

## **Dance or Change Your Religion: Conservation of Dance Music “Awhui” and Ethnic Identity Among Lahu Na Shehle of Northern Thailand**

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This article has two parts. Part I introduces the culture of the people of the five Lahu Na Shehle villages of Northern Thailand with their growing recognition of the problem of cultural loss, especially of their practice of music and dance, that in conjunction with key rituals, sustains their social and political solidarity, their good health system, and their sense of identity. Part I also presents an account of two anthropologists' solution to their lack of training as ethnomusicologists and ethnochoreologist, by becoming specialists in capture, collecting field audio and video recordings in forms usable by music and dance scholars back on their campus. Part II presents in some detail the results of recursive teamwork across specialist boundaries in fundamental discoveries about how the Lahu system functions. It also addresses the possible place of the scholarly work in the villagers' current motivation to organize cultural conservation that will address their problem of cultural loss.

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgment: Research and startup field work for this article was funded in part by the Center for East Asia and Pacific Studies at the University of Illinois. We thank those who participated and contributed to the research at different times over its several years of iduration: Patricia Howard, PhD., now Instructor at the University of Kentucky; Valarie Barske, PhD., University of Wisconsin, Steven's Point; Sarah Mosher, M. A., for ethnomusicology expertise; Patrick McCall for German translations and musical knowledge; and Prof. Emeritus David W. Plath, University of Illinois for his expertise and contributions with video ethnography and to video included in this article. We thank Joan Cole for expertise in digital imaging and web design that made this multimedia article possible. With special gratitude we thank all the LahuNaShehle villagers of Wingpapao District for their cheerful hospitality and generous, unstinting contribution of cultural knowledge to our project.

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Part I

**Dancing Circle**

On return visits to mountain villages of the *Labu NaShebleh* /lá<sup>21</sup> hu<sup>11</sup> ná<sup>42</sup> sheb<sup>21</sup> leb<sup>45</sup> /, it's a good idea to check the number of fenced dance circles in the village as soon as possible after arrival greetings are over.<sup>2</sup> That tells one how many villages the LahuNaShehle (here after LNS) residents regard to be on the settlement site, whatever Thai government officials or the nearby development station officials think is the case. The central place of dance and music for LSN culture is clearly signaled by the political geography of the village. Every village has an earthen dance circle surrounded by a fence and each dance circle is the emblem signaling the existence of a separate religio-political unit.



**Figure 1.** <http://www.lahudancemusic.org/multimedia.htm><sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tone contour of LahuNaShehle syllables will be indicated at first appearance only by two superscript digits, the first digit the beginning, the second digit the end of the pitch contour. Pitch is graduated from 1 the lowest to 5 the highest. Syllables without digits are midlevel, 33, tones. Words in the Lahu syllabic language are difficult to specify, so word-like combinations of syllables are shown by capitalizing the first letters of each syllable in a word-like cluster in Lahu.

<sup>3</sup> How to get to the multimedia clips: if you click on the arrow in the thumbnail images, it will take you to a webpage with all of the multimedia documents available. You can either stream the video clips there, in a window on one side of the desktop for the clips and in a window on the

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Among LNS dancing is under pressure to change, pushed and pulled by missionary proselytizing, schooling, state officials, the magnetism of global popular culture, culture flows of new media, and tourist shows. For twenty years of study prior to this project, our ethnography of everyday life was filled with not only the talk and goings on, but also with video visual and sonic records of the on-going musics and the dance of five LSN villages. It can't be said that we ignored their dance and music.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Our 1992 documentary "Candles for New Years" highlighted the dance scenes and the ritual and social context of New Year dancing that includes the only four days of the year when they dance in daytime. Yet in truth the ethnography never included the study of the dance and its music in depth. Now, given the likelihood it will change beyond present recognition, it seemed imperative to set out to record, study, understand and conserve its present historical form for, not only academic purposes, but as an historic resource for future generations of the LahuNaShehleh.

Each dance circle has its religious leaders—a priestly married couple, the KehLu Ma /*keb<sup>21</sup>lu<sup>45</sup>ma*/ and KehLuPa /*keb<sup>21</sup>lu<sup>45</sup>pa<sup>11</sup>*/, and its own village chiefly couple. Changes in the number and location of dance circles, or lack of changes, are clues to recent political-religious history of peace and harmony or conflict and upheavals in the settlement, as well as changes or continuity in

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other side for the written script; or download the audio and video clips to your desktop, where you can set up playback however you like. If you have good internet access, it is preferable to go to <http://www.lahudancemusic.org/multimedia.htm> to play the clips from there to stream them. This link will have tips for setting up video playback on your computer.

<sup>4</sup> Jacquetta Hill, "The Household As the Center of Life Among the Lahu of Northern Thailand," in *Family and Community Changes In East Asia*, ed. by K. Morioka and J. Suginoara (Tokyo: Japan Sociological Society, 1985) ; 504-526.

<sup>5</sup> Jacquetta Hill, "Women and Men in Local Leadership In the Lahu Na Shehleh Villages of Northern Thailand," *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography: Leadership, Justice and Politics at the Grassroots* 12 (2004):35-64.

<sup>6</sup> David Plath, *Candles for New Years* (Video Cassette, 1992, Champaign, Il.: Media Production Group/Documentary Educational Resources(<http://der.org/2007>) DVD.

villages' religious and political leadership. The fenced dance circle, CaKhuiKui /ca<sup>11</sup> kbui<sup>45</sup> keui<sup>21</sup>/ is the physical icon of LNS culture, and ritual involving the circle, along with its dance and music, are iconic links with LNS identity .

There are potent religious connections among the altar, BoBa /bo<sup>21</sup> ba/, in the priest couple's house; the altars of all the main houses in the village; and the dance circle with its flat-topped earthen mound, TehPvu /teh<sup>21</sup> pvu<sup>45</sup>/, at its center. The houses with these altars are the sites of the mutual exchanges of the emblematic sticky rice cakes at New Year time, each such household sending out a team of its youths and young adults to carry out the exchanges in ones own village and to every other LahuNaShehleh village visited during the New Year ceremonial season. These recurrent ritual exchanges renew social solidarity among households in each LNS village and in regional networks of households among the many villages. Religious connections are seen also in the well defined movements of sacred objects: burning bees wax candles in a special basket, accompanied by the sacred musical instrument, the NawKhuMa /naw<sup>21</sup> kbui<sup>21</sup> ma/ , on the way *from* the altar in the priestly house *to* the central mound, TehPvu, in the dancing place, and *back* at the end of the dance. The TehPvu must be circuited by the dance musician and dancers seven times counter clockwise to begin a dance and seven times clockwise to end it. Thus, the dance and its music is a religious-medical event that brings AwBu /aw<sup>11</sup> bu/, good health, abundance, protection from ill fortune, and harmony in social relations, thus justifying the extent and cost invested in sponsoring and participating in these ceremonies. It is also a social participatory and aesthetic event.

The significance of dance and its associated ritual for Lahu identity was confirmed in an interview with the priest of one village, whose words suggested the title of this article--*DANCE OR CHANGE YOUR RELIGION!*



Figure 2. [Identity and Dance \(Video Clip\)](#)

### **Project and Purpose**

This study of Lahu dance and music began with a cultural problem faced by Lahu teenagers who were away from their village settings of participatory socialization in order to attend school beyond elementary level. Caught up in the distant setting of Thai towns and cities and the new media technology of music and dance, still they recognized and were troubled by their failure to acquire the desired and appropriate expertise in the dance and music that marked their sense of home and identity as Lahu Na Shehle. Outside the context of participation they had no way to approach learning, nor teaching it. The discussion is also about how anthropologists-videographers, who were neither dancers nor musicians, followed long term anthropological study of the culture of five villages with a deep, rigorous study of LNS dance and its music. We needed the technical assistance of an ethnomusicologist, and a human movement specialist, or ethnochoreologist, to help us 'capture' the dance and music. These specialists are scarce. Those who specialize in the dance and music of highland minorities of northern Thailand just are not available to join projects such as ours. So we had to learn how to capture the dance and music in live performance and bring it back home to the University setting where specialists there can be persuaded to join in,

part time, for a more rigorous analysis.<sup>7,8</sup> There we enjoyed the good fortune of having a graduate student at the University of Illinois from one of these five Lahu villages, join our state-side project in 2006 as a dance and culture consultant.

Briefly stated, the goals of our project are

- a. to document dance and it's music in detail and analyze them comprehensively before current 'historical' forms change;
- b. to record dance and music in context in multiple ways that allow upcoming generations to revive or reshape them, if they choose;
- c. to address arenas of academic discourse.

### **Multimedia Project Startup and Phases**

Since the circumstance of the project (especially the fact that we could only film the Lahu dance in daylight four days out of the year) led to rather a complicated time line of phases and methods, Appendix A offers a more detailed outline. Here we will mention some highlights, including how we learned from our failures, and successes, about how to go about this kind of project, especially the capture of the dance and music.

### **Figure 3. [Appendix A: Project Phases and Methods \(PDF File\)](#)**

Our first fieldtrip to study dance by necessity was in the summer of 2004, a time of the year when the Lahu only dance at night. It was rainy season in Thailand. The single light above the entrance to the dance circle satisfied the dancers' needs, but lighting posed a gargantuan hurdle to video filming in the night during rainy season.

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<sup>7</sup> Owe Ronstrom, "It Takes Two—or More—to Tango: Researching Traditional Music/Dance Interrelations," in *Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods, and Issues in Dance Ethnography*, ed. T. J. Buckland (New York: St. Martins Press, 1999): 134-144.

<sup>8</sup> Judy Van Zite, "Capturing the Dancing: Why and How?" in *Dance in the Field*, 85-99.



**Figure 4.** [Night Dancing \(Video Clip\)](#)

Since dance and its music were hard to capture under these circumstance, high school, college and university LNS students in nearby Chiang Mai came to our aid on our patio in Chiang Mai in daytime to demonstrate and teach us.



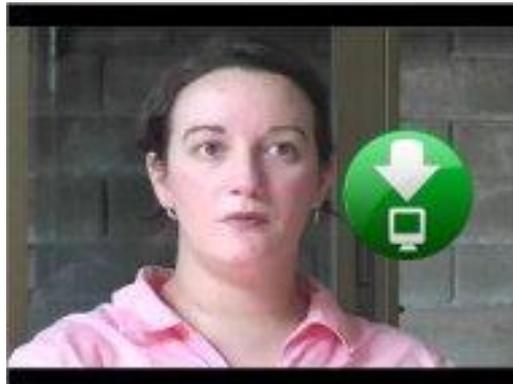
**Figure 5.** [Students' Dancing Demo \(Video Clip\)](#)

In the villages we conducted interviews and demonstrations in day time with musicians and dancers.



**Figure 6.** [Cafa, Dancing Musician Demo \(Video Clip\)](#)

We did night shoots of two night dances celebrating the appearances of new rice shoots at the CaSuiCa /ca<sup>11</sup> sui<sup>54</sup> ca<sup>21</sup>/ feast, ritual, and dance, an all night dance. In 2004 the experience of our dance specialist, Valare Barske, in learning to dance three Lahu dances and her initial analysis of the experience gave us valuable information.



**Figure 7.** [Explaining Dance Experience \(Video Clip\)](#)

From interviews, demonstrations, and Barske's experience we learned that the LNS concept of dance and music, called AwHui /aw<sup>21</sup> hui<sup>45</sup>/, refers simultaneously to dance and music, understood as unitary. This unitary approach to dance and its music turned out to pose a major challenge to our search for expert assistance. The "fusion" of music and dance into an integral entity is common in

world music and dance.<sup>9</sup> Yet in academic settings it's difficult to find the right expert with the necessary dual expertise, since they are commonly divided into separate disciplines and separate departments in academic and scholarly settings.

As we began our analysis of the hours of video capture on returning to the University of Illinois, after 2004 fieldwork, we learned we had *not* filmed the dancers and their feet *continuously enough* to do a valid analysis from the video data of the dances of men and women in their *circle dance*. Later we also learned we started with several wrong questions, particularly the question of how many dances and dance melodies the LSN 'had.' They don't name their dances, although they have names for some of the steps and may use those terms to refer to a dance.<sup>10</sup> Nor do they count their melodies, either. And they don't talk, discuss, or comment specifically about dance, nor music outside the dance event, although the New Year celebration of food, visitors, women's costumes, and the sociality and fun of getting together was often a topic of enthusiastic conversation. Dances are *participatory activity events*—occasions of great enthusiasm, joyful anticipation, and passionate embodiment of dancing, eating, greeting, talking. Here discourse analysis about dance and music is a non-starter for this study of human movement and sound.

We returned to Thailand around New Year's time in 2005 to do a proper capture of the dancers' movements in the four days of daylight dancing. In the fall of 2005, however, when an ethnomusicology graduate student, Sarah Mosher, joined the project, she turned up a problem with the capture of *musical sound*. Mosher couldn't isolate sustained samples of the musical pieces and repeats of the beat sequences, as the lone musician danced around the circle *away from the audio pickup of the video camera!*

We returned to the field in early 2006 once again, around New Year's time to properly capture the audio data in the context of actual dances. A Lahu youth and research assistant, CaKhaw /*ca<sup>21</sup> k<sup>han</sup><sup>21</sup>*/, followed behind and next to the dancing musician with a video camera, recording the sound as they moved in circles. We also collected the full dance-music repertoire of two master musicians

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<sup>9</sup> Ronstrom, "It Takes Two," 134-144.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gretel Schworer, *Die Mundorgel bei den La Hu in Nord-Thailand: Bauweise, Function and Musi.* (Hamburg: Verlag der Musikalienhandlung Karl Dieter Wagner, 1982) 2 Vols.

through individual interviews and recording sessions (a procedure similar to that used in Schworer's 1970's study of Lahu Naw music).<sup>11</sup> *This is crucial information because a single musician sets the "program" of the dance based on his repertoire while he acts as the dancing musician, until succeeded by the next lone musician.*

In summer of 2006, Nannaphat Saenghong, our Lahu dance consultant entered University of Illinois and in the fall she began to teach Sarah, the project ethnomusicologist, Lahu dance. Fall 2008 brought us a dance specialist: Kate Grim-Feinberg, an anthropology doctoral student with professional dance background and practiced expertise in Labanotation for transcribing human body movement.<sup>12</sup> We then set up a quasi-visual anthropology experiment to begin in Fall 2008 when Grim-Feinberg returned from her own summer fieldwork in the Andean mountains of Peru. We wished to seize this opportunity to address the question of how far one can go in a valid analysis of dance movement from working only with the video capture, and then subsequently working with a native informant, but still without the analyst herself participating in real dance events. During the Fall of 2008, she worked only with the video data for her rigorous writing or scoring of the dance in Labanotation, and read several ethnographic articles on LNS for context. She surveyed all of the video material that we had on hand from the earliest to the most recent field trips, but the recordings from 2005 were most useful for dance analysis. Then in January of 2009 she began to work with our expert LNS dancer, Saenghong, learning and working out the dances with her. Only when she began to work with Saenghong did she learn to hum the music as she worked on the step sequences, bridging the academic gap between music and dance movement. In midsemester she added study of the musical materials left by the ethnomusicologist, Mosher, with interpretive assistance from our undergraduate musician assistant, Patrick McCall. This produced insight into the impressive complexity of LNS dance and music.

### **Who Are the Lahu?**

The Lahu are a Tibeto-Burmese speaking highland people with villages widely scattered through the highland borderlands of

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<sup>11</sup> Schworer, *Die Mundorgel*.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Hutchinson Guest, *The Laban System of Analyzing and Recording Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

Southwestern China, Eastern Burma, Northern Laos, and North and Northwestern Thailand. By recent approximate counts there are about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a million Lahu in total. Approximately 50,000 to 70,000 now reside in Thailand, living among a mosaic of villages of other distinctive ethnic populations. Until the 1970s Lahu were highland swidden farmers, who moved every five to six years in search of new land and the security to cultivate it. Now settled down, culture and economic change are rapid.

**Figure 8.** Map of [Thailand](#), “A” [Village](#) Location (Google Maps)

The LNS view of the Thailand-based Lahu is that there are two main groups: themselves, self-referenced as the Lahu Na or Black Lahu, and the other Lahu, all of whom they call PaLi /*pa li<sup>45</sup>*/. The PaLi call our target Lahu subgroup, not Lahu Na, but *Shebleh*. That is **not** a favored self referent for the LNS villagers.

**Figure 9.** [Lahu Subgroupings \(PDF File\)](#) <sup>13</sup>

However most linguists and most anthropologists view the Lahu in Thailand as represented mainly by four subgroups: Black Lahu, who call themselves *Labu Na*; Red Lahu, or Lahu Nyi /*la<sup>21</sup> hu<sup>11</sup> nyi<sup>45</sup>*/, and Lahu *Shebleh*, who also refer to themselves as *Labu Na*; and a fourth very distinctive Lahu dialect grouping, the Yellow Lahu, or *Labu Shi* /*la<sup>21</sup> hu<sup>11</sup> shi*/. To respect the villagers self-reference and also to keep the outside world straight on who we are talking about, we have adopted the group name “LahuNa*Shebleh*,” or hereafter LNS. It is well to note that while all Lahu have much in common, including linguistic similarity, LNS are distinctive from others in important ways, especially in their rituals, dance, music, and musical instruments.

While these differences may seem inconsequential, the fact that LNS differ from other Lahu in their dance and music takes on special significance when it comes to light that the differences are not recognized in academic circles, endangering their growing desire to preserve core features of their present culture practices. Their dance with its music has not been described and analyzed in published sources, although a German ethnomusicologist researched and

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<sup>13</sup> David Bradley, *Labu Dialects* (Canberra, Australia: University of Australia Press, 1979).

reported on Lahu free-reed mouth organ music among several Lahu subdivisions, based on individual musician interviews, not on in-context performance of dance with its music.<sup>14</sup> LSN are often bracketed with the Red and (other) Black Lahu and pegged as essentially the same. For example in *The Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music* section on the Lahu, no mention is made of the difference in the LNS dance as the authors describe the dance of other Lahu.<sup>15</sup> The reader is left to assume there is nothing distinctive about LNS dance and music, inaccurately presuming that the LNS dance and its music is the same as the other Lahu groups, although it is not.

Paradoxically, from two sources of evidence we know LNS dance is actually more akin to the dance and music of another a Tibeto-Burmese language speaking minority, the Lisu, who live in nearby villages in the mosaic of the many ethnic minority villages of the Northern Thai highlands. This was confirmed with still photos and audio tapes loaned to us by an anthropologist, Paul Durrenberger who studied the Lisu in Northern Thailand in the 1960's,<sup>16</sup> plus our own interviews with LNS musicians and dancers. They tell us that when they go to nearby Lisu villages to participate in dances, they can immediately join in, in contrast to their experience in "Pali" villages where they must first learn new dance steps and their relationship to the music. Equally interesting, the use of the small free reed mouth organ, the NawKhehLeh /*nan*<sup>21</sup> /*keh*<sup>45</sup> /*leh*/ now most favored by the five LNS villages for dancing, was adopted from the Lisu in the early 1980's, not from the 'other' Lahu, the PaLi, who use only the smaller Naw musical instruments. Thus, LNS dance and its music become of special interest not only because it is so intimately embedded in the practice of their religion and sense of distinctive group identity. It is important to present its full character in detail, to support villagers' moves toward its conservation and preservation as an historical

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<sup>14</sup> Schworer, *Die Mundorgel*.

<sup>15</sup> Ruriko Uchida and Amy Catlin, "Music of Upland Minorities in Burma, Laos, and Thailand," in *The Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music*, ed. by T. Miller and S. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2008) 303-317.

<sup>16</sup> E. Paul Durrenberger, *Lisu Religions* (DeKalb, IL: Center for Southeast Asia Studies, Northern Illinois University Monograph Series on Southeast Asia, Occasional Paper 13, 1989).

reality, rather than let it disappear by the reductive process of combining categories.

### Culture Context of Dance

The LNS dance CaKhui /ca<sup>21</sup> k<sup>h</sup>ui<sup>42</sup>/ is an event in a series of events: animals are sacrificed and eaten during the daylight hours, accompanied by compulsory ritual at the BoBa or altar, seeking AwBu good health and fortune, abundant crops, harmonious human relations, etc. from the leading spirit, GuiSa /Gui<sup>21</sup> sa<sup>45</sup>/.<sup>17</sup> Except for the first four days of New Year celebration, dances begin around 8 p.m. and end when dancers tire, with ritual closure at the altar of the KehLu (priest) house, then concluding with feasting on food that remains from the afternoon feast. Dance is a religious event as well as a social, participatory, entertainment, and aesthetic event.

Lahu New Year happens with the new moon, often around the time of Chinese New Year, when all the villages in this “multivillage” community visit one another to dance, feast and pay formal ritual calls on the households with altars.<sup>18,19</sup> Indeed the schedule of LNS villages’ New Year festivals throughout the Northern Thai region depends on coordinating the celebrations and visits across the region. By religious interdiction, heavy physically demanding work in the field is suspended beginning with the day of the new moon and ending with the day of the full moon. So, there is energy and enthusiasm to spare for New Year activities and ceremonies.

The essential condition for a fulsome New Year celebration is a good harvest of the main crops, rice for staple food and corn for cash to buy abundant food and materials for fancy costuming. In the village there is near frenzy of sartorial activity by the women, who are the tailors and seamstresses of LNS society, as they sew and appliqué new garments. Rice for feasting and feeding visitors must be secured, if not from ones own harvest, then by purchase. The favored food of New Year season, pork, gets devoted attention, in both fattening the

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<sup>17</sup> Hill, *Women and Men in Leadership*.

<sup>18</sup> Delmos J. Jones, “The Multi-village Community: Village Segmentation and Coalescence in Northern Thailand.” *Behavior Science Notes, HRAF Quarterly Bulletin* 3, no. 3 (1968) 149-174.

<sup>19</sup> Hill, *Women and Men in Local Leadership*.

pigs one has on hand and scouting out nearby farmers who have a supply of the right size pigs for New Year feasting, especially for guests.

On the night of the dark of the moon formal New Year season begins, triggered by making sticky rice cakes, first in the house of the KehLu, then followed immediately by all other houses in the village. These rice cakes are used in paired exchanges throughout the New Year among houses in the LNS village to symbolize LNS religious solidarity, not only among the households of a village, but among the households of the multi-village community and among households of the LNS villages of the Northern Thailand region. On the night of the new moon the first New Year's dance, an all night dance, begins the period of the New Year season known as Female New Year, KhawSuiMa /khaw<sup>22</sup>sui<sup>45</sup>ma/.

During the New Year season when visitors from other villages join in, the dance circle becomes packed and dancing reaches the year's crescendo of visual and musical excitement and enjoyment. Costumes and women's fashions are a special passion at New Year festivals. The women's long jackets in white-bordered and multicolor appliqué outline the movements of their close-order steps as radius after radius of women dancers wheel around the central candle-laden baskets, like colorful spokes of a Ferris wheel around its hub.

As more and more dancers arrive, men form lines clasping hands, their rhythmic steps marking a percussion beat. The musician sets the awhui (the dance and music). As momentum builds, the women's precision steps take on the quality of close order drill, keyed to the loud slaps of the men's feet as they step to the duple (4/4) beat of the music. The circling parade charges to new speed as strings of dancing men outside the women's formation join hand clasps into one long curving line behind the musician, taking giant steps and swinging foot movements that rise to leaps. Outside the circle the sound can be heard throughout the village like a disciplined corps on parade. The excited cries of the men, "This dancing is the greatest fun! This dance is the very best!" /ca<sup>21</sup>kehui<sup>42</sup>chan<sup>11</sup>ja<sup>21</sup>! ca<sup>21</sup>kehui<sup>42</sup>da<sup>22</sup>ja<sup>21</sup>!/, spread the news that this dance is a parade of enthusiastic delight. Out of the mass of moving bodies arises a rhythmic composition built up from slaps of the men's feet and brushing rasps of the women's sliding steps---an ordered beauty of orchestrated bodies and sounds---a dance of unusual dimensions in the northern hills of Thailand

**Summary:**

**Part I**

We found that the LahuNaShehleh practice of their ritual dance-complex is a political as well as a religious and medical activity. Performing the dance with its rituals sustains the identity of LNS. Not to dance is tantamount to changing religion and identity. We were told explicitly, by one of the villages' priests, that there would be no LNS, should people and households fail to practice the dance with its rituals. So understanding the technical structure of the dance and music performance, at a particular historical horizon, as well as the ritual and ceremonial contexts in which they occur is significant. The cultural complex in question, the importance of dance and its music and its accompanying ritual, goes beyond being critical to LNS villagers' sense of their own identity. In addition, the recurrent rituals associated with the dance and music renew and strengthen social solidarity among households in each LNS village, as well as in the network of households across the many LNS villages of Northern Thailand.

**Part II**

Part II of the article goes into specifics of what the ethnomusical and ethnochoreological research revealed about the Lahu dance and music, LNS awhui. We suggest using the theoretical concept of musical formula to understand the non-notated musical performances and their relation to the dance. Thereafter we turn to consider, briefly, the Thai political context of multiculturalism in its policy toward local cultural variation, and some recent efforts in the Lahu villages to initiate measures of cultural conservation.

**Music**

In approaching an aural music tradition without its own notation system (that is, the music is unwritten), Mosher, the ethnomusicologist on the team, was deeply concerned that transcribing Lahu music in standard Western notation would result in ethnocentric transcriptions that failed to capture the nuances and

character of Lahu music.<sup>20</sup> But after trying several alternative procedures she settled on a very spartan version of Western notation using a five line staff, that focused on pitch, timing and phrasing. Analysis of selections of pieces of music from the 58 digital video tapes varying from 20 minutes to 1 hour (shot in 2004,-5,- and -6) that were played on several different musical instruments, showed that Lahu music is built on repetition of a few short phrases with and without variations, within larger cyclical forms, usually based on a 16 or 32 beat cycle (but not always). She was reluctant to introduce bars to mark measures because of the etic (outsider) assumptions they introduce, although much of the music can be counted in simple duple or 4/4 meter. Still some pieces are better understood in compound duple meter, for example 12/8. Lahu music has rhythmic 'swing' that is difficult to capture in written notation, but dance music is usually extremely steady, continuing at precisely the same tempo through a piece of music. Melodies usually consisted of four or five tones that fall close to the C-D-E-G or A-B-flat-C-E-F on the Western system of musical scales. However their music uses some tones that fall in between the tones of Western scales such as half sharps and flats as well as slides and pitch bends to ornament notes. Moreover pitch is not standardized in Lahu music. One factor that introduces musical variation is the variety of instruments that are played for awhuis, each with a different range of pitches and timbres. Even among individual instruments of the same kind, but made by hand from local materials, there are notable differences in their sound production.

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<sup>20</sup> Terry Miller and Jaremechai Chonpairot, "A History of Siamese Music Reconstructed from Western Documents, 1505-1932," *Crossroads* 8 no. 2 (1994): 1-192

NawKehLeh



**Figure 10.** Two [NawKehLehs](#) (Click to Enlarge)

Working only with music, before learning some of the dances from Saenghong, our cultural consultant, Mosher faced several ‘uncertainty’ problems, such as determining the ‘beginning’ of the cycles and their lengths in beats. For example, in different performances of the same tune the dancing musician might begin and end at different spots within the musical phrase. Beginnings were ambiguous in the sound recordings. Musicians repeat their material multiple times, improvising new variations as they play, but each variation is built on the same basic musical idea. Repetition need not be exact in order for a piece of music to be cyclical, but each cycle must be the same number of beats in length. However, the music that Mosher tagged as awhui number one (#1) sounded very different when played for dances on four different instruments: it was not a single melody adapted to fit different instruments, Mosher decided.

Five basic kinds of instruments are played for dances, four wind instruments and one string instrument. The vertical flute, called the Seh /seh<sup>21</sup>/ will not be discussed because it is seldom played for dances, although it often is played for entertainment and pass-time by women. Three of the wind instruments are free-reed mouth organs,

with five pipes penetrating a gourd sounding-chest held in the musicians' hands and fingered to control the musical tones.



[NawKhuMa \(CaSaRabui\)](#)



[NawSui \(CaDui\)](#)



[NawKehLeh \(CamuiPaNeh\)](#)



[Tu\[ng\] \(CaPhaw\)](#)

**Figure 11.** Audio of Four Musical Instruments  
(Click images to download Audio Clips)

The NawKhuMa is the tallest and most sacred of all instruments and is used to play sacred ritual music for ceremonial purposes. The music of the NawKhuMa usually and preferably opens and closes the dances, but its bass pitch is used to play only one melody for an actual dance awhui. The NawSui /naw21sui4?/, of medium size compared to the NaKhuMa, is used to play several dance tunes, as well as for ceremonies. While higher pitched than the NawKhuMa, its timber is still subdued. Like the NaKhuMa it is far less favored for dance than the third and much smaller NawKehLeh. The shorter bamboo pipes of the smallest Naw, plays a higher pitch, sounding a sweeter, louder melody than the other two Naws. Dancers find its melody a beautiful sound that they can readily hear, and so its music is the most popular among dancers. The string lute, called the Tung /tu2?/, with its edgy banjo-like sound, delivers a

clear, peppy beat and before the early 1980's when the NawKehLeh was adopted, it was the favored dance instrument in the hands of a good musician. The music for chanting rituals, played only by the NawKhuMa and the NawSui, was played at a very slow tempo sounding almost non-metrical. At times the music was recognizable as very slow, non-metered versions of dance melodies.

No drums, gongs, cymbals or other percussive instruments are used, unlike the music of other Lahu subgroups.<sup>21, 22</sup> The men dancers with a rhythmic slap step to the ground by their feet keep a metronomic pulse throughout the music, sustaining an audible, tight rhythmic structure to music. The men's slap step and the brush foot sound of the women's steps between counts are the percussive instruments of the LNS dance music.

One after another for as long as each can sound his instrument, a single male dancing musician provides the music for the dance. (On special occasions, more than one dancing musician plays at the same time.) After the first compulsory awhui, the choice of musical pieces is up to him. The musician's own repertoire of awhui, his musical skills and his endurance set the order and duration of awhui's in his portion of the dance. Among the LNS only men play for the dances, unlike the practice of the Red Lahu subgroup.

In the recordings we see the dancers change their dance steps, WITHOUT MISSING A BEAT but still can't identify what in the music they hear, or in the dance of the dancing musician they see, to anticipate the music and dance are about to change. We guess it is not one, but several, kinds of simultaneous cues.

Asking the question of how many melodies for dance there are led to misunderstandings and contradictions. A more nuanced way of thinking about aural/oral music is that the musical repertoire is based on musical "formula,"<sup>23</sup> or "a simple modal system."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Anthony Walker, *Merit and the Millennium: Routine and Crisis in the Ritual Lives of the Lahu People* (New Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 2003), plates 46 & 47.

<sup>22</sup> See also Schworer, *Die Mundorgel*.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Becker, *Traditional Music in Modern Java: Gamelan in a Changing Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1980), 20.

<sup>24</sup> Terry Miller, "Thailand," in *The Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music*, eds. Terry Miller and Sean Williams, (New York: Routledge, 2008) 121-182.

Miller explains that music for the /khaen/, free-reed mouth organ of Northeastern Thailand (as well as Laos) when played by a single musician for women singers "... is improvised, based on /lai/, a simple modal system [of which there are six]... and several basic programmatic pieces also known to all players."<sup>25</sup> As Becker explains, "The basic building block of an oral tradition [in music] is the melodic formula... [not a fixed formula, but one] ...which can be expanded, condensed, or rearranged according to the rules of the situation."<sup>26</sup> In formulaic performance according to Torino "...a piece is considered a platform for individual playing rather than an object to be faithfully reproduced. [Musical] pieces and dance styles are treated...as loose models with associated collections of formulas rather than...as closely reproducible items."<sup>27</sup> In this conception of oral music there maybe four or five basic pieces, which formulaic improvisation can multiply into numerous musical pieces. Treated as items to be closely reproduced, the formulaic variations seen through a Western musical lens are counted as different musical pieces, but Lahu dancers hear all variations of a basic piece as the same melody, or more specifically, as the same dance and same awhui.

As we have found, based on a careful reassessment of Mosher's transcriptions and Grim-Feinberg's and Saenghong's Laban analysis there is not a single melody for every dance sequence; rather there are several different melodies that can go with a dance sequence, but each melody must have the same pattern of beats so that dancers can keep their pace and place for that dance sequence.

When Mosher began to work with Saenghong on the dances that are associated with the music, beginning with awhu #1, many of the musical ambiguities that puzzled her began to clear up. The dance for awhui #1 was the same for the "different" music played on three different instruments. Importantly in the sequences of steps that made up the dance she was learning, she noticed a pause "during which dancers remain stationary while they bend and then straighten their knees." This pause, was noticed earlier as a "toe raising" by

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<sup>25</sup> Terry Miller, "Thailand", p. 175.

<sup>26</sup> Becker, *Traditional Music in Modern Java*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Turino, "Formulas and Improvisation in Participatory Music," in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, And Society*, eds., G. Solis and B. Nettle (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 104.

Barske. Later in the close, systematic analysis of more extensive dance recordings by Grim-Feinberg as she worked with Saenghong, the pause proved it to be a fundamental organizing feature of the structure of LNS dance.

### Structure of Dance Awhui

People who grow up participating in dance circles can master awhuis without any conscious awareness of their structure. It's apparent that we are dealing with tacit, embodied knowledge that dancers and dancing musicians have acquired through experience and practice, but do not articulate verbally.<sup>28, 29</sup> However, in order to enable scholarly discussion and to contribute to a future teaching of dance-music outside a context of participation, we need to figure out how it all fits together as a system. Due in part to disciplinary divides, mentioned above, our greatest challenge has been to describe analytically from an etic, or outsider comparative perspective, the relationship between music and dance in LNS awhuis. To transcribe the dance as movement we have used Labanotation, a writing system invented by Rudolf Laban in 1928 to notate dance, but which can be adapted for notating any system of human movement.<sup>30</sup>

#### Figure 12. [Appendix B: Labanotation Key \(PDF File\)](#)

From an emic (or insider's meaningful) perspective, we know that dance and music components of awhuis are inextricably linked. Lahu dancers say that the music tells them which sequence of steps and phrases to perform, when to switch sequences, and which sequence to switch to at any given moment. The dancing musician makes the musical decisions, and the other dancers follow along without missing a beat. As we noted earlier, his coordinated

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<sup>28</sup> Janet Dougherty and Charles Keller, "Taskonomy: A Practice Approach to Knowledge Structures," in *Directions in Cognitive Anthropology*, ed. Janet Dougherty (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 161-175.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Keller and Janet Keller, "Thinking and Acting With Iron," in *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*, ed. Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1993), 125-143.

<sup>30</sup> A. H. Guest, *The Laban System*.

unpredictability may be an example of formulaic variation common in participatory dance-music events.<sup>31</sup>

In 2009 Grim-Feinberg and Saenghong analyzed over three hours of LNS dance videos from 2004, 2005, and 2006 dances. You can see the researchers at work viewing the films in our office, jotting down in Labanotation which patterns were repeated and which had not yet been notated.

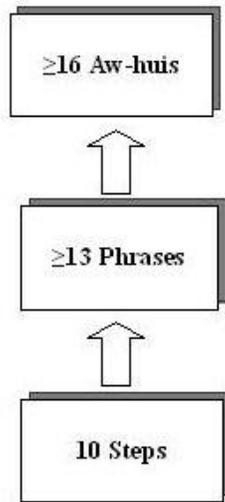


**Figure 13.** [Researchers At Work \(Video Clip\)](#)

In the dancing captured on video, they found sixteen awhuis. There, of course, may be additional awhuis not captured on those three hours of video. They identified thirteen phrases, or sequences of dance steps, that in different combinations make up the sixteen or more awhuis. They distinguished ten different steps that make up these phrases, shown in Figure 14. Component Structure of Awhuis.

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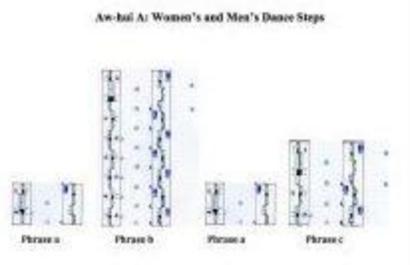
<sup>31</sup> T. Turino, *Formulas and Improvisation*, 113.



**Figure 14.** Component Structure of Awhuis

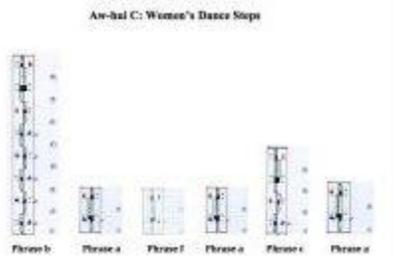
This structure has a generative quality: consider all the possible ways that ten steps could be combined in different sequences to form phrases, and then all of the ways that phrases could be put together to form different awhuis. The possible number of awhuis that dancers might have to keep track of is enormous.

The phrases of awhui A can be represented in Labanotation, as shown in Figure 15, with each left column representing women's steps and each right column representing men's steps, when read from bottom to top and from left to right. Letter labels for awhuis and phrases are used for analytical purposes only. Since Lahu dancers and musicians do not name nor label awhuis and their components, we labeled them in our own way in alphabetical order, starting with the first awhui identified in the videos as awhui A and continuing in alphabetic order as we found them.



**Figure 15.** Awhui A Dance Phrases (Click Thumbnail to Enlarge)

Awhui A starts with what is called “Phrase a” which takes two counts to execute the steps and other movements. (See count numbers in parentheses.) Then the dancers go into Phrase b, which takes eight counts; then repeat Phrase a; and then do four-count Phrase c. Awhui A would be a repetition of phrases abacabacabacabac, etc. Awhuis are performed cyclically and both dancers and musicians can start and end at any point in the cycle, depending on the dancing musicians’ choice



**Figure 16.** Awhui C Dance Phrases (Click Thumbnail to Enlarge)

Turning to the Labanotation of women’s phrases for Awhui C in Figure 16, notice the repetition of phrases a, b, and c, which were also the component parts of Awhui A. In this awhui, however, the phrases are performed in a different order, and with a new phrase “f,” added in the middle. The repeated cycle of Awhui C would be bafacabafacabafacabaf, etc.

Focusing on the steps, in the component structure of awhuis list in Figure 17, we have identified ten steps that we have observed are utilized to compose the phrases. We have also found greater variation among men's dance steps than among women's.

10 Dance Steps				
<b>RF = right front LF = left front RB = right back LB = left back</b> <b>RS = right side T = together Br = brush (women only)</b> <b>and = bending and straightening of standing leg</b> <b>turn = quarter turn on standing leg (only men do this)</b> <b>° = hesitation at the end of a phrase before starting the next (pause)</b>				
Examples				
PHRASE	COUNTS	WOMEN'S STEPS (Version 1)	WOMEN'S STEPS (Version 2)	MEN'S STEPS (Version 1)
a	1	RF-br-		RF-LF-
	2	T-and°		RF-and°
b	1	LF-br-		LF-and-
	2	RF-br-		RF-and-
	3	LF-br-		LF-and-
	4	RF-br-		RF-and-
	5	LF-br-		LF-and-
	6	RS-and-		RF-turn-
	7	LB-and-		LB-RB-
	8	T-and°		turn-LF-and°
c	1	LF-br-	LB-br-	LF-and-
	2	RS-and-	RS-and-	RF-turn-
	3	LB-and-	LB-and-	LB-RB-
	4	T-and°	T-and°	turn-LF-and°

**Figure 17.** Ten Dance Steps (Click Thumbnail to Enlarge)

For example, in Phrase a on count 1, women step right front-brush, while men step right front-left front. On count 2, women step together-pause, while men step right front-pause. In another example Saenghong and Grim-Feinberg demonstrate how the women's and men's steps fit together in Phrase b, that begins Awhui C. Saenghong, in slacks, performs the women's steps on the left while Grim-Feinberg, in skirt, performs the men's steps.

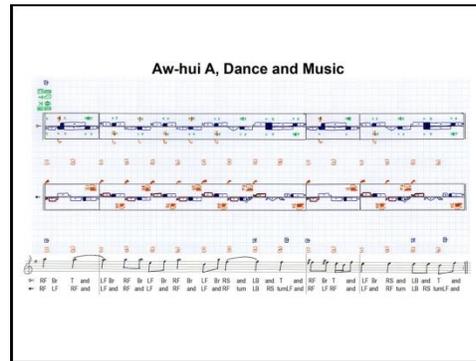


**Figure 18.** [Researchers Demo Phrase B \(Video Clip\)](#)

Note that the women and men are always moving in the same direction, but the men travel farther around the outside of the circle

while the women do smaller and more controlled movements. The men make the sound of the down beat with foot slaps and the women make a brushing sound in between counts. Listen carefully for the slaps and brushes of men's and women's steps in the Lahu dance circle. (See Village Dance Circle, Figure 1.) Here human body movements carry the role of the percussion instruments that are used by other Lahu subgroups.

Awhui A. Figure 19, shows how we represent a complete awhui including both dance notation and music notation.



**Figure 19.** Awhui A Dance & Music Horizontal (Click Thumbnail to Enlarge)

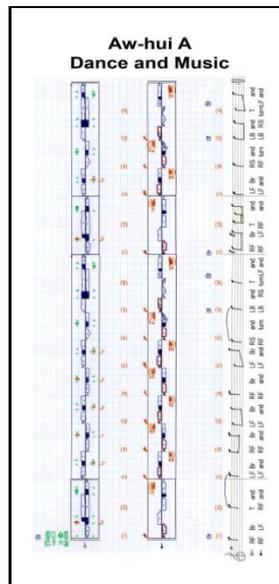
While Labanotation is usually read vertically and music notation is read horizontally, this representation shows the dance notation sideways in order to show the relationship between the dance and the music more readily. Here one sees the close relationship between the cadence of the music and the dance steps in the phrase units of the dance. The top line shows women's dance steps and the middle line shows men's dance steps. These are the same images that we showed previously in Awhui A phrases, there separated into vertical phrases. The bottom staff shows music notation, and underneath it are letter abbreviations for the women's steps and then the men's steps.

In this horizontal representation note the timing of the dance steps and music. Numbers for counts and bar lines separating phrases are lined up on all three staves to show what happens simultaneously in the women's dance, men's dance, and music. We have divided phrases based on dance steps, and on Saenghong's sense of when

"the music tells you" to pause. The small circle at the end of each dance phrase (before each bar line on the dance staffs) indicates a brief pause or hesitation, before stepping into the next phrase.

So the Labanotation clearly demonstrates the discovery that a brief pause or hesitation, regularly marks the basic units of the LNS dance as well as the regularity of the cadence of the dance and the musical beats. However, note there is no pause in the music notation, since Mosher did not detect a pause present in the music.

By turning this notation vertically, we can begin to read the dance notation, starting from the bottom and following the body movements more readily.



**Figure 20.** Awhui A Dance & Music Vertical (Click Thumbnail to Enlarge)

The staff on the left shows the women's steps, and the staff on the right shows the men's steps. In each staff, the center line marks the center of the body. Everything on the left side represents the left half of the body, and the right side represents the right half of the body. The inner-most column touching the center line is the support column, and represents weight bearing movements. We have drawn these weight bearing symbols in blue to show the directions in

which the dancers move. A close look at the blue symbols that are parallel to each other on the women's and men's staffs reveals that women's and men's steps move generally in the same directions and are closely coordinated.

The next columns, on the left and right sides of each staff but not touching the center line, show leg gestures. Arm, body, and head movements are shown in columns outside of the staff. As LNS dance is mostly focused on the lower body, most of the notation is inside the staffs.

Stylistic elements are drawn in green. However, these are included on the women's staff only because they come from direct work with Saenghong who performs women's dance expertly, but cannot confidently execute men's dancing with its stylistic elements. While we were able to learn much about men's steps from watching and imitating videos, the videos cannot reveal stylistic preferences without the interpretive assistance of a male dancer. The green symbols on the lower left show women's posture: head and body straight up, shoulders back, elbows out to the side and slanting down. The green symbols in the women's leg gesture columns throughout the staff show how women quickly bend and straighten their knees, causing their costumes to swing back and forth in unison, thus documenting an aesthetic element of prime importance to LNS dancers.

In orange, on the right edge of the women's staff and the left edge of the men's staff, are the audible accents made by the dancers' steps that create the music's cadence. Men create loud heavy accents, while women's steps create light accents, as Saenghong and Grim-Fienberg demonstrated in Phrase B (See Researchers Demo of Phase B, Figure 18).

The dancing musician decides how many times dancers repeat an awhui sequence. There isn't any set order in which the awhuis are always performed (except for the first and last awhui). He might play the music for it just twice, or he might repeat it a dozen times. The dancing musician can switch to a different aw-hui at any point in the current sequence. He might switch after going through the whole sequence or he might switch at some point in the middle of the sequence, to any other awhui that he knows how to play. Dancers must constantly listen to know to repeat the pattern, or when to switch to a new pattern. As soon as dancers hear that switch,

they quickly must figure out, in seconds, which pattern of steps comes next.

Expert dancers may be able to make the switches we have described mainly by listening to the dancing musician. Even dancers who are not so expert, including people like Saenghong who do not live in the village full time and do not participate regularly, pick up on the switch quickly by watching and feeling the movements of more expert dancers around them, in addition to listening to the music.

Obviously there is more work to be done to provide an adequate account of the LNS dance system. However, Grim-Feinberg's identification of the 'phrase' as the unit of steps and body movements that are combined to make up the 'units' of dance of the awhuis, and that the phrases are consistently set to regular beats or counts, is a major step forward in understanding the structure of LNS dance and music. Further her discovery that every phrase is marked by a pause of one beat (on a count of "one and") in the body movements, but was not notated by Mosher in the music, is a second significant step toward understanding the structure of LNS dances. While the melodies that musicians play for the same dance may have certain musical differences, they must have cadence that fits the particular combination and sequence of phrases that comprise a given awhui

At this point the question arises of what use this analysis is for LNS purposes. We consider this question in the larger context of Thailand's government policy toward culture diversity and the involvement of the villagers in utilization of the work described here to further their interest in their own cultural conservation through organizing cultural learning centers.

### **Thai Policy and Local Cultural Conservation**

Current Thai government policies regarding cultural preservation and transmission of local cultures supports the ideal of culture learning centers and provides limited funding, as well as information and guide lines for organizing those centers. The Thai government's policy toward cultural diversity was pushed forward by several forces, but three main ones.<sup>32</sup> There has been a proliferation of NGO's

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<sup>32</sup> Prasit Leepreecha. "Knowledge and Myth about Hmong (Khuam Roo Lae Ma Ya Kkhati Gieow Gab Glum Chat Pan Hmong)," *Office of the National Cultural Commission under the Ministry of Culture*, 2003, accessed May

promoting localism in their emphasis on the value systems of cultures and local wisdom as an alternative approach to economic development. UNESCO and OECD introduced the life-long learning concept into Thai economic thinking especially during the rescue from the Asian financial crisis of the 1990's. The economic and governmental structural reforms of the 1999 constitution, led to decentralization of some political powers to local administrative bodies.

The Thai Prime Minister's statement in his 2008 inaugural speech to the Council of Ministers iterated a policy of support for "cultural learning spaces for the public," and for the "...promotion and preservation of Thai culture in all its aspects, including local traditions and wisdom."<sup>33</sup> In 2008 the National Culture Commission published a handbook entitled "Standard Principles and Practice of Cultural Learning Centers," which centers, "...can be a place or center containing knowledge and activities that relate to cultural life which has value for people in communities;...and emphasizes the transmission of knowledge and understanding of that particular cultural life to people in their community and to people outside their society."<sup>34</sup> National cultural learning centers would be funded by the government, but 'peoples' cultural learning centers are funded by local, personal, and private sources. An additional source of Thai government funds is channeled through the Ministry of Education's Office of the Commission on Basic Education (k-12), and then to the Provincial Educational Service Areas and on through administrative district levels to local schools as discretionary funds to be used by school principals to support local educational projects. For example, in 2009 the principal of Kha Bi Primary school decided

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25, 2009,

<http://www.culture.go.th/knowledge/ebook/nation/nation01.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Royal Thai Government, 2008 "Policy Statement of the Council Of Ministers: delivered by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to the National Assembly," 2008, accessed May, 25, 2009, [http://www.thaigov.go.th/multimedia/vana/Policy\\_St2551.pdf](http://www.thaigov.go.th/multimedia/vana/Policy_St2551.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Office of the National Cultural Commission, "Standard Principles and Implementation in Cultural Learning Center." *Office of the National Cultural Commission under the Ministry of Culture*, 2008, accessed May 25, 2009, <http://www.culture.go.th/knowledge/kumee/placeculture.pdf>

to allocate this discretionary budget to a culture conservation project described below. In sum, the movement toward cultural learning centers provides important opportunities to local communities and ethnic minority groups to create and show pride in their own local practice and culture.

### **Lahu Village Culture Conservation**

One village among the five that this project is involved with, early in the decade had collected artifacts toward establishing a village museum. That beginning readily morphed into strong interest in establishing culture learning centers as villagers' fears of cultural extinction heighten from the flood of new forms of media, internet technology, TV, CD's, DVD's, karaoke machines, cell phones with radio and TV, along with the long periods of absence of many of the young for schooling and wage work from social and cultural participation in village events. All portended imminent change. Paradoxically, however, they currently feel most threatened by growing presence and pressure of Christian proselytizing efforts by other Lahu, well financed and backed by foreign international resources.

The culture learning centers raise the question of the ways, if any, the project to record in video and analyze and conceptualize LahuNaShehleh dance and its music can contribute to their efforts. By the summer of 2009 the work of analysis of music and dance had reached a stage of development to allow us to try out the idea that Laban transcription of dance might make sense to the villagers and be useful in teaching and learning when expert dancers and musician, as well as the context of participatory learning, were not readily available to them. We visited the village in late summer of 2009 en route to the US from a conference in Yunnan China. We seized on the presence of one expert woman dancer, who happened that day not to be working in the fields, to show her a short example of our work and to interview her about its usefulness or uselessness to the villagers. First we showed NaDuLui /*na du<sup>45</sup> lui<sup>45</sup>*/, to her great pleasure, video clips of dancing during past New Year festivals in her own village. Sanghong then showed her a PDF of the Labanotation transcript of the same dance, explaining and demonstrating how the dance steps and movements were iconically represented in the Labanotation 'script.'



**Figure 21.** Lahu Dancer Views Labanotation (Video Clip)

NaDuLui quickly grasped the idea of representing the dance in Labanotation as well as video. She explained that the video and iconic transcription, rather than written words, could be understood and learned readily by villagers like her who could not read nor write. However, she emphasized that the video of the dance and audio of the music were needed with the Labanotation. The interview confirmed that Laban analysis could be meaningful to the learners of dance who did not have actual performing dancing experts to learn from and the actual contexts of dancing and musical events to participate in while learning.

After returning to our University, through cell phone conversations with the villagers we learned of another village venture with cultural transmission of dancing, this time in the local primary school at the initiative of the discerning school principal. Since the Thai government issued its policy, noted earlier, in support of local culture preservation, the policy has been implemented both through allocation of funds to local government units channeled through provincial governments and to local schools channeled through Provincial Educational Service Areas. The principal of the Kha Bi Primary school used these discretionary funds to hire a local Lahu woman expert dancer (who was already employed by the school for other services) and an expert Lahu male musician, to teach the children from first to sixth grade to dance LNS dance. Indeed the venture was so successful that in the following school year the Lahu musician planned to teach a group Lahu boys to play Lahu instruments for dancing, using four types of instruments used for dance music that already have been purchased. This elementary

school principal wisely respects the legitimacy of Lahu expertise in dance and music in her choice of instructors.

The Lahu children tried out their dancing and musical knowledge at New Years time in the dance circle under the eyes of older youths, parents, and elders of their own and other Lahu visiting villages. Village elders were especially impressed with the young students excitement with Lahu dance. To them it was remarkable to know their children actually were so interested in LNS dance and in continuing to dance, a heartfelt desire of LahuNaShehleh people.

### Conclusions

We found that the Lahu Na Shehleh practice of their ritual dance-complex is a political as well as a religious and medical activity. Performing the dance with its rituals sustains the identity of LNS. Not to dance is tantamount to changing religion and identity. We were told explicitly, by one of the villages' priests, that there would be no LNS, should people and households fail to practice the dance with its rituals. So understanding the technical structure of the dance and music performance, at a particular historical horizon, as well as the ritual and ceremonial contexts in which they occur is significant. The cultural complex in question, the importance of dance and its music and its accompanying ritual, goes beyond being critical to LNS villagers' sense of their own identity. In addition, the recurrent rituals associated with the dance and music renew and strengthen social solidarity among households in each LNS village, as well as in the network of households among the many LNS villages across Northern Thailand.

Dancing has for centuries been a central collective religious activity among the Lahu as among many other minorities in Southwestern China and Northern Southeast Asia.<sup>35, 36</sup> But dancing and its religious context are under great pressure to change, being

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<sup>35</sup> Anthony Walker, *Merit and the Millennium*.

<sup>36</sup> ShanShan Du, *"Chopsticks Only Work In Pairs": Gender Unity and Gender Equality Among The Lahu of Southwest China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

pushed toward extinction by schooling, missionaries,<sup>37</sup> state officials, and pulled by the magnetism of global popular culture, culture flows of new media, and the economics of tourism shows. Teens and youths, especially those away from the village for schooling and work, say by living away, often in cities, they are losing confidence in their Lahu dancing skills, while learning other forms of dance and playing guitars instead of the instruments traditionally used in the dance circle. These circumstance lend a sense of urgency to documenting LNS dancing in meticulous detail; to analyzing it comprehensively before its current historical form changes beyond historical retrieval; and to recording it in multiple media ways that would allow upcoming LNS generations to perform it, or to reshape it, if they so choose, as aesthetic and religious practice and performance.

Along with a brief introduction to who the LahuNaShehle are politically and ethnically and to the community context and the ceremonial context of dancing, we describe and show in video the dance and music event. One story in Part I is how two anthropologists, an ethnographer and a videographer, after long-term ethnography of the five LNS villages, were propelled into a study of aspects of Lahu cultural life, their dance and its music, for which they had no specialized preparation. They had to find ways to draw other experts into the study of the art and practice of dance and music, mainly in the form of material captured in video in distant villages in Northern Thailand and brought back to a university setting. The first part of this article focuses on the discovery of ways of joining together with specialists and experts in the study of music and dance, along with expert performers, to produce an historically accurate account of the dance and music of several Lahu villages.

In Part 2 of this article, we summarize the preliminary results of the ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology of their dance and its music, the LNS awhui. Developing a sound understanding of LNS conception and practice of the awhui was a primary objective and focus of the analysis. Understanding the technical structure of the dance and music performance, at a particular historical horizon, as well as the ritual and ceremonial contexts in which they occur is significant.

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<sup>37</sup> Yoichia Nishimoto, *Lahu Narratives of Inferiority: Christianity and Minority in Ethnic Power Relations* (Chiang Rai, Thailand: Center for Inter-Ethnic Studies, 2000).

Grim-Feinberg, our project ethnochoreologist, working with the Lahu dance consultant, Saenghong, at the University of Illinois to learn to dance the awhuis (LNS concept of a dance and its music) used Labanotation to analyze several hours of village dancing captured in video. They identified the unit of steps and body movements that are combined to make up an awhui, and that are consistently set to regular beats; i.e. cadence. Labeling the combination of steps and sequences “dance phrases,” Grim-Feinberg established that every dance phrase is marked by a pause of one beat at its end. Dances are made of different combinations and sequences of phrases. All phrases were found to be made up of combinations of steps from a set of ten possible steps. Grim-Feinberg and Saenghong have so far identified thirteen (13) phrases and sixteen (16) dances, or awhuis, based on combinations of steps drawn from those ten (10) steps. While the ethnomusicologist, Mosher, discovered earlier that the melodies that musicians play for the same dance may have musical differences, ethnochoreological analysis of the human movements of their dance, showed music must have cadence that fits the particular sequence of phrases and pauses that dancers hear as a given, particular awhui, the music that goes with the dance.

The theme of culture conservation fueled much of the project activity described here. So it is not merely a narrative of research for academic purposes, but a sampling of efforts to assist the villagers in their intentions and efforts to establish means for culture conservation. Thai Government policy toward conservation of cultural diversity began to change in 2008. Briefly we described a recent example of how that policy had stimulated a cultural conservation project through small discretionary school funding that engaged Lahu village experts in dance and music to teach elementary school-age Lahu children to dance and to play the music for dancing. We showed, in video, an example of the enthusiastic response of a village dancer to a sampling of our video and labanotation analysis, further confirming villagers’ interest in organizing a more permanent culture conservation establishment within the villages. While this flurry of current activity is no assurance of long-term support from the Thai State, it illustrates how quickly local communities will take up even small flows of resources for culture conservation enterprises when offered the opportunity. Yet, the history of development of this kind of enterprise in Thailand, as well as in other global locations, warns that much more effort and investment will be required to

design and establish a self-supporting organization to place culture conservation on sustainable grounds.<sup>38</sup>

The description of this enterprise and its teamwork demonstrated unquestionably that video filming alone is not sufficient for historical documentation of such cultural phenomena. Too much context and meaning is unavailable in a video record alone. A reliable and readily validated system for the close analysis of video is necessary along with native interpretation, such as that provided by native expert dance consultants. And as well, the ethnography of the cultural context in which the dance and music are practiced and from which they derived their cultural meaning and significance must be provided. We suggest the approach and measures used here may be used by other scholars, as well as anthropological ethnographers, who are not trained to study cultural activities such as dance and music, in order to translate the culture complexes threatened with irrevocable change, into scholarly terms that document its historical existence.

As a scholarly study, this brief analysis of LNS dance and its music is only the first step toward entering the arena of issues and theories of dance and music of 'unwritten' and 'unnotated' art forms. This particular study provides a groundwork of precise data that hopefully will contribute to comparative studies of the arts of dance and music of other highland minorities in Northern Thailand, to add to the already substantial scholarship on political, economic, and religious issues and theories concerning the highlanders of Thailand.

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<sup>38</sup> Joy Hendry, *Reclaiming Culture: Indigenous People and Self-Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).