WALKER, ANTHONY R., editor. Mvuh hpa, mi hpa: *Creating Heaven, Creating Eart: An Epic Myth of the Lahu People in Yunnan.* Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1995. vi + 105 pages. Map, illustrations. Paper n.p.; ISBN 974-7047-65-9.

The Lahu speak a Tibeto-Burmese language, so that they are related at least linguistically to the Tibetans, the Burmese, the Yi, and a large number of other ethnolinguistic groups in the Himalayan region, Tibet, the Tibetan borderlands, southwestern China, northeastern India, southeastern Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the northern fringes of Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

The Lahu homeland overlaps with the borders of several different countries. It extends from the Salween eastward to the Mekong; in its northern part, it extends beyond the Mekong eastward to the Red River. The Lahu now number about 381,000 in southwestern Yunnan, China; possibly 150,000 in the eastern part of the Shan State, Myanmar; some 40,000 in northernmost Thailand; and perhaps 10,000 in northwestern Laos. To these figures may be added around 30,000 Kucong of southwestern Yunnan, and slightly more than 4,000 Kucong of northwestern Vietnam who speak a rather closely related dialect. These figures are to be accepted with caution, however, as in this part of the world, population censuses and estimates tend to be of limited reliability because of complex problems of ethnic identification as well as various other factors.

The social and cultural characteristics of the Lahu have much in common with those of other Tibeto-Burmese peoples, especially the Yi, the Lisu, the Hani, or even the Nakhi. The Lahu are deeply egalitarian, and this includes quite pronounced gender equality. The basic social unit is the household, consisting of a nuclear family plus sometimes one or two elder relatives of either the husband or his wife, also sometimes one or two orphans related to them in some way. In addition, a married daughter/son usually remains in the parental home for a year or more together with her husband/his wife. Each household is free to move to another village at any time, so that village membership fluctuates. Village chiefs are selected by household heads. Although there are no formal political institutions above the village level, two or more small villages sometimes share a common chief. In the past, Lahu villages frequently pledged allegiance to a local lord, most often a Shan or a Lu. Nowadays the villages are generally linked to the administrative structures of the particular state in which they are located, but, as many of them are remote from administrative centers, this link may still be largely nominal.

Above all, the Lahu love to hunt. However, they also find it necessary to cultivate the soil. Food crops typically include rice, maize, buckwheat or millet, plus chilies and a variety of vegetables. Cash crops may be tea, tobacco, or opium. Traditionally the Lahu have relied on slash-and-burn methods, so that village mobility is high. However, population pressure has increasingly led them to become sedentary and to practice irrigated rice cultivation both in Yunnan—as they have done for the past two or three centuries—and in Thailand in recent years.

The Lahu believe that each person has multiple "souls." They also generally accept the idea that a large number of nature spirits exist around them, as well as the spirits of the dead before they become reincarnated into another body. It is necessary to propitiate spirits, so that they will not harm human beings or their crops. As in other Tibeto-Burmese autochthonous cosmogonies, the creator of heaven and earth is not expected to interfere very much in human activities nowadays. There are village priests and spirit specialists, but the distinction between the two varies from one community to another. The spirit specialists may perform propitia-

tory exorcistic rites; some of them may also practice shamanistic rituals. The Lahu have a long tradition of messianic leaders, many of whom claimed supernatural powers and divine affiliations. Such messianic leaders have occasionally come into conflict with state authorities.

Lahu tradition points to a northern origin. Chinese scholars claim that the ancestors of the Lahu migrated, as part of the Qiang peoples, from a northern homeland somewhere on the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau, southwest to Yunnan. Later on, the Lahu resumed their southward migration: the Lahu Na (Black Lahu) followed a western route, reasonably close to the Salween, whereas the Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu) and the Lahu Hpu (White Lahu) took a more easterly course. In the nineteenth century, as the Chinese increased their pressure with the aim of bringing southwestern Yunnan under their sway, some of the Lahu preferred to migrate further south into Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand.

History has thus brought some of the Lahu under the rule of Chinese, British, Burmese, Siamese, French, and, albeit sometimes loosely, the Lao. They also have been involved in multi-ethnic contacts with valley populations such as the Lu, the Shan, the Yuan, and the Lao, as well as with a variety of highlanders. This accounts to a large extent for the great social and cultural diversity that may be observed among the Lahu.

The creation myth presented in this small book is fairly widely known among the Lahu, but it is very difficult nowadays to find a bard who can provide a "complete" version. This text was collected in the 1960s, in the Lancang Lahu autonomous Xian, southwestern Yunnan, by a group of Chinese folklorists directed by Liu Huihao. It has been published in Chinese, for which there are several editions. It has now been orally translated from Chinese into English by Shi Kun, a student at Ohio State University. The editor, Anthony R. Walker, has produced a very readable English version. It is, of course, a serious drawback that this creation myth was not translated directly from the Lahu original. However, the editor feels confident that not too much has been lost in the process of double translation. Furthermore, he hopes to be able to offer, in the future, an English translation of the Lahu creation myth based this time on a version that has been published in Lahu in Kunming. One would expect this would result in a less readable, but more scholarly translation. Anthony R. Walker is highly qualified for this task. As a social anthropologist, he has been studying the Lahu since 1966, carrying out extended fieldwork among them both in Thailand and in Yunnan.

Predictably this Lahu creation myth has many points in common with Yi, Lisu, Hani, and other Tibeto-Burmese creation myths. This applies not only to the contents, but also to the style. For instance, there are numerous couplets: synonyms, antonyms, complementary terms, or words that are related in some other fashion. Most often, the stronger term appears first, the weaker term last. There are, of course, frequent references to the flora and the fauna with which the Lahu are familiar in their rich subtropical monsoon environment. Culture related connotations abound: they are likely to be irremediably lost on all outsiders to Lahu culture. Yet even an unfamiliar outsider may profit from reading this creation myth.

William L. DESSAINT
CACSPI (CNRS)
Paris