

A NOTE ON THE LITERATURE ON THE
LAHU SHEHLEH AND LAHU NA OF
NORTHERN THAILAND¹

by

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Some of the various groups of Lahu (e.g. Lahu Viya, —Gulao, Ale, —Lalou, —Adawaga, —Nam Pehn, —Bala, —Shehleh) are designated by others as well as by the groups themselves according to the predominant colour in the dress of their womenfolk: Lahu Na (Black Lahu), —Nyi (Red—), —Shi (Yellow—), and —Hpu (White—).² Although some Black Lahu maintain rather contemptuously that some group names are derived from the notion that the Red and Yellow Lahu would look 'red' and 'yellow' respectively, the former explanation seems to be more sound. According to Young 'nyi' signifies 'raw' rather than 'red'; whereas Walker's Lahu Nyi informants regard the reddish colour of their clothes as the reason and justification for the designation of their group.³ For the Lahu of Thailand the grouping is somewhat uncertain; let us look briefly at both the groups concerned.

The *Lahu Shehleh*⁴ live in Northern Thailand in 27 villages scattered over 5 provinces. With a few thousand members in Burma⁵ and Thailand they are a smaller group within the Lahu (who are

1) The field data for this article were collected during 1967. The author visited 26 villages of the Shehleh and 5 of the Na. (In 1968/9 he visited the other two villages of Lahu Na. The data obtained on these visits are not included in this article). He is indebted to the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg (Germany) for financing his research, to the National Research Council (Bangkok) and the Tribal Research Centre (Chiangmai) for helpful assistance in preparing and performing his field-work, and to other Thai organizations and individuals.

2) The Lahu Hpu are not referred to in the ethnographical literature. Two of their four villages in Thailand are to be found in Chiangrai Province, close to the Laotian border.

3) Young, 1966 : 9; Walker, 1967 : 4.

4) Informants could give precise explanations neither for 'Lahu' nor for 'Shehleh'.

5) Personal communication of H. Young and statements of some Shehleh.

supposed to number about 220,000⁶); in Thailand, however, they number 3,500 and are second only to the Lahu Nyi. On the other hand only some 400 *Lahu Na* (Meuneu)⁷ live in Thailand, whereas in Burma and China they form the largest group among the Lahu. In Thailand they are in the majority in two villages and in five others their number is inferior to the other Lahu groups. The Shehlehs are called by their Thai (and Shan) neighbours *Mussö Dam*⁸, a designation which can lead the superficial observer to conclude that they are identical with the Lahu Na known in the ethnographical literature.⁹ The Thai call them *Mussö Dam* because of their clothing; but they do not call themselves Lahu Na—as would correspond to *Mussö Dam*—but Lahu Shehlehs¹⁰.

Nothing could be more puzzling. Nowadays they are the only group of the Lahu in Thailand whose members wear black dress; the Lahu Na, being Christians, dress in the Thai or European way wearing their traditional black dress only at rare festive occasions which their baptism permits. They are called by the Thai, in general and mistakenly, *Mussö Daeng*¹¹, since their women's dress resembles that of the Lahu Nyi. Now, fashion or colour of the dress does not warrant any certainty if considered as the sole criterion for classification. To a Thai neighbour this may be of no importance, but it should be fundamental to an anthropologist to determine *who* is to be regarded as Lahu Nyi, Na, or Shehlehs. The following discussion will consider whether enough attention was devoted to this problem as far as Lahu Na and Lahu Shehlehs are concerned.

Let us outline the contributions of Young and Jones which represent the present state of knowledge and then confront them with our findings. Both authors offer the first useful information on the

6) LeBar, 1964 : 30.

7) 'Na' means 'black' and 'Meuneu' 'land-northern' (from the Shan); according to Young, 1966 : 9.

8) Literally, 'hunters-black' (Shan/Thai).

9) cf. Telford, 1937; LeBar, 1964.

10) Some of the Shehlehs are inclined to call themselves 'Na' in front of strangers, because they are called by the Thai 'Mussö Dam'. They do so willingly as the Na are given highest prestige among the Lahu. But when questioned more thoroughly, the Shehlehs distinguish themselves from the Lahu Na who, the Shehlehs believe, belong to a different Lahu group.

11) Literally, 'hunters-red' (Shan/Thai).

Lahu in Thailand; the contributions of their predecessors are less important¹². Young is looked upon as an expert for the Lahu; he was born in a Lahu Na village in Yunnan, the son of an American Baptist missionary, and lived among the Lahu for many years. He knows the language thoroughly. Jones stayed among the Lahu mainly in the Fang area of Chiangmai Province engaged in pre-doctoral research during 1964-66 while a graduate student at Cornell University. Young's book on the hill tribes of Northern Thailand is a valuable source of information and has become a basis for discussion for all anthropological researchers working in Thailand. During 1959 Young collected data in the field and in 1961 he described, among others, four Lahu groups: Lahu Na and Nyi, Lahu Shehle and Shi. It is not necessary to be acquainted with the author to understand his sympathy for a particular group; that is, for 'his' Lahu Na, whom he considers the 'pure Lahu' from whom the other Lahu split off¹³.

The number of the Lahu Na villages are 'few', 'some 10 known', once '25' and 'their total population 3,000'¹⁴. He maintains these 'true Lahu Na 'should not be confused with the 'so-called, Mussuh Dam', the Shehle.¹⁵ The Lahu Na have immigrated into Thailand from Laos and Burma. They have no difficulties whatsoever with the dialect of the Nyi, but do with that of the Shehle. 'With very few exceptions, Thailand's Lahu Nyi and Lahu Na are theistic animists. The exceptions are Christians from Burma numbering less than 200 people'¹⁶. In describing the religious attitudes and ceremonies, economic activities, and the political, social and religious organization¹⁷ he often does not make it clear which group he is

12) cf. Young, 1966 and Jones, 1967; a valuable source on the Lahu in Burma: Telford, 1937, cf. bibliographies of Embree-Dotson, 1950 and LeBar, 1964. A valuable linguistic contribution is Matisoff, 1967 (not taken into account in this note) who did research from 1964 to 1966 mainly in the Chiangdao area of Chiangmai Province. Since 1966 Walker has been with the Lahu Nyi engaged in anthropological research. The father of G. Young, Harold, intends to publish an autobiography on his missionary efforts among the Lahu in Burma and China.

13) He reflects here theories of his father and uncle, both of whom did research on this problem.

14) Young, 1966 : 9, 10, 89. In the 4th edition he writes : "2000 Lahu Na" (1969 : 10) and "3000 Lahu Na" (1969 : 89).

15) Young, 1966 : 9f.

16) Young, 1966 : 10.

17) Young, 1966 : 10a.f.

describing, the Nyi or Na or both.¹⁸ Furthermore, he does not mention the characteristic differences between the Christians and the animists. Young cannot find the same sympathy for the Shehleh: 'They are less energetic and slower-moving than other Lahu and are not as attractive physically'¹⁹. 'Women shave the front of their heads... that it is difficult to distinguish them from the men and boys'²⁰. He supposes they called themselves in earlier times Na Muey²¹, but after coming to Thailand some 40 years ago they adopted the Lahu Nyi designation 'Shehleh'²². Besides, they have 'undergone a number of changes from their original customs through the influence of the Lahu Nyi in Thailand'²³. Though 'theistic animists' like the Nyi they do not give candle-burning the same importance as the Nyi do²⁴ and have practically discontinued the sabbatical dances.

In their 14 villages the 2,200 Shehleh live separated from the outside world; Young counts them 'among Thailand's most backward hill people'²⁵. They have no intermarriage with the other tribes, and among themselves may practice 'polygamy'²⁶—an important personality may have up to three wives.

It is evident that Young is not as certain in his discussion of the Shehleh as he is for the Nyi and Na. Jones, on his part, solves the problem in an elegant manner: 'Young has a section on Lahu Shelleh, which he says are found in Thailand, but informants in three different Black Lahu villages in Thailand stated that Shelleh is the Red Lahu name for the Black Lahu'²⁷. As he describes in his study on variation mainly the 'Black Lahu'²⁸ information on the Shehleh should be under the heading 'Black Lahu'. In beginning his study Jones states that 'The limits of the Lahu population are unknown.

18) As when stating the animists would call themselves 'peh tu pa' beeswax burners (1966 : 11).

19) Young, 1966 : 21.

20) Young, 1966 : 21.

21) Young, 1966 : 20; he also calls them Na Mwe (1966 : 10.)

22) Young, 1966 : 20.

23) Young, 1966 : 20.

24) Young, 1966 : 20.

25) Young, 1966 : 23.

26) Young, 1966 : 22.

27) Jones, 1967 : 16; cf. also footnote 10.

28) In the glossary Jones translates 'Black Lahu' as 'Lahu Na' (1967 : 190).

Thus, the findings of this study can only be suggestive²⁹. The main aim of his study is 'to describe the range of cultural variation among six villages of a single ethnic group—the Lahu'³⁰. He reports the situation encountered in a village of the Black Lahu near Fang and then relates his findings to those in five other villages³¹ using 65 selected characteristics³² in indicating variation or commonness

As first observer he reports, for example, 'spirit-groups', units of several households for the celebration of common religious ceremonies which are conducted in the house of that unit wherein is the house-altar³³. The members of a group are in general linked through kinship relations³⁴, but a household may join any 'spirit-group'³⁵ and membership does not depend on being of a particular descent-group. Jones could not find 'patrilineal surnames'³⁶ or descent groups—with the exception of Tak, where they exist only through intermarriages with members of other ethnic groups. He states: 'the kinship system . . . is bilateral'³⁷.

The religious ceremonies held by the 'spirit-groups' are conducted by a 'spirit-doctor' or a 'priest', not by ordinary villagers. The 'spirit-doctor' is the most 'powerful man'³⁸, he has more importance than the 'priest'³⁹, he is 'the keeper of Lahu customs'⁴⁰. The villagers work in his fields, in those of the 'priest' and of the headman in exchange for services rendered by these officials⁴¹. Although the village headman is the political representative of his village he has a weaker position than the officials of the religious sphere who enjoy

29) Jones, 1967 : 15.

30) Jones, 1967 : 5f.

31) Jones, 1967 : 115 a.f. Two of these villages are inhabited by Red Lahu : we shall not include them in the following and we first shall omit the Christian village as well.

32) Some of the weaknesses of his comparison he knows himself (1967 : 124).

33) Jones, 1967 : 65.

34) Jones, 1967 : 65 a.f.

35) Jones, 1967 : 65; cf. also 145.

36) Jones, 1967 : 134.

37) Jones, 1967 : 182, 118; cf. also 145.

38) Jones, 1967 : 75.

39) Jones, 1967 : 111, 120; is at least valid for Fang.

40) Jones, 1967 : 111.

41) Jones, 1967 : 121.

the benefit of the 'lack of differentiation between the religious and the political aspects of a role'⁴². Obviously, each male villager can acquire one of these positions irrespective of his descent⁴³.

The villages of the Black Lahu described by Jones have only one communal centre, a circular dancing-ground, which is surrounded, generally, by planks. In this ground candles are burned during some of the religious ceremonies and the men dance⁴⁴. The dancing has a religious significance; in dancing 'they gain merits'⁴⁵. Jones asserts among the Lahu 'a belief in a high god'⁴⁶, but nevertheless he does not fail to recognize that they also believe 'in a large number of spirits'⁴⁷. In his scheme for comparison between the villages he places belief in an animistic high god as equivalent to the Chiengdao Black Lahu's belief in the Christian God⁴⁸, for he believes these Christian Lahu to be members of the same group as the above-mentioned non-Christian Black Lahu of Thailand and that differences derive only from recent conversion.

Our description of Young's and Jones' contributions is fragmentary. For our purposes, however, no comprehensive review need be attempted, but only relevant parts investigated. It appears that Young does not know the number of villages inhabited by the Lahu Na. The actual number, generously estimated, may be up to seven, including those in which majorities from other Lahu groups live together with Lahu Na minorities. The Lahu Na are migrants from Burma and China and settled down in Thailand some 15 years ago. They are all Christians like most of the Shi and Nyi minority in contrast to the Shehleh and Nyi of Thailand. Therefore, Young's description of Lahu Na animists, of their religious ceremonies, economic activities and such, while of historical interest, is for Thailand's Lahu Na antiquated and not to the point. On the other hand, the Shehleh of Thailand are non-Christians. They are 'peh tu pa', beeswax burners,

42) Jones, 1967: 72.

43) Jones, 1967: 77; cf. also 134.

44) Jones, 1967: 95.

45) Jones, 1967: 114.

46) Jones, 1967: 121.

47) Jones, 1967: 121.

48) Jones, 1967: 124.

and differ in this respect from the Na whose ancestors were 'sang tu pa', joss-stick burners. As Young states, this is by no means the only difference between the Shehleh and the Na.

The Shehleh live in Thailand in 27 villages⁴⁹, not in 14; they constitute (numbering 3,500) a far larger group in Thailand than the Na, who in 1959 did not exceed 200 persons—by no means 3,000 (!). Young himself is too familiar with these Christians, who partly settled down in Thailand on his suggestion, to succumb to such an erroneous estimate. The Shehleh formerly called themselves Na Muey, according to Young; actually, we find a descendent group—numerically the strongest⁵⁰—called Na Meu. They have adopted the term 'Shehleh', as informants stated to this writer, from the Nyi, from whom they borrowed various of the minor ceremonies and the position of 'pawku'⁵¹, which reminds us of a shaman. They did not curtail the 'sabbatical dances', for they did not dance at the moon-phases, whereas the Nyi and Na do or did. The influence of the Nyi on the vast majority of the Shehleh is not as pervasive as Young suggests. He received his information on this subject solely from a village near Mae Taeng, Chiangmai Province, one among four villages⁵² of the Shehleh in Thailand exposed to the influence of the surrounding Nyi to a high degree. There, through intermarriages and other factors the Nyi style was imitated both in dress and in ceremonies. Young obviously also got his information on the possibility to marry several wives from the headman of this village⁵³. This headman happens to be the only one among Thailand's Shehleh⁵⁴ who has a wife and a concubine whom he treats and regards as a 'wife' for many years, a 'wife' acquired without the necessary marriage rituals being performed, a connection not permitted by social norms. Young, basing himself on a single informant, has taken the exception for the rule.

49) At the time of Young's censuses there were only 18 villages of the Shehleh in Thailand. In 1968 a new village was founded; so the actual number is 28.

50) Besides Hpakho, Gawmu, Awhe, and Malaw.

51) cf. Young, 1966: 11, 16-18.

52) Consisting a total of 40 of the 601 houses of the Shehleh in Thailand (=6.5%).

53) According to this headman, he met and informed Young once in Chiangmai.

54) The author took village-censuses and statistics on the house-holds for all Shehleh in Thailand (601 houses).

Jones presents much information on 'priests', 'spirit-groups' and dancing-grounds, for example, lacking in Young's reports. Young's aim, however, to give a concise description, explains some of the omissions; in addition, we are indebted to him for the first report on the Shehle. Jones' long stay among the Lahu as a researcher obliges and enables us to apply another standard in appreciating his contribution. He acknowledges only three groups of Lahu in Thailand: Yellow, Red, and Black--the Shehle being 'black' as well. If he is correct, Young's contribution on the Shehle would be superfluous, having described the group already in the section on the Na. Yet Jones on his part confesses 'the limits of the Lahu population are unknown', thus retreating from his stand.

According to our experience the 'Black Lahu' of the villages visited by Jones are Lahu Shehle; only the Christian village is inhabited by Lahu Na⁵⁵. The Shehle most likely presented themselves to Jones as being Na⁵⁶. His research among the Christian Lahu (Na) suffers from the fact that he probably did not enquire into the data before Christianization. Had he investigated, he would have been sceptical as to whether these Christians could be equated to the 'Black Lahu' in the three other villages. To affirm that after conversion they differ from the non-Christians is a commonplace. It is more important to find out whether the cultural patterns encountered in the three non-Christian villages are identical to those of the non-Christian ancestors of the Christians of Chiengdao. Our own research indicates that this is not true in regard to many cultural features. Briefly, then, a catalogue of the traditional differences that point to the differentiation between the groups⁵⁷:

55) The author also visited these four villages. In three there lived, according to their own assertions (and those of the Shehle in other villages, who were connected with the inhabitants of the three villages through kin relationships), Shehle and in one village Christian Lahu Na with minorities from other groups (Lahu Nyi,-Viya,-Gulao,-Shi as well as Karen, Lisu and formerly Chinese and Kachin; sons of villagers live in Burma, Laos, China, and Taiwan).

56) Their motive: cf. footnote 10. As Jones indicates (1967: 16), informants from three villages had postulated the identity between 'Shehle' and 'Black Lahu' it is assumed that the Christian Lahu Na did not do so. They emphasized the differences between Na and Shehle, when interviewed by the author.

57) This catalogue advances only a selection.

- 1) Dress; hairstyle; dialect.
- 2) No 'pawkhu', no 'priest', no 'spirit-groups' with the Na, no permanent dancing-ground; the Shehleh may dance each day, the Na on rare occasions; days of rest; disposal of the dead; religious ceremonies of the Na influenced by the Chinese, those of the Shehleh by the Shan.
- 3) Kinship terms; marriage regulations, period of service by the bridegroom with parents-in-law.
- 4) Distribution of inheritance; fines and allotment thereof.
- 5) Ambivalent avoidance, mutual ignorance of the peculiarities of each other.

We cannot elaborate on these differences here. Let us proceed to a further discussion of Jones' thesis. The membership of the 'spirit-groups' described by him, contrary to his assertions, is connected to the membership of a certain descent-group, that is, Na Meu and Hpakho households cannot belong to *one* 'spirit-group'. Thus we have patrilineal descent-groups whose members perform religious ceremonies in different manners⁵⁸. The common ceremonies of a village are conducted by the 'priest'. *He* is the keeper of customs, the most important man in the village, and not the 'spirit-doctor', as Jones thinks, who may perform only the minor household ceremonies⁵⁹. Jones is here, and this applies also to his village near Fang, prey to erroneous information. Furthermore the 'priest's' and the headman's office is restricted to those who (or whose wives) are of such descent.

Jones states, following Telford and Young, 'a belief in a high god' within the Lahu which harmonizes with that in a 'great number of spirits'. In our opinion it seems to indicate that this 'Guisha', the creator-god, is an unintentional construction of the Christian missionaries. For 'Guisha' is used in many Lahu myths as an abbreviation of 'gui ma' and 'sha ma', a male and a female supernatural being who jointly created the world⁶⁰. Certainly, the Guisha-

58) The Na Meu kill, for example, a female pig and do not dance in a certain ceremony, the Hpakho kill a male one and dance.

59) The 'spirit-doctors' are paid generally with opium; most of them are smokers, because only smokers dare to challenge the spirits.

60) cf. Spielmann, 1968; more detailed research is necessary.

concept is not to be equalled with the Christian God-concept, as Jones does in his comparison.

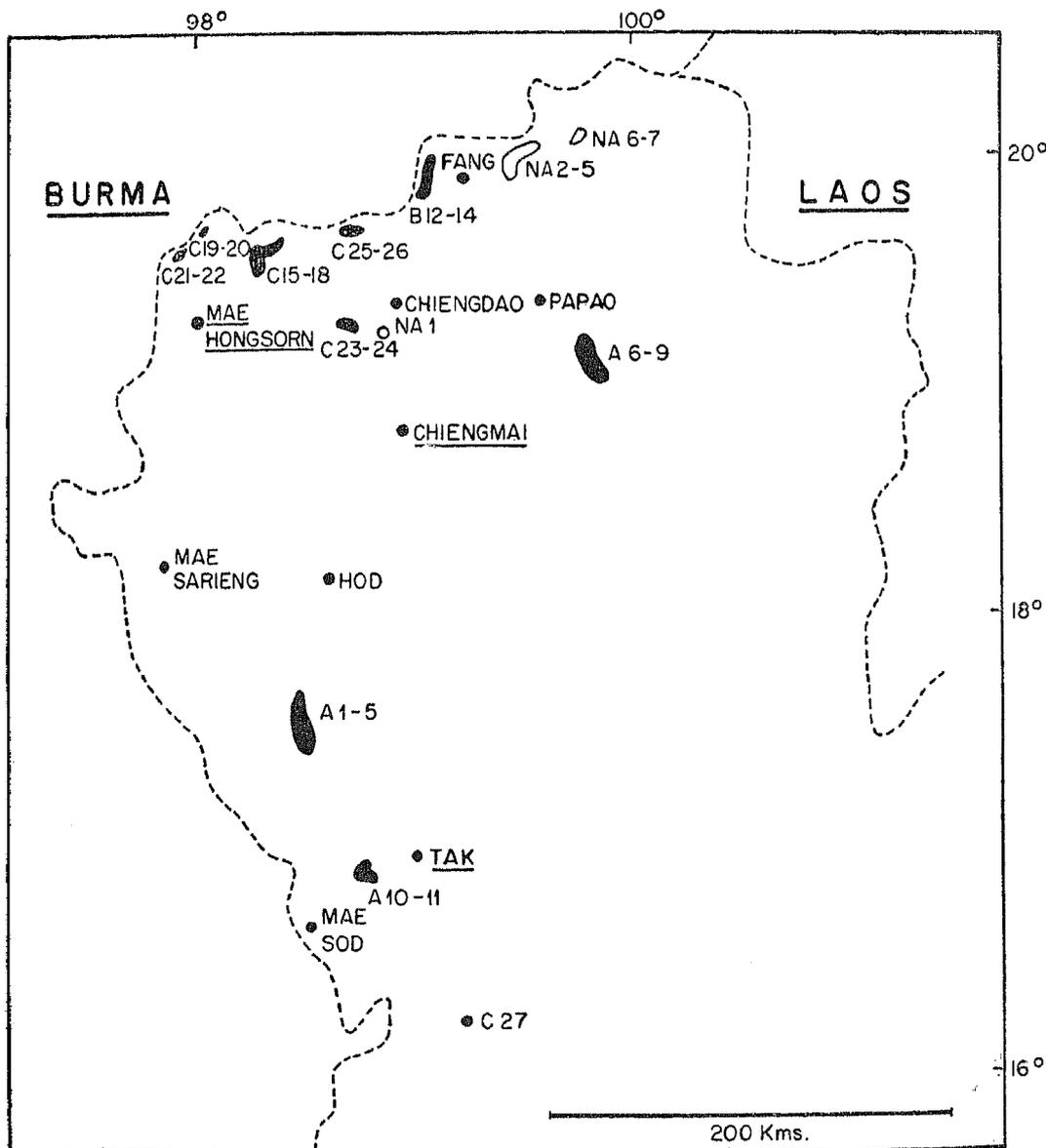
Once more it should be stressed here that Jones' statements on the non-Christian Lahu in Thailand fit in with the Shehle, but not with the Christian *and* non-Christian Lahu Na; his description of the Christian Black Lahu is valid only for the Lahu Na.

Conclusion : Our criticism *eo ipso* has been as fragmentary as our review. It is to be pointed out that the Shehle are neither so 'reddish' as Young believes nor so 'black' as Jones states, but they are Shehle, a sub-group of the Lahu. To determine whether they were (more than 120 years ago) still Lahu 'Na', is beyond our intent here, and the research to hand does not offer a solution to this problem. The two contributions of Young and Jones are to be considered critically; much erroneous information and gaps in the material presented could have been avoided by more thorough research. In view of the scarce literature on the Lahu, however, we are grateful for these contributions. To add to the prevailing confusion on 'red and black', the Christian Lahu Na of Thailand live in some villages together with Christian Lahu Nyi, who affirm they are Na like the other villagers⁶¹. Yet their traditional dress, kinship terms, historical movements and history of conversion, in addition to other factors, reveal their appertaining to the Nyi. The motive of their false assertion may be that the Nyi are refractory in the eyes of Thai officials, since Pawkhu Luang in Burma called the Nyi to unity⁶² and acted in Burma in favour of the Burmese against the Shan rebels. The Christian Nyi want to have friendly connections with the Thai government and moreover the Christian Lahu Na of Burma are pro-Shan, the Christian Lahu Nyi also keep apart from Pawkhu Luang. They take the 'Christian white lie' and turn themselves 'black'. From all this, then, Lahu appear inclined to dislike their identity and observers do not know how to classify them.

61) cf. Young, 1966, the photos of the Lahu Nyi girl. The father of this girl asserts they are Lahu Na.

62) cf. Young, 1966 : 11, 19,

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Legend :

Lahu Shehleh

A 1-5	= 5 villages in Amphur Omkoi, Chiangmai Province	142 houses
A 6-9	= 4 villages in Amphur Wiang Papao, Chiengrai Province and in Amphur Chienghung, Lampang	99 houses
A 10-11	= 2 villages in Amphur Muang, Tak Province and in Amphur Mae Sod, Tak Province	97 houses
B 12-14	= 3 villages in Amphur Fang, Chiangmai Province	117 houses
C 15-18	= 4 villages in Amphur Muang, Mae Hongsorn Province	} 93 houses
C 19-22	= 4 villages in Amphur Muang, Mae Hongsorn Province	
C 23-24	= 2 villages in Amphur Mae Taeng, Chiangmai Province	15 houses
C 25-26	= 2 villages in Amphur Chiangdao, Chiangmai Province	18 houses
C 27	= 1 villages in Amphur Mae Sod, Tak Province	20 houses
	<u>27 villages</u>	<u>601 houses</u>

Lahu Na

NA 1	= 1 villages in Amphur Chiangdao, Chiangmai Province	31 houses
NA 2-5	= 4 villages in Amphur Fang, Chiangmai Province	40 houses
NA 6-7	= 2 villages in Amphur Mae Chan, Chiengrai Province	9 houses
	<u>7 villages</u>	<u>80 houses</u>

The author did not visit the villages C 27, NA 6, and NA 7.

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