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Narrating Loss and Differentiation: Lahu Origin Stories on the Margins of Burma, China, and Siam

Frances O'Morchoe*

This article examines variations in Lahu oral tradition across time and space in order to understand the continuities as well as changes in how people express what it means to be Lahu. By comparing stories of ethnic origins collected in Burma in the 1890s and 1930s, in Northern Thailand and Yunnan in the 1960s, in Yunnan in the 2000s, and in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma) today, this article helps us to assess the influence that past political projects of ethnic classification, regional conflicts, and ongoing Lahu experiences of migration have had on Lahu people's self-identification over time. This article combines insights from the fields of borderlands history and folklore studies to understand ethnic identity and experience across the colonial-imposed borders which characterize this diverse region. In contexts varying from British and Chinese state encroachment in the late nineteenth century to the Baptist conversion experiences in the twentieth century, this comparative transnational analysis of Lahu stories helps us to understand the uneasy fit between nations and states in much of Southeast Asia today. Examining stories of the origins of ethnic divisions can thus show the influence of Southeast Asia's complex borderland politics on the self-conceptions of borderland inhabitants in this region riven by conflict and territorial disputes.

Keywords: Lahu, stories, borderlands, identity, migration, ethnicity

Introduction: The Uses of Stories

“‘Puij’ comes from the sound of a white bird falling out of a tree when shot with a cross-bow. ‘Kye’ means fell down.” Peter, a seminary student in Yangon, explained to me that “Puijkye,” the name for the original home of the Lahu, is today known as Beijing. He told me how, after a period of wandering away from Puijkye, the Lahu founded their own state in southwest China. The Chinese attacked many times but were always shot. The Chinese eventually managed to trick the Lahu out of their land. The land was called

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Mvuh Meh Mi Meh, which means “horse-cultivated soil.” There are 54 different groups of Lahu today, Peter explained, but they all once came from this state in China.

Stories of how the Lahu people came to live in the highlands at the borders of China, Myanmar, and Thailand are numerous, and they bear similarities whether collected in Mong Hka (today Ximeng) in the 1890s, in Keng Tung in the 1930s, in Yunnan in the 1960s, or in Yangon in 2016.¹⁾ Comparing stories of ethnic origins across space and time can help scholars to understand how identities are, and become, meaningful to people over time. This transnational comparative method also allows scholars to examine the differences in the historical experiences of people divided by borders during the eras of colonialism and the formation of postcolonial nation-states. Central to this method is the need to pay attention to the voices of narrators, which allows historians to examine the effects of divergent historical experiences on how some people express what it means to be Lahu. Stories are necessarily refracted through the people who tell and record them, and as a method they offer a way for scholars to approach the history of people who lack indigenous-language written historical documents. Studying stories is a way to show how identification shifted over time in a space of complex borderland interactions, connected by transnational religious movements, the globalization of upland economies, and colonial and nation-state penetration. This article compares Lahu stories told at different times and in different places across the region, in order to understand how the complex borderland politics of the region has influenced the experience of what it means to be Lahu. Comparing stories of Lahu origins over time helps us to see the influence that past political projects of ethnic classification, regional conflicts, and ongoing Lahu experiences of migration have had on Lahu people’s self-identification over time.

This comparative historical method builds on the work of scholars who analyze shifting categories of ethnic identification over time. Among the most prominent scholars to have worked in this field was Edmund Leach. In his work on Kachin people, Leach argued that groups of Kachin people oscillated between the political models “gumsa” and “gumlao” (Leach 1954). A problem with Leach’s analysis is that he assumed that the meanings of concepts such as gumsa and gumlao were stable across time. Leach aimed to challenge structuralism—the orthodoxy among anthropologists at the time—but his mechanical explanation is problematic (Robinne and Sadan 2007). Michael Moerman takes this analysis further, providing tools for resolving some of these problems. He gives insight into how, when “objective ethnical characteristics” fail to define entities, scholars can still use “attitudes of identification and classification” (Moerman 1965). The anthropologist’s job is thus to discover what features are locally significant for deter-

1) I use the term “Burma” to refer to the country before the name was changed in 1989, and “Myanmar” to refer to the country after that time.

mining difference. Yves Conrad (1989) likewise shows the inaccuracy of descriptions of ethnic groups as living in “splendid isolation,” with distinctive and unique languages and cultures. Strategies of identification can change as circumstances change. Charles Keyes (1995) has shown how state building and national identity formation can influence ethnic identification, while Deborah Tooker (1992) has shown how the Akha notion of exteriorized tradition enables ethnic and religious change. This article will focus on the temporal and spatial contingencies of these complex questions of ethnicity and identity. This paper aims to trace the causes of some of these changes, by studying stories told at different times and in different places by peoples who call themselves Lahu. Continuities of migration motifs reflect the continuing salience of migration to Lahu people’s self-identification, whereas changes in the central motifs of stories regarding ethnic difference point to the influence on identity of events in the twentieth century. State projects in 1950s China, Vietnam, and Thailand aimed to “scientifically” classify populations by race or ethnicity (Keyes 2002). The Ethnic Classification Project, which took place in southwest China in the early Communist period and in which ethnologists and linguists set out to demarcate the complex ethnic landscape into a precise number of ethnic categories, was one such project (Mullaney 2010). This article, by tracing changes in Lahu stories over time, argues that this twentieth-century context influenced the changing experience and expression of Lahu identity.

There are two recurring motifs in the stories told by Lahu people. The first concerns the loss of the Lahu’s original homeland in Yunnan, and the second concerns the origins of ethnic difference. The changes and continuities evident in the different iterations of these two motifs over time reflect the continuity as well as change in what it means to be Lahu, in contexts varying from British and Chinese state encroachment in the late nineteenth century through to the influence of Baptist conversion experiences in the twentieth century. Stories of the first motif, telling of the Lahu’s historic homeland in China, can be found dating from the present day back to the 1890s. Narrators, when they tell these stories of a former Lahu homeland in Yunnan, recount them sometimes as legend and sometimes as history. Despite the differences in framing, the meaning of the stories to Lahu people, as well as their mobilizing power, has been stable over time. The stories highlight the Lahu’s pride in their former state in Yunnan, where they governed themselves for many years before being defeated by the Chinese and forced to flee. The second motif concerns the origins of ethnic difference. Stories with this motif vary across time and place. Before the twentieth century, stories of this type focused on explaining the origins of the divisions within the Lahu people and the differences between Lahu and Shan people. From the mid-twentieth century, stories include a wider variety of ethnic categories and recount how God granted to all of the different groups different types of

land and different skills. Both types of story hark back to an age of Lahu superiority, either when the Lahu ruled over their own kingdom (but were tricked out of it and defeated by the Chinese) or when all ethnic groups were equal until the Lahu, despite being God's favorites, made bad decisions when God was dividing the world between the different ethnic nations.

Scholars such as Anthony D. Smith and Bruce Cauthen have noted how narrative tropes like those discussed here are universal, and how they help to unite people within a common ethnic identity. The idea of a historic golden age recurs particularly frequently. It can give consolation in times of hardship. Memories of a golden age also stimulate a sense of regeneration, through which the special origins of the ethnic group or nation have the potential to be recreated one day by the descendants of its founders (Smith 1996; Cauthen 2004). Smith and Cauthen see the presence of this type of myth, a myth of "ethnic election," of being God's chosen people, as one of the most important factors explaining how an ethnic community can be reproduced down the generations (Smith 1992; Cauthen 2004).

Nishimoto Yoichi, in his study of Lahu narratives of inferiority, identified this type of theme running through Lahu stories, which recount how the Lahu were once God's favorite people but were unlucky in the loss of their kingdom (Nishimoto 2000). The Lahu's narratives of inferiority explain their current hardship and tribulations as being a result of bad luck, despite God helping them as much as he could. This paper furthers Nishimoto's analysis to show how the Lahu narratives changed in the context of complex border politics, reflecting the experience of living in a febrile borderland context. Nishimoto analyzes Lahu narratives as the product of a long history of ethnic relations and argues that the negative Lahu self-definition is made in binary opposition to lowlanders. This article adds to this analysis by understanding that the stories reference multiple ethnic divisions of the hills—e.g., tops and middles of hills—as well as ethnic divisions by occupation—e.g., farmers and traders—rather than just a binary of upland and lowland groups. Nishimoto studies narratives as a reflection of people's social experience. This article deepens this analysis by comparing stories against each other to understand changes across time and space.

This paper undertakes a transnational historical study of storytelling and identity, showing how people can use myths to express their sense of an enduring identity as well as to mobilize unity among groups living dispersed across diverse borderlands. For scholars making historical comparisons, tracing changes in stories over time can explain how people have adapted to their changing environment. Examining local conceptions of ethnic divisions, contestation, and conquest of territory can show the influence of Southeast Asia's complex borderland politics on the self-conceptions of borderland inhab-

itants in this region riven by conflict and territorial disputes.

Being Lahu in the Contest for the Borderlands

Looking across this border zone at a group that has confronted many different state realities—different levels and kinds of state penetration—the stories they tell show how the Lahu have negotiated what it is to be Lahu, and how they have positioned themselves in relation to lowland states. Like all the people living in this historic border zone, the Lahu have lived in different relationships with the multitude of overlapping lowland states they have encountered. The nature of center-periphery relations has long been an object of study for specialists in this region. O. W. Wolters (1968) borrowed the concept of the mandala—implying concentric circles of royal influence—from South Asian historiography to describe Ayudhya. Stanley Tambiah (1976) and Aidan Southall (1988) used the concepts of “galactic polity” and “segmentary state” respectively to denote the relations between central leaders and the populations on the periphery of their influence. Mandy Sadan (2013) preferred the term “borderworld” to connote a zone where local people were aware of the existence of multiple neighboring geographies. The emphasis on the fuzzy nature of highland governance employed by historians of Southeast Asia contrasts with the descriptions found in the historiography of the Chinese Qing Empire’s frontiers. The formalized nature of many of the types of Ming and Qing governance (such as the *tusi*, or “native chieftain,” system) in these borderlands means that historians of China are more likely to describe systems of tribute as indirect rule (Crossley *et al.* 2006). On the ground, local actors such as the Lahu had to negotiate these multiple relationships in real time (Giersch 2006).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the multiplicity of types of relationships between the Lahu and external states, and the hugely varied levels of state penetration, continued; the modern era has changed but not ended the ambiguous state position of the Lahu. After independence many parts of Burma’s Shan State were governmental gray areas, neither completely in nor completely out of the central Burmese government’s control. Some places passed between the control of the Burmese army and the control of armed ethnic groups and militias, all wielding state-like powers such as extraction, the exercise of coercive power, and the ability to manipulate the local economy (Callahan 2007). One such group was the remnants of Kuomintang (KMT) troops who fled from China to Burma during World War II. Many Christian Lahu refugees also fled over the border into Burma after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Meehan 2015). In China, Yunnan was the last bastion of resistance for the KMT, the

last province to be taken over by the Communists in the 1950s. Lancang Lahu Autonomous County, supposedly Lahu-majority and Lahu-run but in reality a Han enterprise, was established in 1953, and the policy of “direct transition into socialism” was begun (Ma 2007). In Thailand over the same period many parts of the mountain border areas remained until the 1970s and 1980s outside central government control. Chinese Nationalist KMT troops, Burmese rebel groups, Thai Communists, and American CIA operatives all lived, and fought, scattered across Thailand’s northern borderland through the mid-twentieth century (Chang 2001). The multitude of Lahu endo- and exonyms hints at the plurality of their relations with lowland states. They are commonly called Luohei by Chinese, and Mussur by Thai and Shan (from whence Muhso by British colonial officials). Luohei means “black beasts” or “black savages,” while the Shan name, Mussur, means “hunter” (Walker 1977; Ma 2007; Thein Tun Oo 2013). A Lahu informant in Yangon told me that the name Lahu to them means “tiger (Lǎ) breeder (Hǔ).” As he said proudly, “Everyone is afraid of tigers except the Lahu who breed them.”

There is incredible diversity among Lahu people, along lines of language, religion, livelihood, and location. James Matisoff, the foremost scholar of Lahu linguistics, identifies a “bewildering profusion” of names for various subgroups of Lahu, although he notes that most of the distinctions between subgroups are primarily cultural rather than linguistic (Matisoff 1992, 133). Anthony Walker (1974) refers to more than 20 different subgroups of Lahu people. One interlocutor of mine estimated the number of subgroups at 54. Estimates of the number of Lahu dialects also vary widely (Walker 1974). Noel Kya Heh, a Lahu linguist, has made a comparative study of 36 different Lahu dialects (Kya Heh, personal correspondence). The Lahu Na (Black Lahu) are the most numerous in terms of population, and Lahu Na is the most commonly understood dialect (Bradley 1979). Other dialects are relatively mutually unintelligible, with some in addition being heavily influenced by the languages of the various countries in which their speakers live. Such diversity reflects in part that the region is a vast ethnic “shatter zone” (Scott 2009). Diversity is also partly a function of the environment of the highlands. Jean Michaud argues that in Zomia, “people and space always intersect, especially when geographical remoteness equates to economic and political isolation” (Michaud 2010, 199). The poor soil of the hills has necessitated living dispersed in small groups across the region and moving frequently. Historical circumstance—being caught in the middle of this politically febrile border landscape—has also scattered the Lahu. Political and economic turmoil has long caused waves of refugees and other migrants to move across the borderlands in this region (Kataoka 2011). For Lahu people the trend of migration has been broadly southward, first on the part of rebels escaping the extension of Qing administration in Yunnan, and later on the part of Christian Lahu escaping the People’s Republic of

China (PRC). Other groups later moved south from Burma into Northern Thailand in the second half of the twentieth century, seeking a better life away from Ne Win's socialist government in Burma. Economic circumstance, at first a function of eking out a living as swidden farmers in the mountains, has long caused Lahu people to lead a life on the move.

The Lahu are also subdivided along religious lines. Some are Christian, some animist, and some Buddhist. Mahayana Buddhism has a long history among the Lahu in Yunnan, influencing a series of Lahu "Buddha kings" as well as anti-Han Lahu rebellions in the late nineteenth century (Ma 2007; Kataoka 2013). Many Lahu were animist before American missionaries brought Christianity to the region. Missionaries moved to both Keng Tung in Shan State, where Baptists arrived in 1900, and Chiang Mai, where Presbyterians started proselytizing in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition, Lahu today are starkly divided by economic circumstance. Some continue to live in the mountains as swidden farmers, while others live and work in towns such as Keng Tung, Chiang Mai, and Yangon. Mapping onto this last difference, the majority of the Lahu today have very low levels of education, but there is also a highly educated minority who despair over the lack of interest in education shown by most Lahu. Despite this diversity of dialects, religions, locations, and lifestyles, it will become clear that shared histories, myths, and stories are a way through which some people express what being Lahu means.

A Former Lahu State in China

A narrative of exile and banishment from a historic homeland is a theme running through many of the stories told by Lahu people. Versions of a story of the loss of the Lahu's lowland state in Yunnan and their subsequent migration to their mountain villages have been collected across the region, from Burma in the 1890s to Northern Thailand and Yunnan in the 1960s, Yunnan in the 2000s, and Thailand and Myanmar (Burma) today (Scott 1893; Jones 1967; Walker 1995; Pun and Lewis 2002; Ma 2007; Young 2013). The story goes that an original Lahu homeland, today known as Mvuh Meh Mi Meh, was a valley kingdom in China that the Lahu used to rule. Eventually the Chinese managed to defeat them, and the Lahu were forced to scatter. Many Lahu use these myths to identify themselves as a mobile mountain people, and to differentiate their history from those of their many neighboring ethnic groups. This story of historic migration from a vanquished former state reflects the centrality of the experience of migration in Lahu history. Migration was for a long time, and for many continues to be, a part of life for the Lahu (Kataoka 2011). A deep sense of pride in the former Lahu state, where the Lahu ruled

themselves independently of neighboring powers, is central to all the stories studied here. Nishimoto (2000) has studied these myths of the Lahu country told in Thailand, analyzing their contemporary relevance in the context of Christian millennialism and the twentieth-century Lahu independence movement. This article analyzes historic changes and continuities in these stories across the region, to emphasize the effect of migration on how different people express what it means to be Lahu.

A narrative regarding the original homeland of the Lahu was passed down as oral history at least until the 1890s. Indeed, a Lahu valley state in Yunnan and the subsequent migration of the Lahu out of it are mentioned in British colonial records in 1893, not long after the first documented mass southward migrations of Lahu people from Yunnan. The Lahu chief of Mong Hka (today Ximeng), in a meeting with a British official, told a history of the Lahu in which they used to live in a valley kingdom called Mong Meu in Yunnan. A couple of centuries or more ago, he said, they were driven out by the Chinese and left in three large groups, one going down the Mekong and settling as far south as Chiang Mai, another going west and scattering themselves over the western Shan states, and the third settling at Nan Cha, whence they spread northward to Mong Lem (Scott 1893). The chief, known as the Ta Fu Ye, told the British that he was the last Lahu Fu (Buddha king) still living, and that he was acknowledged as such by all the Lahu. Telling the British the story of the Lahu's historic kingdom in China was part of the chief's attempt to position himself as a ruler of a unified people, and to maximize his negotiating position in the face of British and Chinese state penetration. Chinese accounts record that the Lahu chief at Mong Hka had in 1891 submitted to the imperial Chinese authorities, and that in 1891 the Qing had created a subprefecture called Chen-pien (also transcribed as Zhenbian, today Lancang), under a Chinese magistrate, out of several Lahu, Wa, and Shan states near Mong Hka (Davies 1909; Barton 1933; Fiskesjö 2000, 21). Until a few years before, Chinese rule had been only nominal and these small states had been practically independent. The extension of Qing administration into these areas, while rapid, did not completely displace pre-existing structures of authority. The Mong Hka chief in 1893, by telling the British the story of the Lahu historic kingdom in Yunnan, was trying to leverage the unity of the Lahu as a nation, as part of an attempt to preserve his autonomy in a time of accelerating state encroachment.

The historical record corroborates this chief's story of the Lahu being expelled from their home in China. An anthropologist of the Lahu, Anthony Walker, has described some of the Lahu rebellions in Yunnan in the eighteenth century, and the beginning of the southward migration of the Lahu from Yunnan. In 1799 there was a particularly massive rebellion in Mengmeng (modern Shuangjiang County), led by a Lahu, Li Wenming, against the local Tai ruler of Mengmeng. The rebellion was defeated in 1800, and the Lahu leader

was put to death. As part of the Qing policy at that time of *yi yi zhi yi* (“ruling the barbarian through the barbarian”), the Han monk co-leader Zhang Fuguo voluntarily derobed and was given control of three *meng* (*muang*, referring to Tai-inhabited plains) and five *quan* (Lahu “circles,” referring to smaller statelets in the mountains), and a title under the Qing’s *tusi* system. In 1883 Zhang Fuguo’s son and grandson attacked Mengmeng, were defeated, and lost the *tusi*-ship. The region was subsequently placed under direct Qing administration (Kataoka 2013). The severity of the Qing response was likely occasioned by fears of British interference to the south (Walker 2003). A Baptist missionary to the Lahu, William Marcus Young, in 1932 concurred in this description of the Chinese “pacification” of the Lahu rebels causing large-scale migration out of Yunnan. Young asserted that the Chinese method of subduing the Lahu was to “prune” their leaders:

In the long run the method has been effective in reducing them; by constantly pruning their leaders the Chinese gradually broke down the spirit of the Lahus, who were formerly as turbulent as the present wild Was; now those who have not emigrated are if anything to be reckoned amongst the mildest and, until we brought Christianity to them, spiritually the most depressed. (Barton 1933, 98)

What had probably reflected historical fact came in time to be blended with legend, incorporated into a story about finding the location of God’s home. In 1912 Baptist missionaries recorded a story relating to the Lahu’s original home in China, in which a place, Mun Mehn, is mentioned as a point on the journey to God’s house. This was just one year after missionaries—mostly Americans and Karen—had begun the work of committing the Lahu language to writing. Rev. Ba Te, a Karen Christian missionary, wrote in 1912 that the story was spread across the region where the Lahu were to be found (Antisdell 1911). It is a story of following the trail of God’s bees and flies in order to find and make offerings to God. Part of it goes as follows:

Going up farther and farther,
We pass over rocks and stones.
Going up farther and farther,
We come to the land where the Chinese dwell.
The large empire covering half the earth,
Taking up half the sky,
All covered with mist.
The track of the bee is almost lost,
And the trace of the green fly.
I make my eyes those of the wild cat,
The eyes of the hawk I make mine.
The trace of the bee trends eastward,
So trends the track of the green fly.

Having passed the land of the Chinese,
 Having crossed their sky,
 We pass onward and forward.
 We come to the land Mun Mehn,
 We come to her plain.
 Having passed the plain of the Mun Mehn,
 We pass on further forward.
 [. . .]
 And we find that God resides in the East,
 God abides in the Land of the East.
 [. . .] (Ba Te 1912)

This same place—below spelled Mvuh Me Mi Me, reflecting the variation in Lahu orthographic systems in use at the time—is also at the center of a story of banishment and exile which Saya (later Rev.) Ai Pun, an early Lahu convert to Baptist Protestantism, collected in Shan State in the 1930s. This version tells the story like a history once again and uses the idea of a Lahu original homeland to constantly emphasize the essential unity of the Lahu, even while using the idea of a historic defeat by the Chinese to explain why the Lahu are so dispersed today:

It is not known how long the Lahu people lived at Mvuh Me Mi Me. They had their own country and their own rulers. After they had lived there a long time the Chinese fought them and defeated them. The Lahu then scattered to many places. Because they scattered around like this, they could not defeat the Chinese.

But the Lahu do not like to live under anyone. So the Lahu left the country of Mvuh Me Mi Me and moved to Sha K'ai Shi (the land of the free). But not all of them went down to the country of Sha K'ai Shi. Some of them went and lived wherever they wanted to. Those who moved to the country of Sha K'ai Shi were very numerous. But they were still under the Chinese and wore earrings to show this.

Later when the English came and fought in Burma, the Chinese came and fought the Lahu. Since they defeated the Lahu, there were no more Lahu rulers. With no Lahu rulers to govern them, the Lahu people could not live together. So some of them went to the north, some to the south, some to the east, and some to the west. (Ai Pun 1939)

Rev. Ai Pun first published this version of the story in 1939 in a collection of stories, titled *Lāhū Kǎ pui kǎ lao*, with the American Baptist Mission Press. His daughter, Angela Pun, together with an American missionary, Paul Lewis, translated the same collection of stories into English in 2002 and published the collection with White Lotus Press in Bangkok. In 2007 Rev. Ai Pun republished the English translation in Chiang Mai. This publication history, involving the same stories being recycled verbatim down through the generations, sometimes published jointly with American missionaries, reminds us to pay attention to the narrators and recorders of stories, and what audience they might

have had in mind.

Lahu people and missionaries in the 1900s might have been both attentive to evidence of a unified Lahu people and interested in demonstrating the geographical reach of a mutually intelligible Lahu language. Missionaries often sought to find and demarcate territories containing linguistically homogenous groups (Errington 2001). This search for linguistically defined territories was especially at the forefront of the minds of the Baptists working out of Keng Tung in the early 1900s. Their interest in collecting stories of past Lahu kingdoms would have been energized by a decades-long embittered feud over territory with the Presbyterians based in Chiang Mai, in which the two sets of missionaries debated furiously as to how to divide between them the “fertile” Lahu hills (Young 1905; Kelly *et al.* 1913). The close collaboration between Rev. Ai Pun and Protestant missionaries in collecting Lahu stories is evident also in other stories the former recorded. Some of his stories hark directly to the Old Testament. A Lahu story about original sin is a near identical copy of the story in Genesis, complete with snakes, gendered temptation, and forbidden fruit, differing only in that the first two humans are called Ca Ti and Na Ti and the devil is a shape-shifting giant, Ca Nu Ca Peh (Ai Pun 1939, 19).

In a similar collaboration mixing Lahu legend and Baptist mission, Lahu elders who were translating the New Testament with the American missionary Lewis in the 1950s suggested the term *G’ui sha mvuh mih* to translate “Kingdom of God.” In an oral history interview recording, Lewis described his frustration over the Lahu translators insisting on using this translation, which implied “Country” rather than “Kingdom” of God. The Lahu elders preferred the term, they said, because it fitted in with their legends about walking to find the country of God (Lewis and Lewis n.d.). *G’ui sha* is the name of the principal Lahu deity, creator of the world, whom Lahu worshipped before the arrival of Buddhism or Christianity (Samuel 1998). Walker has argued that in the eighteenth-century conversion movement, concepts of Mahayana Buddhahood were blended into the Lahu’s *G’ui sha*, “to the extent that *G’ui sha* and *fo* [Buddha] became virtually identical in the minds of most Lahu” (Walker 2009, 325). The above episode further evidences how Lahu elders explicitly merged the concept of the Christian deity with pre-existing concepts of a creator god.

A deep pride in being Lahu, expressed through stories of former glory and historic defeat, infuses tellings of these myths today. The historical reality of the vanquished Lahu kingdom of *Mvuh Meh Mi Meh* is interpreted differently by Lahu people I speak to today. Some accept the story as historical, others as legend. One Lahu Baptist pastor described to me how he had just recently traveled to Yunnan and had met tens of Lahu Christian leaders and elderly persons who knew the history of the Lahu. While in Yunnan,

he was able to visit villages near “the ancient Lahu state.” “Actually,” he said, “I passed by Lincang, which is Mvuh Meh Mi Meh, the Lahu state.”²⁾ Different people have translated the term to me variously as “God-given soil” and “horse-cultivated soil.” The symbolism of an original Lahu homeland, where the Lahu people lived together under their own ruler, gives this phrase a deeper meaning. Whether the story is recounted as myth or history, it is interpreted as depicting the former superiority of the Lahu, as rulers in their own land, and their subsequent downfall at the hands of the Chinese. Stories of banishment and exile from a common homeland enable people to express a unified “Lahu” identity because of, rather than despite, a long history of migration and dispersal.

Origin Stories and Ethnic Divisions of the Hills

While the stories of migration reflect a motif which stayed constant over time, stories explaining the origins of ethnic difference changed over time and space. This section argues that upheavals in the mid-twentieth century are reflected in the changing motifs of these stories. Ethnic classification projects in China in the 1950s, together with regional migration spurred by conflict, affected ethnic identification. The stories described below see a shift in the core motif, from explaining the origins of differences among Lahu people—such as between the Lahu Na and Lahu Shi—to explaining the origins of differences between groups such as the Han, Wa, Shan, and Lahu. Ethnic categories gain more specific characteristics over time, as the Han begin to be characterized as traders and the Shan as paddy farmers wielding ploughs, in comparison to the Lahu as tillers of mountain fields. Where the migration motif of previous stories stayed constant because it retained explanatory power, these stories reflect historic changes in what it meant to be Lahu in the borderlands between China, Burma, and Thailand during the twentieth century.

Soon after the independence of the PRC in 1949, an unprecedented project of ethnic classification took place in Yunnan. Teams of ethnologists were sent into the countryside to conduct censuses and impose order on the immense complexity of the ethnographic landscape of southwest China. The Lahu were among the larger of the ethnic groups identified at the time. In the 1953–54 inaugural Yunnan census, 134,854 people self-reported as Lahu. They were one of 14 groups with over one hundred thousand self-reporting members in Yunnan (Mullaney 2010). The effect of this classification project on ethnicity in China has been immense. Thomas Mullaney has described how, since the classification, the 56 categories have become increasingly reified and ubiquitous.

2) Shuangjiang County, previously known as Meng Meng, in Lincang was the location of a massive Lahu revolt in 1799, which was defeated by the Qing (Walker 2003).

China has seen concerted attempts to bring the quotidian experience of ethnicity into line with the 56 *minzu* model. Policy making, cultural production, and artistic production have all been co-opted to realize this model.

The effects of this 1950s classification project continue to be felt in the experience of being Lahu, even today in Myanmar. A booklet about the Lahu, written recently in Burmese by Maung Maung Tun, a Lahu Christian from Keng Tung, describes the history of the PRC classification as a crucial moment (Maung Maung Tun 2017). In a summary of key dates in Lahu history, including the date of the first converts to Christianity, and the date “Lahu” first appeared in the Burmese census (as Lolo-Muhso), Maung Maung Tun explains the arrival of Chinese researchers in Yunnan and their classification of Lahu as a “national race” in China (translated as *taingyinthar* in Burmese).

The twentieth-century history of Lahu migration can explain how the reified and unified models of ethnicity instituted in China and Burma came to be felt across the region. Kataoka Tatsuki (2011) has described Lahu migration patterns, including the migration of Lahu people from Burma to Thailand due to the fighting in Shan State between the KMT and the Burmese army. He emphasizes that migration was not unidirectional, from north to south, but that people sometimes returned to their original homes. Similarly, in 1949, PRC persecution spurred an efflux of Lahu Christians from Yunnan, yet connections persist today between Lahu Christian churches in Myanmar and China. Continuing movement across the region characterizes the history of Lahu people. Mapping the changes in explanations of ethnic difference across the region can thus reveal the influence of events in Yunnan in the mid-twentieth century on how people have experienced ethnicity.

Comparing stories of the origins of ethnic difference from before and after these events of the mid-twentieth century can highlight the impact these events had on people’s experience of ethnicity. In a story Rev. Ai Pun recorded in the 1930s, Ca Ti and Na Ti, the first humans, were born from a gourd. This story of the gourd is a theme common to the origin stories of many different peoples in the region (Proschan 2001). Soon after God created the first humans, he created the Lahu people. Rev. Ai Pun’s 1939 narrative first explains the Lahu people’s division into Lahu Na and Lahu Shi, and second describes how the Lahu and Akha came to lose writing, and how God divided the mountains and valleys between the Shan and the Lahu:

Not long after Ca Ti and Na Ti disobeyed God, Na Ti became pregnant, and gave birth to a child. The child was not like a human baby, however. It was like a bag, with strips of cloth on it. When the mother and father saw this child they were frightened, and so they threw it away in the jungle. . . . God took the child to Ca Ti and Na Ti, and cut the cloth strips off. When he cut off one of the strips it became a baby boy, and cutting off another strip it became a baby girl. The animals all

came together and took care of the two babies. . . . Because the Lahu Na group was nursed by a black dog, they are called the Lahu Na (Black Lahu). And because the Lahu Shi group was nursed by a yellow dog, they are called the Lahu Shi (Yellow Lahu). (Ai Pun 1939)

Soon after creating the Lahu, God divided the land between the different nations:

As people increased in number there were also many different nations, and arguments and fights quite often broke out among them. Therefore God came back down, and in order that each nation would have a place to farm, divided the land up among them.

Now the Lahu people say that God loves them more than any other group. So God gave the Lahu people the first choice to pick the place they wanted to live and farm. They looked up at the mountains and ravines, and since they were so beautiful they chose those places. The Shan chose the level places.

God was not yet satisfied. Because he wanted to give the Lahu people the level places this is what he did. He brought fire and water before the Lahu and the Shan and got them to choose again. The Lahu people looked very carefully and chose the fire. . . .

God was not satisfied yet. Because of his great love for the Lahu people he wanted to help them. . . . So he brought a sambar deer and a horse, and he asked the Lahu people to make the first choice. . . . they chose the deer.

. . . At this time God said to them, "Look carefully and remember this. The place where the sambar deer lives and where fire burns is the land of the Lahu. Where water gathers and where it is level, that is the land of the Shan. Oh you Lahu, this is as much as I can help you. Since this is all the luck you have, you must live on the mountains and in the ravines. So until the end of time, live on the mountains." (Ai Pun 1939)

In stories collected after the classification projects in Yunnan, however, the emergence of ethnic groups is explained differently. In a story collected in Yunnan in the 1960s, the Lahu who emerged from the gourd were a single homogenous group. This story, recorded by Professor Liu Huihao, a Chinese folklorist, and published in 1995 by the anthropologist Walker, retains some similarities to Rev. Ai Pun's myth from 1930s Burma. G'ui sha created the world, and the first people—Ca Ti and Na Ti—came out of a gourd (Walker 1995). Na Ti bore 18 children, each of whom was nursed by a different animal. These nine pairs of children each had a hundred children, and these nine hundred children hunted a tiger together. In this story the origins of the different ethnic groups lay in how the tiger was cooked, and where G'ui sha told each group to live. The children of Ca Ti and Na Ti were Lahu, Wa, Aini (a local name for Akha in Lancang), Han, Laomian, and Tai. (In this story the number nine simply indicates "many.") God then divided the land between the Tai (Shan), Han, Wa, and Lahu:

G'ui-sha came to divide their habitations.
G'ui-sha called the ducks and the magpies,
He called the silver pheasant and the camel bird.

He told the birds to lead the people.
 G'ui-sha said to the birds,
 "You good-looking ducks, go live by the river.
 You silver pheasants, go live on the mountain tops.
 You colourful magpies, go live in the mid-ranges of the mountains.
 You camel birds, go live on the mountain ridges."

The Tai followed the ducks,
 So the Tai live by the water.
 The Han followed the magpies,
 So the Han live in the middle ranges of the mountains.
 The Wa followed the silver pheasants,
 So the Wa live on the mountain tops.
 The Lahu followed the camel birds,
 So the Lahu live on the mountain ridges.
 Every ethnic group was given a settlement.
 Everybody was happy.
 There were no boundaries between them,
 They were all like brothers and sisters. (Walker 1995, 81)

At the same time in Thailand, the Chinese also feature among the ethnic groups created from the gourd. In stories collected by Delmos Jones, an American anthropologist, in Northern Thailand in 1967, Lahu informants told him that multiple other ethnic groups were created at the same time as the Lahu (Jones 1967). In these stories, recorded in villages near Chiang Rai and Me Sai in the 1960s, the Chinese, the Shan, the Red Lahu, and the Black Lahu all came from the gourd at the same time. Each was allowed to ask God for one thing. The Han man went to God and asked for writing, "and from that day the Chinese have known how to read and write, and they have had the knowledge to trade." Then the Shan went to see God and told him his troubles. God gave him the tip of a plough, "and from that day the Shans have ploughed their paddy fields in the plains." The Red Lahu man bowed and asked for nothing, but God gave him literature written on paper. The Red Lahu carried the paper in an old basket, and the paper fell through the holes in the basket and was lost. Then the Black Lahu went to see God. He told God he was a mountain dweller, and God gave him a hoe to till his mountain fields (Jones 1967, 86). The same themes—the Lahu's lack of writing, their mountain dwelling place—are visible in these stories in Thailand, but the ethnic categories have stronger identifying features. The focus on Chinese as traders, Shans as paddy farmers, and Lahu as tillers of mountain fields is new.

Comparing the Lahu stories over time suggests a shift in emphasis from explaining the origins of divisions within the Lahu to explaining the division of the highlands among all the various ethnic groups. Stories highlighting the fact that the Lahu made bad choices

and were unlucky at the time when God was dividing the land help to explain why the Lahu live in the mountains and have such a hard lifestyle, despite being God's favorite people. These stories help to explain why Lahu people living in the hills are proud to live there, even though life is much harder than for Lahu living in towns. Some Lahu people in Myanmar expressed to me the idea that Lahu in Thailand are rich and lead an easy life (a common stereotype which elides the experiences of the many city-dwelling Lahu in Myanmar and mountain-dwelling Lahu in Thailand). Yet these stories show that even Lahu living in cities have a sense of Lahu identity which is centered on their people being destined to lead a tough life in the mountains. Wherever Lahu live today, stories relating the importance of their highland origins, and explaining their bad luck despite being God's favorites, continue to be meaningful. Lahu people use common narratives of origin to maintain and continually recreate what it means to be Lahu, despite living in communities widely dispersed across the region.

Conclusion

Comparing stories across borders can show changes as well as continuities in people's self-identification over time. Events of the twentieth century; the liminal and precarious situation of Lahu people living between Burma, Thailand, and China; and experiences of mass migration across the region's developing international borders all undoubtedly had an influence on the formation of Lahu identity. Similarities between a story recorded in the late nineteenth century, which a chief used to rally people for a political cause, and stories told today about Mvuh Meh Mi Meh indicate an understanding of a common Lahu identity which draws on history, told through stories, to unify people with pride in being Lahu despite historic adversity. Nishimoto's study of Lahu narratives of inferiority is borne out by this historical comparison. Lahu stories dating from the 1890s through the twentieth century to the present day contain a motif of the loss of a former Lahu state in China. The stories all highlight the Lahu's benighted history and resulting marginalization. By contrast, stories about the origins of ethnic groups have evolved over the period studied here. Comparing stories collected in the 1930s with those collected later in the twentieth century reflects how the experience of ethnicity was influenced by events of the twentieth century. Over the period, Lahu is increasingly unified as a category, while attributes such as occupation are increasingly applied to describe the differences between groups. Ethnic classification projects in post-independence Yunnan marked the start of ongoing efforts in China to reify the 56 *minzu* ethnicities. PRC persecution of Christian minorities in the years following independence caused outward migration of the Lahu,

among others, while in Burma in the same period, conflict between the KMT and the Burmese army spurred southward migration of the Lahu to Thailand. Changes in origin stories reflect the effect of these borderland upheavals on the experience of ethnicity across the region.

There are several avenues for future research. It is possible that stories of Lahu ownership of the mountains, given to the Lahu by God at the beginning of the world, grew in salience as the Lahu were denied access to their traditional swidden-farming livelihood in the twentieth century. The linked problems of natural population growth, unsustainable deforestation by logging companies in Northern Thailand, and forced migration carried out by the Burmese army have prevented many Lahu from carrying on with shifting cultivation. Lahu stories of ethnic origins, and particularly the allocation of land to ethnic groups, can perhaps be understood as alternative narratives describing subversive claims (*vis-à-vis* the dominant political entities) to space and territory.

Today, as the Lahu's land has come to be at the periphery of multiple states, and even while other markers of ethnic identity have morphed over the last century and continue to differ across the region, a Lahu sense of identity continues to be based on memories of a historic homeland in China. At the same time, this article has shown how the complex events of the twentieth century, and the Lahu's precarious liminal position at the margins of southwest China and upland Southeast Asia, are experienced and expressed in stories of ethnic difference.

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