

## **The Lahu-speaking Peoples of the Yunnan-Indochina Borderlands: A Threefold Religious Heritage and its Consequent Synchronisms**

**ANTHONY R. WALKER**

**Suvarna Sikha, 426 Sarasavigama Rd., Hindagala, Nr. Kandy**

**SRI LANKA**

Email Address: [reklawra@gmail.com](mailto:reklawra@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** There are some three quarters of a million, mostly mountain-dwelling, people speaking one or another dialect of the Lahu language and residing in the uplands that characterize much of the borderlands of South Western Yunnan and the four Southeast Asian states of Burma, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand (there is also a small Diasporic community in southern California). The underlying world view of these people is animistic, a label not to be read as a synonym for so-called “primitive religion” — a concept more or less impossible to define from any useful cross-cultural perspective — rather, animism describes a world view premised on the supposition that all culturally significant phenomena in the visible world and tangible world comprise material form and non-material “spirit essence” (surely quite as reasonable a view as one that posits the existence of an intervening deity). But over the centuries, many Lahu communities have been influenced by and, in some cases incorporated into a worldview pervaded by Buddhist ideas and practices, both of the Mahāyāna and Thēravāda traditions (in that order). But those that accepted aspects of Buddhism seldom, if ever, abandoned their ancestral animism. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing to the present day, the Christian religion — first Protestantism and subsequently Roman Catholicism — impacted greatly on many Lahu communities, beginning in Northern Thailand but subsequently in Burma, China and Laos. The Diasporic Lahu community in southern California is, I understand, more or less wholly Christianized. Christianity has been less tolerant of synchronism than has Buddhism; nonetheless, many an ancestral belief rooted in the ancestral animism survives in Lahu Christian communities. The purpose of this paper, based on the author’s long-term field and library research that stretches back almost half a century is to explore the principal characteristics of ancient Lahu animism, explore the history of contact these people have had with varieties of Buddhism and Christianity and highlight those areas of their religious culture that demonstrate the extent to which Lahu have managed to synchronize old and new religious ideas.