

## REFERENCE CITED

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## SOUTHEAST ASIA

Walker, Anthony R. *Merit and the Millennium: Routine and Crisis in the Ritual Lives of the Lahu People*. New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 2003, xxxii + 907 pages. Maps, figures, numerous b/w plates, glossaries of Lahu words, Chinese characters and words in Thai/Siamese script, bibliography, index of authors, general index with glossary. Hardcover US\$55.00; ISBN 81-7075-0660.

This monumental book is the result of nearly forty years of acquaintance with and research on the Lahu, a swidden agriculturalist Montagnard people inhabiting the northern part of Southeast Asia (Southwest China, northeast Burma, northwest Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam). Its aim is twofold: first, to present and explain the religious ideas and practices of one particular Red Lahu community in North Thailand where the author had worked for four years "in terms of the wider context of the Lahu speaking peoples" of Southeast Asia; second, to demonstrate that "the mountain people in this part of the world, participate, if only on the peripheries, in the drama of surrounding lowland based civilisations. [...] They are certainly not wholly separate, so-called tribal people [...] much of their cultural heritage [...] make[s] very little sense without surrounding civilisations" (738).

Accordingly, the book falls broadly into three sections. Part one (3–108) sets the scene. First, the author's "home" village, Ca Taw in Phrao district, Chiang Mai province, Northwest Thailand is presented briefly, then the focus is broadened. Then he discusses the Lahu between two "high" civilizations, the Han and the Tai, their pseudo-historical migrations in and from their hypothetical homeland in Gansu and Qinghai, to Sichuan and Yunnan in southern China, and finally their actual historical presence there from the seventeenth century onwards. This broad focus beyond the study of a single village and the concomitant historical perspective are the great assets of the book. It is common in Southeast Asian anthropology to find that many hill peoples, including the Lahu, originate from areas other than their current homes. They have spread all over northern Southeast Asia only in the past few centuries, still safeguarding many of their original common cultural traits. And "despite all the doubts that have been raised concerning the sociological and cultural validity of ethnic labels such as 'Lahu' [...] it is only against the broad ethnographic and historical backgrounds that the details of life in even one small Lahu community finally begin to make sense" (48).

As a result of this perspective, the book far transcends the usual limitations of one given community studied personally by the fieldworker, and becomes a treatise of Lahu culture and religion *in general*. The point of departure is always constituted by the author's own data, but these are presented in a broader context as local variations of a Lahu continuum that stretches from Southern China to Northern Southeast Asia. This way, detailed descriptions of ritual phenomena and the minutiae of Lahu ritual life alternate in the book

with “comparative data from a significant number of Lahu communities in various locations from Lincang to Lanna” (504). In the end, the author finds that “particular practices [...] seen within the generalized cultural matrix, make a great deal more sense than if they had been analysed in isolation” (503).

Anyone who has ever worked in this part of the world could not agree more with this procedure. Nevertheless, it is true that there is a reverse side of the coin. One not infrequently has the feeling that the intimacy of single village studies is lost and that the author’s presentations of his own material are, in a way, sociologically de-contextualized, as if they had been sacrificed for the sake of the broader ethnographic context and comparison. But what is lost on the roundabout is made up on the swing. Professor Walker’s knowledge of the Lahu’s world is unusually profound. Not only that, having travelled widely, he not only has firsthand experience of many Lahu communities in Thailand and China, but he seems to know and have read everything that has ever been written on Lahu culture, be it published or unpublished, in “Western” (English, French, German) or in “Asian” (Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, Lahu, Thai) languages. His bibliography, arranged according to the above-mentioned headings covers 72 (!) pages and constitutes in itself a most precious research tool for anyone who is interested in Lahu culture, religion, and language.

The second part (111–547) deals in detail with “diverse strands of Lahu supernatural ideas and ritual practices,” i.e. Lahu ontology, animism and theism, merit making and sorcery, impact of Mahayana Buddhism, cult of the “monotheistic” almighty creator divinity, life cycles and cycles of the year, and Lahu messianic movements. As for elements of the animistic continuum (spirit propitiation, spirit exorcism, calling back the soul, magic, and the like), field anthropologists of Southeast Asian hill peoples will surely find numerous parallels with their own material. Thus, I was delighted to find such analogies even with the faraway Bru (Vân Kiêu) people’s religion of the Central Vietnamese Highlands where I worked in 1985–1989 (calling back the soul, ways of spirit propitiation and of spirit exorcism, feeding the farming implements, building of miniature *chedis*, use of divination blocks, and the like). As a matter of fact, these parallels with the religious world make one feel at home amongst the Lahu. This raises the question of a possible common historical layer or prolonged cultural contact of many if not all the Southeast Asian Montagnard ethnic groups far beyond the limits of one given generalized cultural matrix, be it Lahu, Akha, Hmong, or whatever—a fact that would be worthy of a joint comparative study in the future.

But the real novelty of the book is the detailed ethnographical and historical demonstration of the impact of Mahayana Buddhism on Lahu religion. “Buddhism, although seldom a formerly-recognized presence in upland communities, is none the less hardly alien to the hill people. In some cases, as this book tells for the Lahu, Buddhist ideas have permeated deeply into the upland tradition” (9). The first insights into this world had been provided by ritual texts, the recording, transcription, translation, and interpretation of which were a major concern of Professor Walker’s activity in the past decades. These “made reference to institutions and ideas that were obviously of Buddhist origin [...] and [...] were replete with lexical items of obvious Tai, Pali, and, ultimately, Sanskrit derivation, sprinkled with a few Chinese and Burmese words as well” (736). This led him, after long historical researches (mostly in Chinese sources) back to the Lahu’s Mahayana Buddhist heritage in Yunnan.

One of the most exciting parts of the book is when the author, using historical sources, traces back the spread of Buddhism and the activity of Buddhist monks in the eighteenth-to-nineteenth centuries in the Lahu mountains. And although his preliminary results were met fifteen years ago with scepticism (413), to me his demonstration of the

temple-based cult's Buddhist antecedents seems to be quite convincing: "just as the village temples have origins in Buddhist prototypes rather than indigenous spirit shrines, so the antecedents of the village priests [...] lie with the Mahayanist monks [...] and not the indigenous spirit masters" (400). Such cases are known in other parts of Southeast Asia too, although it is enough here to refer to the Bru, whose "shamanic" texts and religious ideas contain elements of Thai, Khmer, and Vietnamese origin, among others (see, for example, VARGAS 1994, 122–76).

In the third part (550–734), the Christian experience of the Lahu, i.e. Christian proselytization and the consolidation of Christianity in the Lahu Mountains are detailed. As one might guess, the advent of Christianity had been prepared by Lahu messianism that, in turn, had been preconditioned by the activity of the said theocratic Buddhist monks. This is how and why Christian missionaries could be seen as messiahs by many Lahu at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Owing to lack of space, it is impossible to enumerate all the results and problems dealt with in this remarkable and voluminous book. Instead, let me say that, all in all, it is a scholarly masterpiece and a major contribution to Lahu religion and to Southeast-Asian "Montagnard" culture in general.

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WILDER, WILLIAM D., Editor. *Journeys of the Soul: Anthropological Studies of Death, Burial and Reburial Practices in Borneo*. Borneo Research Council, Monograph Series No.7. Phillips, Maine 04966: Borneo Research Council, Inc., 2003. xiv + 366 pages. Map, tables, illustrations, references, index. Cloth US\$45.00; ISBN 1-929900-04-X.

This collection of papers contains five solid ethnographic studies on mortuary notions and practices as observed among five indigenous peoples on the island of Borneo. The discussed ethnic groups are taken solely from the western parts of the island, that is, the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. They include the Rungus from the northern tip of Sabah and four Sarawakian groups; namely, the Punan Bah, the Iban, the Kelabit, and the Bidayuh. Apart from the introductory article (Chapter 1) written by the editor, five articles are divided into two parts. Part One presents "traditional" aspects of the customs and beliefs that were well detected at the time of respective researches among the Rungus, the Punan Bah, and the Iban. The papers in Part Two, by contrast, deal with the almost entirely Christianized groups of the Kelabit and the Bidayuh and mainly attempt to reconstruct the past practices and notions. All the articles, except the introduction, are the revised papers that were originally read at the American Anthropological Association conference held in 1997.

The topic discussed in this book is noticeably a long established one in anthropological literature, and especially so in the study of Bornean societies. In the introduction, with the