

A Soul's Journey: A Lisu Song¹ from Northern Thailand

By

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Lisu are slash and burn agriculturalists who live in the upland areas of Northern Thailand, Burma, and Southwestern China (for works on the Lisu see Dessaint, 1971; for a description of Lisu agriculture and photographs, see Dessaint, 1972). Lisu believe that every person has a soul which animates the body. If the soul should depart from the body, the person exhibits characteristic symptoms of anorexia, insomnia, bad dreams, and general malaise. When an individual exhibits these symptoms, they are often diagnosed as caused by soul loss, either because the soul has been captured by some spirit or because the soul has departed of its own volition. The obvious therapy is to cause the person's soul to return to his body. This is accomplished by performing one of several soul calling ceremonies. Some of these involve the construction of a bridge which may simply be a scratch in the ground, two planks pegged into the ground, or a large bridge over a stream or river. Some involve the construction of a path-side resthouse or bench. Others take place inside the house and involve offerings placed on two or three tables beside the door, with branches to either side (hence it is sometimes called the custom of the branches).

Diagnosis of soul loss can be a result of a shamanistic seance during which the shaman's spirits inform the people that an individual's soul is absent, or of other diagnostic procedures, one of which is the cloth measuring diagnosis. This involves laying out a strip of cloth and measur-

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ing hand-spans along it from the tip of the thumb to the end of the little finger. As each span is measured off, a possible cause of the malady is called out. The procedure is repeated until the length of the cloth is found to be different from the original measurement. When the little finger falls beyond the end of the cloth, or just short of it, the cause called out then is considered to be the cause of the malady. The idea is that the spirits have shortened or lengthened the cloth to indicate this cause. At new year (Lisu celebrate Chinese new year) shamans invoke their spirits who tell the people of a village whose soul is gone and what must be done to return it, among other things. After the soul calling ceremonies indicated by the shaman had been completed for members of two households, people gathered to partake of feasts. The main component of these feasts were the pigs sacrificed during the soul calling ceremonies. Throughout the night the male elders sang a song which describes the torment of the individual whose soul had departed, and the means by which it had been returned. One man would sing a line and the others would respond. If the first line were, "She searched the bottom of the village," the response would be, "She searched the top of the village." If the first line were, "The left hand has no gold," the second would be, "The right hand has no silver." The song continued for most of the night. After a period of singing, the leader invited the others to eat. Then the song stopped while the people returned to the feast. After a period of eating, the song resumed once again.

The song is interesting because it tells the story of the journey of a soul which has departed and how it has returned. Although the general theme of the song is set, the details are not. I heard and recorded the song twice, and there were differences in content, but the major themes were the same.

Here I shall present a translation of one of the performances. I have taken some liberties with the text. Instead of giving both the leader's line and the response, I have given only one line which incorporates both. If the actual lines were: "She searched the top of the village," and "She searched the bottom of the village," I have written, "She searched the top and bottom of the village." The song is very repetitious, and I have deleted some of the repetition. Since the text is rather lengthy, I present it without analysis, except for a few items which might make the text more easily understood. Instead of including foot-notes in the text I shall explain some of the usages here.

Lisu often express emotions in terms of particular states of the heart. To have a long heart is to be patient, to have a cool heart is to be wor-

ried. A central character is Greatgrandfather, the Longbearded, the Longeyebrowed. This is the most junior of the lineage spirits. He is the one invoked in many soul calling ceremonies to help guide the soul back to its body. A state of soul absence is often spoken of as a person's having no strength or having bad breath.

Many aspects of the dualism of Lisu cosmology are apparent in this song. In other contexts the heavens are said to have nine levels while the earth has seven. The phrase, "The seven levels of the spirit land, the nine levels of the spirit land," thus means, "The whole of the spirit land."

At one point, the Overlord of the spirit land instructs the woman to write a letter. This refers to the practice of a shaman's invoking his spirits to possess him and write a letter to the Overlord of the spirit land imploring him to extend someone's life.

I think these minor comments will clarify some of the text. The text follows.

I am an old woman, I am lonely.
 I am an old woman, so I tell correctly.
 I am an old woman, I think about people's not dying and being people.
 Today is the new year, so I will tell.
 Today is new year, she has bad breath, no strength.
 She dreamed and doesn't see the child.
 She always dreams of the spirit land.
 She isn't happy, always has trouble.
 She has twelve children.
 I don't want to die; she wants always to be a person.
 I don't want to die.
 I think of the top of the village, the bottom of the village.
 At the top of the village, at the bottom of the village is one who knows.
 I think about one length of white cloth.
 I want to make the cloth measuring diagnosis quickly.
 At the top of the village the one who knows has measured the cloth.
 The one who knows said that I's lonely.
 The one who knows said that if you don't want die, may you not die.
 The old woman said to give a length of cloth to the one who knows.
 This one who knows will measure.
 The one who knows said the right hand moves a little, so he knows.
 The one who knows said to exchange a pig soul for the human soul.
 The one who knows said to make a resthouse at the fork in the path.

The one who knows said only this.
I think about taking care of the children.
I have looked for one who knows at the top and bottom of the village.
I must pay the one who knows.
I have thought about everything.
In the right hand I have no silver; there is no gold in the left hand.
Young people of the top of the village, young people of the bottom of
the village.
Young people listen carefully.
Young people, I don't want to die.
Young people, if you can, help me.
If you are able, help me; if you are not, I will die.
If you help me, I won't leave my children.
Young people, listen carefully, the old man will tell.
Young people, if you help, I won't die.
I am happy twelve times over to have you young people.
More than this, I don't like to speak much.
Old men eat together.
If we don't eat, we aren't nostalgic.
If we don't eat, we don't know.
Old woman, listen carefully;
The oldest of the young people will tell you.
Old woman, you think about the top and bottom of the village.
Everything you think is like a dream.
I, the old woman, listen to your voice, so I am lonely.
You tell me you don't have strength.
Old woman, don't worry.
Old woman, don't worry when you sleep and dream.
You don't need to look for the one who knows at the top or bottom of
the village.
The oldest young person knows you have no strength.
I know many things.
What can we do for you to be happy?
Your elder children will tell you.
Old woman, with your blessing I will tell you.
By Father's blessing we have Great-grandfather.
Don't have a cold heart.
I know about everything.
I have relatives in twelve places.
I will tell you where a man who knows lives.

I will tell at the fork in the path.
Old woman, you have told me of twelve places.
Old woman, at the fork in the path,
I know where your soul is staying.
I will tell more than this.
Old woman, don't have a cold heart.
Old woman, by the blessing of your father and mother.
In the sleeping room your father is calling you.
We call the soul by the custom of the elders.
We have the ceremony of the branches. I will tell.
We have put sticky rice on the table.
On the left side is an animal.
They are giving a three year old pig.
They will give silver to Father.
On the high hill your children are calling you.
Old woman, if you stay far, fly and come back;
 if you stay close, jump and come back.
We have sticky rice for you and call you.
Old woman, please obey my voice.
Old woman, they have given a three year old pig.
Old woman, the right hand has given silver;
 the left hand given gold.
Old woman, they have offered to Great-grandfather.
He has already searched the seven levels of the spirit land;
 he has already searched the nine levels of the spirit land.
Old woman, the one with the long beard can bring the soul.
He is the one who follows the footprints of the soul.
He takes the soul, and never loses his honor.
He is the one who looks for the soul up there.
In the seven levels of the spirit land,
 in the nine levels of the spirit land.
There are twelve doors to the spirit land,
The spirit with the long beard can see.
The spirit with the long eyebrows can see.
There are twelve doors, so twelve spirits.
He followed the footprints of the soul and has seen it.
The soul's heart is soft.
The soul has obeyed my voice.
They have already opened the door.
The door of the land of the dead has opened and the soul is coming back.

Open the door, and Overlord of the spirit land;
Now Great-grandfather is talking to the Overlord of the spirit land.
The spirit with the long beard has a long heart.
They turn to this side; to that side; the talking has finished.
The Overlord of the spirit land has obeyed Great-grandfather's voice.
The Overlord is very happy.
Great-grandfather has given him a pig, has given him silver.
The Overlord wanted silver.
As soon as it is given, he is very happy.
He is already happy, so he tells;
He tells everything.
The Overlord said she has arrived at sickness, at death,
Write a letter.
The Overlord said that she must write the letter.
She is in the copper house, in the iron house.
He doesn't have more to tell.
Great-grandfather has already taken the soul.
The soul was in the iron house, Great-grandfather has let it loose.
He has removed the iron house and taken the soul.
Old woman, listen carefully.
Great-grandfather said he is very lonely.
Great-grandfather said you have been away from your children a long
time.
Great-grandfather said, Why did you obey the voice of the spirits?
Now I speak to you with the words of your children.
You take care of only one of your children.
Old woman, my voice is that of your child.
Old woman, I am really calling you.
Today is a good day, a beautiful day, so I am calling the soul.
Great-grandfather has already told about the spirit land.
The spirit land is the land of the dead.
Don't say I speak well.
Only spirits speak well.
Old woman, my voice is your child's voice.
It is beautiful in the land of the dead, but don't be happy.
Spirits have beautiful bodies.
Please obey my voice.
Take care of the child; only one calls his mother.
Great-grandfather says, Old woman, in the spirit land there is nothing.
Please come back.

When the door is opened, we will go back on the path.
I am the one with the long beard and long eyebrows, so follow me.
I don't need to say everything.
Open the door and turn.
I will tell what happens after the door is opened.
She opens the door and sees Great-grandfather.
If you follow me you will see your children.
Old woman, follow me and come back to the house.
Like two trees falling together, they have come back.
Come back quickly old woman.
The sleeping place is yours; the eating place is yours.
We call the soul in the sleeping room.
Come back quickly.
We have sticky rice and your children are calling you.
Your daughter is calling you.
If you are hungry, come eat sticky rice.
You don't need to be hungry any more.
If you are cold, come put on new clothes.
Your relatives from the top of the village;
Your relatives from the bottom of the village are calling you.
All of the people are calling you.
If you don't come back to the house it is your fault.
You search for me, I have been kind to you.
If you return I have no more to say.
I don't have more than this.
I don't know, but have already done it for you.
Eat together.
Eat together, old and young.
After we eat we will be nostalgic.
After we eat we will hear the young peoples' voices.
I will tell your words.
If I don't say, it isn't good.
You have told me.
You dreamed so you looked for me.
You searched for me, so I have come.
The young people don't know.
Old woman, we don't know, don't be angry.
As long as we don't die, you can't die.
You don't need to look for someone else.
If you look for someone else, you must pay silver.

I will do it by the blessing of the old men.
You call me and I will do it.
Think only that.
You have a pig.
You put the branches and you look for someone to pray.
If you have silver, give silver.
If you have a pig, it is enough.
Old woman, keep the table and look here.
Keep the silver table, the gold table and come to me.
Old woman, if you have sticky rice, I will come.
I must look for the one with the long beard and long eyebrows.
Old woman, the spirit with the long beard and long eyebrows will come.
The one with the long beard and eyebrows will go to the spirit land.
The one with the long beard can follow the footprints of the soul.
The one with the long eyebrows can follow them to the seven levels, to
the nine levels of the spirit land.
The voice of the one with the long beard is not loud.
Give this pig to the one with the long beard and long eyebrows.
Give this silver to the one with the long beard and long eyebrows.
The one with the long beard and long eyebrows will follow the soul to
the spirit land.
Give silver and gold to the longbearded one.
After you give the pig,
When the door to the spirit land opens,
You check whether the spirit dog turns or not.
If it turns back, come quickly.
When the Overlord's door opens, you will see the one with the long beard.
Just as soon as the door is opened, you will see the dog.
When you look, you will be afraid.
If Longbeard doesn't see the Overlord of the spirit land, he won't stop.
Longbeard is the one who follows the soul.
Longbeard has reached the place of the ruler of the spirit land.
He sees the Lord of the spirit land.
He peeks into the Lord of the spirit land's place.
The Lord of the spirit land is opening the door.
The Lord of the spirit land's sleeping room door is open.
He tells the Overlord and he obeys his voice.
The lord of the spirit land says he wants silver and gold.
The Overlord said he needs silver and gold.
He has been given silver and gold.

The overlord is already happy.
The Lord of the spirit land is happy and laughs.
He has told the Overlord.
The Overlord said to look in the iron house.
I have reached the iron house;
I will remove the iron house.
I am the one with the long beard and long eyebrows.
I don't like to talk loudly.
I can remove the house of iron, the house of copper.
I have removed the iron house, the copper house.
I have arrived at the seven levels, at the nine levels.
I have arrived at the place where the soul is.
If I don't see the soul, I won't stop.
Soul, you listen carefully.
This is the voice of Longbeard, of Longeyebrows, and of your children.
The spirit land is not the place for us to stay.
Longbeard's voice is lonely.
If you hear your child's voice, do you feel pity?
Old woman, I tell your child's words.
In the sleeping room we call Mother and don't see her.
In the eating place, we call Mother and don't see her.
Near the house we call Mother, and don't see her.
Your children feed the pigs and call Mother;
They feed the chickens and call Father.
Listen carefully to the words of your children.
If you don't come back, it isn't good.
Old woman, I will tell you everything.
If you have animals, come look after them;
If you have chickens, come watch over them.
After you went to the spirit land, the black tiger came;
After you went to the spirit land, the white eagle came.
If you don't watch your animals, the tiger will eat them;
If you don't care for your chickens, the eagle will eat them.
Only one of your many pigs remains;
Only one of your numerous chickens is alive.
You have pigs, come look at them;
You have chickens; come watch after them.
You be careful to come back on the same path you went on.
You follow the one with the long beard and long eyebrows.
If you follow Longbeard, you will see your children.

You remember the path you went on.
When does the door open? Is it open or not?
The door is open, so the path is ready for you to return on.
Old woman, when the door opens you will see a white dog, a white eagle.
These will turn around; you come quickly.
If they bite you, it won't be good for your body.
Old woman, our father and mother took care of us, our bodies are
 beautiful.
When the door is opened, come back quickly.
When the door is opened, follow the eagle you will see.
Don't get separated from this eagle.
If you follow the eagle's path you can see your children.
You come back like a falling log.
Come back quickly.
In the house we have prepared a table for you.
We have prepared the table and call Mother,
Please come back quickly.
In the house we have prepared twelve tables.
We already see the mother and the child.
We have met, so we don't need to do more.
We don't have more to do, so we will separate.
If your children stay at the top of the village,
If your children stay at the bottom of the village,
 we don't have more to do, so we will depart.
In the future if you have something to do, tell me quickly.
When the bodies separate, let the hearts stay together.
I don't have anything more to do, so I don't like to talk more.
Everyone eat together, eat together.
Everyone eat together.
If the old men don't sing, it isn't good; the old men must sing.
I am an old man, I will tell you.
Old woman, you haven't seen your children in a long time.
You have dreamed for three years and three months already.
You haven't seen your children in a long time.
For three years and three months you haven't seen your children.
Your children said it has been a long time.
You have been in the spirit land for a long time.
In your dream you hear a sound like thunder in the spirit land.
In the iron house, in the copper house, you heard the sound of thunder.
You look at the iron house, at the copper house.

It has many holes, it isn't good.
The iron house, the copper house has been removed.
Look, see Longbeard, Longeyebrows.
Listen to the voice of Longbeard, Longeyebrows.
The soul listens and it is like the child's voice.
I hear the child's voice so I'm lonely.
I want to see the child, I nearly die.
I have been lonely for my child for a long time.
My child has put twelve kinds of food and drink.
I am thinking about everything.
I think this is not my place, this is the spirit place.
I hear my children's voices so I want to return.
I will follow the one with the long beard and long eyebrows.
If I follow this Longbeard, Longeyebrows, I will see my children.
I will think about the path I came here on.
When will the Overlord's door open?
If the door opens, I will go back.
I can't stay here, I must return.
If I don't go back, I can't see my children.
As soon as the Overlord's door opens, I will return.
The Overlord said that he is happy.
My father took care of me, so my body is beautiful.
When the door opens I see an eagle.
I won't separate from the eagle.
I follow the eagle so I will see my children.
I will return like a big falling tree.
I return and have already reached the top of the village.
I listen in the house and hear much noise.
That noise is my children.
That noise is calling me.
I go quickly, so I have reached the door.
I peek into the house.
They have prepared tables all over the house.
There is much noise in the house.
I will concentrate on that noise.
I enter the door.
I am nearly inside the house.
In the house there is one thing.
It isn't some other thing.
If I'm not quick, I'll break my foot and my leg.

One spirit stays there.
If I'm not quick it will break my foot and my leg.
I enter the house but the spirit bars my way.
The spirit says: Those tables all over the house are for me.
They called my soul, not your soul, the spirit says.
The spirit says: They didn't call you, don't come.
My children, you think about that.
I will tell you about calling the soul.
You called the soul, why didn't you call me?
This is Great-grandfather's voice.
I have done much; I will do more.
Yesterday I heard something.
I heard about being lonely.
I did it, but someone made a barrier in front of me.
I didn't call him, but he made a barrier.
He barred the way with his foot, so I am lonely.
Old woman, I told you before not to go to the spirit land:
You did not obey.
If you hadn't gone to the spirit land you would see your children.
This is your fault.
You left your children; it's your fault.
You haven't died; you are a person.
If you are in the spirit land, you don't need to worry.
Don't cry.
After today I will keep it in my heart.
I know about the spirit land.
Don't worry Old Woman.
Old woman, the bad spirit that bars the way is small.
The spirit bars the way, so the young people aren't happy.
That bad spirit is only as big as my thumb.
I, who know, will do everything for the old woman's blessing.
Everything is for your blessing.
Father raised us, he has honor;
Mother took care of us, she has honor.
I am happy for the single women.
There are many single ladies' leggings.
The pipe music is very loud.
Perhaps tomorrow is a good day.
Don't think about leaving.
I will let the dancers come here one by one.

All together they will drive the spirit from the house.
Drive this bad spirit to the old year.
They will drive it to the old year like ants fly away;
They will drive it to the old year like a grasshopper hops.
I will tell you what I heard in the house.
If the spirit's legs are not swift, they will be broken.
They are forming in the sleeping room to drive the spirit.
They will drive it away; it can't stay anywhere on earth.
They will drive it like thunder.
It has been driven away as I say.
It is going like to ant flying away; like a grasshopper jumping.
By the blessing of the unmarried girls it can be driven away.
These single girls live by the blessing of the old woman.
The spirit has gone out like cast away sand.
In the sleeping room it is clear as water.
In the eating room there is nothing.
Old woman, don't stay around the house for three days and three nights.
Old woman, come back quickly.
Your children have sticky rice.
They have new clothes for you.
Please come in the door.
If you arrive at the door you will see your children.
If you see your children, eat with them.
If you are cold, wear these clothes.
Eat together, and when you've had enough,
If you are not hungry, I will tell.
Always stay near the fireplace and teach your children.
After today, don't leave your children.
Don't think about other countries, other lands.
I know and I can do things well, so you now see your children.
You see your children, so you don't need to leave them again.
You have animals and rice barns around the house, take care of them.
If you have animals, don't leave them again;
If you have chickens, don't leave them again.
If you don't leave again, I don't need to say more.
You take care of your children.
One is at the top of the stream; one at the bottom of the stream.
The senior children have made their own houses.
In the future, if you have something to do, please tell me.
More than this, eat together.

When you speak, a small noise comes.
We young people think about you.
In the old year you were very loud.
If the young people don't tell you, you don't know.
Old woman, eat medicine, then you will speak loud.
You speak loud, but have only a small voice.
You didn't eat the medicine, so it became like this.
Old woman, it doesn't matter.
Old woman, don't say the young people know.
You are not some other old woman.
You are our old woman.
Old woman, don't have a cold heart.
In the future you will have strength.
Old woman, we have everything for you.
By Father's blessing we have medicine.
Which is a good day; which is bad?
When does the cock crow?
I know when the cock crows.
We have twelve medicine plants.
Before dawn, I have walked around three times.
I have checked the leaf buds.
There are three leaf buds that are better medicine than the others.
We have three good medicine plants.
The right hand plucks the medicine.
We take the first medicine.
We pull up the medicine and put it in the pocket.
We have put this medicine in the pocket.
Which is a good day, a bad day?
I am an old man, I am going to the work place.
I will tell you.
I look at the sticky rice; the medicine isn't in it.
Check what the young people are doing.
If the young people extend their hands, they have put medicine.
They put medicine into the sticky rice.
This is medicine to make you strong.
After they put medicine, please eat it.
Please eat the sticky rice.
Eat and think.
When you eat, decide whether you are getting hot or cold.
If you get a little hot, it is really medicine.

Good medicine is a little hot.
If you eat and get hot, stretch your legs.
You can extend your foot easily.
Your legs will walk quickly.
If you can walk quickly, please tell your children.
You will speak with a small voice but it will be very loud.
If you tell your children, your voice will be like thunder.
You will be louder than in the old year.
If you have a child at the top of the village, run to his house.
If you visit there, your feet will be quick.
If you stand up you won't be tired.
If you visit your relatives you can walk fast.
If you visit the bottom of the village, you can speak loudly.
Old woman, listen carefully.
I know, so I tell you.
I also know about the spirit land.
I know about the place your children know nothing about.
I know, so you have seen the children.
I know a place where you don't need to use silver.
Your relatives know about me.
I know why you don't have strength.
Old woman, listen carefully.
I know about bad work in the fields.
I can do it because of my knowledge.
If you keep one animal, it will become many.
I will tell about of one seed of rice.
Today I will tell you all I know.
One pig has become many;
One rice grain has become many.
Near the house you now have twelve rice barns.
You won't have more trouble.
You have much rice.
I will tell you more than this.
I will tell you how to make liquor.
You made bad liquor, I will tell about this.
After today, if you make liquor, it will be strong.
You must stay with the rice barns.
Old woman, you don't need to share your food.
If you have strong liquor, you will get blessing.
After today, Old woman,

Don't go to the spirit land.
The spirit land is not the place for us to stay.
Take care of your children and don't leave them.
Always stay near the fireplace.
Look after the animals near the house.
Look after the rice barns.
Old woman, listen carefully.
Young people don't know well, but we have told you much.
Don't say the young people know well and speak.
You aren't the others' old woman, you belong to us.
We young people don't want to die, so we know.
We know you didn't have blessing.
Old woman of the top of the village,
Old woman of the bottom of the village, you also listen.
One person lives at the top of the village;
One lives at the bottom of the village, so we will depart.
Our bodies will separate, but our hearts will remain together.
In the future, if you have trouble, tell us.
In the future, if you tell us, we will help again.
We have no country, so we will separate.
I have no more to say.
We have no country, so we are in tears.
I look for honor where others live.
I have no more than this to say.

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