

# The Lahu Shi People

Arthur Cooper

## WHO ARE THE LAHU SHI

The Lahu Shi Balan people live in a number of countries including Thailand, Myanmar, the Lao PDR, Vietnam, and the United States. The number of people in this language group is estimated to be 55,000. In Thailand there are more than 50 villages of Lahu Shi Balan people in the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Tak, Mae Hong Son and Lampang. Many of the villages are large, some having more than one hundred houses. There are no published figures of the Lahu Shi population in Thailand, but an informal survey of villages suggests there are nearly 15,000 Lahu Shi people in Thailand.

The Lahu Shi have a long history of migrating to new locations to find a more peaceful life. Hundreds of years ago, they and other Lahu groups moved from Yunnan Province in China to eastern Myanmar and northern Lao PDR. In the early part of the twentieth century, some of the Lahu groups began to enter northern Thailand from Myanmar. Lahu Shi people, however, only began migrating from Myanmar to Thailand in the past forty years. A more recent migration was from the Lao PDR to Thailand. Many of those Lahu Shi people eventually left Thailand and are now living in the United States.



## Lifestyle

Even though the Lahu Shi people have a history of migrating, there are stable aspects of their lives. The membership of Lahu Shi villages is relatively stable, being built around family ties. They highly value being among their kin relations. Most Lahu Shi villages are homogeneous, though in some, there are a few families from other Lahu groups or Akha people. A couple of the villages in Thailand have a mix of Lahu Shi people who migrated to Thailand from different villages or countries, but even in these cases, the groups tend to live clustered together in distinct areas of the villages.

Each village has an elected headman. He is normally a well-respected person in the village, usually thirty to fifty years old. His role is to interface with the outside, channel information, facilitate the discussion of matters pertaining to the village, coordinate village projects, and uphold and enforce village law. In

Thailand, this traditional role is replaced by the corresponding Thai governing system. This gives the headman the additional responsibility of reporting to the local government, which requires having some education in the Thai system. Each village has a village council that works with and assists the headman.



In addition to a headman, the Lahu Shi traditionally have a religious authority figure in their village leadership structure. The traditional Lahu belief system is a combination of animism over a nearly monotheistic base. The religious authority figure is usually a man and could be called a priest or shaman. He and the headman have similar levels of authority in the village, though the shaman does not generally deal with civic functions like the headman. This person deals with religious issues and traditional medicine. In Thailand and Myanmar, most of the Lahu Shi adopted Christianity, and the church

chairman or village pastor fills the religious leader role. Although they are not officially part of the village leadership structure, they seem to exercise considerable authority in many activities in the community.

## Living

The hills and forests surrounding a Lahu Shi village are the economic center for most of the needs of the community. As subsistence farmers, husbands and wives usually work their fields together cultivating dry paddy rice, corn and vegetables for their family's consumption. In Thailand, some people raise cash crops such as ginger or various fruits. Chickens, pigs, and cows are the major sources of meat and are sometimes sold for cash. Water buffalo are sometimes used for work in fields suitable for wet rice cultivation. Mountain ponies are often used to bear burdens from the far off hillside fields. A number of forest products are gathered for personal use as well as for sale outside the community.

Buying and selling in lowland market towns brings resources to the village and is an outlet for their products and services. The village blacksmith often makes the tools and implements needed for farming and hunting, but the metal for them is purchased from outsiders. Women weave on back-strap looms and sew both for their own needs as well as for sale in shops and markets. In the past, the thread and cloth used in this home industry was made in the village, but now they purchase these supplies in market centers. Some men and women leave their villages for brief times to work as laborers in construction in urban centers, or plant and harvest rice and other crops for lowland farmers.

A very important reason for Lahu Shi people to go outside of their community is for education. Most of their villages in Thailand have schools with grades one through six. Many Lahu Shi villages have established and run pre-schools to teach their children some basic Thai before they start school. The Lahu Shi highly value education and parents try to provide opportunities for their children to pursue education in urban centers. Some people who receive advanced education do not return to their home villages, but instead stay in the larger urban centers where they spent years in schools. These people often believe there are better options for them there, but they also usually maintain strong ties with family in their home villages.



**เทิดพระเกียรติคุณ  
พระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัวภูมิพลอดุลยเดช  
เนื่องในมหามงคลวโรกาสที่ทรงเจริญพระชนมพรรษา 6 รอบ**

In Honor of  
His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej  
On the Auspicious Occasion of his Sixth Cycle Birthday

**Minority Language Orthograph in Thailand:  
Five Case Studies**

Edited by the TU-SIL-LRDP Committee  
Under the auspices of Thammasat University  
and in cooperation with SIL International

*January 2002*