

The Lahu Ethnic Group



Calabash is worshiped by the Lahus. There was a myth that “man comes from calabash” in the epic Mupamipa of the Lahus. The Lahus dance Lusheng (a reed-pipe wind instrument) dance at the festivals while the Lahus in Lancang County have “Calabash Festival”. The design composed of calabash and lace trimmings of blouse represents the origin of human and of the Lahus’ ancestors, and symbolizes the beauty of females, the prosperity in population and a happy life.

The environment and the population

The Lahus have a population of 453 705, who are mainly distributed in the Lancang River Valley and the mountain areas in the lower reaches of the Yuanjiang River, namely the counties of Lancang, Menglian, Shuangjiang and others in the five prefectures of Simao, Lincang, Xishuangbanna, Honghe and Yuxi.

The Lahus live under subtropical area, where there stand many mountains and rivers run through this area. The climate friendly, this area has plenty of rainfall and a rich storage of animals and plant lives. The Lahus used to live by collecting and hunting, later on they transformed to flash-and-burn agriculture in mountain areas. The staple crops include: rice, maize, wheat, buckwheat, and millet. Collecting and hunting are also important complementary sources of income.



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The historical origin—A history of constant moving to the south

The Lahus are the offspring of the ancient Di-Qiang clan. They moved from the southeast Sichuan to Yunan in the Spring and Autumn Period, east and middle Yunnan in the two Han Dynasties, Dali area from the Three-Kingdom Period to the Tang Dynasty. They kept moving to the south in the two main streams in Song and Yuan Dynasty, west stream moving into Lincang area from Dali; the east stream into Xishuangbanna, Simao through Mt. Ailao and Mt. Wuliang. The distribution of the Lahus first took shape in the Qing Dynasty.

The Lahus were once called “Guocuoman” in the history book New Tang Book-Nanman, and some Chinese-written documents in modern times also called them Guocong, Guzong, Kucong, etc. Apart from many names given by other peoples, they call themselves Lahu, or Guocuo. Lahu mean the tiger-hunting people, and Guocuo means mountaineers. In 1952, according to the will of the Lahus, the government officially granted this name for this people.

The subgroups and the languages

The Lahus in Yunnan call themselves Lahu'na, Lahu'xi, or Lahu'pu, and the Lahus are accordingly divided into three branches. Na, Xi, and Pu respectively mean black, yellow and white. Therefore they are also called black Lahus, yellow Lahus and white Lahus.

The Lahu language, along with Yi language, Naxi language, and Hani language, belongs to Yi language branch of the Tibetan-Burma language group of the Chinese-Tibetan language family. In early 20th century, foreign missionaries created Lahu language based on Roman alphabets. In 1957, a unified standardized Pinyin language on the basis of the existing language, which has been widely applied in education, broadcasting and in publications.

The featured housing—The thatch cottage and Divine Woods

Some Lahus still did not settle down in the Qing Dynasty. They began to form a stable settlement in 19th century, gathering as clans. Tiled houses are found in some areas, but there are more thatch cottages. There are two types of houses: floor-standing houses and stake-standing houses. The latter type has bedrooms and guest rooms on the upper storey, with a fireplace in the middle of the guest room for heating and cooking. The fire in the fireplace keeps on throughout the year. It is also where the whole family spend their time together, cooking, meeting guests, chatting, and sleeping, etc. The lower is for the storey of the sundries and livestock. There is usually a balcony extending out of the floor for drying grains.

The Lahus' villages are mostly built in thick woods or bamboo forests on hill sides, with a gate and sharpened bamboo stakes surrounding as fences. There are usually thick woods over the villages, which are deemed divine in the eyes of the Lahus. No felling is allowed. Many villages conduct stream water through bamboo tubes, and they develop gardens and fields near their villages. A square stands somewhere in a village, with a divine pole standing in the middle of the square. People set up New Year Pole on the square and dance when they celebrate the Kuo Festival according to Lahu calendar.



The costumes and ornaments—the legends recorded on clothes

The Lahus consider black as beautiful. Ancient Lahu'nas wore long robes, while Lahu'xis wore short shirts and skirts. In modern times, a Lahu man wears a black scarf or an edgeless round black hat, a black collarless jacket buttoned on the right side or a jacket with buttons down the front, baggy wide black trousers. A Lahu woman binds her legs with black cloth stripes, and long robes with high vents, a scarf long enough to reach the waist, and baggy wide trousers.

The traditional clothes of the Lahus have many beautiful stories. One of them goes: The ancestor of the Lahus sneaked into a calabash for refuge at the time of the ancient Flood time. A god hurt him on the head unconsciously when chopping calabashes, so he took off his girdle and bound the wounded Lahu on the head. That's why all Lahus wear scarves today. The three obvious red patterned-stripes are to memorialize those who died in the three major wars in their moving history. And the pattern of dog teeth has to do with the dog totemism of this people.

The dietetic customs—the bamboo-tube rice and the bamboo-tube tea

The Lahus use bamboo tubes to cook, which not only preserved the original taste of the food, but also added to a unique bamboo flavor. They also make tea in bamboo tubes. After baking the tea leaves, put them into a bamboo tube and press them; then put the bamboo tube near the fireplace to roast it to dry; when it's dry, cut the tube and take out the tea. That's bamboo tube tea, with a great combination of tea and bamboo flavor.

The marriage and family—survivals of extended families

The Lahu youngsters are free to date on their own choices. They date their partners and visit neighboring villages in slack season. They set up bonfires and play the Lusheng (a Chinese wind musical instrument), sing songs and play the harmonica to express their affection. Some also grab the scarves or bags of others to sound out if they also have the same feeling. The paring marriage system between the moieties that was long observed in the past has been replaced by the monogamy system.

Remains of the Great-Family system are still seen by the mid-20th century. The grand corridor-like bamboo buildings, also known as “Bankao”, still exist in the south reach of Lancang River. This kind of Bankao buildings measures over 300 square meters, divided into many smaller rooms by fences. Members of this great family live together, numbering from 40s up to several hundreds. Apart from the public productive tools, each individual family has a fireplace of their own, acting as an independent productive unit.

The calabash culture—Calabash Festival and Calabash Dance



The Lahus have a close bond with calabashes not only in their life but also in their folk stories. It is recorded in the long epic Mupamipa that the ancestor of the Lahus came out of a calabash, therefore, the Lahus have calabash as their symbolic image. In 1995, the Lancang Lahu Autonomous County officially appointed every Lunar October 15th as the Apeng Alongni Day, namely the Calabash Festival.

Lusheng made of calabashes are the favorite musical instrument of the Lahus. A good Lusheng player is

more likely to obtain the love of girls. They are also fond of Lusheng Dance. They dance automatically when hearing the music of Lusheng. Men and women hold hands together, forming a circle, leaning forward and backward, crouching and jumping, and the audience's eyes are dazed by such exciting dances.

The religion—Animism and Esha Worship

The Lahus believe in the Big Vehicle Buddhism and the ancient religion of Animism. A few Lahus follow Christianity or Roman Catholic. They conduct many forms of sacrifice-offering ceremonies before many activities, in hope for the favor of all gods and spirits. Those professional priests are called Mobas, most of whom are very well learnt about the tradition and culture of this people, some even know herbal medicine, astronomy and calendar well. They are highly respected by the Lahu people.

The Esha worship is found in the Lahus alone. Esha does not have any given image; instead, it has a huge stone or an aged tree as its symbol, enshrined in the forbidden zone behind the villages. Esha is considered as "the Great god" who created the universe and human kind, and who rules over all things. Its image can be seen in many aspects of the Lahu tradition and culture.