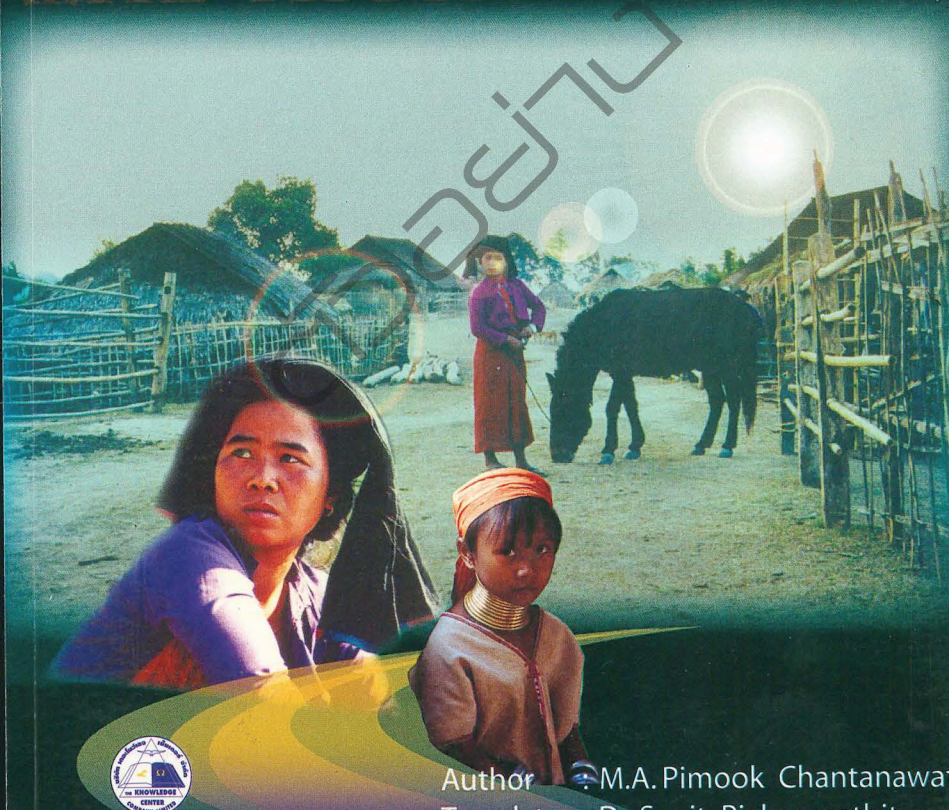


UNSEEN EVENTS

OF

THE HIGHLANDERS



The Knowledge Center
GOOD BOOK GOOD VALUE

Author : M.A. Pimook Chantanawa
Translator : Dr. Suvit Pichayasathit
Editor : Dr. George A. Sioris

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Preface

This is the story about the way of life of some of the hilltribes who live in Northern Thailand, especially along the Thai-Burma (Myanmar) border areas. These are areas where progress and civilization have still to enter, and where the lives, beliefs and rituals of the hilltribes have remained the same for many centuries. For the reader who has a quest for knowledge and is eager to find out the unbelievable truths about these hilltribes, this story is essential reading.

Phimook Chantanawat guides you through his adventure living with, and teaching hilltribe people. In "Unseen events of the highlanders" he tells you the story of what really is on the moon! Endeavors to find the Sa-Ngae fish, also going in search of an elusive fish that has no eye's and lives deep within a cavern. The strange, sometimes bizarre rituals surrounding weddings, funerals and ghosts are all revealed. Along the

Preface

This book, "The Hands from the Hills" is a collection of articles related to local history, culture, customs and daily life activities of minority peoples in Northern Thailand, as well as in Shan State, Burma (Myanmar). These stories have been printed in several magazines and journals. Their publication in the same issue will make it more convenient for readers who would like to learn about the historical and cultural aspects of the minority peoples.

The stories and information presented in this book are drawn from direct experiences of the writer while working in the tribal communities, including from documentary study and from the analysis of social events and the trends that may affect the people. Some of the articles reflect the personal view of the writer, and are based on my educational background in anthropology. I would like to thank Ass. Prof. Dr.Ngampit Satsa-nguan, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, who has encouraged me to work with tribal people in Mae Hongson. Thanks are also to all my former teachers who provided me with fundamental knowledge to live and work with other people.

Pimook Chantanawat
Mae Hongson, 2001

journey we meet long-necked people of the Krajang tribe, the infamous Khun Sa, warlord and opium smuggler, and Chao Yod Suk who, with his private army, continues to fight against the Burmese government, hoping to win peace and independence for his people.

Also included are detailed maps, so that one day the reader may also make the same journey to witness the wonder and beauty of the hilltribes.

The Knowledge Center

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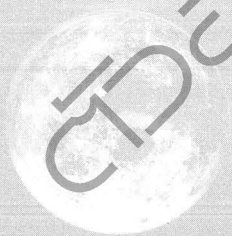
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1

The Funeral Ritual of the Red Lahu

Death, a mysterious destination, has been unavoidable and faced by all human beings, be they millionaires, the poor, the great army commanders, the coward, the philosopher, or the fool. Everybody finishes his role in this world with death, an undeniable truth of life.

Nonetheless, there is hardly a person who really comprehends the essence of this truth. Currently, human beings in each group, social entity, race or culture still provide different answers, and organize a variety of rituals related to death. When a member of the society passes away, people in one culture may treat the dead with a peaceful, simple and economical ritual,

whereas others may treat the dead with a luxurious and extravagant ritual. Similarly, one culture may treat the dead with sensational events and fun, while people in another culture may be in deep grief. All these are the response of human beings to the query they still cannot adequately understand.

The funeral ritual of the Red Lahu presented here is one of the approaches the writer experienced while living in the Lahu community in the mountainous and remote area along the Thai-Burmese border, as a teacher and researcher of the Lahu culture.

The Red Lahu: who are they?

Red Lahu is a sub-ethnic group of Lahu. Thai people call them “*Musur*,” while they call themselves “*Lahu*.” The ethnic group of Lahu is divided into several sub-ethnicities more than any other tribal group in Thailand. Each ethnic group has its own distinct culture while sharing the core culture with other ethnic groups in common. The funeral ritual of each sub-ethnic group is trivially different in specific details. For instance, when a Red Lahu person has died normally, the corpse will be buried. On the other

hand, if the person had an abnormal death, the corpse will be burned. The Kulao Lahu, however, always burn the dead body, with the exception of an infant corpse. Similarly, the Sae Lae Lahu, always cremate the corpse no matter how the person has died.

The death of Red Lahu: Should the dead body be burned or buried? It seems that dead and living creatures cannot be separated. Death is an end road for everybody. The Red Lahu classify death into two categories: good death and bad death. In Lahu language, death is termed as "*Sayway*." A good death is referred to the end of someone's life because of aging or sickness without having any blood coming out of the dead body. A bad death is referred to the end of someone's life because of being killed by someone or by an accident, such as a car accident, or falling from a cliff or a tree.

In customary practice, the body of the person who had a good death or normal death would be buried, while the body of the person who had a bad death or died because of an accident or killing would be burned. A sample case is depicted by the death of a boy in Yapanae village. This boy, the son of the village headman, was actually one of my students. He rode a motorcycle and lost

his life because of an accident in February 1993. He was lost from the village during the Lahu's New Year Festival. Nobody knew where he was. Pujong, the spiritual leader in the village killed a chicken for an oracle prophecy and told the people that he went to another village. They waited for him for two days. When there was no sign that he would come back, the village headman asked a group of young men to search for him. After searching for nine days, one of the men in the team found his body in the "*lalang*" bush on the road side to Mae Hongson, about 3 kilometers from Pang Mapah District Office. The people in the village, including the writer, cremated his body with grief. He was a very nice kid and always fetched water and firewood for me, even when I did not request it. The 1993 New Year Celebration in Yapanae village was quiet and mournful, not as hilarious as in the previous years.

Funeral Procedure.

When someone in the family passes away, relatives and friends express their sorrow and mourning. According to the Red Lahu custom, if the dead person is a young child,

the corpse can be buried within the same day. If the dead person is an adult, the corpse will be kept for one day, and the next day it can be buried. There is no coffin. Instead, the relatives will cover the corpse with cloth or a reed mat.

Based on their belief, a chicken will be slaughtered and cooked as food for the dead person. They will cut a chicken wing with feathers and a chicken leg, sandwich them with a piece of bamboo strip, and put them on the chest of the dead body. It is believed that the wing would become a fan to use to cool down with when feeling tired after a long journey: The leg would become a digging tool for the dead person to dig for drinking water. Relatives have to find a handful of grass or pick up some leaves in the housing area that can be used as thatch, tie it and put it on the chest of the dead body. It is believed that the person can use it as a broom for cleaning. They also put some tin, the kind that they use to make a bullet, in the mouth of the corpse believing that this would be money for the dead to spend. A pot of rice will be cooked for the dead, putting in it charcoal or ash to make the rice look black and not suitable for eating. It is a sign to warn those who are still alive not to follow the dead because they will not have clean rice to eat.

The following day, relatives would tie a bamboo trunk on each side of the dead body and carry it to the village cemetery. The dead body will be carried down the house from the side wall, not down the ladder as they believe that the ladder is the way up and down for the living persons. Carrying the dead body down the ladder may cause another member of the family to follow him in death.

In addition, the relatives will put the personal belongings of the dead person, such as pillow, blanket, clothes, and knife on the edge of the grave for the dead to use. A scientific and medical analysis suggests the hygienic usefulness of this treatment, especially if the dead person has an infectious disease, this will prevent the family members from infection.

Choosing the Area for the Grave.

The Red Lahu have their own method of choosing the area to dig a grave by tossing a prophecy egg. Wherever the egg drops and breaks, it means that the dead person is satisfied to be buried there, and that area will be chosen as

The power of the spirit on the fate of the village people has been challenged by civil society through higher education and technology. Maybe people from the city are not aware that their culture has brought anguish to the watching spirits, and thus it may eventually result in disaster for the village people.

