2.1 The genetic position of Lahu.

The Lahu language is an important member of the Loloish (or Yi) branch of the Lolo-Burman (= Burmese-Lolo) subgroup of the vast Tibeto-Burman (TB) family, which comprises hundreds of languages spoken in Northeast India (Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura), the Himalayan region (Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Tibet), China both north (Sichuan) and south (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi) of the Yangtze, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

Lolo-Burman is one of at least six major divisions of the TB family, which, farflung and ramified as it is, is only part of a larger linguistic stock, Sino-Tibetan, which includes Chinese [see Benedict 1972, JAM in prep.].

The Lolo-Burman languages are characterized by the simplification of initial consonant clusters and the disappearance of most syllable-final consonantal contrasts, compensated for by a proliferation of vowels and tones. All these developments are carried much further in Loloish than in Burmish. The Loloish family itself may be subdivided further, with a consensus developing among Western scholars for a tripartite subgrouping into Northern, Central, and Southern Loloish [Burling 1967; Matisoff 1969a, 1972a, 1972b; Bradley 1979b; Wheatley 1977, 1985.] The name "lolo" still carries pejorative connotations to Chinese ears, and the term currently preferred is Yi, now written with a sanitized character which originally meant 'sacrificial vessel', instead of the previously used homophonous character 'barbarian.' In view of the cumbersome derived adjective in English ("Yi-ish"), I feel we would do better to retain the term "Loloish" for the whole family, and reserve Yi as a synonym for the "Northern Loloish" subgroup. At the Second International Loloish Conference (Lund, Sweden) in October 1986, the new term "Yi-pho" was suggested for the whole Loloish family. It remains to be seen whether this neonym will catch on, but the initial reaction of Chinese scholars seems quite favorable.

Lahu belongs with Lisu in the Central Loloish subgroup.

The etymology of the name Lahu remains obscure, though I have suggested [JAM 1969a] that the last syllable -hu is to be identified as a doublet of the element -su/-so that appears in the names of so many other TB groups (Bisu, Lisu, Moso, Nasu, Nosu, Tosu, etc.), which undoubtedly meant 'people; person' (cf. Written Burmese su '3rd person pronoun,' Lahu šu 'contrastive 3rd person pronoun'). Going a step further, I would like to relate all these forms to the word Lolo itself, setting up a proto-form *s-it with the meaning 'person; member of a community' (cf. Wr.Bs. it 'person'). The -u ~ -o variation is in evidence throughout this word-family -- in many parts of the Lahu-speaking area, including much of Yunnan, the name is pronounced Laho.

The Burmese exonym for the Lahu is Mou?-haōu, meaning 'hunter,' a tribute to the legendary caccatorial prowess of the Lahu people. This name was taken over by the Thai (Siamese muusao), and is romanized variously as Muhsur, Muho, Musser, Messur, etc. In China, the Lahu were formerly called Lo-hei, with the second character, meaning 'black,' perhaps having pejorative connotations. The modern Chinese name is Lahu, with the second character bearing the auspicious meaning 'blessing; bliss.'

2.2 Lahu Dialects and Cultural Subdivisions

The two Western scholars who have studied the question of Lahu dialec- tal/cultural subdivisions in greatest detail are Walker (1970b, 1974f) and
Bradley (1979a). There is a bewildering profusion of names for various "kinds of Lahu," some of them broad designations that subsume several subgroups, others quite specific and restricted in scope. The loose, egalitarian structure of Lahu society makes it highly "fissionable" -- if a group of people have a grievance, or decide to follow the lead of a restless, charismatic leader [Walker 1974e], there is nothing stopping them from picking up stakes and moving elsewhere, perhaps assuming a distinctive group label in the process. Such splits may be quite recent, so that the differentiation from other groups is more psychological and cultural than linguistic.

Walker (1970b, pp. 36-40) has collected 23 group-names from informants in Thailand, including 11 for groups living in Yunnan, 12 from Burma, 7 from Thailand, and 5 from Laos (with several groups represented in more than one country). In Thailand itself, all known Lahu communities fall into four major categories: Black Lahu (Lāhū-nā?), Red Lahu (Lāhū-nī), Yellow Lahu (Lāhū-šī), and Lahu Shehleh (Lāhū-šē-īē). (Color designations are commonly used to distinguish subgroups of SE Asian minority peoples, and in some cases may be shown to correlate with features of the women's dress. The meaning of šē-īē remains obscure.) Bradley (1979a) lists 15 subgroups of Black, 3 of Red, 3 of Shehleh, 7 of Yellow, 12 "divergent or unclassified," plus 2 non-Lahu groups who have "become" Lahu.

Greatly complicating the sorting out of the subdivisional nomenclature is the fact that many groups use a different name for themselves (their "autonym") from the name(s) they are called by others (their "exonyms") [see JAM 1985c]. In Thailand there is a striking lack of agreement from village to village as to just what differentiates "Black" from "Red," or either of these from "Shehleh." A text I tape-recorded in a Christian village that calls itself "Black" was declared to be "Red" by an animist village that also considers itself "Black." Contrariwise, a text recorded in this animist village was unanimously and hilariously described as "Shehleh" by the Christian village.

According to purely linguistic criteria, it is clear that Red Lahu and Lahu Shehleh are both extremely close to Black Lahu, and can be regarded as subdialects of the great Lāhū-nā? or Black Lahu stock that is the dominant Lahu group in China and Burma. It is Yellow Lahu that is drastically divergent from these, with significant tonal, consonantal, vocalic, lexical, and grammatical differences from the Black dialects. The Yellow Lahu (Lāhū-šī), sometimes known by the Thai exonym Kwi or Kui, may safely be assumed to have split off from the rest of the Lahu people at a relatively early date. (Interestingly enough, it is the Yellow Lahu who have been among the first to reach the shores of the U.S. A few YL refugees from Laos have been settled near Palo Alto, California. Hundreds more were adopted by a Mormon church group in Salt Lake City, but have since followed a Hmong leader and resettled themselves in Visalia, California.)
The Dictionary of Lahu

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