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LISU OCCULT ROLES¹

The Lisu are a Tibeto-Burman people who dwell in the uplands of Thailand Burma, and Southern China (Dessaint 1971a). They are swidden agriculturalists who produce rice for subsistence and opium for a cash crop (Dessaint 1972). Their villages are scattered among those of other ethnic groups and each Lisu village is independent of all others (Dessaint 1971b). In the view of these people the world is populated not only by visible human beings but also by invisible spirits.

Since Lisu cosmology posits a set of occult beings, there are also various ways of relating to them. In this paper I shall explore the ways Lisu define these relationships with their spirits. All Lisu relate to spirits in one way or another — spirits cause people to be sick or suffer other misfortunes, they protect people, demand offerings from people, and accept offerings from them. Some individuals interact with the spirits in more well defined ways, ways that are set apart from the general interaction with spirits, and labeled by the people. That these ways of interacting with spirits are labeled is not significant, but that they are set apart from other ways of interacting with spirits is. This indicates that there is a set of categories with criteria for membership.

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What I shall discuss, then, is the set of categories of people who interact with spirits in culturally defined ways, the criteria for these roles, and other aspects of the categories which are necessary to fully understand them and to relate them to other sets of categories.

There is a sense in which these roles could be called religious because the belief in superhuman beings is often used as a criterial feature for religion (see, e.g., Spiro 1966). In this sense the Lisu occult roles are religious roles. I do not want to belabor the point, or to enter into the problem of defining religion, however, since at best religion would define a part of a set of ideas and actions which would come into play in many different situations and overlap to a great extent with political, economic, social and other domains.

Instead of trying to define religion, I shall try to describe the categories of roles and their meaning for the Lisu of Northern Thailand whom I studied. This can give us some insight into the way the Lisu view their world and their relations to it.

In the Lisu view there are two sorts of roles that involve occult or supernatural entities. In one group of roles these are alters to a human ego; in another they are an aspect of the ego rather than an alter. One of the former is the servitor of the village guardian spirit (*mēmā*). On a ridge overlooking every Lisu village is a house of the village guardian spirit (*āpāmù hīn*, lit. old grandfather house). This is the first permanent structure constructed when a group of people decide to settle on a particular site. After the structure is completed, the men go there and the oldest asks the spirit guardian to choose from among them a servitor. The old man then divines with cowerie shells, sticks, or coins, in front of each man, starting with himself. When the oracle objects fall one up and one down, that man is selected for the role. Lisu say that when a person is chosen in this way he may not refuse service. If a servitor wants to leave his village, he must convene the men and choose a new one in the same manner.

Roop (personal communication 1970) reports that in one instance a man was confirmed for this position and refused it. Another name was therefore proposed and this man was also acceptable. He refused the position, "but the Lisu did not now dare to show *āpāmù* how unwilling they were to serve him and decided that they could not propose a third name to him. The outcome was that a third prayer was made in which it was proposed to [divine] for all three men, the old [one] . . . and both the new names indicating that whichever name was now chosen would henceforth be the priest. This time the old priest's name was approved,

while the new names were rejected, and the original man remained in the village to carry out his duties." Roop indicates that this individual had rather strong personal reasons for wanting to leave the village.

The point, then, is not that a person may not refuse the appointment, but that if one does not accept it, there may be unfortunate consequences. Various stories of spiritual vengeance are told to illustrate the point that one must not neglect duties to the village guardian spirit.

The important aspect of the role is that the servitor is selected by the spirit; a person does not elect to be servitor. If it were a matter of personal choice, the procedure might be simply to ask who wanted the job, and to divine if there were more than one applicant. The fact that in Roop's example, the man who was selected did not want the position but did stay against his wishes, suggests some kind of compulsion.

From the method of recruitment it is evident that all men are equally qualified for the role. There is no special training for the role. Each man learns appropriate prayers and the system of time reckoning as a part of growing up. The only skills needed are those of any Lisu male.

Keeping the calendar is one of the servitor's duties. Lisu reckon time in terms of twelve days named for animals like the Chinese twelve day cycle. The year has twelve months of thirty and thirty-one days alternatively. The years form twelve year cycles as the Chinese years do. Time reckoning for the Lisu involves declaring which days will be counted as fortnightly holy days and on which days to observe annual ceremonies.

Each holy day the servitor must sweep the compound of the village guardian spirit and renew the water and joss sticks on his altar. When a sacrifice must be made by the whole village, the servitor is responsible for collecting the money from each household, buying a pig, and making the offering.

Like the servitors, shamans are also recruited by spirits. Bizarre behavior is taken as a sign that the spirits have chosen a man to be their horse. When a man's behavior indicates that he is to become a shaman (*niphà*), shamans from surrounding villages come to initiate the new shaman. After the initiation the new shaman seeks instruction from a senior shaman of his lineage. Throughout these training sessions, the audience of Lisu is asked to confirm that the new shaman is behaving properly and not in a random way. The shaman must speak sense, not gibberish.

The shaman's duties are to communicate with the spirits whenever this is necessary. The shaman is possessed by his lineage spirits (*nizà*).

People can speak to these spirits as they ride their horse, the shaman. These spirits can communicate questions from the people to other spirits and answer them. The spirits not only help diagnose illnesses and other misfortunes, they help separate the souls of the dead from those of the living after a death, concoct spirit medicines, help chase away evil spirits, and perform other such curative acts. A shaman may refuse to help someone if he wants to.

The behavior of the shaman is channeled and routinized at the training sessions; it is not random behavior. Training is necessary once one has been recruited to the role of shaman, but learning is not conditional for being recruited. The only criterion for becoming a shaman is that one must have lineage spirits to ride him.

Both the shaman and the servitor belong to spirits. In these relationships there is no choice on the part of the human. The spirit chooses and the person is obliged to submit to the wishes of the spirit(s) or suffer the consequences. Furthermore, there is no contract or compact between the spirit and the person. These two roles contrast with a set of specialists who choose to have a spirit belong to them. These people have to learn techniques for the roles, call the spirit to live on altars in their houses, and enter into a contractual relationship with it. These are the herbalists or "medicine women" (*néchīmā jūamā*) and the "incantation men" (*Yi khwù juāphà*).

The knowledge of the medicine woman is passed on from mother to daughter, or from female teacher to female student. When the mother has died, the daughter can install her "medicine spirit" in her own house. Each year her husband or another male relative may give two annual offerings. When the herbalist gives someone medicine and the patient recovers, he offers money to the medicine spirit. The herbalist keeps the offering. If a herbalist did not keep the medicine spirit, the thank offerings could not be given, and the herbalist would get no fee. The amount of the offering is negotiated before the treatment, and it is given only in the case the patient recovers.

The medicine women provide herbal remedies for ailments which are the result of natural causes. If an ailment is caused by supernatural forces, no medicines will help; but if it is a natural malfunction of the body, a thing of itself, then herbal medicines will help.

A person may pay a fee to anyone who knows an incantation and learn it. In order for the incantations to be effective one has to observe certain restrictions such as not stepping over pig troughs or under woman's clothing. Most people find the prohibitions too restrictive and either do

not have incantations or claim that they have lost their power. The power of the incantations is in the words themselves. Anyone can learn them, but the women can have only minor incantations. The incantations are used to stop bleeding, to drive away evil spirits, to heal wounds and correct dislocated bones, and to make medicines to treat naturally caused diseases. These are made by blowing over a cup of water on liquor after saying the incantation. This produces medicines whose effect is like that of the herbalists.

The incantations can be used for ill purposes as well, to intrude objects (*tài*) into enemies or to make liquor or tea into poison. For this reason Lisu never drink out of the same cup after someone else. The remains are thrown out and the cup refilled.

Men with powerful incantations may keep the spirit of incantations. This incantation spirit is said to be the same one that makes herbal medicines effective, the medicine spirit.

Although the four roles discussed so far are different in the type of relationship between the spirit and the person, all of them involve a spirit as an alter to a human ego. Either the spirit owns the person or the person has contracted with a spirit. With the witchcraft spirit (*Phyíphē*) and were-animal spirit (*Phwù swī*) there is no such relationship. The spirit is taken to be an aspect of the ego of the individual, not an alter to the ego.

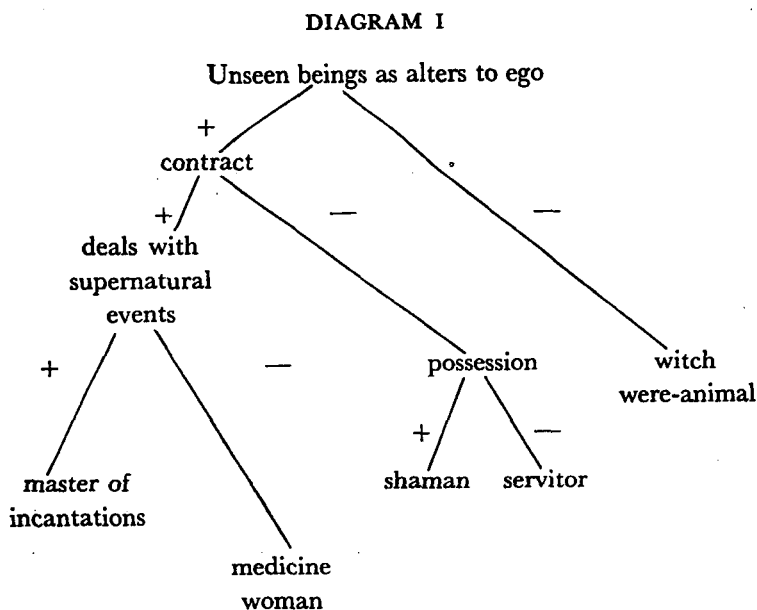
The main way to get one of these spirits is by contamination from a relative through close association. The spirit is contagious, just as a communicable disease, except that the minimum exposure time is three years. If a person kills one of these individuals, he becomes infested with the spirit.

I suggest that the spirit is an aspect of the ego of the person in these cases because the individual cannot control this evil power. He or she may unwittingly cause misfortune to someone. If the person is angry with someone he may send the witchcraft spirit to a victim to cause him misfortune, but the spirit may visit misery on another without the volition of the witch. Likewise, if a person has the were-animal spirit, he may be transformed into a were-animal and consume human flesh quite against his wishes. The spirit and the person form one entity, not two entities which relate to each other. In this sense the spirit is an aspect of the person's personality not an alter to the individual. Since this is the case, no manipulative techniques such as prayers or offerings are required to invoke this spirit. It exists with the ego of the afflicted individual. Furthermore, there is no aspect of learning involved in these

roles. In the other roles, the person has to learn the techniques for relating with the spirit alter either by special training or by general education; in the witch-were-animal role a person does certain things not because he has learned to, but because his personality has been altered by the infestation with the spirit.

We see that the attributes conditional for each role are aspects of the type of relationship between the person and the spirit. If the spirit is not an aspect of the personality of the person, but an alter to him, there may or may not be a contractual relationship between the two parties. If there is a contractual relationship, the person may deal with supernatural situations and be a master of incantations. If there is not a contractual relationship, the person who is selected by the spirits may be possessed by the spirits and be a shaman, or may not be possessed and be a servitor of the village guardian spirit.

The relationships of these critical features and the categories of relationships with supernatural beings, the occult roles, may be illustrated by diagram I.



This taxonomic description is sufficient to indicate the relationships among criterial attributes and roles, but it does not capture certain

salient facts about the role system. Shamans, servitors of the village guardian spirit, and masters of incantations can only be males; medicine women can only be women; witches and were-animals can be either men or women. This taxonomic description does not indicate that this should be the case, nor does it indicate why this should be the case. One could conceive of a taxonomy that uses sex as a critical feature, but this would obscure the relationships that are important for the Lisu. For instance, the master of incantations and the medicine woman would belong to two very different categories and the fact that they have contracts with the same spirit could not be indicated.

To understand the sexual distribution of roles, we have to take account of Lisu concepts that are not directly pertinent to this taxonomy of relationships with supernatural beings.

In the Lisu cosmology there is a pervasive set of dual oppositions. These involve the opposition of day and night, up and down, left and right, male and female, gold and silver, heaven and earth, nine and seven, large and small, sun and moon, breath and bones, spirit and human, and soul and body. The set which includes left, male, day, up, large, sun, breath, soul, and spirit is attributed with power relative to the complementary set. The elements of these sets, in Lisu thought, combine in an additive way. An element from the powerful set in combination with one from the unpowerful set produces an entity of neutral capacities. Thus a person is composed of a soul and a body in a normal state of health. If the soul is subtracted, only the body is left, and the individual lacks the power for continued life unless the soul is returned.

Since women and spirits belong to different sets, to bring them together would create a neutral combination, thus depriving the spirits of their power. For this reason women do not make offerings to spirits, are not allowed inside the compound for the village guardian spirit, and may not handle the altar paraphernalia.

By the same logic more powerful spirits are located above or to the left of less powerful spirits, and spirits are located above people. The altar of the village guardian spirit is located above the village, the altar for the hill spirit is located above that of the village guardian spirit.

There is, then, an effort to preserve the polarity of spirits, to keep them powerful by not introducing elements from the complementary set. There is also an effort to preserve the neutral state of humans for if a person moves too far toward either pole, he dies and becomes a body and a spirit, but no longer a person.

Lisu distinguish misfortunes caused by spirits from those which occur

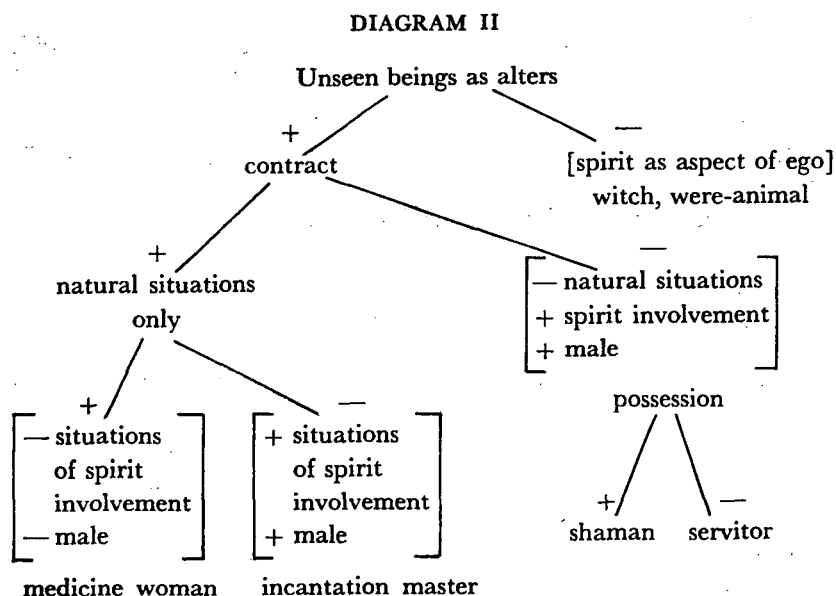
by themselves as the result of mechanical processes. The latter are natural and the former are supernatural. In order to contend with supernatural events one has to discover just what spirit is involved and what its motivations are. To manage natural events, one attempts to ascertain mechanical relationships and does not ask questions of motivation and identity.

It follows from the logic of polarities that supernatural events should be dealt with by supernatural means and natural events by natural means. It also follows that the methods of contending with these misfortunes should be appropriate to the type of event, so men handle supernatural events while women treat natural ones. Only men perform roles which are imposed by the wishes of the spirits: shaman and servitor. These roles deal with spirits in preventing and protecting against diseases and other misfortunes. The witch and were-animal roles can be performed by either men or women. These roles involve both a human and spirit as one composite entity. The entity is both human and spirit, thus of neutral polarity. Since the role is of neutral polarity, both men and women may fill it.

The logic of polarities implies that the roles that treat of natural maladies should be female, that those that deal with spirits as social objects should be male, and that those which entail an entity that partakes of both a spirit and a human should be occupied indifferently by either.

To fully account for the Lisu system of occult roles we have to incorporate these features in addition to the criterial features. One of the criterial features is that if there is a contract, the person may or may not deal with natural situations only. This defines the role of medicine woman (natural) as opposed to master of incantations (supernatural). If there is no contract (the criterion that defines shamans and servitors), then the role deals only with supernatural situations. Since situations or events are defined in terms of involvement of spirits, those roles that deal with supernatural events deal with spirits and those that do not, do not deal with spirits. According to the dualistic logic, only men can fill roles that entail interaction with spirits and women those that do not. We also have to state that if a spirit is not an alter, then it is an aspect of the ego of the person, thereby making him a spirit-person amalgam which, again following the dualistic logic, can be either male or female since it is neutral.

If we allow for these further defining features in addition to criterial features, then diagram II represents the system of roles.



Without the incorporation of these additional features which derive from the dualistic logic, it would be impossible to account for the sexes of the various roles. Furthermore, without a discussion of the logic of polarities, it could not be shown that the system of role specifications has anything to do with anything else. It would not be possible to show how this categorical system is related to other categorical systems in the Lisu world view. We could not understand why shamans are called on to treat some diseases and medicine women others — how the roles are used in dealing with events. We see that the taxonomic approach alone is not sufficient even to understand systems of categories.

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