

Marriage and land property: bilateral non-linear kinship and communal authority of the Lahu on the southwest Yunnan frontier, China¹

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Abstract: This paper discusses how a social system based on bilateral and non-hierarchical kinship is able to establish and maintain systems of authority. The Muga Lahu in Yunnan practise a bilateral and non-linear kinship system based on the gender equality principle, and communal life is also based on equal couples' kinship networking, bound to non-linear ties through marriage. The Lahu here never practise matrilineal, patrilineal or cognatic kinship and descent in daily life, but an individual couple is bound to immediate ancestors through the redistribution of cropland property. In communal life, family separation and farmland reorganization are carried out dynamically through the marriages of the younger generation. The flexible kinship group establishes labour-sharing, ritual-participating and intermarriage groups in everyday life. Therefore, the kinship system is closely bound to farmland redistribution and the continuation of families. This bilateral, non-linear kinship system constitutes a dynamic social institution, but all couples are equal to each other. Due to the lack of authority over the equality of social units such as equal couples, the Lahu communal authority historically comes from superior external powers, such as the religious power linked with religious movements involved in

¹ 'Bilateral non-linear kinship' means that the relatives of a married couple are of parallel importance, while there is no clear internal hierarchy among the relatives and no family genealogy can be recorded. This research project was partly funded by the RGC Direct Grant 2007/08 (Project No DAG07/08.HSS05) of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and the University Grant Committee-Area of Excellence Scheme: The Historical Anthropology of Chinese Society. An earlier working version of this paper was presented at the IUAS 2009 at Kunming (28–31 July 2009). The author's special thanks go to Professor Du Shanshan for her long-term encouragement and advice since 1996. Her fundamental research on the gender equality ideal of the Lahu made this study possible. The author's thanks also go to Professor James Wilkerson for his comments on an earlier version of this paper, and special thanks are due to the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

the Yunnan–Burma frontier formation since the 1720s. The established Lahu political system was destroyed by the coming of the Qing and the Republic states, because of its anti-Han or anti-state stance in frontier history. It is clear that the superior religious power over the kinship network worked as a means of social mobilization through religious movements, and became the authority source for social cohesion in history, but it has been replaced by state-appointed cadres in current communal life in China. The Lahu case shows that more attention should be paid to the relationships between frontier history, dynamic kinship and social organization among ethnic minorities in Chinese and South East Asian frontier societies.

Keywords: kinship; land property; Lahu; Yunnan–Burma frontier

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After the 1720s, a regional political system, outside the Qing state administration, was gradually established after lengthy ethnic conflicts. It was known as the Five Buddha Districts system. The leaders of this religious movement were Han Chinese Buddhist monks who established their political centre in mountains to the west of the Mekong River, which were known as the Luohei (Lahu) Mountains. Based on the system in the central monastery in Nanzha village, the Five Buddha Districts system mobilized and organized hundreds of Lahu and Wa villages over a large terrain to become a regional independent political system outside the Qing state. This movement was at its height from the 1790s to 1890s, but then it eventually declined towards the 1920s and the whole centralized political system was destroyed, step by step, by the Qing and the Republic states.² After that, continuing political changes deeply affected Lahu society and, subsequently, communal authority based on religious belief was demolished in the 1950s. Since then, state-appointed local cadres have taken the place of political leaders over the kinship groups as a new embedded administrative layer in communal affairs.

² Ma Jianxiong (2004), ‘“Luo bandits” to “Lahu nationality”: ethnic identity in the process of border formation’, *Journal of History and Anthropology*, Vol 2, No 1, pp 1–32; Ma Jianxiong (2007), ‘Ethnic politics in the Ailao Mountains: reforms to the native chieftain system in the early to mid Qing Dynasty and the mobilization of the Lahu identity’, *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology Academia Sinica*, Vol 78, No 3, pp 553–602.

However, the family cropland redistribution system remained the core basis of everyday life after 1980 when farmland was returned to families. Therefore, the mechanism of social integration based on kinship has also firmly returned to its historical roots in contemporary Lahu society in China.

A historical perspective on Lahu family reproduction, farmland redistribution and their religious background is crucial. In this paper, I explain how political authority could be established over egalitarian bilateral kinship based on intensive ethnographic data, to provide an opposing case to the theory of 'egalitarian culture' contributed by James C. Scott. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott takes the Lahu as a representative case of his 'escape culture' because the Lahu are a highland swiddening people whose heartland is in the south-west corner of Yunnan. He believes that the Lahu have an egalitarian society with little or no political unity beyond the hamlet level and, moreover, that there is little effective authority even within the hamlet.³ These discussions about the Lahu are cited from Anthony R. Walker. Walker reports that the Lahu Nyi 'had a typical cognatic kinship system that did not distinguish terminologically or, for the most part, in practice, between relatives (aw- vī aw- nyi) on the father's side (aw- pa hpaw-) from those on the mother's side (aw- e hpaw-). But this did not translate into a complete absence of lineal ideology.'⁴ The Lahu on the Yunnan-Burma frontier are not a people without political unity beyond the communities, or little effective authority within the community based on swidden agriculture, even if their religious authority may have been weakened by the impact of state power after 1949. This case study shows different facts that counter Scott's assumption of an 'escape culture' or Zomia people from a historical perspective.

Evans-Pritchard has shown how lineal kinships functioned as political groups in Nuer society,⁵ which means that the political units were recruited on a kinship basis. Most scholars focused on lineal systems such as the patrilineal Nuer, Han Chinese lineage, or the matrilineal Moso, in which kinship consisted simply of units of 'alliance' made or 'expressed' by marriage. The real differences between kinship systems,

³ James C. Scott (2009), *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, and London, p 289.

⁴ Anthony R. Walker (2003), *Merit and the Millennium: Routine and Crisis in the Ritual Lives of the Lahu People*, Hindustan Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, p 43.

⁵ E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1990), *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

then, lay in the different ways they moved women around the system in marriage.⁶ Could principles of non-linear bilateral kinship be expressed in the form of political groups, and organize communal life? According to Fox, some used modes with double-descent systems as methods of affiliating people to groups or organizations through kinship links. In the cognatic case, the descent is not limited by sex, but all the ancestor's descendants are included in this group. For Fox, the cognatic principle means that all the descendants of the ultimate ancestor have a right to the land of the group, so that a man must choose which lineage to belong to, of the many that claim a link. However, the cognatic principle (a man can join either a father's or mother's group, etc) shows that a series of discrete non-overlapping groups can be formed, and the great adaptational advantage that these groups have is flexibility.⁷ If we take the Lahu in Yunnan as a case, we shall find that their social flexibility is deeply matched with the descent principle of farmland property through marriage; but are they of cognatic descent? Even if Walker reports that the Lahu Nyi are, the Muga Lahu show that their customs are different.

Based on a study of the Lahu Shi villages at Nuofu in southern Lancang county in the 1980s, Huang argues that the matrilineal system had been maintained until the 1950s, while some patrilineal systems also remained in a few villages among the Lahu Shi. Both matrilineal and patrilineal systems were evidence of certain stages of social development based on social evolutionary theory.⁸ But a recent study on the Lahu Shi by Han revises Huang's idea. He reports that, because the local Menglian Dai chieftain and governments collected tax by household registration before 1949, some households chose to live together in a big house as a strategy for escaping or reducing this official taxation. This situation caused a misunderstanding among scholars such as Huang, especially as they were seriously influenced by socialist evolutionism. Han argues that the Lahu Shi actually practise a bilateral kinship system. Besides this, Han also points out that the father's side, mother's side and mother's brothers form three groups of egos who send gifts to confirm their

⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949), *Les Structures Elementaires de la Parenté*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris; and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963), *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books, New York.

⁷ Robin Fox (1983), *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropology Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 147–148.

⁸ Huang Shuping (1986), 'The Lahu Shi family institution and its changes', *New Asia Academic Bulletin*, Vol VI (Special Issue on Anthropological Studies of China), pp 121–129.

relationships.⁹ But Han did not provide detailed information about how the three groups could be redefined in terms of kinship creation through marriage.¹⁰

Du Shanshan's research contributes a fundamental understanding to gender equality and the married couple as a unit. The Lahu trace kinship relations through both the male and female, and bilateral kinship systems reduce the potential for built-in gender divisions in social structures. In this system, alliance/descent and endogamy/exogamy (based on Lévi-Strauss, 1982; and Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995) built into unilineal kinship structures tend to blur. Beyond this, Du points out that, 'while sharing with some other societies the bilateral principles that undermine gender discrimination, the Lahu kinship system goes a step further by structurally promoting the principle of gender unity, which is rooted in the orientation toward the dyadic ego (paired ego) in kinship terminology.'¹¹ Du surmises that the kinship relation is completely bilateral, using the married couple as the reference point for classification. Such a terminology system unifies a married couple as a single social category (a dyadic ego) that reckons kinship relations with other paired social units (other married couples).¹²

Introducing the marriage and kinship issue from a historical perspective, Shih studies the Moso in south-west China and contributes to an understanding of the relationship between frontier people and mainstream society in the process of Chinese empire construction. For instance, the *tisese*, or 'walking marriage' among the Moso people living in the Lugu Lake area was a result of the cultural cross-fertilization brought about during the Yuan and Qing empire-building processes in late imperial China. It was this historical process that brought the *tisese*-practising Moso one step closer to mainstream Chinese culture.¹³

The majority of the Lahu ethnic minority lives in the mountain areas of south-west Yunnan province in China, especially in counties such as

⁹ Han Junkui (2009), *A Tree Without Annual Ring: Kinship System of the Lahu Shi on the Border Between China and Burma*, Yunnan People's Publishing House, Kunming, pp 109, 176.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 200.

¹¹ Shanshan Du (2002), 'Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs': *Gender Unity and Gender Equality Among the Lahu of Southwest China*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp 140, 142.

¹² *Ibid*, pp 139–148.

¹³ Chuan-kang Shih (2001), 'Genesis of marriage among the Moso and empire-building in late imperial China', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 60, No 2 pp 381–412.; and Lu Yuan, and Sam Mitchell (2000), 'Land of the walking marriage', *Natural History*, Vol 109, No 9, pp 58–64.

Lancang, Shuangjiang, Menglian, Gengma and Menghai along the China–Myanmar border, and has a population of about 450,000 in Yunnan.¹⁴ According to Walker’s estimation, there are about 700,000 Lahu people in the world. Approximately 200,000 of them live in north-eastern Myanmar, more than 60,000 in northern Thailand, and the remainder in Vietnam, Laos and other countries.¹⁵ From the north to the south, there are Lahu subgroups including the Lahu Na, the Lahu Shi, the Kucong, the Lahu Hpu, the Lahu Nyi and the Lahu Sheh leh. The majority of the Lahu are Lahu Na, but people living in Lahu-concentrated areas do not care about the title of their branch. For example, in the Muga Valley, residents just refer to themselves as the Lahu rather than the Lahu Na, while the Lahu Nyi and the Lahu Sheh leh can be found only in Myanmar and Thailand. As Lahu-language-speaking groups, different subgroups share a common Lahu identity. For the majority of them, the belief in E Sha Buddha, along with their historical memory about the migration routes from Meng Mian (today’s Lincang area) to their current homes, is due to their historical defeats in wars against the Han Chinese and the Dai people. In general, even if there are different subgroups, the Lahu identity has been shaped by waves of resistance since they were driven from central Yunnan’s mountainous area by the Qing government and Han Chinese migration, or the Dai chieftains after the 1720s.

The anthropological field data in this paper have been collected from the Muga Valley, which has, since 1995, had the highest concentration of Lahu in the world. The article also reviews detailed, first-hand historical documents on the Yunnan–Burma frontier formation. By combining these two kinds of data, I argue that, based on the gender equality ideal and the paired worlds, the Lahu community lacks an internal mechanism of collective cohesion or political power based on the kinship network. Therefore, communal authority that has come from the religious power linked to E Sha Buddha belief, plus the sense of cyclical lives between two worlds, makes bilateral kinship become non-linear. Based on the Muga case, married couples compose a community, and these couples are equal to each other as well as having equal social responsibility and common tasks in communal life. In this way, a small

¹⁴ Shi Chunyun, ed (2009), *The People Come from the Gourd – The Lahu Nationality*, Yunnan Nationalities Publishing House, Kunming, p 1.

¹⁵ Anthony R. Walker (2003), *Merit and the Millennium: Routine and Crisis in the Ritual Lives of the Lahu People*, Hindustan Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, pp 101–102.

community can easily disperse and reorganize based on its feature of social flexibility. Therefore, family separation and farmland reorganization are carried out in a dynamic way through the younger generation's marriages. Moreover, the kinship groups created by marital relations and cropland reorganization between two generations perform dynamically as labour-sharing, ritual-participating and intermarriage groups in everyday life. Based on farmland property distribution, bilateral non-linear kinship is a basic social institution. The non-linear feature of the Muga Lahu on the one hand makes a community with no internal mechanism for collective cohesion, as does the lineal system; but, on the other hand, religious beliefs perform a crucial role as power sources superior to the kinship network, which provided effective authority sources when, historically, the Lahu were mobilized against the states.

In general, a lineal or non-linear mechanism correlates with social cohesion to a certain degree. Under the conditions of frontier formation in history, the socio-cultural mechanisms of communal authority and kinship are deeply correlated. Bilateral non-linear kinship, along with E Sha Buddha belief and the cosmos view of two worlds, have been interdependent for over a century, through the centralized Five Buddha Districts system. Even though it developed outside the state administrative and judiciary system, the state created the situation. Lahu kinship should be understood as a part of the social consequences of frontier formation, because communal authority bound to kinship is the cultural rule that has shaped Lahu society and deeply influenced its social cohesion.

Principles of marriage, family and kinship of the Muga Lahu

At 120 kilometres long, the Black River is one of the main tributaries of the Mekong River in the west, and there are about 100,000 Lahu people in settlements scattered on the mountainsides along its valley.¹⁶ The Muga Valley is in the upper part of Black River Valley, close to the historical political centre of Nanzha. Traditionally, the Muga Valley was an independent Buddha district with its centre at Munuo village, as a result of which the Muga Valley is also known as the Munuo Buddha District. There are about 17,000 Lahu inhabitants there, in 39 villages. Because of its intensely concentrated Lahu population, Muga has been viewed as a typical Lahu residential area by the county government.

¹⁶ The Compiling Committee (1996), *The Gazetteer of Lancang County*, Yunnan People's Publishing House, Kunming, p 64.

Also, the famous myth, *Creating Heaven, Creating Earth*, was recorded in Muga, mainly in Ban village, which was my main field site in Muga.¹⁷ There are about 300 families made up of 1,300 villagers in this village, and about 10 ritual specialists (mo³⁵ pa³¹)¹⁸ who, with their rich knowledge of history and myth, have taken on the responsibility of healing rituals. The well known myths of the Muga Valley set out systematic, ideological explanations of the principles of marriage as the basis of social institution.

Myth and incest taboos that form the rules of family and kinship

In order to understand basic social relations and the whole social system in Muga, we must start with the rule of the family. Based on a mythical tale, the first couple were Zadi and Nadi, who emerged from a gourd cultivated by the God of Creation, E Sha. They gave birth to a son and a daughter, Zayi and Nayi, who were the first generation of human beings. Zayi and Nayi married. The brother, Zayi, is called pha⁵⁴, while the sister, Nayi, is called nu³¹ ma³³. As the first generation of human beings, their relationship was not only that of husband and wife, but also brother and sister (see Figure 1).

Later, Zayi and Nayi gave birth to eight sons and eight daughters. Zayi led the sons and Nayi led the daughters out hunting. Conflicts arose when a meal of a barking deer and a porcupine was shared unevenly between the pha⁵⁴, Zayi and the nu³¹ ma³³, Nayi. The pha⁵⁴ and the nu³¹ ma³³ separated into two families, and their children married to make eight families. According to the myth, since then the relationship between the husband's and wife's parents has been called hu³³ mo⁵⁴ lo⁵⁴ mo⁵⁴. Thenceforth, from the third generation of human beings, people were obliged to obey the marriage principle: that is, sons of the sister nu³¹ ma³³ can marry daughters of the brother pha⁵⁴, but the sons of brothers and the daughters of sisters are still called the pha⁵⁴ and the nu³¹ ma³³ by each other, which means that they are still brothers and sisters, so marriage between them is strictly banned. Marriage between a woman and her father's sister's son, or between a man and his

¹⁷ Liu Huihao, and Walker, A. R. (1995), *Mvuh hpa mi hpa [Creating Heaven, Creating Earth: An Epic Myth of the Lahu People in Yunnan]* (edited and introduced by Anthony R. Walker from a Chinese text collated by Liu Huihao), Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai. See also Ma Jianxiong (2009), 'Local knowledge constructed by the state: re-interpreting myths and imagining the migration history of the Lahu in Yunnan, Southwest China', *Asian Ethnology*, Vol 68, No 1, pp 111–129.

¹⁸ The superscript numbers indicate the tones of the Lahu language.

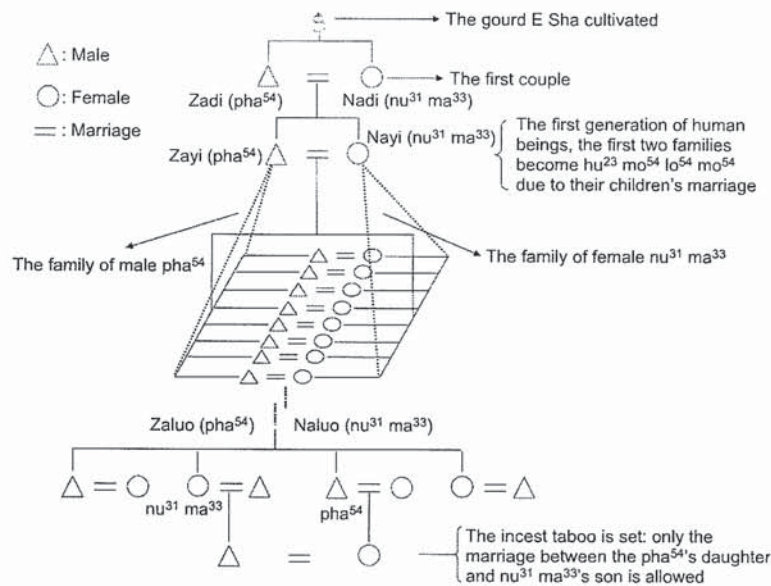


Figure 1. Myth and incest taboo.

mother's brother's daughter is allowed, but marriage between a man and his father's brother's daughter, a man and his father's sister's daughter, or between a woman and her father's brother's son, and between a woman and her mother's brother's son is prohibited. According to my informant Zawa in Ban village, 'after the generation of Zayi and Nayi's children, brothers could no longer marry their sisters, because their parents had already separated into two families. Therefore, only sisters' sons can marry brothers' daughters.'¹⁹ Because of the family set-up, the relationship between brother and sister has transformed from that of husband and wife (pha⁵⁴ – nu³¹ ma³³) into affinity, hu³³ mo⁵³ lo⁵⁴ mo⁵³ (see Figure 1).

This mythological tale helped to create the incest taboo for the Lahu and, as without family there would be no incest at all, it is only when the family is set up that there is an incest taboo to be obeyed. The origins of human beings and human families are therefore explained philosophically by myth. The marriage principle defines who the pha⁵⁴

¹⁹ Ma Jianxiong (2005), 'Field notes: Interview with Zawa', 29 June.

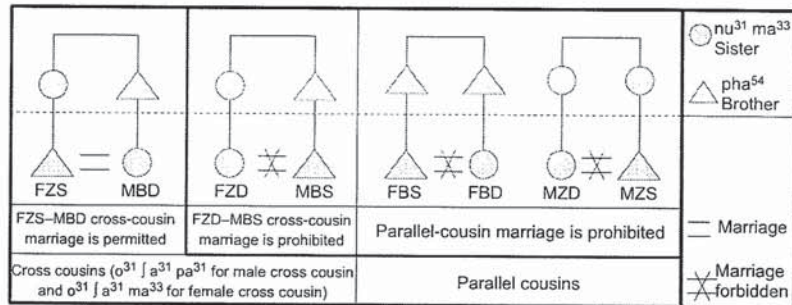


Figure 2. The marriage principle for cousins.

Note: From a male ego's point of view, MBD is mother's brother's daughter; FZD is father's sister's daughter; FBD is father's brother's daughter; MZD is mother's sister's daughter. From a female ego's point of view, FZS is father's sister's son; MBS is mother's brother's son; FBS is father's brother's son; MZS is mother's sister's son.

and the nu³¹ ma³³ are among brothers and sisters, and by this definition a basic marriage tie can be made: (1) sexuality crossed between parents and children is the first law: that is, for the female's ego, 'my sisters' daughters are equal to my daughters, my brothers' sons are equal to my sons', and for the male's ego, 'my brother's sons are equal to my sons, my sisters' daughters are equal my daughters'; but for females, 'my brothers' daughters are not equal to my daughters', and for males, 'my sisters' sons are not equal to my sons'. This law is based on the 'gender crossing' between sisters and brothers within the same generation and between two generations of parents and children. Marriage between the brother pha⁵⁴ and the sister nu³¹ ma³³ is banned (see Figure 2).

In summary, according to the above principles, we can draw a diagram about the marriage between the pha⁵⁴'s daughter (MBD) and the nu³¹ ma³³'s son (FZS). Because marriage is based on the principle of gender equality, which has been thoroughly embodied in the above-mentioned myth since the birth of human beings, people have been following this principle to organize their families and to share the harvest. What the myth tries to convey is that, although family is a result of the uneven division of hunted game, the underlying principle is always the equality between genders, and the inequality of family assets will result in conflict. Therefore, in the two styles of bilateral cross-cousin marriage, only the marriage between the pha⁵⁴'s daughter and the nu³¹ ma³³'s son is permitted because they are suitably gender-crossed. In this case, according to Figure 2, among the four kinds of cross-cousins,

FZS, MBD, FZD and MBS, we can define FZS and MBD as the FZS–MBD cross-cousins, because they are not only gender crossing with the parents, but there is also gender crossing between the cousins, which shows a quadrilateral gender crossing in two generations. Because FZS for a female ego and MBD for a male ego are no longer defined as the relationship between pha⁵⁴ and nu³¹ ma³³, the FZS–MBD cross-cousin marriage sets the minimum boundary for the incest taboo, through myth. However, based on my field data, this FZS–MBD cross-cousin marriage is not a pre-emptive practised marriage in the Muga Valley. Meanwhile, the parallel-cousins marriage and the marriage between the mother’s brother’s son (from a female ego, MBS) and the father’s sister’s daughter (from a male ego, FZD) in the subcategory of the FZD–MBS cross-cousin marriage is still prohibited. In general, the FZS–MBD cross-cousins could be considered as a subcategory under the heading bilateral cross-cousins.²⁰

In Muga, the relationships amongst all of the children of the parents can be called o³¹ vi³⁵ o³¹ nie³³, meaning ‘the elder and the young’, without gender distinction. Among them, gender-crossing brothers and sisters are formally addressed as pha⁵⁴ and the nu³¹ ma³³, which is not normally used in daily life, meaning brothers and sisters of the same parents. But, as pointed out by my informants, if a brother’s daughter really wants to marry a sister’s son, the kinship relationship thus produced is the closest. ‘The marriage between a brother’s daughter and a sister’s son is usually considered to be a good one, because family cropland will not be shared by other families.’²¹ Here, we can say that the FZS–MBD cross-cousin marriage sits on the boundary of the marriage taboo rule (Figure 2). However, even though villagers think this style of cross-cousin marriage is acceptable, it is still rare in practice, based on my field data. After all, family cropland is the most important factor to consider when people choose their spouses.

Bilateral kinship and the building of a new family

Under the marriage principle of gender crossing and gender equality, the Muga Lahu, after marriage, prefer neo-local residences. According to the life histories of my informants, before the mid-1990s, the average marriage age was about 17. According to my field observations,

²⁰ The term ‘bilateral cross-cousin marriage’ means marriage between MBD and FZD as well as FZD and MBS. See also Robert Parkin (1997), *Kinship: An Introduction to the Basic Concepts*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p 79.

²¹ Ma Jianxiong (2005), ‘Field notes: Interview with Zamu and Zake’, 28 July.

weddings, compared with other rituals such as soul-calling healing rituals or the New Year Festival, are held very simply. After long talks between the two families about the division of the family cropland, the date of the wedding is always decided quite casually. Of the several weddings in which I participated, most of the dates were decided only one or two days beforehand. Of course, tabooed days, such as the dates of parents' deaths, must be avoided. Before the wedding, the two families have to reach agreement on the following issues: how long will the newly-weds live with the family of either of the parents before they build their new house and move out? The results might be diverse. For example, one couple, Zalu and Nayue, have been living with Nayue's parents since their wedding in 2002, which means Zalu joined Nayue's family before their new house was built. But for Zamo and Nayue, after the wedding the wife, Nayue, joined Zamo's family in January 2005, which had been arranged long before the wedding date was decided. The day before the wedding, relatives of both sides have to be quickly informed.

It was a day of the dog, a good day for both sides.²² At noon, the ritual specialist Zawu was invited to play the role of the matchmaker *zi³³ qa³¹ pa³¹*. On hearing that Zamo was getting married, all his brothers and sisters sent gifts to Zamo, including money, alcohol and cigarettes. Before sunset, all the preparations were done and most of the relatives and friends had arrived at Zamo's home. After dark, everyone present, including the groom himself, led by the matchmaker, went to the bride's home in the same village. Once the procession arrived at the bride Nayue's home, the bride and groom had to hide in a corner, and the bride's parents and the *pha*⁵⁴, who is the mother's brother, seated themselves beside the fireplace in the side room. Then the matchmaker came in, and said to the *pha*⁵⁴ seven times: 'It's said that your family has some vegetable seeds, so we come to ask for a few of them. Would you please give some to us?' The *pha*⁵⁴ answered, 'You are incorrect, we don't have these seeds, please go back home!' The *pha*⁵⁴ rejected the matchmaker six times, but on the seventh he agreed to give them what he was asked for.

Then people from the groom's home came into the room. The bride and groom carried water in a bamboo canister and poured it into a bowl, and then drank it together at the entrance to the room. At this moment, all the participants in the wedding gave praise: 'What a delicacy!' This

²² According to the local calendar, all days are defined by the 12 animal signs of the zodiac calendar. They are: rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and boar. Everyday life is based on this 12-day cycle.

is meant to suggest that the newly-wed couple are hard-working, and the water is considered to be given by E Sha, and is used as a mythological medicine to permit their marriage. Later, the bride and groom went into the room and squatted before the incense shrine to E Sha in the middle of the wall. The head of the bride's team, the blacksmith, the ritual specialist mo³⁵ pa³¹ and the matchmaker were seated on one side of the room, and on the opposite side were seated the parents of the bride and relatives of the groom. Then, the ritual specialist made the following speech:

'The moon and the sun are a pair, the river and the mountain are a pair, the bamboo and the tree are a pair. Therefore, man and woman are a pair (nɛ²¹ shie³¹ ya⁵³ de³³ jie³³). Your marriage will be approved by E Sha if you kowtow to Him. Then you will be a couple.'

These remarks are very important in the private and social lives of the Lahu. Although the idea that 'male and female are a pair' is very much emphasized in Lahu culture, this was the first and only time that I had heard the basic principle of beings as pairs, linking human beings to the structure of the cosmos. After that, the ritual specialist twined seven threads into a string and tied it to the couples' arms as their armlets, meaning 'the two pairs of their souls are bound together', and so they will receive the blessing of good fortune in life from E Sha, and will be protected by all the others. After the dinner, the procession returned to the bride's home, drinking and singing until sunrise. Then, according to the arrangements previously made between the two families, the couple would move to live with the family of either the husband's or the wife's parents until they built their own house and received their share of the cropland from both sets of parents.

At the wedding, the brothers of the bride's mother, the pha⁵⁴, perform a very important role on behalf of the bride's side of the family, while the matchmaker represents the groom's side. Apart from the moment for kowtowing to E Sha and having the string tied to their arms as armlets, the bride and the groom are hidden from the public. Weddings, therefore, can be seen as a staged drama, in which the pha⁵⁴, the matchmaker, the team heads, the blacksmith and the ritual specialists all play their roles. In other words, they are the representatives of the village community and their presence at the wedding helps authenticate the marriage. Through their performances at the wedding, the social relations connected with the marriage are emphasized (see Figure 3).

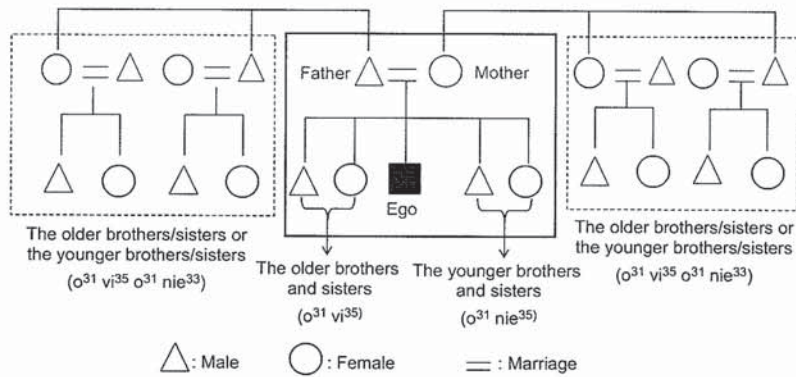


Figure 3. The family structure.

It is clear that a kinship group is built up around the newly-weds. According to the rule of naming, based on the 12 animal signs of the zodiac calendar, which define 12 days as a time cycle, a person is given the name of the zodiac date of his or her birth. With the 12-day cycle, many villagers will have the same name. But through marriage, the couple will have a new name, by putting their names together, which can be easily distinguished from those of the others. In this sense, the husband and the wife become an independent social unit. For example, when a Zasi marries a Naduo, their family will simply be called Zasi-duo or Naduo-si. In other words, an individual person does not have a clear social identity; only the families set up through marriage can be socially identified. Therefore, when a new family starts, it begins not only to possess a social identity, but also to have its kinship network established.

Explanation of terminology

From the classification of kinship terminology shown in Table 1 and Figure 4, it can be seen that the kinship system of the Lahu in the Muga Valley centres around the nuclear family, and key relatives of the husband and the wife, such as parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, are treated equally by the dyadic ego couple and by individuals, each of whom has an individual term. This is a very neat bilateral kinship system, encompassing the terminology used on formal occasions such as New Year Festival when people need to send a gift, as a confirmation

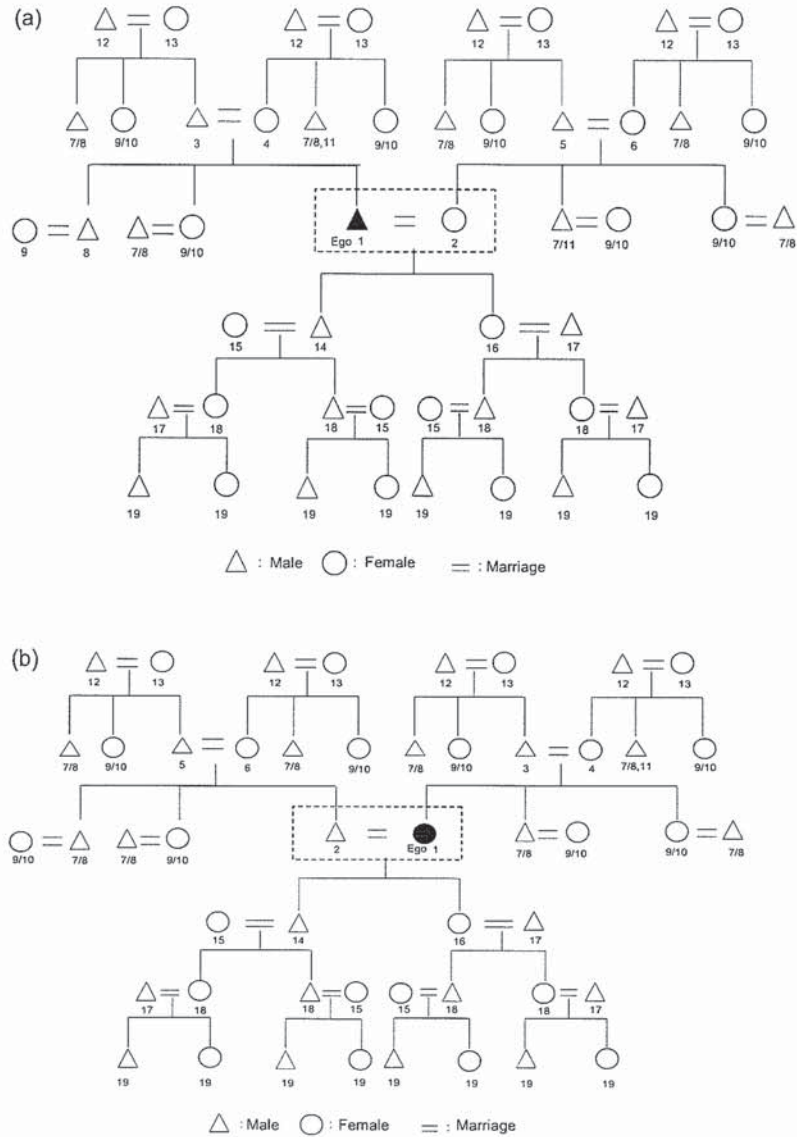


Figure 4. The core kinship group of male ego and female ego; (a) from a male ego's point of view; (b) from a female ego's point of view.

Table 1. Classification of kinship terminology.

From the male ego's point of view		From the female ego's point of view	
No	Terminology Relationships	No	Terminology Relationships
1	ɣa ³¹ Ego	1	ɣa ³¹ Ego
2	o ³¹ mu ⁵⁴ ma ³³ My wife	2	o ³¹ pho ⁵⁴ mo ⁵⁴ My husband
3	o ³¹ pa ³³ My father	3	o ³¹ pa ³³ My father
4	o ³¹ ei ³³ My mother	4	o ³¹ ei ³³ My mother
5	o ³¹ bu ³¹ My wife's father	5	o ³¹ bu ³¹ My husband's father
6	o ³¹ bi ³³ My wife's mother	6	o ³¹ bi ³³ My husband's mother
7	o ³¹ vi ³⁵ ba ³¹ (a) My elder brother; (b) all sons of my father's brothers and sisters and all sons of my mother's brothers and sisters who are older than me; (c) all my male relatives older than me	7	o ³¹ vi ³⁵ ba ³¹ (a) My elder brother; (b) all sons of my father's brothers and sisters and all sons of my mother's brothers and sisters who are older than me; (c) all my male relatives older than me.
8	o ³¹ nie ³³ ba ³¹ (a) My younger brothers; (b) all sons of my father's brothers and sisters and all sons of my mother's brothers and sisters who are younger than me; (c) all my male relatives younger than me	8	o ³¹ nie ³³ ba ³¹ (a) My younger brothers; (b) all sons of my father's brothers and sisters and all sons of my mother's brothers and sisters who are younger than me; (c) all my male relatives younger than me
9	o ³¹ vi ³⁵ ma ³³ (a) My elder sister; (b) all daughters of my father's brothers and sisters, and all daughters of my mother's brothers and sisters who are older than me; (c) all my female relatives older than me	9	o ³¹ vi ³⁵ ma ³³ (a) My elder sister; (b) all daughters of my father's brothers and sisters, and all daughters of my mother's brothers and sisters who are older than me; (c) all my female relatives older than me
10	o ³¹ nie ³³ ma ³³ (a) My younger sister; (b) all daughters of my father's brothers and sisters and all daughters of my mother's brothers and sisters who are younger than me; (c) all my female relatives younger than me	10	o ³¹ nie ³³ ma ³³ (a) My younger sister; (b) all daughters of my father's brothers and sisters and all daughters of my mother's brothers and sisters who are younger than me; (c) all my female relatives younger than me

11	o ³¹ pha ⁵⁴	My wife's elder or younger brothers; my mother's elder or younger brothers	11	o ³¹ pha ⁵⁴	My mother's elder or younger brothers
12	o ³¹ bu ³⁵	My father's father, my mother's father; my wife's father, my wife's mother's father.	12	o ³¹ bu ³⁵	My father's father, my mother's father; my husband's father's father, my husband's mother's father
13	o ³¹ bi ³³ (jio ³⁵)	My father's mother, my mother's mother, my wife's father's mother, my wife's mother's mother.	13	o ³¹ bi ³³ (jio ³⁵)	My father's mother, my mother's mother, my husband's father's mother, my husband's mother's mother
14	o ³¹ ya ⁵³	My son	14	o ³¹ ya ⁵³	My son
15	o ³¹ khe ⁵⁴ ma ³³	My son's wife; my grandson's wife	15	o ³¹ khe ⁵⁴ ma ³³	My son's wife; my grandson's wife
16	o ³¹ ya ⁵³ mi ⁵⁴	My daughter	16	o ³¹ ya ⁵³ mi ⁵⁴	My daughter
17	o ³¹ ma ³⁵ pa ³¹	My daughter's husband, my granddaughter's husband	17	o ³¹ ma ³⁵ pa ³¹	My daughter's husband, my granddaughter's husband
18	o ³¹ hui ³¹	My grandson or granddaughter	18	o ³¹ hui ³¹	My grandson or granddaughter
19	o ³¹ ha ⁵⁴	My grandson's son or daughter, my granddaughter's son or daughter	19	o ³¹ ha ⁵⁴	My grandson's son or daughter, my granddaughter's son or daughter

ritual. However, the kinship terms are used in formal situations – for example, when making introductions. In everyday situations, children call their parents father a³¹ pa³³ and mother a³¹ ei³³ or their spouse's parents a³¹ bu³³ and a³¹ bi³³, their grandfather a³¹ bu³⁵ and grandmother a³¹ bi³³ jio³⁵. However, the younger generation is referred to directly by name. For example, Nayue's father, Zafa, always calls her Nayue, but Nayue always calls him a³¹ pa³³. Outside the nuclear family, the other kinship terms are less emphasized and relatives are generally referred to as the younger 'o³¹ vi³⁵' and the older 'o³¹ nie³³', according to their gender.

In general, with this bilateral system as the focal point, a couple, their brothers and sisters, and their parents and children are given the same, parallel importance, which can be seen in their labour sharing and observation of the taboo dates. The marriage weaves the bride's and groom's own family ties into the new family equally, and the father's or mother's descendants are excluded and the lineal genealogy is often ignored. But the bilateral kinship with the husband's and wife's parents is strongly maintained as the principle. In summary, the system prioritizes bilateral descent by sons and daughters, and so places more emphasis on the nuclear family and gender equality. Therefore, all the members of the kinship relatives group are also called 'o³¹ vi³⁵ o³¹ nie³³', meaning 'kin', or literally, 'the elder and younger relatives'. In an everyday context, the usual position is to refer to those relatives directly by name, rather than the reported term. Couples within this kinship network are mutually equal in their sharing of labour and other social tasks. Goodenough suggests that the kinship terminology cannot be summed up as a creature of exchanges, such as marital exchanges, but that it may have been influenced by marriage customs. In other words, the terminology can be understood independently.²³ James Wilkerson suggests that 'house' could also be a key social unit among minority peoples in south-west China, which shows certain features of their kinship terminologies.²⁴ Whatever the case, 'o³¹ vi³⁵ o³¹ nie³³' kinship cannot be defined as a 'cognatic descent' group, because it is combined with a mechanism for forgetting ancestors beyond those who are immediate.

²³ Ward H. Goodenough (2006), *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology*, Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick, NJ, and London, p 42.

²⁴ James Wilkerson (2009), 'A preliminary description of the classification of Shidong Miao kin terms', paper presented at *The 16th Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (16th CIUAES)*, 28 July, Kunming.

Family division and the bilateral inheritance of cropland property

The above discussion of myth, kinship and marriage is based on an idealized understanding of the farmland system of the Lahu: the division of family cropland and the reproduction of families occur on condition that the land property is under the complete control of individual families and is divided equally by parents when their children marry. But the reality is far more complex. This can be illustrated by a brief review of the local history. In 1958, all the privately owned croplands were turned over to cooperatives, organized under the mobilization of the government, which were later transformed into production teams. Unlike most regions in China, the Muga Valley did not undergo land reform in the 1950s because of its political significance as a frontier, and so in 1980, when the state-owned cropland was contracted to individual families, the villagers simply withdrew the shares they had put into the cooperatives in 1958.²⁵ As for those newly created families, they were given the cropland reclaimed after 1958, and, with the help of the then government, built irrigation facilities. Therefore, the marriage system practised before 1958 was resumed in 1980. It was only from 1958 to 1980 that the system was interrupted by collective production. All the villagers were organized into two cooperative groups in 1958, which then shifted into eight production teams, A to H. But the production teams organized among the Ban villagers, more often called *she*, were actually composed of kinship members. Even if social transformation in China also set the institutional change for ethnic minorities, the division of land property easily resumed its traditional way once the working team system was destroyed in 1980. The influence of state policy on cropland, therefore, resumed its pre-1958 character in the frontier area. Even if farming conditions, such as irrigation channels, farming techniques, seeds and the use of fertilizers, have changed to a certain degree in the last 30 years, the family division of cropland property is still based on bilateral inheritance.

The process of family division sets the starting point for discussion

²⁵ The County Archives of Lancang (1980), 'The Muga Commune', in *Archives* category No 54-1-Muga Township, Volume 209. In China, after 1949 the political movement of land reform spread to the larger body. Work teams entered the villages and organized the peasantry to attack and destroy landlords. The land reform shifted landholding from landlords to their former tenants, the landless labourers. In some frontier regions in southern Yunnan, this kind of land reform was not carried out. See Fairbank (1992), *China: A New History*, Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, and London, pp 350–353.

here. In Ban village, simple as the actual wedding ceremony is, negotiations between the two families concerned before the wedding are far more complex and important. Because of the importance of the family cropland, the division of it, brought about by marriage, may affect all the kinship members. Compared with the patrilineal descent system of the Han Chinese in the Pearl River Delta,²⁶ or the matrilineal Moso descent system in the Lugu Lake area,²⁷ the Lahu system does not involve an exchange of women as put forward by Lévi-Strauss; neither is it a marriage between two matrilineal families, as at Lugu Lake.²⁸ Rather, in this system, a new family is always separated from both parental families. If this reproduction style of families is to be maintained, the newly-wed couple must keep balanced ties with both families.

The married couple Zasi and Naduo may be used as an example here. When they married, Zasi was 17 and Naduo was 16. After the wedding, they lived with Naduo's parents for one year, and then with Zasi's parents for a year. During this period of time, they learned from both their parents how to farm and make a living. Two years later, on a rat day of the Lahu calendar, they built their own grass-thatched house, which was completed in one day with the help of their brothers and sisters. The day of the rat in the Lahu calendar is thus the day for the couple to clear and repair the house. Long before the wedding, their parents had been discussing how to divide the family croplands. The result of the negotiations was that Naduo was given a paddy field of 0.5 *mu* (1 *mu* equals 666 square metres), which could be easily irrigated, and the expected yields in the autumn would be 300 kilogrammes. Besides this, she was also given another small piece of paddy field of about 0.1 *mu*, which could be used for cultivating the seedlings, with yields of about 100 kg of grain. Zasi was given a 0.8 *mu* (about 530 square metres) piece of paddy field with expected yields of about 400 kg because of the poor irrigation facilities. Therefore, the total amount of their grain yield would be about 800 kg. With their son Zanu, born in 1989, and daughter Naluo, born in 1995, the grain for each family member is only 200 kg. The three areas of paddy field can be used for wheat farming in winter, the harvest of which can be used for feeding pigs. Zasi and

²⁶ Maurice Freedman (1965), *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*, Athlone Press, London.

²⁷ Cai Hua, translated by Asti Hustvedt (2001), *A Society Without Fathers and Husbands: The Na of China*, Zone Books, New York.

²⁸ *Ibid*; Chuan-kang Shih (2001), 'Genesis of marriage among the Moso and empire-building in late imperial China', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 60, No 2, pp 381–412.

Naduo told me of their worries: 'Our children are still young, but when they grow up, our harvest will not be enough to feed the family even if we work very hard!' After the death of Naduo's father, her mother gave another piece of paddy field to them, which is 0.4 *mu* and easily irrigated. But they have to help her mother farm her cropland. Like other mountainous areas in Yunnan, the Muga Valley's paddy fields are mostly small, usually less than 0.5 *mu* (333 square metres). Together with the practice of the division of the family cropland upon their children's marriage, the cropland of a Lahu family is usually widely scattered, adding to the difficulty of farming.

When children grow up, parents have to prepare for their marriage. First, they have to choose one of their children to live with. Second, they will divide their family cropland into several parts according to the number of family members. Usually, they choose to live with the most hard-working child. The one who is chosen is lucky, because he or she usually receives a large share of the family cropland. As long as the child supports the parents until the day they die, he or she will also receive the parents' share of the family cropland. Sometimes, the spouse of the chosen child has to give up his or her rights to the family cropland of his or her parents' family. This provides opportunities for the families with less cropland to set up marriage ties with those with more cropland. In short, the division of the family cropland is under the control of parents and it is directly connected to the duty to support elderly parents. When a child takes on the responsibility of supporting his or her parents, he or she inherits the rights to the cropland of the parents. However, in this process the family title or any kind of lineal descent is often ignored. This can thus be defined as a non-lineal bilateral descent.

According to myth, the Lahu had a long tradition of irrigated rice farming at Meng Mien (Lincang), before they were forced to move to the Muga Valley having failed in battles with the Han and the Dai. There were about 17,000 *mu* of irrigated terraced paddy field in 2005, with an average of 0.9 *mu* per person in the Muga Valley,²⁹ but the average for the Ban villagers was only 0.7 *mu*, which was lower than the township average. Some drylands on the hillsides can be used only to cultivate low-harvest corn, dry rice and buckwheat, with annual yields of just 150 kg per *mu*. Therefore, these dry hillside croplands are not seen as

²⁹ Muga Township Government (2005), *The Official Statistics Report of Muga Township Government*, Muga Township Government, Lancang.

important living resources. In recent years, some tea gardens have been reclaimed on the hillsides as a way of earning cash income.

All villagers take irrigated cropland as their basic living resource. It is the most important factor to be considered in the negotiation between parents when they arrange a marriage for their children. As early as the first date of the two children, this is considered by the parents on both sides. Sometimes, brothers and sisters are also seriously involved in their younger brothers' or sisters' dating, because once a marriage tie is established they can no longer avoid interacting with the relatives on both sides. Zasi told me,

'I had already dated about 20 girls before I decided to marry Naduo. Some of the girls lived in Ban village, and some in other villages. I dated them for many years but we didn't talk about a wedding, and we did not have sexual relations either. Among them, three girls had been seriously considered as my prospective spouse, but I finally chose Naduo because the conditions of her share of the family cropland were better. After the wedding, we lived at her parents' home for the first year and lived at my parents' home for the second year. After that, we built our own house, and lived independently. We thought, if we lived with my parents too long, there would be conflict between Naduo and my brothers or sisters. Ideally, we could get equal shares with our brothers and sisters. In actual practice, unfairness in the division of family cropland usually occurs, because of the different conditions of the family croplands. The problem here is whether both sides can reach an acceptable arrangement because the arrangement may decide the quality of life of the newly-wed couple.'

Napo, born in 1925, recalled,

'Just as the old saying goes, "Never marry a person without cropland." I married when I was 15 or 16, but shortly after the wedding, my husband died of disease. My husband's family has a large piece of paddy field, and so they make a comparably good living. After his death, his share of the paddy field would have been taken back by his parents. His parents asked me to marry his younger brother. Although I didn't like him, I agreed to the suggestion after careful consideration. By so doing, I could live on their cropland. On the wedding night, I was very reluctant to sleep with him. I hesitated for some time and then I slept with him. And I have been living with him till

now. The reason I decided to live with him was because of the condition of their family cropland.³⁰

Religious belief integrated into the non-lineal bilateral kinship

According to myth, after the creative god E Sha cultivated the gourd in which the ancestral pair of human beings was generated, E Sha also divided the cosmos into two worlds, as a pair, just as man and woman are a pair, and the sun and the moon are a pair. The god E Sha therefore sent human lives into an endless cycle between the paired worlds: the world of the living (de³¹ mu⁵³ mi³¹) and the world of the dead (si³³ mu⁵³ mi³¹). After people die, their souls will go back to the world of the dead for another generation, then they will die again, and the souls will return to the world of the living to be reborn as insects in the fields. This process means that ancestors will disappear from the world of the dead after their one life there. After those insects die again, the souls will become dew, which becomes the souls of rice at the moment when rice is in bloom. After eating cooked rice, parents will give birth to their children. Therefore lives circulate between two worlds.

People believe that, living in the world of the dead, the dead parents still supervise their children in the world of the living, watching their daily lives. But people in the world of the living cannot see them. Because the dead people can only live in the world of the dead for just one generation, after which their souls will shift into a new style of life, returning to the world of the living again, all ancestors older than the dead parents' generation are excluded, leaving the upper generation as the immediate ancestors. Additionally, because all residents living in the world of the dead were moved from our world, all of them still keep their living style, which means that that world is just an extended part of our living world. The result is that there is no productive ability for lives in the world of the dead, and all life resources must rely on supplies in the world of the living. The logic is distinct here: all children must provide chickens, pigs and cattle to their immediate ancestors, because the immediate ancestors were the providers of cropland to their children, as the basic source for their life.

Another important piece of logic concerns souls. Ban villagers believe that everyone has two souls as a pair. One soul is settled at home; the other is attached to the body and is very active. The body soul likes

³⁰ Napo's husband passed away in August 1995. I attended the funeral, and this was the first time I had observed a Lahu cremation ceremony. Napo passed away in 2007.

to flee to the world of the dead to visit the immediate ancestors, and once the body soul has left, people will fall ill. In this case, a healing ritual must be held to call back the departed soul, as an occasion of exchange with the immediate ancestors. As the head of a family, a couple needs to host this ritual. On the one hand, it is an exchange with the upper generation living in another world, and on the other, this ritual is a healing process. If the sick person recovers, it means the departed body soul has returned. Ideally, the healing ritual shows the negotiation between two worlds – one couple in the world of the living and two in the world of the dead. This frequently held ritual can also be seen as an educational occasion for all villagers to confirm their belief about the double worlds as a pair. The ancestors older than the upper generations of the current family head couple have already disappeared, institutionally, from the genealogic memory, but the two generations separated into two worlds have an extremely close relationship, which combines people's souls and cropland together, and the healing ritual becomes evidence to demonstrate this relationship, which involves all close kinship.

In the daily life of Ban village, some parents can intervene in their children's married life, and they can take the cropland back from their children even when their children are already living independently in their own houses. This kind of intervention can only end when both the parents have died. But symbolically, the parents still perform the role of the family's guardian and the landowner in the world of the dead after their death, as the immediate ancestors. Because children live on the farmland of their parents, children must provide symbolic living resources for their dead parents living in the world of the dead, such as chickens or pigs, which can not be reproduced there. That is why, in the soul-calling rituals, children have to sacrifice chickens, oxen or pigs to their dead parents in exchange for their souls, which are believed to have been taken by their parents. This close relationship between the two generations shows that the living resources of a couple are determined by their parents. And their souls are also controlled by their parents as the immediate ancestors in the world of the dead. With the tripartite relations among the couple and the two parental families, the lineage ties are ignored or forgotten institutionally by the Lahu people, but the relationship between the two generations is made very close, and sometimes it may become very tense. In other words, the parents are the providers of cropland in the living world, but are the property destroyers in the spiritual world due to the killing of animals in rituals. This

seemingly rather contradictory attitude of the children towards their parents is very often shown in daily life and at times of ritual performances. The equal division of the family cropland among family members is only an ideal, which is hard to realize because of the different conditions of the cropland and the complex relations between families and individuals. Therefore, the connection of the division of the family cropland with marriage has become the main source of family conflicts. This is the reason why Lahu society is always in an endless process of family separation and reorganization, and the social feature of flexibility is significant.

Egalitarian, labour cooperation and non-linear bilateral kinship

Bound together with the birth of a new family, the cropland, social units and kinship networks are all reorganized. In the Muga Valley, farming, as the most important economy, calls for a cooperation system to match the periods of agricultural production. I noted the daily labour of some families over a period of three months. There were only three days when the couple worked together as a labour-sharing team. Leaving home together after lunch, the husband and wife would take on different tasks, which might also be seen as a team cooperating for farming. The most important agricultural tasks are seeding in the spring, transplanting rice seedlings in the early summer and harvesting in the autumn. It is impossible for a lone couple to deal with these farming tasks in the short periods – traditionally called *jieqi* (which means solar terms) – in which the work concerned must be done. Therefore, a labour-sharing group needs to be organized. In other words, some work may be done by the husband and wife themselves, but some important, labour-consuming tasks must be carried out by a labour-sharing group consisting of the kinship members of the couple. But we can say that, in daily farming tasks, women and men work together as cooperation teams – a very common phenomenon that can be easily observed in Muga as the basic way of sharing labour among the Lahu.³¹ So, we need to return to the issue of labour division in rice farming agriculture in mountainous areas such as the Muga Valley. The social organization of collective actions

³¹ On the issue of ‘unifying gender in labour’, see also Shanshan Du (2002), ‘“Husband and wife do it together”: unifying gender in labour’, in *Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs: Gender Unity and Gender Equality Among the Lahu of Southwest China*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp 79–106.

is closely related to the combination of kinship groups, religious beliefs and the local ecological environment.

Kinship as a labour exchanging group

After the newly-wed couple have received the shares of the family cropland when they have built their own house, their daily life focuses on farming. At the same time, they have to maintain a normal relationship with their parents. In the Muga Valley, the irrigation canals were built before the Lahu moved in, but the construction undertaken in 1963 enlarged the irrigated areas by 25%. The transplanting of rice seedlings is performed before June. In this season, the tasks to be dealt with are the harvesting of winter crops such as wheat or beans, spreading manure and ploughing the cropland at least three times, irrigating the field, and transplanting the rice seedlings. All the work must be done in about one month, which requires cooperation among the kinship members. Besides this, house building, harvesting and/or even weeding need their cooperation. A couple's brothers and sisters, together with their parents, are the basic kinship members. For instance, when exchanging labour with kinship members, Zasi and Naduo will first go to their brothers and sisters and then their parents' brothers and sisters. Maintaining an equal relationship with relatives on both sides is very important. In the busy seasons, the work schedule must be carefully arranged. For example, one day they will help a family on Zasi's side, and on the second day they will help a family on Naduo's side. Working days for both sides will be recorded, and any extra working days on either side must be compensated for. When the brothers and sisters of one couple are all treated equally, husband and wife will have an equal say in the family's affairs, such as descent and responsibilities for bringing up children.

Kinship as ritual participants

According to my records, the healing ritual of soul-calling, ha³³ khu³³, was held almost every night in Ban village. Take Zapo and Naduo's family, for example: they held a series of rituals to treat Naduo's serious lumbago in a 12-day cycle of the zodiac calendar, including calling left souls back by driving away the house ne⁴³ spirit (ye³¹ ne⁵⁴ de³³) and the mountain ne⁵⁴ spirit. In the final ritual, an ox was killed in exchange for the escaped soul and the beef shared within the intermarriage group, in public, on the village road. In these rituals, 14 chickens and one ox were killed. The participants included the brothers and sisters of Zapo

and Naduo, and brothers and sisters of their parents, numbering around 30 people in all. When the ox was killed, some of the beef was sold at the market, while the rest, including the head and legs, was shared among the relatives. After the beef had been shared, the ritual specialist mo³⁵ pa³¹ sent the soul of the ox to their immediate ancestors in the world of the dead in exchange for Naduo's soul. In 50 families of team E in Ban village, in June 2005 alone, soul-calling rituals were held 10 times. The annual average is two or three times for each family, and even when no-one in the family falls ill, the ritual is held at least once a year. Whenever a ritual is held, the kinship members of the patient will crowd into his or her house. In the ritual, the souls of the killed chickens, pigs or oxen are used in exchange for the left soul of the patient, and the meat is shared among the kinship members. Besides this, the patient's family has to provide alcohol for the participants. People chat, accompanied by the songs sung by the mo³⁵ pa³¹, deep into the night, or until the next morning. They can imagine the scenery along the journey to the world of the dead. When the ritual is finished, people are already drunk. According to the villagers, to participate in a ritual is regarded as a labour that must be compensated for by the patient's family with a day's labour, and the mo³⁵ pa³¹ will be paid six *yuan* for each ritual he conducts. The reason why all the kinship members must participate in the ritual is that they have to send their souls to the world of the dead to ask for the return of the escaped soul of the patient. It is a kind of labour exchange, just like harvesting or planting.

Since the collapse of the village temple in 1958, rituals held in the homes of individuals have become major public affairs. In the 50 families of team E in Ban village, the treatment ritual is held every three days, which helps confirm relationships among kinship members. In other words, apart from New Year Festival, the public activities of Ban village are held separately by different families. Although a couple always share labour with their own kinship members, there is no collective power evolving from this social networking. The power structure could be ideologically viewed from the relationship between E Sha and the pair of worlds, but this authority source could not be viewed from the frequently practised rituals, which are the most important of public activities and held in the public area of the kinship groups. In the social lives of the Ban villagers, individuality and collectivity are expressed in the following two ways: a couple work socially as an individual unit, but the combination of couples in a kinship group works as a community. The relationship among the kinship members is equal, but the relationship between two immediate generations is

tense. Therefore, the kinship system of the Muga Lahu excludes the lineal hierarchy among couples. Collective power is equally distributed among the couples within the kinship groups in the treatment rituals, and the social network so maintained is used as a way to exchange labour and share resources. Ritual participants confirm their relationships with the other kinship members, keep up public life practices through a certain couple inside the group, and maintain their sharing responsibilities and social tasks for everyday life. Home has thus become a kind of public space, and through rituals, families are equally woven into a flat network for matters of sharing resources on the basis of their religious duty to attend rituals, and this makes the collective imagination of another world possible.

In general, as a neat bilateral system, the internal authority within the kinship network is ruled out, compared with the lineal systems (such as patrilineal or matrilineal systems), and it is clear that the Lahu do not constitute a simple cognatic lineage or descent group, because they do not trace back to any ancestor beyond one generation, and only the dead generation is remembered as the immediate ancestors, based on its ideology of circulating between two worlds, which we can easily observe through treatment or healing rituals.

However, the tension and the close ties between two generations are based on the inheritance of cropland property and the ritual negotiation between the two worlds. As a result of this mechanism, the lineage ties are forgotten institutionally, although that does not mean that the Lahu do not remember their dead generations in history. The dead are remembered by the villagers through stories and rituals. After their death, the generation of immediate ancestors can move to the world of the dead, though they will then disappear from that world after one life-cycle. Therefore, even if villagers can remember some historically important figures or family ancestors, not all the dead will be placed in the collective historical memory because genealogy is not practised. The social institution of the two worlds excludes generations that are older than the immediate ancestor from the cycle of life.

Kinship as a sharing group

For the Ban villagers, marriages of younger generations are of vital importance, because the kinship networks resulting from these marriages will affect the lives of all the kinship members. If this relationship is to be maintained, a couple must undertake their duty to help other brothers and sisters to deal with their difficulties.

Most villagers marry at the age of 15 or 16, and family quarrels often

arise because the couples are so young and unable to live independently. But some conflicts may result from the different personalities or temperaments of the couple. This causes some married people to face external pressure, such as help required from their kinship members even when they want to resolve family conflicts by themselves, which in turn may cause more conflict between husband and wife. Divorce among the Lahu is almost impossible because of the large social cost incurred. Therefore, family amity or fornication is the most talked about subject in the daily life of the village. Fornication is always punished and any possibility of divorce removed. The following case of punishment as a result of fornication provides a clear example.

In January 2005, a married woman, Naluo, of team F, was seen fornicating with Zazu, a bachelor, of team C. Then Naluo's husband asked the heads of team F and team C to resolve this affair. Naluo and her husband, plus Zazu and all their brothers and sisters presented themselves at the village office to discuss how to punish their infidelity (cho³³ pe³¹). Traditionally, because this was the first time they had been discovered, Naluo and Zazu had to be fined 100 *yuan*, which is one-quarter of the family's annual income, and this money was shared by all the participants in this meeting. Additionally, Naluo and Zazu had to pledge that they would never fornicate again, and if they were found to be doing so a second time, they would be fined 500 *yuan*. However, two months later, they were found sleeping together again in the mountain forest. Everyone was angry and scolded them. Because Zazu was still unmarried, the fine had to be paid by his mother. But Zazu's mother said her family faced a serious food shortage, and asked how she could pay such a large sum of money. Naluo's family could not afford the fine either. Naluo's husband said they would deposit one of their family's croplands with anyone who could lend them the money. But for Zazu, there was no way for him to obtain the money. So Zazu said, 'I do not know how to deal with this. What can I do? The only way out is to commit suicide!' Then the meeting participants shared the money paid by Naluo and her husband, which was 30 *yuan* each, and left. Although it was Naluo's husband who had reported this affair to the village heads, he himself had to pay the fine. Several months later, Naluo, under arrangements made by middlemen, went to Henan province. Zazu did not commit suicide and was not pursued for the fine. Regarding this incident, my hostess told me that, 'There was an old saying about fornication, that is, the two fornicators are just like a man and a woman walking on the same road, with the man taking the lead. So the man must take the

greater responsibility for it and he must be fined more. Anyway, this kind of scandal must be punished.'

Fornication is the biggest threat to the social order of the community, and so the punishment for fornication is also one of the heaviest. In other words, the social order is built on the basis of family ties. The bilateral and non-lineal kinship system and social network is created and maintained through marriage. The lineal kinship links or lineal authority powers are very weak among the Muga Lahu, but flat links woven by marriage ties are strongly reinforced by sharing social responsibilities and material tasks.

The exclusion mechanism in marriage

When the cooperative groups were organized by the government working team in 1958, the cropland of one-third of the families in Ban village – about 70 households – was far from adequate or lacked irrigation facilities. They were the poorest households so they were the first to be organized into two cooperatives, which were later transformed into the production teams A and B in 1958, and are today the villagers' groups A and B (including 81 households in 2005). The rich families before 1958 were organized into today's villagers' groups E, F and G (including 147 households in 2005) and they now have a surplus of food. The families in groups C, D and H (106 households in 2005) are at the intermediate level. Generally speaking, all eight villagers' groups are economically classified into the above-mentioned three categories of families. As intermarriage ties are more often established among families in the same category, there are therefore three categories of kinship groups. When the cooperatives were organized among the villagers, the families with a small amount of cropland were grouped together, as those of the same kinship group had long been sharing labour and food among themselves. When the cooperatives were later transformed into production teams, the membership of the teams was changed. At that time, it was very difficult to assign labour, because the team's cropland was widely scattered as a result of the traditional practice of family cropland division upon marriage – and so the waste of labour was enormous. This is always ignored by local officials when they talk about the old days. Unlike most regions in China, the Lahu case deserves closer attention. It can be said that the families who were poor before 1958 were still poor after 1980, because their living resources had not increased with the increase in population.

Since 1980, institutionalized labour sharing under the system of pro-

duction teams has been replaced by labour sharing among the kinship members. But the traditional practice of family cropland division upon marriage again, as before 1958, helps classify the kinship groups in the village into several categories. Intermarriage ties are established only among families in a certain category. A social boundary is thus formed between families of two different categories.

Families in a team are usually relatives. This is because people prefer to marry those in the same team. If a person chooses a spouse in another village, then his or her life will be very hard. For example, if a girl is married to someone in another village, her share of the family cropland will be a long way from her husband's family, which makes farming it difficult. More often than not, she will give up her share. So, many people prefer to marry those with good cropland in the same village. The result is that people with good cropland marry each other, which is the best way to ensure that kinship members will not go hungry. But the problem is that those with poor cropland are often excluded by those with good cropland when choosing a spouse. So intermarriage ties exist only among those families with similar land conditions. When a bad choice is made, all the kinship members have to share the life crises, if any, together. Therefore, cropland is the most important factor when choosing a spouse. Because the family cropland is usually composed of widely scattered, differently sized fields with different conditions of irrigation, parents often make early plans to divide the family cropland.

The connection of the division of the family cropland with marriage puts the family cropland into an endless process of fragmentation: hence the dynamic changes of communal structure and the frequent reproduction of families. In regions such as Muga, where land resources are becoming more and more insufficient due to the population increase over the past few decades, serious famines between the 1950s and the 1980s remain fresh in villagers' minds. This further consolidates their traditional strategy of spouse choosing, because for them the choice of spouse is equal to the choice of cropland and labour sharing groups. In other words, social boundaries influenced by economic matters have developed between the following three categories: teams A and B, teams E, F and G, and teams C, D and H. However, the social boundary among different intermarriage groups is shaped by the exclusion mechanism in marriage, although it does not affect the hierarchy or power relations between different teams, because all of them are organized by equal couples.

In summary, on the basis of the principle of gender equality, the marriage system of the Lahu connects the division of family cropland with

marriage. In the process of family reproduction, the living resources of the children are in the hands of their parents. Meanwhile, because men and women have equal rights to the family cropland, the husband and wife have an equal say in the family's affairs. Centred on the nuclear family and bilateral kinship principle, the brothers and sisters of the husband and wife form the kinship group of this family, sharing labour and harvests together. This close relationship among the members of the kinship group is further consolidated ideologically and socially through common participation in the treatment rituals conducted for any of the kinship members. Therefore, to choose a spouse is not a private event. Rather, it is a choice made under pressure from the parents, brothers and sisters. Briefly, among the Lahu, marriage is the most important social event. To avoid the loss of the family cropland and to ensure the survival of the family, people prefer to choose a spouse within certain categories of families. From 1958 to 1980, the three socially separated categories of families were transformed into 'cooperatives' or 'production teams', but after 1980, under the influence of poverty-relief projects, the category composed of 'the poorest families' began to face another kind of pressure imposed by the state in the name of modernization and social development.

Based on the above long-term ethnography, we can conclude that the Muga Lahu practise an egalitarian system based on marriage and land redistribution by taking gender equality and paired worlds as their social ideal, which creates a non-hierarchical kinship institution within the community. However, this system is not equal to a society without a higher level authority over kinship and communities; otherwise we could not explain the centralized political system that has existed for more than a century. A large-scale, socially unifying and religious penetration has been the most important social process for internal integration in villages, and regional cooperation has been well mobilized, shaping the Lahu ethnic identity deeply in different periods of time. In general, communal authority is separated from bilateral non-lineal kinship, and attached to religious belief or the state. Meanwhile, kinship still maintains communal life in a very dynamic and flexible way for family production, land distribution and labour cooperation under local ecological and agricultural conditions. Although religious authority was destroyed by the state, and because the community lacks its internal hierarchy linked with kinship, the everyday cooperation and agricultural tasks based on marriage and kinship still work very well. The human innovative ability of independent political mobilization in a large terrain has, however, been diminished under the

penetration of modern states. It is the state that makes the Lahu powerless in the historical process of frontier formation. The following section will review this history briefly.

Authority over communities or kinship groups

The above discussion of so-called egalitarian bilateral kinship without internal hierarchy derives from contemporary field observation. But the question is clear: if it is an egalitarian system, how was the authority within the community and across communities, based on the centralized Five Buddha Districts system, historically possible – especially during the long-term political battles against the Qing state? Initially, it was an effective political hierarchy; how, then, has the system been changed or maintained based on this non-lineal bilateral social institution? It is important to note that the above ethnography on this social institution is not a newly created cultural adaptation of recent years. As a basic social institution, this system has been practised for a very long time in the most Lahu-concentrated valley on the mountainous frontier between southern Yunnan and north-eastern Burma. The historical process of social change must therefore be carefully reviewed, as it can provide us with a fundamental understanding of the mutual complement and cooperation between kinship and authority in a long-term reconstruction dynamic. The kinship style is still there, but the authority style has been changed contemporarily.

A brief review is necessary of the history of authorities in the Luohei Mountains in western Mekong areas. Because of increasing Han immigration in the southern Ailao Mountains, and to control local resources such as silver and salt mines and tea plantations, the Qing government carried out reforms of the native chieftain system [*Gaitu Guiliu*] in the 1720s. This political change stimulated indigenous rebellions from local minorities including the Luohei, the Woni and the Dai. After that, the Yunnan–Guizhou governor adopted a policy of driving the Luohei away to the western part of Mekong, the barrier separating the Burmese after the wars between the Qing and the Kingdom of Burma. The Lahu were recorded as the Luohei in Chinese documents before 1953. Gradually, the Luohei had been mobilized by this resistance, which originated as a religious movement in the 1720s.³² In 1790, a Han Chinese monk, Yang Deyuan, built the Nanzha Buddhist monastery and another centre

³² Ni Tui (1846), *The Chronicle of Yunnan*, Vol 12; and Chen Zonghai (1899), *The (Guangxu) Gazetteer of Puer Prefecture*, Vol 28.

in Mannuo village in northern Nanzha. After his death, four of his students succeeded to his leadership and mobilized much larger political networks in the mountains. The most powerful was Monk Tongjin, whose original name was Zhang Fuguo, which he later resumed at the request of the Qing government. He eventually built Nanzha, the political centre, and initially controlled 20,000 Lahu people.³³

After this, the Five Buddha Districts were gradually established in the Luohei Mountains in the western area of the Mekong River. In different periods, this region has been identified as the Five or Six Buddhist Districts under the leadership of the Nanzha monastery. The Great Master of Nanzha's title was fu³¹ zu⁵³ pha⁵⁴, meaning the Monk of Buddha, and these monks continued claiming that they were, generation by generation, the incarnations of E Sha Buddha, and that the creative god E Sha was Buddha himself. The Nanzha central monastery was also an education centre. Boys were selected to study there and the most outstanding students would resume their secular life and were sent to be the jo⁵³ mo⁵⁴ or the khu³⁵ in different districts, meaning the highest officer of a district. Some famous jo⁵⁴ mo⁵⁴ such as Xi Taiye [Lord Xi] and Zhabu Taiye [Lord Zhabu] of Muga had control over all the Lahu villages (there were then 16) and some nearby Wa villages for a long time. Wang Fuye and San Fuzu were also monks, but they resumed secular life as Buddha District leaders in the eastern and middle Luohei Mountains. These jo⁵³ mo⁵⁴ officers regularly met at Nanzha many times every year, for political and religious conversation and education.³⁴

In these districts, every village built its temple (fu³¹ ye³¹ or ho³⁵ ye³¹), which was maintained by a monk pha³¹ or a regular manager. Sometimes, the village heads kha⁵⁴ xie³³ took the position of temple managers, and collected household tax from the village, organized village warriors and met the district jo⁵³ mo⁵⁴. Therefore, tax was paid to the district centre first, and then the leaders of the districts paid their tax to the Nanzha centre. Meanwhile, at the village temple, warriors were organized and the village heads also selected. The village temple was not only a place to worship E Sha Buddha, but also served as the village offices.³⁵ In this case, the three-level political and military leadership

³³ Monk Guangyuan (1805), 'The original records about the Luohei's convert at Mannuo', *Yunnan Academy of Social Science Archives*, Vol 345-3.

³⁴ Anon (transcription in 1957), 'The draft gazetteer of Nanzha Buddha', *Yunnan Academy of Social Science Archives*, Vol 345-3.

³⁵ Yan Sijiu (1963), 'The investigation on the Lahu at Laba village in Donghe district Lancang county', in *The Social Historical Investigation Materials (Volume 2)*, Research Institution of Nationalities, Kunming, pp 14-44.

was stable: the Nanzha central monastery – the district jo⁵³ mo⁵⁴ or ku³⁵ officers and temples – the village heads, monks and temples. This system was gradually destroyed by the Qing government when the army crossed the Mekong River in 1888 in order to control the Yunnan–Burma frontier after British colonists had occupied upper Burma. Through this system, the Lahu villages had been mobilized well institutionally, and the Lahu culture had also been fundamentally reconstructed under the E Sha Buddha belief, which was quite different from an ordinary Buddhist society. It was a culture based on a bilateral and non-lineal system, the belief in a two-world cosmos and two-stage circulation of lives by excluding upper generations from family genealogy. However, after the Qing army crossed the Mekong River, some powerful ‘Lahulized’ Han families were brought in as new chieftains to work with the leaders of the newly established Zhenbian military county, and then Lancang county as its complement.³⁶ The Shi families therefore mainly controlled the replaced leadership of the Buddha Districts until 1949.

Even though the centralized authority of E Sha Buddha was destroyed by the Qing and the Republic states, the communal authority based on E Sha Buddha belief had been well maintained from the 1880s to 1958. The method of selecting village heads by equal couples at village temples, which means the power of the village head kha⁵⁴ xie³³ over kinship as authorized and identified by the god E Sha, finally collapsed in most Lahu villages in the political movement of 1958. Since then, all local cadres of township governments and village offices have been appointed by the county government, which has meant that belief in the god E Sha was no longer a source of authority over kinship.

It is important to show the detailed process of the mechanism for choosing a village head from the kinship groups before the 1950s, because it is key to understanding kinship relationships. According to my informants,³⁷ all communal affairs were controlled by the village head before the 1950s. The village head was selected at the village temple fu³¹ ye³¹, meaning the House of the E Sha Buddha. All husbands of household heads (the household head is a couple) gathered at the village temple during the New Year Festival every year. Led by a monk, these representatives of all the villagers selected a village head kha⁵⁴ xie³³ by way of divination under the name of E Sha Buddha. If the

³⁶ Ma Jianxiong (2009), ‘Performing the state agency: three powerful families on the southern Yunnan–Burma Frontier since the 1880s’, paper presented at the *SEAA and TSAE Taipei 2009 Conference*, 5 July.

³⁷ Ma Jianxiong (2005), ‘Field notes: Interview with Zawa and Zamu’, 4 July.

selected village head was acceptable, he would be kept for the next year, but if he was weak, a new alternative was selected the next year. The selected village head normally organized a prestigious leading group from the village composed of the village head himself, a blacksmith *jia*³³ *li*³⁵, a ritual specialist *mo*³⁵ *pa*³¹ and some influential elderly men. The task of this group was to maintain the order and the rule of the village: for example, to manage the public grain storage for emergencies, to punish cases of fornication and to organize the repair of irrigation canals. Before the Five Buddha Districts were destroyed in the late Qing dynasty, the leadership of the village head and his leadership committee also took responsibility for tax collection for the *ku*³⁵, who was appointed by the central Buddhist monastery at Nanzha.

‘Because there was nobody to manage the public matters of the village, all common affairs, such as doing good deeds or resolving problems, were managed by monks. For a long time, village temples have become village offices and all matters, including lawsuits, taxes and corvée, were controlled by monks who worked as the chieftains in a village. Sometimes, conflicts between villages became conflicts between monks. Some who had a talent for leadership became military commanders and social leaders. Religious tasks were given up, but soldiers were collected and trained at temples. Guns and swords filled the temples. The rebels of Luohei Mountains were all controlled by temples and led by monks. Since the Jiaqing reign (from the 1790s to the 1800s), monks like Tongjin (Zhang Fuguo) and the Wang Buddha (Wang Fuye) became famous leaders. Because the temples were the command offices of the rebels, the general Weichi Dongxiao led the army across the Mekong River and destroyed the system of the Luohei Mountains (from the 1888s to 1905). The government army set fire to all the temples and killed all the monks in ten years, so that the temples and monks were totally destroyed.’³⁸

Even if the Five Buddha Districts system had disappeared in terms of political leadership, the belief in E Sha Buddha and the reconstructed cultural system of resistances had already reset people’s lives and cultural meaning. One of my informants said,

‘Worshipping E Sha is the most important piece of Lahu custom, but

³⁸ Fang Guoyu (1943), *The Investigation of West Yunnan Frontier*, Southwest Cultural Research Institute of Yunnan University, Kunming, p 37.

it has been lost for a long time. It was banned in 1958, and the Cultural Revolution was a harsh time for us because any worship of E Sha was banned. Nowadays, people like money but have lost their right to leadership, because of the loss of Lahu rules and customs to various leaders sent by the Han state.³⁹

It is still worth noting that the rebellious Lahu were mobilized by the system under some heterodox Han monks, but that these monks could not be reviewed as members of the mainstream Buddhist monks, because their ideals and organization were clearly a mixture combining Taoism with Buddhism and rules of secret societies among miners and immigrants.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Lahu religious belief could not be regarded as virtual Buddhism, even if there are remarkable Buddhist influences in Lahu ideas, such as, for example, the belief in circulating lives between two worlds, or the fact that the highest god, E Sha, is believed to be reincarnated generation by generation. Here, we must add bilateral non-linear kinship into the socio-cultural system as an integrated unity. Kinship is not just a simple social institution separated from its historical context if we seriously review the case of the Lahu. The religious movement in frontier history reconstructed the social system, but the society was not simply assembled by 'kinship' and 'religion'. Belief in the reborn E Sha and the coupled worlds, the descent of land property and the reproduction of family all organically become a dynamic and self-fulfilling system.

The history of frontier formation with the expansion of the Qing state forward to the south-west borderland encourages a certain perspective on the Muga Lahu's kinship. Even though the Five Buddha Districts system has long been demolished, and choosing the village head at the village temple has not been done since 1958 in most Lahu areas, at the level of communal affairs, there is still enough space for a kinship network in terms of labour sharing, ritual participation and social exclusion. However, a certain degree of regional diversity of communal leaderships still exists according to Du. For example, the couples of village

³⁹ Ma Jianxiong (2005), 'Field notes: Interview with Yaer', 23 January.

⁴⁰ Yan Sijiu (1963), 'Investigation report on the Lahu of Laba village in Tonghe township', in Yunnan Provincial Research Institute of Nationalities, ed, *Yunnan Lahu Social and Historical Investigation Material, Volume 2*, Yunnan Provincial Institute of Nationalities, Kunming, pp 14–44. For further discussion of the issue of secret societies among the miners at minefields on the Yunnan–Burma frontier, see Ma Jianxiong (2011), 'Shaping of the Yunnan–Burma frontier by secret societies since the end of the 17th century', *Moussons*, No 17, 2011-1, pp 65–84.

heads, spiritual specialists, the monk-couple and leading blacksmith enjoy more prestige than other couples in the village, and their charisma can influence village decision making. But they do not have formal authority and are easy to replace.⁴¹ It is clear that the Lahu-style bilateral non-lineage system has worked for a long time, and still works in the context of irrigation farming, and its internal mechanism merits review. Kinship defines land property, and kinship was defined by family reproduction, but communal authority was given by E Sha Buddha, or the mechanism was mobilized by religious movements in history against the coming of the state. In general, cultural meaning and social structure have been mutually created through land property reconfirmation displayed by rituals, but the 'grammar' has been rewritten by those escaped monks since the religious movements were mobilized.

In summary, bilateral descent only takes place between two proximate generations; the kinship and descent system cannot be simply defined as 'cognatic kinship'; and the non-lineal system with very neat bilateral descent should be relevant. However, sometimes the asymmetry or leaning towards lineal relations (patrilineal or matrilineal) can also be found, to a certain degree, in some Lahu groups. For instance, based on my fieldwork in Nanmei Valley, which is to the north of the Lahu residences with a population of around 3,000, the bilateral kinship leans towards patrilineal descent. At the same time, the historical religious movement had never influenced this area, and E Sha Buddha belief is also absent. But for the Lahu majority living in the central Lahu Mountains in Lancang, land rights are important factors in human reproduction through marriage.

Conclusion

Power relationships or communal authority over the bilateral non-lineal system correlate closely with E Sha belief and land property redistribution, because all Lahu couples are equal due to the ideology of gender equality and the neat bilateral descent from the upper generation. Irrigated rice farming in the valley and on mountainsides has set the environmental conditions for the source of communal authority over the kinship network, aside from the frontier's history. Cropland property rights therefore become a central issue in my discussion because, as agriculturalists, the Lahu need a cooperation network based on marital kinship, and individual couples are woven into the tripartite relations

⁴¹ Shanshan Du, *supra* note 11, at pp 126–135.

with the two sides of parental land givers. This is an endless, dynamic process of family reproduction and farmland reorganization without a lineal descent line. This flat relationship extends to the world of the dead. Cropland property rights also shape the fluid value between the two worlds, which is performed through soul-calling healing rituals as the symbolic path of exchange between two generations.

In addition, the Lahu style of religious belief about the circulation of life between the world of the living and the world of the dead has excluded the possibility of descent through generations by any lineal side. The cultural value is linked with the social system of forgetting ancestors beyond one generation, because after their death the upper generation will move to the world of the dead for one life and, through healing rituals, the living can provide the living resources symbolically, because they are still the owners of land and other property and they still perform the role of guardians until their death in the world of the dead. After their death, they will finally be reborn with new lives in the world of the living. Based on this religious belief, the descent principle is strictly bound to landowners in practice and in rituals. They are the parents in the world of the living and the immediate ancestors in the world of the dead. In general, the concept of 'kindred' or 'cognatic' lines cannot effectively explain the non-lineal system practised by the Muga Lahu, which is matched to land redistribution through marriage for descent. The immediate ancestor is a symbol for ownership, but there is no genealogical line for ancestors in highlighting the descent line. Therefore, the Lahu's non-lineal system weaves a flat and dynamic relationship among equal couples, rather than a cognatic genealogy, forgetting ancestors beyond one generation, effectively based on its religious institution, which is a social consequence of frontier history.

Furthermore, after reviewing this Lahu case, it is clear that the bilateral non-lineal kinship with E Sha Buddha belief and the heterodox monks' leadership in Lahu history were not straightforward occurrences beyond the state. Lahu society has been reshaped under the Five Buddha Districts system in social mobilization and frontier formation over the last three hundred years. It was certainly a political system beyond the administrative boundary of the Qing state; it was the state that created it, and the Lahu struggled long with their social crisis under state pressure until the political system collapsed. The internal social structure of marital ties required a certain collective authority beyond kinship for social mobilization and effective ways to organize communities against the state's power in history. Even if the upper level of religious

authority ultimately could not be maintained, the community still had adequate space for religious authority to match the kinship network in history, until the communal authority was totally destroyed. The Lahu style of a bilateral, non-lineal system is still effective today for irrigation farming and different social tasks, but the contemporary problem of the absence of authority has created further social problems among the Lahu majority in some Lahu communities since 1958.

Some anthropologists assume that kinship is a separate social institution or a meaningful terminology system for social organization. However, if we review the Muga Lahu case, we have to accept that the practised kinship system is also part of frontier history, which has combined with it communal authority beyond the state judiciary, because of its heterodox feature of leadership in terms of taxation, military power and communal organization against the state, along with superior power over flat, non-hierarchical kinship. After the fall of the Five Buddha District system in 1888, when the Qing army crossed the Mekong River, the Lahu tried again and again to resist the coming of the state. But they finally failed.⁴² Some people continue to claim that they are the reborn E Sha Buddha in Myanmar, Thailand and even in Yunnan. Some have portrayed themselves as political leaders or great saviours. But we need to understand that these social movements are always linked with state power and with the Lahu kinship system.⁴³

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