see Moerman, 1967). It is thus assumed that these groups have, through a long march over the centuries, come from a distant historical homeland, and their recent arrival in Thailand is the latest leg in a long journey.

What these groups (with the exception of the Yao) have in common is the absence of a written language. This makes a reconstruction of their past history very much guesswork. Scattered mention in chronicles is often of little help particularly those written by Westerners who viewed highlanders as "ethnic minorities" quite different and distinct from each other as well as from "majority" populations.

The main reason why these groups are perceived as such is that they speak different and mutually unintelligible languages. Cultural differences which can also be observed are then treated as concomitant and serve to reinforce the idea that language boundaries correspond to culture boundaries. Thus are defined ethnic groups, each one supposedly living in a sort of splendid isolation with a language and a culture peculiar to itself. Membership in such an ethnic category is seen as exclusive and determined by "participation in a particular historical tradition". The "ethnicity" of a group is, therefore "seen as depending on the origins of that tradition and of the people bearing it" (Lehman 1967: 102). According to the theory that the origin of

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a language is likely to be located in the area where most of its family branches are concentrated, groups such as Lisu and Lahu, whose languages are, on the basis of linguistic similarities sometimes classified as Tibeto-Burman would ideally originate in Tibet.

Leach calls these speculations "fables" and denounces the "myth of philological origins", stressing that "language groupings are of sociological, rather than historical significance" ln Leach's view the ability to speak a language as a mother-tongue "has no necessary implication for the historical antecedents of the individuals concerned" (1951 : 51). There are linguists who have worked in the region who would apparently agree with him (Bradley, 1983 : 46-55).

This does not mean though, as Lehman points out, that we should therefore underestimate the importance of historical evidence in helping to define "not perhaps a common history, but the context of ethnogenesis" (1979: 216).

Besides the few valid historical inferences that can be drawn from language distributions, languages as a criteria for defining ethnic groups and cultural intergroup differences appears to be equally inadequate, if not irrelevant.

Le Bar et.al.confronted with "the problem of the identification of units for the purpose of ethnographic description", although conceding that language is "not always in agreement with the realities of cultural identification and cultural dynamics", still consider that it constitutes "the only consistent and complete basis for the selection and arrangement of units" (1954 Preface). Yet in the course of the subsequent descriptive summaries, "a whole range of other cultural elements is treated as if they were co-variant with language" (Hinton, 1983: 158) explicitly showing that the authors cling, de facto, to the idea that somehow it must be possible to establish a proper taxonomy of actual groups together with their respective cultures.

The idea of a systematic correspondence between ethnic identity, language and culture is challenged by ethnographic facts reported by several authors.

On one hand, groups identified as sharing a common ethnic identity may speak different languages. The most well documented example for South-East Asia is the case of the Kachin (Leach, 1954; Maran La Raw, 1967) an ethnic group, or rather category, which includes people speaking up to forty mutually unintelligible languages and dialects and displaying marked cultural variations. This is also the situation of the well-known Karen (Lehman, 1967 and 1979; Keyes et.al. 1979). In Kachin state alone at the lower level of the group(s) labelled Lisu (Maran La Raw, 1967: 132) three dialects have been identified.

On the other hand, these very groups that are linguistically defined as different may follow, despite their respective cultural singularities, an overwhelmingly homogeneous common cultural pattern. Again it is the case of the Kachin,

who all share notions of common ancestry, practice the same form of marriage system, have an almost homogeneous customary law and social control system, use only Jinghpaw for ritual purposes, and are largely polyglots...Genetically the languages are divergent; culturally and bilingually, the groups of speakers converge (Maran La Raw, 1967 : 133).

Before proceeding to examine other interpretations offered in the attempt to account for this ethnically complex situation, it is necessary to review concepts in wide general use and provide a contemporary definition.

- **Ethnic group:** a set of individuals with similar consciousness and mutual interests centred on some shared understanding of common values.

- **Ethnic category:** a class of people or groups, based on real or presumed cultural characteristics (e.g. the categories "Kachin","Karen" etc.....)

- **Ethnic identification:** process of assigning an individual (including oneself) to a group or category, and thus implicitly recognizing boundaries of community of interests and predicting a set of behavioral traits appropriate to the members of the group or category (Kunstadter, 1979: 119-20).

It is a corollary of these definitions that ethnicity has ·nothing to do with ancestral racial-like origins and that an "ethnic group" is not necessarily ethnic in this sense. Ethnicity, like other social categorizations, functions as a means of differentiation between groups and is defined, not in absolute terms, but by reference to these other groups. "Ethnicity is a matter of the conceptual organization of intergroup relations" (Lehman, 1979: 216). The proposal, first formulated by Leach, to view ethnic groups as social, rather than cultural entities, whose definition is a function of structural opposition to other such social groups provides a starting point for discussion. This structural opposition fundamentally depends on differential access to productive resources, fecundity of women, political power etc...(Keyes, 1979: 3).

In Lehman's terms,

> When people identify themselves as members of some "ethnic" category...they are taking positions in culturally defined systems of intergroup relation...In such systems, ethnic categories are formally like (interdependent and complementary) roles (Lehman, 1967: 106).

It follows that an ethnic category may be defined as corresponding to a social, culturally defined role in an ethnic role

system. This cultural definition is found in these "symbolic for-
mulations of ethnic identity" (Keyes, 1979: 4) which includes
myths, beliefs, rituals, folklore, art etc. That ethnic distinctions
presuppose linguistic and cultural differences does not require
that these differences be totally unique. Moerman has questioned
the triviality and superficiality of the "distinctive" traits of Lue
ethnicity and pointed out their similarity to those people from
whom they wish to distinguish themselves (Moerman, 1965: 156).

As Lehman stresses,

One cannot ascribe aspects of cultural inventory to
membership in such a low level entity as an ethnic
category, when it is objectively so much more widely
distributed among historically related groups...and
can often be shown to be most relevant to higher
order social structures (Lehman, 1979: 325).

Thus,

What counts in the cultural definition of and ethnic
category is not possession of a unique common cul-
tural "heritage", but the use of a set of cultural ele-
ments (language included, possibly) in a claim to
membership of the category" (Lehman, 1979: 233).

The point is that this set is perceived as distinctive and charac-
teristic of this identity.

It is probably in this sense that Barth sees the sharing of
a common "assemblage of traits" by members of ethnic groups
as "an implication or result" of their claim to the same ethnic
identity, the determination of group membership being a func-
tion of "ascription and identification by the actors themselves"
(But for a possibly controversial interpretation of this position
see Keyes, 1979: 4). What Barth could have stressed here is the
distinction between an ethnic identity as a cultural model, and
the actual individuals or groups who may at some point claim

this identity. Social and cultural systems are reference systems which are used selectively in specific environments where other groups use such systems (Lehman, 1967: 105). In such an environment ethnic categories are defined, not in absolute terms, but by "role complementation"(Ibid: 108). That is, an ethnic category does not correspond to some discrete ancestral group, but to a group or groups of people who assume a social role whose definition is a function of the environmental context of other such roles. The necessary condition for the existence of an ethnic group as such is not its linguistic/cultural distinctiveness, but its structural opposition to other groups in relation to different resources. Ethnic identities appear then to serve as adaptive strategies for people in a certain social conjuncture. As circumstances change, so do strategies change. Leach (1954) has shown the inherent ambivalence and flexibility of the *gumsa-gumlao* system operative among the Kachin of Burma where Kachin "become" Shan by adopting a type of Shan social organization. (For a critique and reformulation of Leach's theory see Maran La Raw, 1967: 138:40). A consequence of this is that ethnic groups, identities and categorizations are not permanent, and that their applications often depends on social context (Kunstadter, 1979: 120). This implies changes in ethnic identity: some groups or individuals may, alternatively or even concurrently, claim different identities.

The Case of Northern Thailand: what is it to be Lisu today?
I will now turn to the case of the Lisu in Northern Thailand and probe the specific nature of their social organization, particularly regarding these fundamental aspects: systems of kinship and affinity and of intergroup relations. This is explored as part of an attempt to delineate the Lisu role and identity in the ethnic mosaic of Thailand.

Lisu along with other major groups (e.g. Hmong, Mien, Akha, Lahu, Karen) are globally referred to by Thai authorities as *"chao khao"* (literally mountain people) and by English speakers as "hill tribes".

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In South-East Asian ethnology, some societies have been labelled "tribal" when they "are not congregations for a great religion, have little supra-village political organization, and are only superficially involved in a cash economy" (Moerman, 1967: 153). A "tribal" society is defined as such in contrast to a "civilized" one (Leach, 1954 & 1960; Lehman, 1963; Moerman, 1965) and although Leach's initial distinction between the two on the basis of ecological and social organization differences has since been considered to be too drastic and simplistic, it is still widely used (e.g. Lehman, 1967; Maran La Raw, 1967).

A similar inter-dependence presides over the politically defined relations between a "minority" and a "majority", which cannot exist as mutually exclusive entities and must be viewed as related systems (Maran La Raw, 1967: 134).

These definitions call for some precision regarding their use in Northern Thailand. The groups encompassed in the category *chao khao* are called "hill tribes" to differentiate them from other "minorities" or "ethnic groups" such as Chinese or Shan, who also live in the hills.

Here I will deliberately leave aside a discussion of the Lisu as a minority within the Thai state polity and limit myself to a definition of their position in the local system of inter-ethnic relations.

Lisu Social organization
Lisu society in Thailand is divided into clans. Six of these clans are said by Lewis (1984: 258) to be "traditional" Lisu clans (this notion will subsequently be questioned), while others are Chinese-Lisu clans resulting from intermarriage withYunnanese Chinese, known in Thailand as *haw*.

Descent is unilineal: membership in a clan is in principle inherited from the father. If the founder of a lineage is Chinese

his descendants will bear a Chinese clan name. Intermarriage with Chinese creates no problem because Lisu and Chinese descent systems are similar. In the case of residence in Lisu society, the Chinese origin of a clan name is thus identifiable. Actually, in Chiang Dao and Pai areas (Chiangwat Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son), such Chinese-Lisu clan names number more than twenty and most appear to have been fairly recently incorporated, with the memory of a *haw* ancestor often as close as the third generation. Similarly, this process of assimilation into Lisu society is fairly common. Sometimes it may be only temporary, given to either *haw* couples or families temporarily resident in a village or fixed as in the case of single males who marry a Lisu bride and take up residence in her village. Then again *haw* brides may be "imported" into Lisu communities.

My collection of genealogies also reveals a high frequency of incorporation involving Lahu men and women. Lahu do not have a clan system like the Lisu. If circumstances do not make it necessary to claim Lisu descent, the descendants of a Lahu man are called Lahu Na or Lahu Nyi according to the Lahu subgroup into which he was born. The question of whether these people are really Lahu or Lisu simply does not have much relevance for the people themselves. I did not come across a specific term for a special category of people who might have been called Lahu-Lisu as there apparently is one (according to Lewis and Durrenberger) for Chinese-Lisu (Hypa-Lisu).

If marriages with *haw* and Lahu are, in order of precendence by far the most numerous (at least for Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son provinces) there is also evidence for intermarriage with members of other ethnic groups. Where Lisu and Akha live in close proximity they can also intermarry. In Chiang Rai province, there is at least one case of a village,Doi Chang, where the two ethnic groups live in one community. In Mae Hong Son there are a few Lisu villages which include distinct *haw* communities.

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In a somewhat less typical situation I have witnessed the progressive integration of two Shan *tai yai* brothers into a Lisu village. These two came from Burma to harvest opium and remained to become residents. Two years later they spoke and dressed like Lisu. The older brother succeeded the head of the household with whom he was living after his host and employer was killed in a vendetta. He married the widow. His younger brother (17 years of age) would most probably also have married a Lisu girl had he not been arrested while guarding an opium pack-train for which he was subsequently imprisoned for life. It is significant that when interrogated by Thai police the unfortunate young man alternatively claimed both Shan and Lisu identity.

In contrast, apparently no marriages are entered into between Lisu and Hmong, Mien or Karen. This is not due to lack of geographical proximity. In the Pai area for instance, Lisu are often in contact with Karen; they go to Karen villages to buy locally distilled alcohol, pigs, and other supplies. Some Karen periodically work for Lisu as wage labourers but not the other way around. Lisu boys may be sent to live and study in Karen villages where there is a school. Lisu often pass through Karen villages which lie along the way from clusters of Lisu villages to the nearest market-town. Despite these opportunities for developing a degree of familiarity I am not aware of marriages taking place.

The same rule holds for the Hmong of whom there are many in the Pai district. Relationships between Lisu and Hmong are weak and virtually non-existent. One reason for this may be that Lisu villages tend to be grouped in clusters which occupy and control the upper part of a mountainous area; Lisu and Hmong thus would mutually exclude each other in their competitive search for possession of a similar ecological niche.

It is interesting to recount a Lisu explanation for this Lisu-Hmong separation. A Lisu man told me it was based on "cultural"

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incompatibility: Hmong men, he said, are polygamous, opi-
um addicts and lazy, while Lisu men are monogamous, do not
smoke opium and are hard-working; therefore, no Lisu girl ever
wants to marry a Hmong.

It should also be noted that I have not come across any
cases of a resident Northern Thai *(yuan* or *khon muang)* settled
in a Lisu village and married to a Lisu woman, nor of a *yuan*
woman married to a Lisu man, although direct contacts between
the two groups are common.

So far I have only considered changes in ethnic identity
resulting in the assimilation of outsiders into Lisu society. It is
reasonable to assume that if some people may become Lisu the
opposite may also occur that individuals may cease to be such.
This is obviously more difficult to trace in a systematic way.
I can however provide a few examples which help cast light on
the process of ethnic identity changes.

Study villages

To illustrate the "fluidity and ambiguity" (Lehman's
terms) that characterize Lisu society, it is necessary to adopt a
diachronic perspective. I had the opportunity to probe some of
the major changes that have taken place in a cluster of Lisu vil-
lages over the past eight years. A selection of examples illustrates
the specific dynamic at work.

Within my study area, the number of settlements has re-
mained approximately the same but one third of the villages have
either moved a short distance, some several times, or been aban-
doned while new ones have been built on new sites.

Similarly, but not necessarily synchronically, the compo-
sition of each village population has undergone modifications.
Some families have moved from one village to another; others
have left the area (some only to come back later) and a few new-
comers have moved in.

These changes had been dictated by a variety of signifi-cant circumstances which are too involved to report in detail in this paper but a brief summary of the history of one village and its population provides an illustration of a broader trend.

In 1967 Mahisu had fourteen houses. Analysed in terms of the ethnic origin of each household head, the village revealed a remarkable heterogeneity: Lisu, Lolo, *haw* and three vari-eties of Lahu (Na, Shi, Nyi). The village was recorded as a Lisu village by malaria teams and the pattern of settlement followed a ritual Lisu layout. All the women, girls, young men and chil-dren wore Lisu dress; some older men did not; one of them could not speak Lisu.

Ten years later all of the older men still lived in Lisu vil-lages, the majority in the same area, some of which were in Pai. But, as a significant example, two sons of one household head (the same one who could not and still cannot speak Lisu) live nowadays in a *haw* community. Another son (from a different family) has married into his grand-father's Lahu village.

Nowadays the village of Mahisu does not exist as a Lisu village; it was abandoned a few years ago and taken over by *haw*. In some cases financial compensation was paid to the former owners for the fields they had cleared.

On the basis of this set of information let me underline a few points and attempt to set them in their day to day context.

What the ethnic label "Lisu" primarily describes is a shared life style. The matter of ancestral origins is clearly not important. Basically, to be Lisu is to live and work in a Lisu com-munity and to be recognized as such by other villagers. In other words, it is to be part of a specific network of social relations. This network fundamentally consists of kinship and affinity relations. Lisu in everyday life do not address or refer to each other by

names but use terms which describe their position in a kinship or affinity relation. These complementary terms correspond to status and sets of associated rights and obligations. Thus the kinship and affinity system appears to be the fundamental structure of the social organization and the privileged means of social recruitment.

In a village, individuals are (truly or fictitiously) related to each other within this frame of reference. Such relationships also link individuals in different villages, and in various ethnic groups. As a direct consequence of intermarriage this reference system extends beyond the limits of a single ethnic group. This last point is of particular help in accounting for the fluidity and ambiguous nature of ethnic groups in general, and of Lisu society in particular. There is evidence of constant movement in and out, one privileged aspect of which, when observing the evolution of the composition of a Lisu community is the continuous assimilation of "outsiders". But these outsides are not strangers. To understand the nature and the modalities of this general process, assimilation must be viewed as only one side of the coin. One is compelled to give up what Leach called the Mac Mahon conception of boundaries between separate contiguous territories and their distinct populations. This static interpretation of ethnic multiplicity is definitely misleading.

Ethnic groups are not closed, isolated and independent population units living in autonomy in "remote" areas. On the contrary it is evident that relationships between ethnic groups are multiple, albeit differential and circumstantial. An important feature of these various relations is that many of them are defined, not in terms of ethnic criteria but in different non-ethnic hierarchies (on this particular point, see Marlowe, 1979), for instance, patron-client relations not based on ethnicity.

What the system of intergroup relations points out is a general state of ebb and flow, a tidal flow of individuals in and out of the ethnically defined social alternatives which ethnic

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groups represent. This movement is channelled through different interlinked networks. What characterizes the system of relations of the Lisu with the *haw* and the Lahu, by contrast to the type of relations Lisu have with other groups, is that its structure is a network of kinship and affinity connections.

This has several important implications. The attempt to circumscribe a Lisu entity outside a given context is futile. Various Lisu groups or sub-groups must be primarily viewed as contextual categorizations.

Who makes the categorization, how and why?
An attempt to answer this question must, if only briefly, examine ideas discussed in the literature on the Lisu concerning ancestry, place of origin and the origin of both the name Lisu and clan names.

The implications are quite radical. If an ethnic group is not ethnic at all in the usual sense; if individuals, depending on circumstances actually circulate between ethnic categories and, by doing so, take up available alternative social roles, then it is apposite to reject the deep-rooted idea of ethnic entities based on ancestral origins. What is remarkable is that scholars continue to try to retain this notion. Lewis for instance observes for the Lisu of Thailand that:

> Six clans are traditionally Lisu, and have Lisu names.... There are further nine principal clans which have evolved from inter-marriage with Yunnanese (Lewis, 1984: 258).

This statement is of particular interest but unfortunately Lewis does not elaborate and we are left to debate what it means "to be traditionally Lisu". This is particularly tantalizing because according to Lewis's formulation it clearly does not rest solely on bearing a Lisu name.

In the absence of an explicit elaboration a tempting interpretation presents itself. Are there in Thailand two kinds of Lisu: the "pure" ones, so to say, and the "mixed" ones; a sort of authentic Lisu hard-core whose ethnic integrity would have been partially lost through the progressive assimilation of Yunnanese outsiders? One wonders how such a view could be convincingly substantiated: existing documentation (ancient chronicles, travellers observations, missionaries accounts etc) tend to suggest a different interpretation.

A survey of the literature such as Dessaint's *Lisu Annotated Bibliography* reveals that descriptions of Lisu by various authors at different times and at disparate places can be quite at odds with each other regarding anything from physical features, possible origins, behaviour, habits, dress, etc to types of social, economic and political organization. One constant feature however, reported by several authors in Burma as well as in China is their hybrid character, their mixing and intermarrying with local neighbours. This explains why different and sometimes contradictory opinions may have been arrived at regarding, for instance, the location of a hypothetical homeland believed by some authors to have been in eastern Tibet, by others in northwest Yunnan; or, as another example, the linguistic affiliations noted between the Lisu and the Lolo, the Moso,the Lutzu, the Atzi Kachin, the Burmese, the Lahu, the Akha, etc (Dessaint: 72).

There is no reason to question the accuracy of the observations, and even the validity of some of the speculations of various authors on the basis of their disparity. On the very contrary, it is precisely this disparity which gives the clue to what may ultimately turn out to be the truth of the matter, the actual process operative from time immemorial.

To take up again the matter of an original homeland. The conflicting answers to this alone indicate that the Lisu themselves are unable to answer, at least not in terms that make sense to those who ask the question.

Fraser writes,

> The origin of the Lisu race...is uncertain. The uniform testimony of the people themselves, from widely separated districts, is that they come from the "head of the river", which they refer, very vaguely, to either the N'Mai Hka, Salween, or Mekhong rivers...As it can be observed that even the present tendency of Lisu migration is in a southerly direction..hence we may suppose that their original home is in or near Eastern Tibet (Fraser, 1922; i).

Enriquez reports,

> The Lisu speak of the birth-place of their race as the "Moon Rocks" of Rgha-hanpa...It is difficult to arrive at any definite conclusion with regard to the origin, history or migrations of the race (Enriquez, 1923: 72).

and elsewhere

> Many (Lisu) say (that they come) from the Upper Salween: some mention Hsiang hsiang (near Hpimaw): and others speak obscurely of the Wa Ba district in Upper Mekhong. It seems more than probable that they came down from Eastern Tibet. (But he also warns) "the whole fabric is guess work (and) the argument is mainly philological and cannot be regarded as conclusive, seeing, as we do, **races around us who change their speech and identify without apparent effort** (my emphasis) (Enriquez, 1921: 72).

Both authors acknowledge the argumentation is rather weak and tentative, based on guesswork rather than historical verification of southward migration.

Enriquez, in his attempt "towards explaining the occurrence of the various races, whose distribution at first appears incomprehensible", is at a loss to account for the directions of the migrations, and in one single page (1923: 80) three times

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invokes the "strange instinct" that is "urging the people to the south". Then, he notes for instance that,

> Driven north, the Pyu founded a new capital at Pagan, consolidated, amalgamated with other tribes, and subsequently, **vanished, emerging again** (phoenix wise) to new life as Burmans" (1923: 79)... "The ancient Sak may have turned round in their tracks and **reappeared again** as Kadus" (1923: 80)....a generation ago, the Kuki Chins left the Chin Hills, settled in Maniput, and since 1877 have re-entered Burma again in the Somra Hill Tracts at a point considerably to the north of their original settlements (1923: 80).

Leach states quite explicitly (1954) that the Lisu may live with and marry non-Lisu, and may change ethnic identity. Consistent with these observations, two remarks help put things in proper perspective. Commenting on the Kachin-Lisu, Lehman stress that "Despite the fact that some kind of Kachin are Lisu, it would be meaningless to ask whether the latter are a "kind" of Kachin since everywhere else, Lisu are in no way Kachin." (1979 : 231). As for Durrenberger, he quite cleverly reflects that to be Lisu is perhaps first of all not to be "Karen, Akha, Lahu or any other ethnic group in the network of such groups" (1971 : 14).

What all these observations point to is quite clear. No socio-cultural homogeneity nor specificity whatsoever can be claimed for the Lisu "tribe" as a whole. What the Lisu of Burma, China and Thailand have in common is that they resemble their immediate neighbours rather than their distant "kinsmen". What remains is an ethnic label whose significance and relevance is local and contextual. It is therefore quite naive to consider that these people known as Lisu nowadays are the direct descendents of the ancient inhabitants of an original homeland that cannot be located with any certainty. **Lisu do not come from nowhere; they come from everywhere within an area that in-**

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cludes eastern India, northern Burma, south-west China and, recently, Northern Thailand.

What does the name "Lisu" mean?
It is often claimed that the proper name for the "group" is Lisu. The Lisu refer to themselves and are referred to by others by this name just as they in turn refer to other groups like the Akha, Lahu, Hmong, Mien, Karen etc. with whom they share a similar life style.

According to Dessaint,

They are known to the Chinese as Li, Liso, Lisaw, Lihsaw, Lishaw, Lishu, or Lip'a. The northern most Lisu along the Salween are called Lutzu (not to be confused with the true Lutzu, further north and west), or Yehjen. The latter term is probably related to the Kachin terms for Lisu: Yawyin, Yawyen, Yaoyen. Lisu in Burma who have been less influenced by Kachin are sometimes called Shisham, while those more influenced are called Lasaw. The Maru refer to them as Lasi. The Lolo (Yi) call them Lip'o, and call those living along the Salween La-u-p'o. Shans and Northern Thai know them as Khae Liisoo, Liisaw or Lisshaw (Dessaint, 1971: 71).

Enriquez notes that,

The Chinese call these people Lisaw, except in the east and central parts of Yunnan, where they give them their proper title of Lisu. Just there, perversely enough, the Lisu call themselves Lihpaw. The Naru and Lashi call them respectively Lasi, and Leurseur. The Chinese call the Kachin races generally Yejen or Ye-ren (Savages), and the Kachins have passed the same name on to the Lisu, changing it slightly in Yawyin. The Chinese never speak of the Lisu as Ye-ren (Enriquez, 1921: 72).

What these various remarks reveal is that: first, people considered to be Lisu by outsiders may actually call themselves

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by different names; second, each dominant group makes distinctions between various Lisu, usually on the basis of their dress styles which also reflects the extent to which they are locally influenced by the dominant culture. Kachin distinguish between Shisham and Lasaw; Lolo between Lip'o and La-u-p'o; Chinese between Pe Lisu, He Lisu and Hwa Lisu. Needless to say, these categorizations are local and contextual; it is irrelevant and pointless to ask Lisu in Thailand whether they belong for instance to the Pe, He or Hwa "subgroup".

Let us now consider the alleged meaning of the name Lisu. Here again they are multiple and have little in common except that they usually fit the view of those who use them.

Dessaint signals that the first radical of the Chinese term means "dog", which would explain why "wild dog" has been suggested. This is an appellation commonly used by Chinese in reference to "barbarians". According to Enriquez, the meaning of the name Yawyin given to the Lisu by the Kachin means "savage". For Fraser Lisu means, "People who have come down" and for Ta'o (1984), "Born from the stone". Dessaint, or rather some of his informants, claim it is a combination of *ili* "custom", "law" and *isu* "one who runs from", hence "outlaw, rebel". Last, but certainly not least, a Thai social worker suggested "Loser" (Khun Duanchai; personal communication). As for me, I never succeeded in getting any Lisu to volunteer a meaning.

To end this review, let me now examine the question of clan names.

Fraser is once again helpful,

> Many Lisu have Chinese surnames and claim Chinese origin. Though all Lisu clan surnames have their Chinese equivalents, some have Chinese surnames without Lisu equivalents: these are usually descendants of Chinese adopted into Lisu families. But even Lisu with ordinary Lisu clan surnames will

sometimes claim to be of Chinese extraction, averring
that their ancestors originally came from eastern
China, usually from the province of Kiangsi - the an-
cestral home of most of the Chinese living near the
Burma frontier. Such Lisu do not, however, boast
of their Chinese origin. No Lisu is ashamed to own
his race, whereas the aborigines of Eastern Yunnan,
where Chinese influence is stronger, are often
ashamed to admit that they are not Chinese, ànd,
indeed, tend to become absorbed in the latter race
(Fraser, 1922: ii).

Enriquez writing on the same question observes that,

The main subdivisions of the Yawyin race
appear to be called Tawn Kya, Hgwa Hpa, Ngaw
Hpa, Naw Kya, Gu Hpa, Lair Mair, Bya Hpa, Dzi
Hpa, Waw Hpa (level tone), and Waw Hpa (descend-
ing tone)....All however do not occur in British terri-
tory. Those which do are known to the Kachins by
Kachin names, **though there seems to be some incon-
sistency in the identification** (my emphasis). Thus,
lists obtained from Kachins and Yawyins at Pajua
(Sima) do not agree exactly with lists obtained in
Sadon...Since we always communicate with Yawyins
in the Kachin language, the clans are usually known
to us by their Kachin names. Thus the Tawn Kya are
spoken of as Mitung in Kachin; the Ngwa Hpa and
Ngaw Hpa as Marip; the Zaw Kya as Lahpai; in
Myitkyina, the Lair-mair are known to the Kachin
as N Hkum, but in Bhamo as Lassang; and at Pajau
the Zaw Kya were identified most positively as
Labya.... The Yawyin families appear to have been
named after individual peculiarities, or after animals.
Thus the Ngwa Hpa means Fish People; Ngaw Hpa,
Joined People etc...." (Enriquez, 1921: 73).

Ch'en who conducted field research in the Hsik'ang province on Lisu and Shui-t'ien groups who had migrated from Yunnan, reports the following:

The Li-Su and Shui-t'ien have adopted Chinese surnames (hsing). All families belonging to the She-tsu group of the Li-su bear the surname Ho; those of the Mai-tsu group have the surnames Chang, Wei, Ku, Li, Lan, Chi, Yang and others. But under the Chinese surnames their original clan names can be observed. The She-tsu group has the Li-su name Hai-tsu-p'a. "Tsu-pa" means "surname"; hai means "rat". In other words, the Li-su surname is "rat". The word "hai" is similar in pronunciation to the Chinese character "Ho". Therefore, the Chinese surname Ho was adopted. There, however, exist in this group twelve clans which take their name from twelve different kinds of rats. (Some say that the Li-su in Yunnan have as many as twenty or thirty different clan-names, all of them being surnamed Ho, but most observers agree that there are twelve in number)...the surnames of the Mai-tsu group are also derived from different clan-names. (Plum, millet, bear, sheep, wolf etc....). It is quite clear that a Li-su clan always adopts the Chinese translation of his clan name, in order to serve as its Chinese surname" (Ch'en 1947: 25 6).

These various reports highlight a number of points and call for comments. First, wherever they are, Lisu adopt a lingua franca translation of their Lisu clan names which, as Enriquez notes, leads to some inconsistency in labels of identification. The same process can be observed in Northern Thailand today where Ngwa Hpa are called Lao Yipa or Sae Li, Bia Hpa Saemi, Li Kya Sinli or Saenli etc...It is also interesting to discover that clan names on both of the lists provided by Enriquez for Northern Burma and Ch'en for Southern China can be found in Northern Thailand. But, as Fraser stresses, if there are Chinese surnames

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without Lisu equivalents, there are also Lisu with ordinary Lisu clan surnames who sometimes claim to be of Chinese extraction. So much for the idea that the origin of a clan could be traced through its name alone. Fraser quoted by Enriquez, (1921: 73), further says about these names that he "did not even regard them as clan, but just family surnames like our own or the Chinese, and that is all they amount to in districts where they are scattered". An observation which is corroborated by P. Durrenberger who writes:

> Most of the lineages are not exclusively Lisu Lineages. Some are Chinese, Lahu and other groups as well. That is, one has to specify both lineage and ethnic label to identify a particular lineage as Lisu, so this can be no measure of the groups to be called Lisu" (Durrenberger, 1971: 8).

It appears that these genealogically defined references to clan and lineage names cannot be systematically associated with a given ethnic identity. To the contrary, some clan and lineage names can be found in groups with different ethnic identities. In other words, there is not necessarily a connection between ethnic origin and identity. It is in this sense that such categorizations as the so-called "Chinese-Lisu" ultimately lack pertinence, except perhaps for policy decision-makers and immigration law enforcement agencies. As I observed earlier, although there is evidence of substantial inter-mixing of Lisu and Lahu in Northern Thailand, I could not confirm the existence of a special Lahu-Lisu category. I strongly doubt that these types of categorizations have the racial-like connotations and implications projected onto them by outside observers. For a Lisu, to be of Lahu or Chinese descent does not affect his claim to being Lisu.

But for those who see a difference it means a lot. The construction of a distinction has clear implications. The *haw*

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of Northern Thailand have no legal status as immigrants thus they are clearly distinguished from the *"chao khao"*. Until very recently opium cultivation, although illegal since 1957 was not subject to the severe repression that is now taking place. To many observers, opium-growing tribal groups basically were, and still are, upland farmers whose meagre subsistence depends on hard work and what they can harvest from difficult mountain fields. The ethnic category *"haw"* does not correspond to the same image. Anthropologists (Motte, 1967; Maxwell Hill, 1983) have unsuccessfully researched the etymology of this *"haw"* appellation (but on this subject, see Ch'en (1947; 257) quoted above). In Northern Thailand, this ethnic label is applied, on the presumption of Yunnanese origin to a variety of people as different as farmers, peddlers, traders, irregulars of the K.M.T., bandits, smugglers and traffickers. The remarkable disposition and ability of the Chinese to trade at all levels of society is identified as a characteristic of *"haw"* and as this group is seen to play a prominent role in the narcotics trade, it therefore takes a strong pejorative connotation. In the context of Northern Thailand this provides a compelling incentive for ethnic identity change. In this respect, a Lahu-Lisu category has little or no particular significance: they are just *"chao khao"*. But a Chinese-Lisu category indeed tells another story.

This point needs to be stressed: for the people concerned, to be "Lisu" is a matter of life style, not of ancestral origins. What then are the specific characteristics of the Lisu way of life? Due to the necessary brevity of this paper, allow me to limit myself to a succinct delineation.

Here again, it is vain to adopt an empirical approach and try to explain it through genetic like traits of character and mental characteristics (e.g. Lewis 1984), even if this sometimes appears to succeed in describing the empirical reality. Thai extension workers and contact teams of various development projects unanimously agree in calling the Lisu the most individualistic, even the most selfish and troublesome people they deal with when

it comes to implementing measures designed to benefit the com-
munity as a whole (constructing drinking and irrigation water sys-
tems, organizing road maintenance, setting-up village committees
to administer revolving loan funds etc...). I have myself wit-
nessed behaviour apparently displaying a considerable lack of
cooperation or concern at the village or intervillage level but such
considerations are of no help in clarifying the structural compo-
nents of the social reality which these behaviours exemplify.

It is at this point that theoretical suggestions of authors
like Lehman generate observations of particular concrete value.
Ethnic categories must be viewed as defined, not in absolute
terms, but by "role complementation" and that the necessary
condition for the existence of an ethnic group as such is its struc-
tural opposition to other groups in relation to different resources.
This is to say that the social specificity of a given group can only
be elucidated by comparison and through its relations, or absence
of relations, with other groups. Ideally, to be able to define and
characterize every group would require an equally in-depth
knowledge of each, per se, and in its differential relations to
the others. A sort of knowledge that few anthropologists, if any,
can claim because most research is conducted within the preva-
lent conception of a rigid separation between groups. This leads
scholars to limit the range of their research and focus their exper-
tise on a particular group: an approach which by definition
precludes the formation of a global view of the actual nature
and function of ethnicity.

There is no doubt though that this specificity can be
found in the structure, forms and modes of the social, economic
and political organization. I indicated earlier that the fundamen-
tal structure of Lisu society is the kinship and affinity system
which determines and controls social recruitment, organizes the
process of production, defines and forms the allocation of power
and authority.

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Historically, wars in this part of the world were conducted to gain control not so much of territory as populations. People were the essential resource. For groups to survive they needed to control the fecundity of their women and the rules that regulated and controlled access to women were fundamental to the constitution of a group. This still holds: each groups' kinship and marriage system is a particular pattern followed in the exchange of women. Intermarriage associates different groups in this process and link them through privileged affinal ties.

Lisu specificity first resides in the structure of the kinship and marriage system. It is the study of matrimonial practice which enables us to analyze Lisu social organization and reveals a complementarity with the Lahu and *haw*.

What makes the kinship and affinity system the fundamental structure in Lisu society is that it also models the organization of the process of production, distribution and circulation of goods. Lisu social organization is adapted to the production of what was until very recently, the main cash crop: opium, and still fundamentally depends on it. The value of the bride - price for instance is directly indexed to the price of opium on the local market. The attitude towards the consumption of opium in Lisu society is notably different from that of other groups including the Lahu and *haw*. The structural complementarity which connects the Lisu with the Lahu and with the *haw* is differential and made up of compatible as well as opposing characteristics.

Lisu specificity also resides in the particular political organization of the group. I have indicated that the structure of power and authority follows that of the family household. The perceived individualism of the Lisu is part and parcel of a code of behaviour which is functional and consistent with the structure, forms and modes of the social organization.

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Conclusion

In these pages, I have delineated a problematique concerning Lisu identity and indicated an interpretation of ethnicity which integrates and accounts for both the information provided in the ethnographic literature and my own fieldwork. I have invoked arguments and observations made by scholars whom I believe have contributed most to clarification of the question of ethnic identity. In doing so I have also called into question the views of those working within an empirical tradition whose writings obscure or mask the actual nature and function of ethnicity in a multi-ethnic context. I strongly doubt the validity of the concept of "rigidly defined" groups (Hinton, 1969: 4) constituted on the basis of alleged loyalty to an ethnic identity (but for a significant change in Hinton's approach to the problem see Hinton, 1983: 155-68). This concept is still very popular among scholars engaged in research work in northern Thailand and I dare say that it not only proves to be wrong and misleading but also to be an obstacle to a diachronic as well as synchronic understanding and clarification of the social mechanisms at work in the multi-ethnic context of Northern Thailand.

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49. Akha child (Ralana)
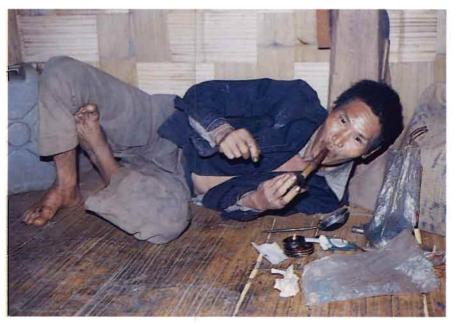
50. Food demonstration (Connell)

51. Akha mother (Hobday)

52. Akha boy and baby (Vienne)

53. Poppy field (Vienne)

54. Opium smoker (Supachai)
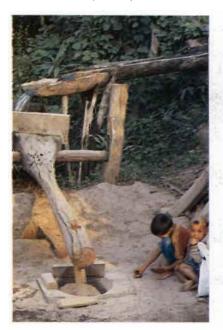
55. Harvesting opium (Connell)

56. Lisu farmers (McKinnon)

57. Lisu tomato harvest (Hobday)

58. Lisu women (Connell)

59. Lisu children (Hobday)

60. Hydraulic rice pounder (McKinnon)

61. Lisu girl (Vienne)

62. Mlabri victim of malaria (Vienne)

63. Mlabri women (McKinnon)

64. Karen woman cutting melon (Kampe)

65. Lahu Sheleh farmers (Supachai)

66. Lahu Sheleh farmers (Supachai)

67. Lahu Sheleh field ceremony (Supachai)

68. Karen wedding (Connell)

RESETTLEMENT: INFORMATION & INTERPRETATIONS

Perhaps the most controversial policy to emerge out of current thinking has been the willingness of the government to consider moving ethnic minorities out of areas in which they are seen to present either a danger to the environment or a risk to national security. As of August 1988, some 5000 people had been involuntarily moved out of national parks but it is not yet clear whether it is the intention to extend this strategy and include highlanders living in special watershed areas. Where people have settled near the border and it is believed that they entered the country relatively recently (since the mid 70 s) repatriation may be reconsidered.

One of the leading factors in this policy decision appears to be a concern to preserve what primary forest remains. The strategy outlined in Appendix V, entitled "Target Areas for Prevention of Forest Destruction by Hilltribes", provides the most succinct statement of intent available. The strategy of relocation is clearly seen as part of a need to protect recently declared national parks (eg Khlong Lan, Kamphaeng Phet). If this type of intervention is extended to areas in the upper north, highlander communities found in locations in which approximately 60 percent of the land remains under forest, may well be moved.

In locations where the forest has already gone, villages may also be clustered under project development work. Such consolidation, ostensibly designed to "reinforce administrative systems obligation, and faith in the institutions of Nation, Religion and Monarchy among the hill tribes" appears to be a part of national policy (Summary of the Plan for the Coordination of the Development of the Area Bordering the Doi Tung Development Project). This particular undertaking

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is being managed by the Centre for the coordination of Hill Tribe Affairs and Eradication of Narcotic Crops (COHAN 3rd Army) and the Internal Security Operations Command, Region 3 (ISOC) working in Mae Chan, Chiang Rai, along the Thai-Burmese border.

The idea of moving highlanders to sites deemed to be more suitable is not new. In 1960-61 the Hill Tribe Welfare Committee took a decision to set up resettlement areas in Tak, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Petchaboon provinces. At this time little was known about highlander cultures, agricultural systems and even the number of people living in the hills. Quite soon after an administrative structure was set up, the idea of planned resettlement was abandoned. Following 1967, the outbreak of fighting between government forces and communist guerrillas based in the highlands created a need to provide centres to and in which hill people could be evacuated and settled. Both of these occasions provided learning experiences which underlined the administrative and financial problems which come with large scale resettlement including the difficulty of finding enough suitable land.

Whether the government of today is better prepared to provide the necessary resources to ensure a reasonable livelihood. for those who may be resettled is still under discussion, if not under question, and forms the main thrust of issues raised in this section.

Mr Wanat Bhruksasri's paper, couched in the liberal and humanitarian terms of earlier policy makers, provides an argument for making a generous accommodation, advocates voluntary as opposed to involuntary relocation and positive national integration rather than forced assimilation. Ardith Eudey, a primitologist from the Riverside Campus of the University of California who accidentally witnessed the resettlement of a Hmong village in Uthai Thani province provides a first hand account of how these operations are conducted.

Cornelia Ann Kammerer, a professional anthropologist trained at the University of Chicago has prepared a comprehensive interpretation based on the imperatives of state formation and several years research conducted amongst the Akha. John McKinnon, a geographer from Victoria University of Wellington working with the TRI-ORSTOM Project builds on the broad analysis of his ORSTOM colleague Bernard Vienne and questions, amongst other things, the ecological thinking which provides the rationale for what he terms the current "get tough" policy.