

# The first Lahu (Muhsur) Christians: A community in Northern Thailand

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**Abstract.** Between 10 to 20 per cent of all the Tibeto-Burman-speaking Lahu people now subscribe to one or another version of the Christian religion.

The largest proportion of present-day Lahu Christians inherited the genre of this Western religion propagated by American Baptist missionaries in the former Kengtung State of Burma (from 1901 to 1966), in Yunnan (from 1920 to 1949), and in North Thailand (from 1968 to 1990). For this reason, it is often thought that pioneer American Baptist among the Lahu, William Marcus Young (1861–1936), was the first to induct a representative of this people into the Christian faith.

In fact this is not the case. The first Lahu Christians lived in North Thailand, baptised by long-time Chiang Mai-based American Presbyterian missionary, Daniel McGilvary. This was in 1891, thirteen years before Young's first baptism of a Lahu in Kengtung, Burma, in October 1904.

The paper addresses three questions. Why were Lahu living in upland North Thailand in the early 1890s? Why did one small Lahu community decide to embrace the Christian religion? Finally, why, in stark contrast to Baptist Christianity in the Lahu Mountains, did this fledgling Lahu Presbyterian community disappear, apparently without trace, sometime after 1920?

## 1. The first Lahu Christians

In 1974 veteran American Baptist missionary-scholar Paul Lewis produced a brief mimeographed report on the state of the Lahu Baptist Church in Thailand, in which he declared that 'Lahu Christians first came into Thailand from Burma about 1953'

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(Lewis 1974, 1). With respect to those Lahu Christians living in Thailand at the time when Lewis wrote his report, this is technically correct. But what Lewis omits to mention is that there had been an earlier Lahu Christian community in this country and, even more importantly, that the first Lahu ever to convert to Christianity had done so in North Thailand. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1. North Thailand and neighbouring countries, indicating places mentioned in the article

In a subsequent article, this time co-authored with his wife Elaine and published as late as 1985, the impression is given that the first missionaries to proselytise and convert Lahu were Baptists, that this occurred in Burma, and that the Lahu Christian presence in Thailand is a post-World War II phenomenon. In their 1985 publication, the Lewises specifically write: ‘work was started among the Lahu in Thailand by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship [as China Inland Missionaries re-named themselves following their expulsion from China in the early 1950s] shortly after the end of World War II’ (Lewis and Lewis 1985, 2).

‘Missionary work’, the Lewises aver, ‘was started among the Lahu at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Rev. William Marcus Young of the American Baptist Mission in Kengtung’ (ibid.). Seventeen years on, Ronald Renard, formerly with Chiang Mai’s Payap University (a Christian institution) seemingly repeats this error in his entry on the ‘Lahu’ for the *Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (2002), wherein he

writes: ‘[t]he American Baptist Mission in Kengtung started work with the Lahu in the early 20<sup>th</sup> c.’ (Renard 2002, 463). (I have to write ‘*seemingly* repeats’ because, although Renard mentions no earlier mission than this, he does not specifically state that Baptist missionaries were ‘the first’ to start work among the Lahu.)

The historical record tells us a different story. The first Lahu formally to convert to Christianity did so in 1891, a full decade before William Young established an American Baptist presence in Kengtung. The first Lahu converts—two men—were baptised by American Presbyterians based in Chiang Mai.

It seems that Presbyterian missionary Chalmers Martin (in Siam, 1883–86; Curtis 1903, 334) was the first Christian evangelist to meet with Lahu in Thailand, this being in 1886 and ‘high up the mountains’ to the north of Chiang Rai (McGilvary 1912, 276). But the man responsible for accepting the first Lahu converts into the Christian religion was the grand old man of the Presbyterian mission in North Thailand, Daniel McGilvary (b. N. Carolina, 1828, d. Chiang Mai, 1911; Swanson 2002, 525–26).

In February 1891, McGilvary (then a sprightly 63 year old) was preparing for the Sunday service at the Presbyterian chapel in the village of Mae Kon (16 km southwest of Chiang Rai), when he spotted outside the Presbyterian chapel door a group of seven men and boys ‘in strange costume evidently not Lāo [= Khon Müang/Yuan/Northern Thai] ... [whom] I immediately recognized as belonging to the Mūsô [Lahu] tribe’.<sup>1</sup> Inviting the visitors to enter, McGilvary learned from their leader, Ca Hpu Kaw<sup>2</sup> (himself ‘nearly, or quite, seventy years old’) that they lived in the mountains a mere 6 kilometres distant), having been driven from their previous homes further away in the mountains because of the accusation of witchcraft. This last datum, as we shall see below, is of particular significance. (Fig. 2)

It seems this small band of outcast Lahu had struck up a friendship with their nearby lowland Khon Müang neighbours, who happened to be Christians. ‘[T]hey had learned from our elders that Christians were not afraid of witchcraft, nor expulsion from the country’, McGilvary (1912, 324) explains. The American missionary invited

<sup>1</sup> ‘Mussur’ is an exonym for Lahu used by Tai-speaking peoples; it means ‘hunters’ (see Walker 2003, 92, n. 156).

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, as in most of my other academic publications on the Lahu peoples, Lahu words are transcribed according to the romanization pioneered during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by American Baptist missionaries in Burma and China; cf. Walker (2003, 653–54, 663–72). This orthography is still widely used among Christian Lahu in Burma and Thailand, as well as in Yunnan (despite the official introduction there, beginning in 1956, of a ‘reformed script’ that itself is based on the Baptist system (Liang et al., Chapter 9, 21–2]). A monosyllabic tonal language, Lahu has seven tones or ‘pitch contours’, six of which are indicated in the Baptist orthography by super- and subscript symbols (straight line, circumflex, and hacek) following each syllable. The mid-level tone is unmarked, the high-rising tone is indicated by a superscript straight line, high-falling tone by a superscript hacek, low-falling tone by a subscript hacek, very-low tone by a subscript straight line, high checked tone by a superscript circumflex, and low checked tone by a subscript circumflex.



**Fig. 2.** Lahu (probably Nyi) visited by Daniel McGilvary in 1890s near Chiang Rai (probably Mae Kon)

the Lahu party to remain for the Sunday service, ‘the first Christian worship they had ever attended’ and one ‘which was modified to suit the needs of the new audience’. Unfortunately, the details of such ‘modification’ are not given.

The following morning, McGilvary climbed up to the Lahu settlement, which he describes (*ibid.*, 325) as being a ‘little hamlet ... home to three families [presumably households], or, rather, three divisions of one family, numbering twenty-six souls’. McGilvary’s day seems to have been given over to evangelistic pursuits, culminating in Ca<sub>1</sub> Hpu Kaw and his brother-in-law Ca<sub>1</sub> Maw<sub>1</sub> testifying to their acceptance of Christian teaching ‘as far as they understood it’. The following Sunday, ‘the whole Mūsô village ... women ... with babes tied with a scarf to the mother’s back, according to their custom’ was back at the Mae Kon chapel, McGilvary (*ibid.*, 326–27) recording that:

The news that they were become Christians had spread, and drew a larger number than usual of our non-Christian neighbours to the services. ... In the afternoon a few of the tribe from another village were present, and listened with surprise to Cha Pū Kaw’s first sermon.

When McGilvary returned to Mae Kon three months later, he was delighted to find the small Lahu community still enthusiastic about becoming Christians. He writes (*ibid.*, 326–27) that:

On Saturday morning the whole village came down ... They all had renounced the worship [propitiation would be a more accurate word] of spirits; they all accepted Jesus; they were

all diligently learning to read and to sing. Their conduct was most consistent; they had a good reflex influence upon the church; and their conversion was an astonishment to the non-Christian community.

‘They had shamed the Lāo Christians’ (ibid., 334) ‘by their earnestness’.

Ca Hpu Kaw’s little band of outcast Lahu by now had understood that one had to participate in the ritual of baptism to be formally accepted as a Christian and seem to have expected McGilvary to baptise the whole community there and then. But the church elders cautioned against such hasty induction, finally demanding from these Lahu a formal and public proclamation of faith and agreeing to the baptism and full admission to church membership only of the two brothers-in-law—‘*the first of their race to be received into the visible church*’ (emphasis added), McGilvary (ibid., 335) declares—and to the baptism of a number of children as ‘non communing’ members. ‘It was felt best to let the others wait till our next visit’, McGilvary (ibid.) explains—but then adds, ‘I have never been satisfied that they should not all have been admitted that day’.

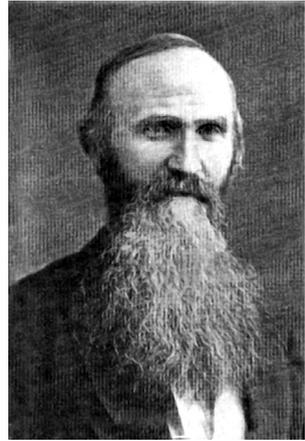
McGilvary took three of the Lahu boys back to Chiang Mai with him. Here they joined the mission’s school for boys, although not with unqualified success. ‘It is not at all surprising that, in surroundings so different from those of their mountain homes, they presently grew lonesome and homesick. But they were satisfactory pupils, and remained in school long enough to get a good start in reading and singing’ (McGilvary, ibid.). (Fig. 3)

Early in 1892, McGilvary (this time accompanied by the mission’s physician, James McKean) was back with the Mae Kon Lahu. McKean (1891, 4) records the missionaries’ delight with the religious condition in which they found Ca Hpu Kaw’s people, a year after he and his brother-in-law had been baptised:

... what was our joy on visiting them in their mountain home to find them all diligent and faithful in study and worship and to find that they all desired to be baptized. Although there are but two families they have built a chapel at their village for their daily use. On Sabbaths they go down to the plain to worship with Laos [*sic.* = Khon Müang] Christians at the chapel in Maa [Mae] Kon. ...

Their building their own chapel, which is much the best house in the village, was their own notion. So important do they consider the observance of the Sabbath day that they have prohibited their Moosur friends from visiting them on that day.

By now both missionaries and local Christian elders had abandoned any reservations they might once have entertained about admitting the remainder of Ca Hpu Kaw’s Lahu community to church membership. Thirteen adults were baptised and received



**Fig. 3.** Pioneer American Presbyterian missionary Dr Daniel McGilvary in 1881

into full membership and seven of the children received infant baptism. The world's very first Lahu Christian community had been born. The year was 1892. The first baptism of a Lahu in Kengtung, Burma, would not occur until 1904 (Young 1904, 45).

## 2. The traditional Lahu worldview

Before proceeding further with our account of the Chiang Mai-based Presbyterian mission's evangelising efforts among the Lahu, it is as well that we examine some of the fundamental characteristics of the worldview these men from the West would have encountered among the Lahu highlanders. This is especially important because the missionaries themselves so frequently dismiss the Lahu belief system as 'superstitious devil worship'—about as useful a characterisation of Lahu supernaturalism as is 'mindless Jesus love' of Christianity.

The traditional worldview the missionaries encountered was one that embraced both animism and theism; it was also one in which the mundane and the supernatural are merged into a seamless whole, such that any attempt to identify a category 'religion' as distinct from 'non-religion', or to distinguish 'religious life' from 'secular life' is fraught with difficulty.

For Lahu traditionalists, to know, for example, how to use a gun, how to propitiate the spirit keeper of the game animals, how to track a barking deer, and if necessary, how to have the soul of one's gun recalled to its proper place within the weapon are all integral and inseparable parts of the ordinary (i.e. 'natural') hunting experience—just as seeking the permission of the spirit owner of the land to fell trees for a new swidden and propitiating malicious spirits before beginning the most dangerous tasks of felling trees and firing the debris, along with the regular work of planting seeds and tending, guarding, harvesting and storing crops, are all integral and inseparable aspects of the normal farming enterprise. For a Lahu to think otherwise is to have been acculturated—in part at least—into an alien worldview, be it the Christianity of the men from the West or the scientific atheism of the Chinese Communist Party ideologues.

It is extremely difficult, moreover, to find any word in the Lahu language that may confidently be glossed as 'religion'. For his *Lahu-English Dictionary*, missionary-scholar Paul Lewis (1986, 483) chooses the terms '*hpa\_ sha\_*', '*bon li*' (along with the associated couplet '*bon li shi li*'), and '*o\_ k'o\_ pui ve*'. But the Shan-derived term *hpa\_ sha\_* (ultimately from Sanskrit *bhāṣa*, 'language') refers to 'teachings' rather than to religion *per se*, while for Lahu traditionalists (Christians may have been instructed otherwise) *bon li* and the couplet '*bon li shi li*' mean 'meritorious customs'. *Bon* is from *aw\_ bon* and comes from Tai<sup>3</sup> *bun*, 'merit'; *shi* is from *aw\_*

<sup>3</sup> I use the unaspirated 'Tai' to refer to all Tai-speaking peoples in (so far as this paper is concerned) Yunnan, Burma and Thailand. I use the aspirated 'Thai' to refer (a) to citizens of the

*shi* and is derived from Tai *sin*, ‘precepts’ or ‘morality’. (These terms, in their turn, come—through Theravāda Buddhism—from Pali, *puñña* [Sanskrit, *punya*] and Pali/Sanskrit, *śīla*); the syllable *li* is from *aw li*, ‘customs’ and is probably derived from Chinese *li*, ‘custom, etiquette’. As for ‘*o k’o\_pui ve*’, it means ‘to bow the head’, not an entirely satisfactory gloss for ‘religion’.

For Lahu traditionalists the notion of *bon li shi li*, as the words suggest, is intimately bound up with the acquisition of ‘merit’ or ‘blessings’, terms which, among Lahu, it seems to me, are more readily interchangeable than some scholars (cf. Lehman 1996) would allow. *Aw bon* may be derived from a variety of different sources and through the performance of several different ritual practices—from the offering of formal worship to the creator-divinity G’ui sha (below, section 2b) in a temple (among some Lahu communities only) to presenting the village blacksmith with rice cakes at New Year’s time, slaughtering a pig so one’s fellow villagers may savour meat without monetary charge, and building a hut along a pathway for weary travellers. In each case, the underlying idea is that the recipient of favours has the ability to invest the donor with the means of acquiring fortune and evading misfortune. Moreover, the more obviously fortunate (wise, important, rich, healthy, etc.) the recipient of one’s favours, the greater the potency of the blessings he or she is thought to be capable of bestowing. *Bon li shi li* is not, however, an expression that traditionalists use in connection with their myriad beliefs and ritual practices associated with spirits and souls, all of which must, at least in any useful anthropological sense of the word, also be embraced by the term *religion*.

## 2a. *Lahu animism*

Lahu traditionalists maintain that all phenomena in the world (or, minimally, all significant phenomena) that human beings experience through their senses comprise two, mostly conjoined, parts: material form and non-material ‘spiritual’ essence, to which may or may not be attributed a special name and singular attributes. This, of course, is prototypical animism (not ‘primitive’ religion, but a particular worldview, no less valid, I would argue, than one that posits the existence of an intervening deity capable of manipulating natural events to human advantage or disadvantage). Following from this animistic perception, human beings possess both a material body (*aw to*) and a spiritual essence (*aw ha*). The two are intimately related to one another, such that any attack on or displacement of the *aw ha* causes the *aw to* to sicken. The human *aw ha*—the non-physical image or counterpart of the physical body—is conceived at once as a unitary ‘spiritual essence’ and as a multiplicity of ‘souls’.

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Kingdom of Thailand, (b) to Siamese or Central Thai, and (c) to Tai Yuan or Khon Müang, when I designate them as ‘Northern Thai’, in other words as the dominant Tai group in North Thailand.

Just as *aw\_ ha* is the word for ‘soul’ or ‘spiritual essence’, so the generic term for a ‘spirit’ is *neˇ*. Lahu do not confuse the two, either in language or, I think, in thought. The two concepts, nonetheless, are clearly related, as evidenced by the notion of a human *aw\_ ha* becoming a malicious *neˇ* when a person dies a ‘bad death’ (one in which life ends violently, often with bloodshed; the concept includes also the death of a woman during childbirth). A *neˇ* is either a free spirit, unbounded by matter, or else it is the owner-guardian of a significant material object: mountain, stream, rock, tree, etc.

The Lahu accord special importance to ‘area spirits’. Consequently, when a Lahu wishes to occupy or exploit a piece of land on which to build his house or fell trees for a swidden, he will take care first to seek the approval of the supernatural owner or owners (number is often obscure, even to the people themselves) of the place. For the Lahu, as mountain dwellers, the principal ‘owner spirits’—on whose good will they believe their fortunes to depend—are the *hk’aw neˇ* or mountain spirits, the most important being the spirit of the particular mountain on which their village and its farming lands are located.

A ritual expert makes regular propitiatory offerings to the local area spirit at a special shrine—sometimes no more than a rough altar, sometimes a more substantial building—set up at the base of a particularly large tree located somewhere in the forest at the head (i.e. uphill) of the village. In this manner, Lahu traditionalists believe, the once fearsome ‘mountain spirit’ is ‘tamed’ to become the community’s supernatural guardian, the *hk’a^ ha\_ shaˇ sheh\_ hpaˇ* or ‘guardian of the village’ upon whose kindness the safety and fertility of the people, their livestock, and their crops depend.

A second major guardian spirit (or conglomeration of spirits) that, in some Lahu communities, has both territorial and kinship associations is (or are) the *yeh\_ neˇ* or spirit protector(s) of the house (*yeh\_*), its members, their livestock, and their possessions and at whose shrine or altar the male household head (at least among the Lahu Nyi with whom this writer used to live) makes offerings of cooked rice, water and beeswax candles on the new and full moon days each month (cf. Walker 2003, 401–8).

These supernatural guardians of village and house apart, Lahu conceive the great majority of the *neˇ* as more likely to cause harm than to bestow benefits upon them. Thus there are a great many spirits associated with natural phenomena (and some with man-made objects) that are believed to visit sickness or other forms of misfortune upon those mortals who offend them. Among the Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) people I studied in North Thailand, the principal nature spirits to which the villagers attributed various of their ailments and to which, as a consequence, they performed propitiatory ritual, were those of hills, streams, trees, lightning, rainbows, whirlwinds, and the sun. They believed these spirits would likely (one may never be quite sure) punish people who intruded upon their territory.

Spirits associated in one way or another with people—dead or alive—seem, in general, to be more feared by the Lahu than those associated with non-human phenomena. Particularly dreaded are the spirits of the ‘bad dead’, spirits released by sorcerers for the purpose of harming their victims and, most feared of all, the familiar spirits of witches (among most Lahu known as *taw*<sub>˥</sub>, but among the Lahu Nyi people this writer studied, as *chaw tsuh*<sup>˥</sup> *tsuh*<sup>˥</sup>). We may term as ‘witches’ those people who are said to harbour a *taw*<sub>˥</sub>, because they are considered inherently evil people through no fault of their own. There is nothing they can do to be rid of their maleficence; as a matter of fact, they may be quite unaware of hosting such evil. Certainly, they are not sorcerers who willingly employ malicious magic to harm their victims. Witches are said to have inherited their demon familiar from a parent or else acquired it accidentally when picking up some very beautiful object they just happened across—this being a favourite way in which *taw*<sub>˥</sub> tempt humans to become their hosts. It is often said that a witch’s familiar periodically leaves its host’s body, either as an immaterial spirit, or else in the form of a cat or some other animal familiar, in order to cause injury to someone else.

To deal with spirits, to recall the wandering souls of the sick, and occasionally, to deliver supernatural retribution to an enemy, a Lahu community may usually count on the services of one or more *maw*<sup>˥</sup> *pa*<sub>˥</sub>. These people are almost always men, and they function as diviners, shamans, soul-recallers, spirit-masters, herbalists, and perhaps also as sorcerers. Whether or not a *maw*<sup>˥</sup> *pa*<sub>˥</sub> utilises shamanistic techniques or depends solely on the power of incantation and ritual offerings, among his most important rôles is that of *ne*<sup>˥</sup> *te sheh*<sub>˥</sub> *hpa*<sup>˥</sup>, ‘master of spirits’ or, better, ‘master of the affairs of spirits’. His principal ritual activities are soul-recall, spirit propitiation, and spirit exorcism.

## **2b. Lahu theism**

Accounts of Lahu metaphysics often begin with their theistic rather than their animist dimension. There is good reason for this. A great many Lahu do seem to place greater emphasis on ‘divinity’—particularly ‘high divinity’—than is the norm among neighbouring peoples belonging to different ethno-linguistic affiliations. It is not that theistic beliefs are absent among other peoples. As a matter of fact, the concept of a creator-god is a characteristic feature of indigenous belief systems throughout the Southeast Asian world, both mainland and archipelago.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, this

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<sup>4</sup> Since the reader of an earlier manuscript version of this paper was uneasy with this statement, I offer here, just a few, supportive references. For the Lahu’s neighbouring Tibeto-Burman-speaking Lisu and Akha people, see respectively Hutheesing 1990, 47 and Lewis 1969, 1: 25–6; for geographically more distant Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples, the Jinghpo or Kachin and Haka Chin, see

creator god is usually considered a remote figure, entirely unconcerned with human kind—its creation. For their part, humans see no useful purpose in worshipping or propitiating a creator divinity that, unlike the spirits, has no impact upon their lives.

The Lahu perception is often—but not among all Lahu—very different. *G'ui sha* is the principal object of the people's worship and a name frequently on their lips. In their villages, temples are frequently set up and in these this high god receives regular worship, led by a hierarchy of part-time ritual practitioners or priests who are quite distinct from the spirit specialists already mentioned.<sup>5</sup>

This ideological and ritual predominance of *G'ui sha* in the lives of many Lahu communities (including the one that was the object of this writer's long-term field research in North Thailand) is a relatively recent phenomenon and, as the author has argued elsewhere (cf. Walker 2006; Walker forthcoming), may be traced to a powerful Mahāyāna Buddhist movement that swept through the Lahu Mountains of south-western Yunnan in the late 1700s. This movement was able to conflate traditional Lahu notions of *G'ui sha*, the remote creator-god, with Mahāyāna notions of transcendental Buddhahood and thus to provide a great many Lahu with a powerful sense of imminent divinity, a notion very different from that their forebears were likely to have entertained.

### 2c. *Messianism*

Animism and theism are a part of the everyday life experience of Lahu traditionalists (and not a few Lahu Christians and Communist Party members besides). A recurrent but not quotidian phenomenon among Lahu—minimally over the past three centuries—is that of holy men who claim oneness with *G'ui sha*'s divinity. These people—part priest, part-prophet, part headman—demonstrate apparently miraculous healing powers as they preach the need for reform of both social conduct and ritual behaviour. They promise a 'new world' of equality—particularly equality with their long-time rulers: Han, Tai and, for a half-century in Burma, British as well. Invariably men of exceptional charisma, such holy men and messianic prophets seek to surmount the limitations of a village-based social organisation so as to challenge the authority of externally-imposed political control wielded by organisationally and technologically more complex, lowland-based, polities. Often they talk also of

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Hanson 1913, 168; Gilhodes 1922, 100 (Kachin); and Lehmann 1963 (Haka Chin); for Batek Negrito of the Malay peninsula, see Endicott 1979, 170; for lowland (now Christian) Filipinos in general, see Kroeber 1973, 190 and Santamaria 1997, 126; for Western Bisayan of Panay Island, Philippines, see Jocano 1969, 322; for Hiligaynon, see Jocano 1983, 245; for highland-dwelling Kalinga of northern Luzon, see Dozier 1966, 162; for Penan in Sarawak, Borneo, see Needham 1972, 180; and for Brunei Dusun, see Pudarno 2009, 339.

<sup>5</sup> *G'ui* is probably from the ancient Tibeto-Burman root *\*ray* meaning 'being' in the sense of 'self-existing first cause' [Matisoff 1985], while *sha* is a generic word for 'deity' [Matisoff 1988, 1159, s.v. śā].

restoring the ‘golden age’ to the Lahu people, when they enjoyed technological parity with their valley-dwelling neighbours and—especially remembered—when they had writing and books of their own.

Armed with these data on Lahu metaphysics, we may now, more usefully, return to the Presbyterian missionaries in the mountains of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century North Thailand.

### 3. The rise and demise of Presbyterian evangelism and a Presbyterian community among the Lahu of North Thailand

Heartened by the manner in which the Mae Kon Lahu had accepted Christianity (McGilvary writes that ‘the whole-hearted zeal with which they had entered the church awakened strong hopes for the conversion of their race’ [1912, 339]), McGilvary and McKean, with Ca Hpu Kaw as their interpreter, soon headed for other Lahu villages further into the mountains to the north of Chiang Rai. The year, we may recall, was 1892. McKean recounts their visit to a senior Lahu priest, for whom he uses the term *achan* [*ācān*] (a title, incidentally, still used by Lahu village priests in Yunnan’s Xishuangbanna [Seepsong Panna] Prefecture (cf. Walker 2003, 399–400). The cleric, who had ‘three or four villages’ under his jurisdiction, received the missionaries cordially. McKean (1892, 4–5) records that the Lahu priest ‘said “true, true, true” to every truth of the Gospel presented to him’. But ‘[w]hen pressed to accept the Gospel at once, the teacher urged that he must first consult with other influential men in other villages. It would be impossible he said for a few persons to become Christians and still live among those who did not’. This would be the response the missionaries were to encounter again and again during the course of their ‘itinerations’ (as they termed their evangelistic forays) among the Lahu.

In one ‘very large Mūsō village’ the missionaries visited, they found the people preoccupied with the matter of accusations against ‘[o]ne of their leading officers ... of being the abode of a demon that had caused an epidemic of disease’—in other words, of being a witch. The village leaders politely advised the missionary party to leave, saying that their ‘head *pū chān* [*pu\_ cawn*˘, or senior priest] was several days’ journey distant. They would confer together among themselves and with him, would let us know the result, and would invite us up again before we left their neighbourhood (McGilvary 1912, 340–41). The missionary party heeded the Lahu leaders’ advice (‘our visit to that group of Mūsō villages was evidently not well timed’, McGilvary writes) (*ibid.*), and headed off to Chiang Saen, on the Mekong River (see Fig. 1).

McGilvary reports (*ibid.*) the presence of Lahu villages in the mountains on both sides of the great river, but notes his decision to concentrate his ‘itinerations’ on the eastern side, where there were eleven settlements ‘under [the jurisdiction of] the

Cheng Sên rulers, of whose cordial and sincere interest in our word we were sure'. This observation, incidentally, confirms the important political relationship between upland Lahu and lowland Tai overlords.

Crossing the Mekong, McGilvary and Ca, Hpu Kaw headed for the Lahu villages in the mountains, receiving in the first of them both a warm and a ceremonial welcome. The senior Lahu headman of the area met them 'with a regular serenade party of men and boys with native reed instruments [the *naw*, or gourd flutes], blowing their plaintive dirge-like music, to welcome us and escort us in' (McGilvary 1912, 342).

The message that McGilvary carried with him was simple: reject the spirit cult and accept Jesus 'for the pardon of sin and the life eternal' (*ibid.*). His Lahu listeners may not have understood the words in quite the same manner that the missionary intended, but neither would his teachings have seemed especially strange to them.

Lahu do not 'worship' the *ne* or spirits as deities; they believe, rather, that they must establish a 'working relationship' with these superhuman entities in order to prevent their wrath and/or obtain their protection. If one has empirical evidence of successful appeal to a power greater than that of the *ne*, then the spirits may safely be ignored—even rejected as the Christian teacher demanded. But wise men and women, in the absence of such certainty, will do well to treat the spirits in the manner the ancestors have taught.

As for Jesus as 'pardoner of sin', if this idea came to them (as it probably did) as 'cleanser of demerit', doubtless it too would have provided little obstacle to comprehension, for this is an accomplishment every Lahu messiah has claimed for himself. The notion of 'eternal life' (*co ti, ha ti* is the Lahu couplet) is one that is thoroughly embedded in Lahu prayer, although it is true that their wish is for undecaying corporeal permanence rather than some form of metaphysical eternity.

McGilvary reports (*ibid.*): 'We tell them of God the great Spirit, the Creator, and Father of all—the Bible, His message to men—the incarnation, life, and death of Christ, and redemption through His blood'. The Lahu notion of G'ui sha, although doubtless more encompassing than is the Christian view of divinity, certainly includes, as we have already noted, the idea of primordial creator and, if the Lahu Nyi this writer studied in North Thailand are in any way representative, of 'fatherhood' as well (cf. Walker 2003, 165). The high esteem in which preliterate Lahu—apparently for generations—have held the written word would certainly have conferred a mystic value to the Bible, as 'G'ui sha's words to humankind'. Considering the long-held Lahu conceptions regarding prophethood, the notions of incarnate divinity and redemptive messiah would surely render a description of Christ's person in those terms hardly exceptional to them.

'Before we get through', McGilvary declares (*ibid.*), 'you will hear man after man say, "I believe that. It is true"'. There is no need, I suggest, to read into these words

an evangelist's fantasy rather than a factual report of Lahu commentary. But as the missionaries soon discovered, while an individual Lahu may genuinely accept the validity of Christian teaching, this need not translate into a desire for admission to the Christian community. The latter course of action requires change of *aw li*, 'customs' and this, among the Lahu (unless they are prepared to accept expulsion from the village), is not an individual's prerogative but that of the community, as represented by its headmen and respected elders. As the leader of this village put it to the American missionary, 'Go on to Sen Bun Tuang [another senior headman] and the head men of the other villages. If they agree, we will accept Christianity. *One village cannot accept it alone* [emphasis added]' (McGilvary 1912, 343).

Time and again, McGilvary would encounter this same Lahu response. The next village they visited was a Lahu Shi or Yellow Lahu community. Again, the evangelists were amicably received and able to talk at length with the senior priest who, after listening to the Christians, retired to deliberate on what he had heard from Ca Hpu Kaw and the American teacher. Some two hours later, McGilvary (*ibid.*, 344) informs us, the priest and village elders returned and

[w]ith oriental politeness ... expressed their gratitude to the 'great teacher' [*sa la lon*] who had come so far and at such expense, and had brought with him a fellow-mountaineer of theirs, to teach them, creatures of the jungle [the original Lahu would surely have been '*hk'aw hk'o^ law hk'o^ ya*': people of the hills and dales], the way of happiness. They had talked these matters over, and understood them somewhat, but not fully. Some were greatly pleased with the teachings, and believed them true. But *they could not yet come as an entire village, and they dared not separate* [emphasis added].

The same was McGilvary's experience at the next Lahu Na (Black Lahu) settlement he visited, this time engaging in conversation with a 'great Pū Chān' or Great Priest (*paw hku lon* in Lahu). At this village, McGilvary writes (1912, 345–46), he was given 'a good reception', many of the villagers, he says, were 'interested and anxious to escape their own spirit-worship'. (Again, we must note that it is not 'worship', but 'propitiation' and 'exorcism' that the Lahu spirit cult is all about—and yes indeed, Lahu regard such propitiation and exorcism as necessary burdens, not desirable spiritual experiences.) But again, McGilvary found a 'number of head men [who] said, "If such and such a village accepts the Jesus-religion, we will". But no one could be found to face the clan and make a start'.

The missionary party returned to Chiang Saen and from there set off to visit some of the Lahu villages in the mountains to the west of the Mekong. The by-now familiar story continued: 'cordial receptions, night audiences, manifest interest, individual believers, anxious consultations, promises for the next year: but the tribal bond was too strong to be broken' (*ibid.*).

McGilvary's 1892 tour among Lahu villages ended with visits to settlements within Ca Hpu Kaw's home area, that is in the mountains above the Mae Kok River to

the west of Chiang Rai (see Fig. 1). McGilvary, by now fully aware that he would only win converts at the command of the Lahu leadership, found himself ‘Encouraged and disappointed at every village’. ‘I was still tempted on’, he says, ‘by visions of capturing some large village that would prove a more effective entering wedge for the tribe than Cha Pū Kaw’s poor little hamlet’ (ibid., 346). And in one village he thought he would succeed. Here the opium-addicted headman was anxious to break free of the drug and, as the missionary thought, if only he could assist the Lahu leader in breaking his addiction, ‘he would surely become a Christian—and then his village would be the one we had been hoping for to free itself from the tribal bond, and become Christian’ (ibid., 348). But this goal was to elude the missionary, the headman failing to break free of his opium pipe. McGilvary (ibid.) writes, plaintively, ‘We spared no labour to reach the homes of these people, or their hearts. We tried to become Mūsôs to the Mūsôs that we might win them. ... But everywhere the tribal bond was too strong to be broken’.

The following year, 1893, McGilvary returned to the Mae Kon and Chiang Saen Lahu. His long tour for this year began in the company of fellow missionary Robert Irwin, their primary goal being Chiang Rung (the modern Meng Jinghong, seat of the Xishuangbanna Dai [Tai] Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan), with a view to advancing Presbyterian mission work among the Tai Lü. On their way north, the two missionaries visited Ca, Hpu Kaw’s village near Chiang Rai. Irwin (1893, 4) reports the event with enthusiasm: ‘We spent two delightful days among them and left with regret. There is no more hopeful work than among this warm-hearted simple tribe’. Following this visit, the two men proceeded to the Chiang Saen area, intending to revisit Lahu villages there as well. But they found the people preoccupied with their New Year festivities and so decided to proceed directly north through Kengtung State towards their destination in Yunnan (ibid.). But on his way back from Xishuangbanna, McGilvary revisited the eleven Lahu villages east of the Mekong River from Chiang Saen. (Irwin had taken sick and had had to return to Chiang Mai.) McGilvary writes (1912, 367) of returning to this area with high hopes, ‘the power of the tribal bond ... had been somewhat weakened ... [and] many head men had promised to enrol themselves as Christians this season’. His hopes, nonetheless, would not to be fulfilled. One Lahu leader after another told the missionary that ‘they would all become Christians if only one officer [senior Lahu headman] or two would join them’. ‘Thus it went on’, the missionary remarks, ‘till we had visited nearly all of the eleven villages’. ‘My failure to gain a large entrance among them’, he concludes, ‘was one of the greatest disappointments of my whole work’. (But this obviously is a retrospective comment, for the mission’s report for 1893 [Anonymous 1893, 4] states, optimistically, ‘Dr. McGilvary spent a month in the mountains among the Moosurs

meeting with every encouragement for the continuation of the work so auspiciously begun among them'.)

McGilvary's final tour of Lahu villages occurred in 1896—following his return from furlough in the United States. He was accompanied this time by his medical missionary colleague, Dr Denman (McGilvary 1912, 384) but not by Ca, Hpu Kaw, who had died sometime in late 1893 or early 1894. In the latter year, McGilvary (1894, 376) wrote an article for the *Missionary Review of the World* in which he says: 'Ch [*sic*] Boo Kaw, the first Moosur convert, has since gone to his rest, exhorting his people with his last breath to embrace the Gospel'.

McGilvary and Denman travelled to Chiang Saen, from where the two men visited Lahu villages to the west of the Mekong (McGilvary 1912, 385). The missionaries remained hopeful for the eventual conversion of the Lahu in this area, declaring in their 1896 Annual Mission Report: '[t]here is a strong hope that ere long the Moosurs will embrace the Gospel, not by individuals, and families, but by villages, and at no distant date, as a tribe' (Anonymous 1896, 7).

Over the following couple of decades, the Lahu Christian community in North Thailand grew—but only very slowly. The reason probably lies in the absence of the kind of charismatic leadership (Lahu and/or foreign) that would be so important a factor in the subsequent successes of Baptist and Roman Catholic missions among the Lahu peoples in Burma and China (see Walker 2003, 570–628). Neither Ca, Hpu Kaw nor Ca, Maw, as outcasts, could ever be accepted as prophets among the Lahu people at large.

The Mae Kon Lahu remained a viable Christian community, receiving more-or-less regular pastoral attention after 1896, the year the Presbyterians established their new mission station in nearby Chiang Rai (cf. Swanson 1984, 47).

One of the Chiang Rai-based missionaries, W.C. Dodd (1897, 7) reports: 'It is truly wonderful what the Gospel is doing in the way of the transformation of character not only [*sic*], but also of personal appearance, of these aborigines of the forest'. In 1898, the Presbyterian missionaries based in Chiang Rai observed that 'several [Lahu] families have left their old village and come to live with the Christian Musuhs, with the intention of becoming like them' (Anonymous 1899, 112). And in 1899 they report spending 'three days ... [with] the Moosurs on the mountains' and tell how 'these warm hearted people had made every preparation for our visit which their hospitable souls could devise' (*ibid.*). The Lahu Christians put up their foreign guests in a specially-erected 'palm tree booth' and had them attend a double wedding, as well as the baptism of six adults and six children. 'The Christian Moosur community', the

missionaries observe, ‘has grown from three families last year to seven this, with three families more promised during the year’ (ibid.).

In 1901, missionary doctor W.A. Briggs (1901, 4) wrote from Chiang Rai of ‘[o]ne Musuh family, living across the border in China, [who had] left their home and came down to the Christian Musuh village near Chieng Rai [presumably that of the Mae Kon Lahu], because they had heard of their fellow tribesmen becoming followers of the Almighty God Jehovah, and they wanted to do likewise’. But what might have become a mass movement into Christianity, in the event did not become one.

The Presbyterian missionaries based in Chiang Rai slowly expanded their evangelistic efforts to other Lahu communities under Siamese jurisdiction and beyond. In 1899 Dr Denman sent ‘two of the Christian Musuhs ... to visit their fellow tribesmen near Cheung Sen on the east side of the Meh Kawng’ (Briggs (1900, 34) and evangelistic work began also among Lahu near Mae Sai (directly north of Chiang Rai [see Fig. 1]), as well as across the Siamese border, in Burma’s Kengtung State. Of this Kengtung mission, Briggs (ibid.) writes:

the most encouraging event ... was the meeting of two villages of Musuhs in the hills beyond Muang Pyak [Mong Hpayak, see Fig. 1] and Chueng Tung [Kengtung] City, who professed belief in what was taught them by the evangelists ... [although they] could not completely understand the evangelists who could not speak Musuh, and they begged that some Christian Musuh from Cheung Rai be sent them ...

[T]wo Musuh Christians and one of our Cheung Rai Elders ... have started to visit these Cheung Tung Musuhs ... and it is expected that the Laos [N. Thailand] Church will meet ... [their expenses].

In the following year (1900), ‘five weeks direct Evangelistic and teaching work [among Lahu resulted in] four adults and five children ... [being] baptized, and a few new households express[ing] their intention of forsaking their demons’ (Briggs 1900, 34).

In 1905, Briggs’s wife spent three weeks among Christian Lahu in the mountains between Chiang Rai and Chiang Khong with, according to her husband, ‘highly satisfactory results’ (Biggs 1905, 5). Also in 1905, fellow Chiang Rai-based missionaries H.S. Vincent and his wife visited Christian and non-Christian Lahu living across the Mekong River. Vincent (as cited by White 1905, 57–8) reported:

We spent three Sabbaths with the Christian Mussu in their hill home. They built cabins for us, cleared roads for us to travel over and carried our goods. In return we administered to their sick, and the effects of our medicines were simply miraculous to those people. In one village eight adults took a stand for Christ and cut loose from devil worship. The rest of the village and one or two other villages are waiting to see how these eight Christians get along. If Jesus can help and protect them, they too will seek him next year.

The missionaries’ ‘devil worship’, of course, is the Lahu’s spirit propitiation and exorcism. The typical religious pragmatism of the Lahu is nicely demonstrated by

their waiting to see whether or not the Jesus of the missionaries was more powerful than the *ne*<sup>ν</sup> or spirits.

Another report in a 1906 edition of the Presbyterian mission's Chiang Mai-based newspaper, *The Laos News* (Anonymous 1906, 36), has the Vincents receiving 'seven catechumens in a village that had never before been visited by a missionary'; additionally, the article notes: '[t]he rest of the people of this village are only waiting another year to see if Jesus Christ can keep these seven from the evil spirits, and if he can they too will receive him'. We need not doubt that the Vincents' medicine had something to do with their evangelistic successes.

The Crooks, another American Presbyterian family based in Chiang Rai, spent two weeks in 1907 with a fledgling Lahu Christian community three days' walk from the mission station. Florence Crooks (1906, 43) writes enthusiastically that '[t]he Musus are such kind-hearted, loving people and they were overjoyed when they saw us coming, and came running to welcome us'. As to their reception of the missionaries' religion, she is equally ebullient, calling the Lahu 'such devotional people' and reporting (*ibid.*) that 'every one came to three services each Sunday and then after that begged to have a song service'.

In 1910 the Chiang Rai Lahu Christian community was placed under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Nang Lae (Fig. 1) church (Swanson 1984, 49–50). Five years on, Chiang Rai-based Presbyterian missionary Ray Bachtell (1915, 9) was able to write:

The work among the Mu Su, or Mountain people to the east of us [thus not in the immediate vicinity of Mae Kon] has been encouraging. During a stay of three days 16 were baptized, 10 of whom were adults who had entered the religion during the year. They were all eager to study that they might know more about the Christian religion. The people were desirous to have a school established for their children. As there are two young men of their number, who have spent some time in our city school, able to teach the elementary branches, we are planning to open a school there soon.

In his book on the history of the Presbyterian mission in North Thailand, Herbert Swanson (1984, 50) confirms that this school was indeed set up and that one of the reasons for it 'was to try to keep the Lahu young people from loosing [*sic*] interest in Christianity, a thing they were prone to do'.

By 1917 there was a Lahu Presbyterian community numbering over fifty under the jurisdiction of the Müang Phan (Fig. 1) church and Swanson remarks (*ibid.*) that 'contacts continued right up to 1920' (by which time the Mae Kon part of the Presbyterian Lahu community would have been some 30 years old). As to what happened later, Swanson offers no clue. There were certainly Lahu Christians in North Thailand until the early 1930s at least. In 1925 the American Presbyterian Mission Press in Chiang Mai released a 100-copy edition of the Gospel of St Mark in

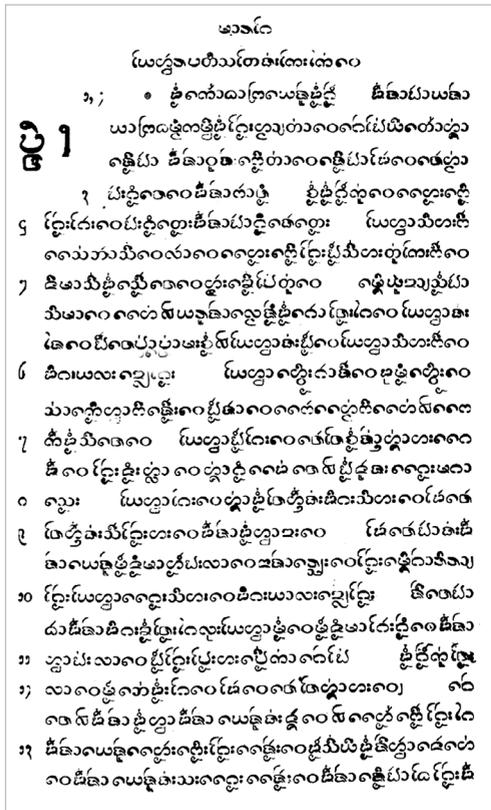


Fig. 4. First page of Gospel of Mark in Lahu using the Yuan (Northern Thai) script, published in Chiang Mai by American Presbyterian Mission Press in 1925

Lahu, using the Yuan (Northern Thai) script (Fig. 4). This was the result of a collaborative effort by Kru Duang Dee, a Northern Thai cleric and American Bible Society colporteur, and Ca K'o, a Yuan-speaking Lahu, apparently resident in a Lahu village 'near Chiengmai' (Hills 1966, 45) (possibly a misidentification of Chiang Rai).<sup>6</sup> Duang Dee reported his translation efforts to American Bible Society headquarters in New York as follows (cited in Anonymous 1923, 267):

We reached the Mussu and found them pleasant. We studied some, jotted down some, taught them some, the work is very good. We started to translate the Gospel of John. How much we will get done [we] cannot yet know, because none of them has much time; they can spare only about one hour a day from the rice fields ...

The Mussu women will not talk to us. We tried to get them to learn John 3:16 ['For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, ...'], but they would not say it. We tried to get them to practice singing, but they would not try. I make a prayer in Mussu for them. The men practice.

In 1930, Eric Seidenfaden (long-term Danish resident of Siam and distinguished amateur ethnologist) used the occasion of the American Bible Society's publication of St Mark's Gospel in Lahu as an opportunity to write a few words on the Lahu people for the *Journal of the Siam Society*. Seidenfaden (1930, 87) identifies Kru Duang Dee as 'one of the native pastors belonging to the American Presbyterian Mission in Nakon Lampang' and notes that this mission at Chiang Rai 'has recently [my emphasis] started work among the Mussö of ... [whom] some communities have now settled in the hills to the east of that town, and some 60–70 individuals have been converted from the animistic belief to Christianity'. It would seem that Seidenfaden does not here refer to the Mae Kon

<sup>6</sup> Apparently Kru Duang Dee and fellow Northern Thai pastor Nan Chai planned to work on a Lahu version of St John's Gospel in 1926, but this project does not seem to have materialised—at least as a publication (cf. Hills 1966, 45).

Lahu, located to the *southwest*, not to the east of Chiang Rai, and Christian for some forty years when he penned these words. Seidenfaden was obviously mistaken in thinking the Presbyterians' Lahu work recently begun, although this may indeed have been true among the 'sixty or seventy' Lahu he mentions as living in the mountains to the east of Chiang Mai.

The author of this paper has no definitive answers as to the origin or fate of the Lahu Christians that Seidenfaden mentions, nor, for that matter, does he know what happened, after about 1920, to Ca<sub>h</sub> Hpu Kaw and Ca<sub>h</sub> Maw<sub>h</sub>'s Mae Kon community—Thailand's (and the world's) first Lahu Christians. Overseas Missionary Fellowship evangelist J. Edwin Hudspeth (1969, 113) wrote in his M.A. thesis on 'Church Growth in North Thailand' of hearing a 'faint recollection that a smallpox epidemic resulted in many deaths, [and that] blame was placed on the Christians [presumably, again, as harbourers of sickness-causing demons] and some reverted'. Another possibility is that, by then, these Kam Müang (Yuan)-speaking Lahu had long since intermarried with Khon Müang Christians and had been absorbed into the larger Northern Thai Christian community. At any rate, the writer is more-or-less certain that in 1966–70, when he was working with Lahu in Thailand, the people of all seventeen Lahu Christian villages in the country at that time (Walker 1970, 73) were either relatively recent Overseas Missionary Fellowship converts, or else Baptist refugees from insurgency-ridden Burma.

#### 4. The attractions of Christianity for Lahu people

As to why the Mae Kon Lahu near Chiang Rai were attracted to Christianity in the first place, the answer is probably quite straightforward.

First of all, as McGilvary tells us, one or more of these Lahu had been accused of witchcraft—that is of harbouring a *taw<sub>h</sub>* (above, p. 9)—and had been expelled (along with fellow household members) from his/her/their home village. Setting up a new settlement for themselves in the hills above the valley of Mae Kon, one of their first priorities would have been to establish a harmonious relationship with the leaders of their immediate lowland neighbours who, in this case, happened to be Khon Müang converts to Presbyterian Christianity. Doubtless some petty trading and bartering of highland for lowland produce now and again would have brought the Lahu newcomers to the Khon Müang village. Here, they may well have participated in Christian ritual activity, for Lahu traditionalists seldom demonstrate liturgical exclusiveness. 'When among the lowlanders, do as the lowlanders do' is the order of the day.

Second, the arrival of Ka<sub>h</sub> la<sub>h</sub> hpu (Caucasian foreigners) at Mae Kon—certainly no daily occurrence—would surely have evoked interest in any Lahu who happened

also to be visiting. And on a Sunday, it would certainly have been in order (as just noted) for the Lahu visitors to participate in Christian worship, along with their Khon Müang hosts.

Third, it pretty much goes without saying that these Lahu highlanders, as outcasts and in a precarious ritual situation themselves, would have been impressed by the words and songs—read from books no less—delivered by so venerable a teacher as the profusely bearded Dr McGilvary. They would have had little difficulty in recognising him as a man of obvious merit and thus of ‘spiritual potency’ and would probably have had little difficulty in assimilating his words about ‘God’ with their own notions of G’ui sha, even if they might not fully have comprehended his Christology or the minutiae of his ritual actions. Moreover, it is by no means beyond the realms of possibility that Ca Hpu Kaw’s people were privy to the messianic prophecies being told in many a Lahu village at this time—of the coming of a white (or it could be ‘pure’) man (or men), who would bring with them the *li hpu* ‘white/pure book’, thus returning to the Lahu people their long-lost writing, leading them into a new world of equality with their lowland rulers, and even bestowing upon them *co ti ha ti*, ‘physical life eternal’.

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