



Wisdom Keepers' Stories

The following interview took place in a northern village of Thailand on February 28, 2001.

Lisu Shaman - Thailand

The Lisu are a northern tribal culture who believe in a spirit world. The creator spirit, Wu Sa, is over a host of other spirits, those that reside in the forest, the water, and even inanimate objects. Each village has an altar for honoring the spirits, particularly, the village guardian spirit. The shaman communicates to the spirit world to determine the cause of illnesses. They perform ceremonies that sometimes tie strings around the neck, arms, wrists, and legs of their patient. They look to see if the soul has left the body. In an exorcism, the shaman uses hot cooking fat and spits fire from his mouth.

LUANG MHO PHEE: LISU SHAMAN

Usu Village of Toong Ku (Chiang Mai province, Phrao district), Thailand

Every Lisu individual has seven female souls and nine male souls. A shaman has even more souls. One of the souls has to do with health and illness. If that soul leaves your body, you get sick. The shaman of the village is a vehicle or "horse" for the spirit. When the spirit mounts him, it makes him wildly shake. The shaman's helper must then talk to the spirit that is in the shaman's body. He will ask it to help someone who is sick, asking what is wrong and what can be done to treat it.

The shaman can pass his spirit to another person within the family, from one generation to another. He, with the confirmation of the spirits, will teach and give his spirit(s) to that person. It usually takes several weeks for the candidate to be prepared for the transmission. The person will appear crazy, shaking all of the time. When they get to the place where they want to place their hands and feet into the fire, they are ready. At this stage, they feel that the fire is cold. This is when the spirit is given to them.

I have five spirits that help me. You can tell this from my altar because it has five bowls. In these bowls are offerings to the five helping spirits and a separate offering to the ancestor spirit. The offerings may include honeycomb wax, flowers, and other sacred things. When the spirit comes into my body, I am able to help others. That is when I become an instrument of the spirits. I am able to walk on red hot metal and handle fire. We have a chant that is very powerful. When it is sung, I can simply point at a person and they will receive a spirit. Once I pointed at an eight-year-old girl. She disappeared in thin air. She was gone for eight days. Then we held a ceremony and asked the spirits to bring her back. When they returned her, she had no memory of what had happened.

One of the spirits is the tiger spirit. When it comes into you, it is very strong and makes you act like a tiger. You even growl loudly. This spirit protects the village and is very important.

We had a family last week that told me that their daughter adjusted the shelf on their altar so she could tend to it without bending over too much. After she did that, things started going wrong in the family. For example, the father went hunting and shot a pheasant with his rifle. When he went to retrieve it, the pheasant turned into a turtle. After that, the daughter disappeared and no one could find her. She didn't get lost in the jungle. She disappeared in her own village. We did a ceremony and found out that the



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spirits took her away. They were upset that she had tampered with their offerings.

I am the only shaman in my clan. My ancestors proclaimed that I would be the last one. It is a heavy responsibility. I must do this work for free. It is my job to help others. I have worked with some of the Akha shamans. They are women shamans. I once lost two cattle and went to one of their shamans. She held a ceremony and called forth the spirits. They told her where the cows were. I went there and found them.

I once saw the spirit of one of our mountains. It was a giant furry creature. People had been making promises to it and not fulfilling their obligations. He was upset. I tried to teach my people to give the mountain spirit the offerings it requires. There are male and female mountain spirits. You must offer things like rifles to the male spirit and offer love organs (carved phalluses) to the female spirits. If you don't do this, bad things can happen. We must provide them with good offerings to keep them happy.

I am not aware of what takes place with me when the spirit uses my body. I don't remember anything. I am told that the spirit makes me provide answers to the people who need help. Sometimes it tells me to stand on red hot metal plates. After doing that, I place my hot feet on the person's sick body. At other times I place hot oil in my mouth and blow it through a lit torch. This fire helps expel bad spirits from a person's house. These are the kind of things I do to help others.