

## **CHAPTER V**

### **MOTHERS, MONEY AND MOBILITY: THE MEANINGS OF BEING FEMALE LAHU VENDORS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

So far we have seen the geographical mobility and social networks of the Lahu women who work as vendors. Through conversations I had with the vendors, they were able to look back at some of the hardships they have experienced in their lives. This chapter will highlight the meaning of the everyday practices of the Lahu vendors. By doing this, I aim to understand the dynamics of their situation and the ways in which they survive the hardships of life. This is the story of Lahu women who have struggled to adapt to a Lahu society undergoing change.

First, the life histories of the Lahu vendors I met will be described, in order to reveal their struggles. Occupational mobility is practiced especially by Lahu women in vulnerable situations, as it often helps them to survive such situations. Second, the meanings attached to their cash income will be highlighted. Through vending, they interpret cash income and use it in order to allow their household to follow the Lahu value system. Third, the meanings behind their trade, other than to generate cash income, will be explained. Vending is not only an opportunity for them to earn cash income, but also a way of creating a social space to interact with their friends. While vending may be popular among other Lahu women, some still regard it as just a temporary occupation and will change to other work if it becomes

available. Lastly, the beliefs of the Lahu vendors will be described, as these act as a support for them, helping them to continue their lives in terms of their work and mobility.

## **5.2 The Social Vulnerability and Occupational Mobility of Lahu Women**

### **5.2.1 Lahu Women and Social Vulnerability**

“Although most of these hill people feed themselves through their own production of rice and other grains, they have for years been involved in the sale of cash crops, livestock and labor. Some may even be so committed to a wage labor economy that they depend on cash for [the] purchase of rice.”  
(Benchaphun 1985:153)

In the highlands, agriculture has been the main source of cash income for Lahu villagers for decades; however, it is now difficult to depend too much on agriculture, since it is no longer profitable. Every year, the Lahu use the same land, as they are prohibited from claiming new land. As a result, the fertility of the fields decreases and they have to use more chemicals to keep the same levels of production. At the same time, the market price of agricultural produces is unstable, indeed, prices have had a tendency to decrease. When Na La cultivated maize in 2009, she sold it at three baht per kilo in the lowlands. Her profit was therefore two baht per kilo, since she had to pay one baht for the cost of transportation. The price was higher in 2008, when she made a profit of three baht per kilo. Not only has the price of maize made it unprofitable to cultivate, but the same has happened for cherries. Na Htaw could sell her cherries to a company at eight baht per kilo, but chose to sell them by herself at the local markets in Chiang Mai, then she can get about 20 baht per kilo. Furthermore, the wages from wage labor in the village are not enough to cover necessary household expenditure. Na Law once worked as a wage laborer in another villager's field; the

payment was 60 to 70 baht which she complained was not enough to cover her household expenses.

Therefore many villagers began to work outside the village. In Village A, many villagers work in Bangkok, as well as in Lampang where there is a factory that cans vegetables. This factory employs about one thousand workers, many of whom are Lahu, Akha and Palong. Many villagers from Village A work there, including the brother of Na Hkalaw and his family. They receive 1,000 baht per week, and get a holiday on Sunday. Na Yaw told me that the number of villagers from Village C who work outside the village is quite large; some work on construction sites in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, and some work on rubber plantations in southern Thailand. An increasing number of Lahu are also working in Taiwan, such as Na Fa's relatives. There used to be northern Thai employers who came to Village C to hire villagers as wage labor in the lowlands; if the villagers chose to stay in the lowlands for a period, there would be more work available for them.

Working outside the village is a phenomenon that has occurred not only among the men but also the women. Cholada (2001:83) states that since Lahu society has engaged in the cash economy, women have begun to migrate to the lowlands and take part in the market economy, as they know that here they can fulfill their role, to "make the household survive continuously" through money. While there are a number of work choices for the Lahu women, why do the Lahu vendors choose to sell in Chiang Mai?

Selling in Chiang Mai is quite profitable when compared to other cash income earning activities. They are able to start their business with a small amount of capital: economic, social and cultural, and can earn a good income. Though it is tiring to carry the heavy vegetables, they can sit and sell produce under an umbrella. They can also go home whenever they want, as there is no leader or boss who controls the vendors. Such things are attractive for the Lahu women, especially those in a vulnerable situation. The vulnerability of the Lahu women limits them in terms of their choice of cash income earning activity, and occurs for several reasons. One reason is age. Lahu women who are middle-aged or old find it difficult to work as wage laborers, as working under the sun for hours is too hard for them - they easily feel pain and suffer poor health; therefore, they prefer not to work in these jobs, and at the same time, they are not the target of the employers either. Vulnerability in terms of age is not only linked to physical problems, but is also about literacy. Most middle-aged or elderly Lahu women were born in Burma. A few of them received a formal education in Burma, but many were not able to access this due to economic and social problems in the household. Having migrated to Thailand, and being already married, they had almost no opportunity to receive a formal Thai education. Through interaction with the lowlanders, they have been able to develop a little of the northern Thai language, but seldom if ever read Thai. Vending is one of the few choices open to them, since it requires only a little conversation in Thai, and they can usually rely on those Lahu vendors who do speak Thai.

Marital status is another factor that accounts for their vulnerability. In the case of the Lahu vendors who are divorced, it is difficult for them to survive only on farming, since they used to rely on their ex-husband's social networks when using the

land and finding labor. Divorce has meant that they have lost these networks and thus have had to find alternative way to survive. At the same time, they now have to take full responsibility for maintaining their and their family's household. Marrying again has helped some of them, while others have chosen to move to look for work. Some Lahu vendors whose husbands are not in good health face similar difficulties.

### **5.2.2 The Changing Identities of the Female Lahu Vendors**

During my research, some vendors told me their stories of struggle, in vulnerable situations, before they started selling in Chiang Mai, and here I will outline three life histories in order to view the tactics employed to deal with these struggles. The first story is of Na La. She now lives in Village D and chose to re-marry after divorce from her first husband. The second story is of Na Tii, who now lives in Saraphi. She divorced her husband and chose to raise her daughter by herself. The third case is Na Hkalaw, who has not divorced her husband but has experienced difficulties due to his health problems.

#### *Na La*

Na La was born in Burma, where she married a Lahu Na man and lived in a village near Myikyina, in Kachin State. Because he was a Christian, she converted to Christianity also. When they had had three children, they decided to leave Burma and stay with her husband's siblings in Thailand, some of whom live in Village D and more of whom live in another village in Chiang Mai. She was the only one among ten of her siblings to migrate to Thailand. They built a house in Village D, but one day her husband left home to visit other villages and never returned - when their first son was seven years old. Later on, she received news that he had died, so she re-married

another man and moved to Village D. Actually, Na La's first husband had not died but re-married a Lahu Nyi woman in a village in Chiang Mai Province. Na La now has four children to take care of, but does not have own field to cultivate, as every available field is already occupied by other villagers. For fourteen years now living in Village D she has had to borrow other people's fields on a rotating basis. If she borrows one person's field, she asks another villager if she can borrow his or her field the next year. Since she has no relatives in Village D, she relies on her friends, such as Na Fa. After her fourth child had reached three years old, she became a vendor in order to earn cash for her daily expenses, and to send the children to school, depending very much on her friendship ties. Her husband now takes care of the field and their buffalo at home. She would like to move to a Lahu Nyi village in Maesuai District, where her friend lives, since there are still available fields there for her to cultivate. Na La's choice to remarry has helped, as she can now share the task of raising her children with her new husband.

### *Na Tii*

Na Tii was born in Burma as the eleventh of twelve children. Her mother is Lahu Na and her father is Chinese; he used to be in army while living in China. They moved from China to Burma after World War II, and she studied until the second year of junior high school level at a school in Lashio in Shan State, learning English and Burmese. Afterwards, she married a man whose father is Chinese and whose mother is Wa. When she was nineteen she migrated to Thailand with her husband, depending on his brother who lives in Wiang Pa Pao in Chiang Rai Province. After entering Thailand through Maesai, they first stayed at a village in Mae Faluang for a week and then moved to Wiang Pa Pao. In Burma, she had been well off, since her father was

the head of the village there and her husband had traded opium in the border area between Burma and China; therefore, she had not worked in the fields or had any other kind of job. She started working in the fields after she moved into the village in Wiang Pa Pao, borrowing her husband's brother's field, and she also joined a training project with twenty other women from different ethnic background. They sewed school costumes for a Japanese organization, which afterward sent the costumes to foreign countries<sup>82</sup>. Two years later, she got a job teaching Lahu to five policemen, having been introduced to them by a Wa man who used to teach them Wa. She stayed at the official police residence in Maejo and taught the men Lahu for three months. After this, they asked her to teach them Burmese as well, but her husband asked her to return home. When she was in Maejo, her husband moved to a village in Phrao, Chiang Mai Province, leaving their daughter with his father in Wiang Pa Pao. Na Tii was growing tired of her husband, who does not think of the family; he does not send money back from his work and likes to move wherever he wants. When he told them he wanted them to move back to their original village in Wiang Pa Pao, even though their daughter had moved school from Wiang Pa Pao to Phrao, she decided to divorce him. Afterwards, she started selling clothes, leaving her daughter in a dormitory for highland youths located in the city of Phrao.

“When living at the village in Phrao, I traded clothes with two friends. We first went to Keng Tung via Maesai. At the border, on the Thai side, we got a ‘passport’ (She used this word to mean a permit document, used to cross the border without a real passport). We could stay in Burma for seven days if we held it. From Tachileik to Keng Tung, we took a three hour drive by rented car. At Keng Tung, we bought clothes from acquaintances who are Lahu Na. Some were western clothes while most were Lahu dresses. Lahu dresses made in Burma are more beautiful than those made in Thailand. We did not have capital so we took the clothes first and paid when we sold

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<sup>82</sup> On this project, she received 80 baht per day from the Thai Government. The project is collaboration between the Thai Government and the Japanese organization. She cannot remember whether the organization is an NGO or not.

them. We stayed at a friend's house in Keng Tung for three days. Afterwards, we went back to Thailand but didn't go back home. We sold the clothes in many Lahu villages. We went to Fang, Mae Chem (districts in Chiang Mai), and Mae Hong Son as well. In each village, we stayed one or several nights at villagers' houses. The sales were good; we didn't go back home for about a month. At that time my daughter was staying in the dormitory."

After her daughter decided to study at a junior high school in Sansai, they moved there, where Na Tii got a job as a matron in a dormitory for highland youths for two years, owned by a Western NGO. She was introduced to this job by the matron of the dormitory where her daughter used to stay in Phrao. After her daughter entered vocational college in Chiang Mai, they moved to Saraphi. In Saraphi, she worked at a ceramics factory for less than a year; she was not comfortable with the job since the factory required her to work regularly but only paid 180 baht per day, so she felt she had no freedom. After she found out that Na Va, who used to live in the same village as her in Burma, was selling goods at Tonlamyai Market, she left the factory and started work as a vendor. Looking back over her career, she expressed her feelings with a smile: "Going back and forth...This is my life. I have experienced many things in this life. I have had a hard time."

In Thailand, she only has her niece's household close to her, as her other siblings and relatives are now all in Burma; therefore, she relies on friendship ties and has changed her occupation in order to survive. For her, her daughter is the main factor which has caused her to move both her residence and her occupation.

#### *Na Hkalaw*

Na Hkalaw was also born in Burma, though her parents were born and got married in China. Na Hkalaw used to have nine siblings, but four died due to a lack of



medical care in Burma. This happened when Na Hkalaw was still small, as she did not find out until 2009. Na Hkalaw's family migrated with other villagers to Village A, led by the now head of the village. She remembers already being in Thailand by the age of fifteen. Na Hkalaw could not go to school in Thailand since she had to help her mother take care of her younger siblings. She then married a man whose mother is Lahu and whose father is Lisu. He used to be a soldier in the army of Kung Sa<sup>83</sup>. They met each other more than 30 years ago, when he visited Village A from Langcang. After they got married, he retired from the army and stayed in the village. She and her husband own a field but do not produce enough to survive within a cash economy. In order to raise their five sons and manage the daily expenses of the household, she and her husband have worked in a variety of jobs. They once worked for three years as the collectors of recycled items, such as plastic bottles and metal, to sell to shops across two different districts in Chiang Mai. At first, they could only earn 180 baht per day doing this job, so moved to another area, where they earned 260 baht per day. Afterwards, they moved to stay in Kham Thiang, renting a room. Here, they worked as wage labor, in a variety of jobs. Na Hkalaw remembers that she once worked at Chiang Mai University, laying grass, plus was a cleaner at Chiang Mai zoo, and they were able to earn 200 baht per person per day doing these jobs. Two years later, her third son died in a car accident and Na Hkalaw and her family went back to Village A for a while. Afterwards, they came back to Kham Thian again to work as wage labor. Her husband was planning to work in Kamphaengphet Province but canceled this after his health became so bad so that he had to have an operation. Since then, it has been difficult for him to work outside the village, and so Na Hkalaw has had to work by herself. Once, while looking for a new job, she met a Lahu vendor at her church in

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<sup>83</sup>Kung Sa was the one of the military cliques in the Shan State in 1960s (Kataoka 2004:196) and became famous in terms of the opium trafficking.

Chiang Mai. The trader introduced Na Hkalaw to vending at Tonlamyai Market, since when, Na Hkalaw and her husband have earned enough money to send their five sons to school, as well as pay for the weddings of four of their sons. It is now her task to make enough money to pay for the wedding of the fifth son, plus to pay the daily household expenses. The first son, who married two years ago and now lives in Bangkok, told Na Hkalaw to stop working. However, it is difficult for him to send money to Na Hkalaw, since he has to take care of his family in Bangkok; therefore, Na Hkalaw continues to work alone.

Each woman uses different tactics to survive their vulnerable situation. Though some scholars have emphasized the egalitarian nature of gender in Lahu society, the reality for the Lahu vendors is often different. In the case of Na La and Na Tii, their husbands and relatives played an important part in their migration from Burma to Thailand; however, the women since become the ones who have to take care of all the household responsibilities, as the men do not<sup>84</sup>. Compared to them, Na Hkalaw's case is much more egalitarian, as Na Hkalaw and her husband used to work together to take care of the household, though this has changed since her husband became sick and has found it difficult to work outside the village. In this situation, mobility in terms of their occupation has helped both Na Tii and Na Hkalaw, while finding a new husband has helped Na La to raise her children and survive in life.

### 5.3 The Meaning of Cash Income

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<sup>84</sup> According to Na Tii, it depends on the couple as to who will take care of children. Although she said there are fathers who take care of their children after divorce, I have not seen evidence of such a case.

- Researcher:** “Did you bring a lot of clothes to the market?  
**Na Suh:** I have brought three T-shirts. I washed two of them yesterday.  
**Researcher:** Why didn’t you bring more?  
**Na Suh:** I don’t have any more. I have sarongs though.”  
 (personal interview with Na Suh (pseudonym - 32 years old): July 2009)
- Na Bon:** “I want a skirt like that (pointing to a long skirt made of a thin cloth printed with colorful flowers, being sold at the Night Bazaar).  
**Researcher:** When will you wear it? I haven’t seen you wearing a skirt before.  
**Na Bon:** I will wear it on Sunday. I don’t have this type of skirt yet.”  
 (personal interview with Na Bon: September 2009)
- Researcher:** “When you receive income from vending, what do you want to buy?  
**Na Ui:** I don’t buy anything. I give it to my children and it is not saved.”  
 (personal interview with Na Ui: October 2009)
- Na Fa:** “This item (hanging in a shop at TonlamyaiMarket) looks good.  
**Researcher:** Have you bought new clothes this year?  
**Na Fa:** No. I haven’t bought new clothes for myself for two years.  
**Researcher:** Really? I thought the Lahu buy new clothes once a year?  
**Na Fa:** I don’t have the money.”  
 (personal interview with Na Fa: January 2010)

The main purpose of selling for most the Lahu vendors is to earn cash income. In order to maximize their profits and minimize their costs, they struggle to economize their life and utilize different tactics, including developing a social network at the markets. They use a portion of their income to cover living expenses at the market, such as food, drink, using the toilet and showering, the costs of using their selling space, and so on. The rest of their income is used to support the household and not for their own use, although several vendors noted their lack of belongings, as mentioned above. The income used on the household is used for daily expenses,

school costs, on construction or refurbishment of the house, and for events such as the New Year and weddings.

### **5.3.1 Living Expenses at Home**

The environment around Village C has changed from in the past, as Ma Ta noted:

“When I was a child, the forest was deep and there were many wild animals. We didn’t have to buy any meat. But now we only have buffaloes or other domestic animals there. We have to buy everything.”  
(personal interview: January 2010)

At present, the village lacks a rich environment such as a deep forest with plenty of wild animals and fertile soil. This has adversely affected the villagers’ ability to be self-sufficient; therefore, they now rely on cash income and buy more goods from the lowlands, for their own convenience. The case of Na Yaw shows well the life experienced in a highland village today, which relies on cash.

Na Yaw’s household in Village C has five members: Na Yaw, Na Hpui, Na Hpui’s husband and two children. They cultivate dry rice and vegetables, such as pumpkins, maize and cucumbers, in the same field, and wet rice in a paddy field. In 2009, they also cultivated red beans in a field owned by Na Yaw’s brother in Wiang Pa Pao, Chiang Rai. They raise chickens in order to obtain eggs and sometimes consume the meat from their six buffaloes, in emergency situations. They also used to have a pig but it died. They usually eat vegetables from the field, or forest products such as bracken and small fish from the stream near the village, if available. When they want to eat pork, they buy it from the lowland vendors who come to the village by pick-up truck or motorbike. They often buy vegetables from vendors as well, since

the vegetables in their field are only available on a seasonal basis. They often use the stores in the village to buy canned fish (at fifteen baht), dried food, seasoning sauces, snacks for the children (available from one baht) and pesticides for their rice field. One of Na Hpui's daughters, who is three years old, eats sweets almost all the time and dislikes main meals. Na Hpui's husband has a motorbike, which he uses when going to nearby villages and the lowlands, as well as to carry the harvested crops from their field to the home. Fuel for the motorbike can be purchased at a store in the village.

Na Yaw's household has some yearly, monthly and daily expenses. Na Yaw and Na Hpui pay 110 baht per person as a membership fee for the church and 60 baht per person for the women's group. Before Na Ga, who lives near Na Yaw's house, got Thai citizenship, Na Yaw had to pay Na Ga's fees, as she did not have any income. Meanwhile, Na Yaw does not need to pay the membership fee for Na Hpui's husband since he is still not registered at a church in Village C. They pay 60 baht for water per year and in terms of monthly fees, they pay 30 baht for electricity, which covers power for the lights in the living room and kitchen, the TV and VSD player, and a refrigerator. On September 2009, I followed Na Yaw home after she had finished selling at Tonlamyai Market for five weeks. On the second day at home, she went to the store to pay off credit of 1,000 baht for pesticides used on the field, 350 baht for pesticides used in the paddy field, 7,500 baht for eight sacks of hill rice, which she planned to sell at the market, and 200 baht for snacks to give to her daughter. At that time, Na Hpui's husband did not go to work for cash income in the lowlands and Na Yaw paid all the credit. She also has to spend some money hiring villagers for work during the rice harvesting season.

Other households spend the most on food, over the other expenses. In the case of Na Hkalaw, when I visited her, she paid 4,000 baht for the food her husband and son had consumed while he was in Chiang Mai for five weeks. Na La emphasized the importance to her of the cash income she receives from vending; saying that if she did not work as a vendor, she would only be able to eat rice, without a side dish. Other than the cash income she receives from her selling job in the city, the selling of maize is another opportunity her and her household have to earn cash during the year.

Meanwhile, the life of the permanent vendors in Chiang Mai also relies on cash, but the level of reliance varies. Vendors living in Doi Saket are generally able to run a garden, raise small numbers of livestock and rent a paddy field from their northern Thai neighbors in order to cultivate wet rice. At Na Fa's house, chilies, potatoes and Roselle leaves are planted and a proportion of the harvest is sold at the market. Na Fa also raises chickens, both for consumption and to obtain eggs. In 2009, Na Va rented 2.5 *rais* of paddy land at a cost of 2,500 baht a year from a northern Thai, and bought two tangs of rice which cost her 400 baht. This helps her to save on the costs of food, because they still have to spend money on electricity and a water supply, which is more expensive in Doi Saket than it is in the highlands, as they tend to have more household electrical appliances there<sup>85</sup>. When compared to Na Fa, Na Tii's household in Saraphi has to pay more. Na Tii rents land from a northern Thai family, at a cost of 1,500 baht per year, while Na Fa borrows her land from a Lahu

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<sup>85</sup> Na Hkalaw's household pays 40 to 50 baht per month on electricity, which covers the lights in the kitchen and the living room; Na Hkalaw does not have a TV or VCD player. However, Na Fa's household, which shares a meter with her mother's house, spends more than 700 baht per month on electricity. This covers running a refrigerator, TV, rice cooker, two fans, lights in the kitchen and living room, and a battery charger for the cell phones in the house, plus TVs, a washing machine and lights in the other rooms.

missionary, for free. Na Tii does not have any space to cultivate vegetables or raise livestock around the home, plus she has to buy everything from the local market near her house.

### **5.3.2 Expenses for Formal Education of the Children**

All the vendors I interviewed have children, while many who are in the age range 40 to 60 years old also have grandchildren. Many of the children and grandchildren are students, and the expenses incurred from their schooling vary among the households, as the following shows:

Na Tii has four children and three of them go to school. The eldest son, who is 22, goes to the university in Chiang Rai. Na Tii has to pay 5,000 baht per term on tuition fees and 1,300 baht per month on renting a room in an apartment near the university. He also does a part-time job during the summer holiday. When he is out of money for his daily expenses, he calls Na Tii and asks her to send some money. The eldest daughter (17 years old) now stays in the dormitory of a Japanese NGO in Wiang Pa Pao. She needs 3,500 baht per year for her accommodation fee.

(based on a personal interview: July 2009)

Na Fa's first son (23 years old) is a third year student at the university in Chiang Mai, where he needs 13,000 baht per year for tuition fees. The second son (20 years old) is already married. Na Fa also has a daughter (18 years old) who is studying to be a nurse. 33,000 baht has already been paid for her tuition fees and she still has six more months to study. The youngest son is in his second year at a junior high school. He stays in a dormitory in Sansai District, adjoining Doi Saket. He requires 3,200 baht per year for his accommodation at the dormitory. Other than the tuition and accommodation fees, all three of them need cash for daily use, including fuel for a motorbike which the first son rides.

(based on a personal interview: June 2008)

Na Ui lives in Village C, and among her three children, the first daughter (27 years old) is married and has two children, and the first son (18 years old) and second son (17 years old) study. The two sons require 4,000 baht per person per year for their accommodation fees at their dormitory in Chiang Rai.

(based on a personal interview: July 2009)

Na Ga has three children, and while the first daughter, Na Leh, is already married, the second daughter (6 years old) studies and stays in Village B. She requires 3,000 baht per year for her accommodation fees. The first son (4 years old) goes to kindergarten.

(based on a personal interview: September 2009)

Ma Ta has four children; her two sons (13 and 10 years old) now study at a primary school in Doi Saket, while her two daughters (7 and 3 years old) stay at a dormitory in Maetam, a sub-district of Maesuai in Chiang Rai, which costs 2,500 baht per person per year. When I met her, in 2009, she had not paid the 2,000 baht accommodation fee for the dormitory<sup>86</sup>.

(based on a personal interview: January 2010)

Article 43 of the Constitution of Thailand, 1997, states that every Thai citizen has the right to receive a free basic education for twelve years. In response to the Constitution, the National Education Act of 1999 was enacted, citing Article 43. Although Lahu vendors do not have to pay tuition fees for those children who study to the high school level, they still have to pay fees for the maintenance of the school, plus other payments depending the school. Moreover, they have to pay for school costumes, as well as other expenses incurred at the school. In the case of vendors who have children studying at university, they have to pay all the tuition fees.

Children living in the highlands tend to live in a dormitory near the school, since it is difficult for them to get to school from home each day. There are several dormitories managed by Christian organizations or NGOs available for the Lahu students in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai Provinces, each with a low annual payment. University students tend to rent a room near the university and pay monthly. In both cases, the Lahu vendors have to set aside a sizable amount of money for these periodic payments, and it is not uncommon for them to be unable to pay for a

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<sup>86</sup> In Thailand, the school year usually starts in June. When I interviewed Ma Ta in 2009, it was still the second term of the 2009 academic year.



dormitory in one go, such as in Ma Ta's case. In such situations they are usually allowed to pay by installments.

Some vendors also help to take care of their grandchildren. Na Ha, living in Village C, takes care of her two grandchildren during the school holidays. Na Ha's daughter, Ma Ta, has four children. She moved to DoiSaket with her family four years ago in order to give her children a better education; however, life in DoiSaket has not been easy. She usually works with her husband at a construction site in DoiSaket, where she and her husband earn 180 baht per person per day, which is not enough to raise four children, since they engage with the cash economy. Therefore, she and her husband have decided to send the two younger children to an elementary school in Maetam Sub-district in Maesuai District, where they stay in a dormitory close to the school. During the school holidays, they go back to Village C and stay with Ma Ta's mother, Na Ha. Na Ha works as a vendor when the grandchildren go to school and stay at the dormitory. She tries to earn enough cash income for her household's living expenses, including the costs of looking after Ma Ta's two children during the school holidays. Therefore, it is Ma Ta's task to not only earn enough cash income to pay for her children, but also Na Ha's. In Lahu society, kinship ties beyond the household are regarded as an important network, and households sometimes join together as kin, in cases where they are too small to cultivate and practice their rituals alone (Sharp 1965:84).

Earning enough money to cover school expenses, as well as the accommodation fees for their children, is not an easy task for the Lahu vendors, as they sometimes have difficulty spending money on the children and grandchildren at

the same time as they have to spend money on living themselves. Na She is one such vendor who complains about the necessity of money. She earns more than 10,000 baht per month but complains it is not enough for her household, since she has two children to take care of. Nevertheless this does not prevent her children from going to school, indeed, she complains when her children stop going to school and stay at home. Part of the cause for this is derived from the influence of western ideas, as introduced by the Christian church through its formal education, which is regarded as important among the Christian Lahu. Lahu vendors also understand the importance of learning the Thai language and the other knowledge to be gained from school, that required to live in Thai society. Many of the vendors lack a formal Thai education themselves, and have had to struggle against their low education status. In light of such experience, the Lahu vendors want and expect their children to have a formal education.

### **5.3.3 Construction and Renovation of the House**

The traditional Lahu house is made of a bamboo roof, with thatch, though recently the villagers' values have changed as they now desire a wooden house. Hoare (1985:111-112) found that having a wooden house with a galvanized iron roof is one of the criteria which helps to define one as rich, and another is to have a paddy field. In practice, the Lahu villagers do recognize that the economic situation of a household that owns a wooden house is good. Some Lahu vendors also use their income from selling to construct or refurbish their houses. Na Yaw is one such person who paid for a wooden house from the income she made from selling. She has since been teased by the other villagers, since she has bought a house which does not really fit with her economic status in the eyes of the villagers. Na Hpui told me the story:

**Na Hpui:** “After my mom divorced her second husband, she decided to buy a wooden house in Village C, from a brother of the second husband. She thought it would be difficult to find a house as good as this at such a low price. She told me that if we have no food, we can find it, but if we don’t have a house, it will be hard.

**Researcher:** How much did she pay for the house?

**Na Hpui:** She bought it for 40,000 baht. And when she bought the house, many of the villagers teased us, saying “they live in such a gorgeous house, but eat only bamboo”.

**Researcher:** Really? How about now? Do they still tease you?

**Na Hpui:** No, they don’t.”

(personal interview with Na Hpui: September 2009)

During her ten years of vending, Na Yaw has not only used her cash income for farming and daily expenses, but has also achieved several other aims, such as buying a wooden house and sending Na Hpui to school, right up to college. Now, her aim is to buy a paddy field in the lowlands in order to cultivate more rice to sell.



**Figure 5.1: Traditional Lahu House with Bamboo Floor and Wall, and Thatched Roof**

In the highlands, land is not transacted among the villagers since they do not have official land use rights documentation, whereas, the land in the lowlands can be transacted. However buying their own land is not really the aim of the permanent vendors living in the lowlands, as some of them have been given land and have the construction of their house supported by Christian missionaries. Na Fa lives in DoiSaket and uses land borrowed from a Lahu missionary, without paying any rent. She also received support from a pastor in Singapore for the construction of her house made of bamboo and with a thatched roof. She is satisfied with the house as it is large enough for her family and not hot like her mother's house which is made from concrete. Na Tii has also been distributed a piece of land in Saraphi from Japanese missionaries; however she does not have enough money to construct a new house on the land, since she still has to spend her cash income on her daughter, who still studies at a vocational college. Na She, who lives in Sanpakhoi, rents a house which costs about 1,000 baht per month, including the expenses on water and electricity. Although she does not have her own house, her main reason for earning cash income is to provide for her children, not to buy a house. In other words, it is common for permanent vendors to earn cash income from vending to pay for their living expenses and their children's school expenses, rather than to construct or refurbish a house.

#### **5.3.4 Expenses for Ceremonies**

For the Christian Lahu, Christmas and New Year are the essential events of the year. Different from the traditional non-Christian Lahu, who celebrate New Year at the same time as the Chinese New Year, in late January to early February<sup>87</sup>, the Christian Lahu celebrate New Year in January, following the Western calendar. A

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<sup>87</sup>I would call those Lahu who believe in animism as well as *G'uisha* the traditional Lahu, in order to differentiate them from the Christian Lahu.

part of the cash income they earn from vending is used to prepare for the New Year. From November until before Christmas, the number of Lahu female vendors at the markets in Chiang Mai increases, for many of them hope to make money for these events. Na Hkalaw is one such trader, who, in November 2008, worked as a vendor in Chiang Mai for three weeks. She told me that she would not go back again until Christmas, in order to earn money for Christmas and New Year. In 2009, Na Yaw spent 3,000 baht on the New Year festivities, as she bought 25 kilos of pork, soft drinks and snacks.

Weddings are another ceremony that vendors have to spend money on. It is not only the households of the bride and groom that have to spend money, but also the other relatives and villagers. They tend to hold the wedding ceremonies in the village, even if the couple live in the lowland for work or study. Na Hkalaw's niece lives in lowlands working; however, she and her groom came back to her home village, Village A, to hold the ceremony. Tents were set up in front of the house of the head of Village A, and the ceremony was held in the morning with the participation of all the villagers. Three pastors led the ceremony with a blessing and sermon, while a choir provided several hymns. Afterwards, all the villagers were invited to have lunch in front of the bride's house, which was prepared by the bride's relatives, including Na Hkalaw, and dinner was provided to the villagers the day before the ceremony. Four big pigs were bought from other villages and slaughtered by the villagers, while rice was cooked at the household of the relatives. In the afternoon, the bride and groom, as well as the villagers, visited the groom's house in another village. When entering the village, everyone got out of their cars and walked with the couple, while the bride



carried a chunk of pork in a basket and took this to the groom's parents, as a gift. At the house, villagers were welcomed with soft drinks and snacks.



**Figure 5.2 Christian Lahu Wedding Ceremony**



**Figure 5.3: A Lahu Na Bride Carrying a Piece of Pork in a Basket to the Groom's Parents' House**

The cost of a wedding varies depending on the household involved. In the above case, the groom's household took responsibility for all the costs, which were 38,000 baht<sup>88</sup>. Na Hkalaw has had to pay such costs four times, as four of her sons have married out of five, and she has spent 90,000 baht in total on their weddings. Two of them had their ceremonies in the same year and so Na Hkalaw and her husband had to prepare 60,000 baht over a short period. Her vending activity has helped to cover a part of the costs and living expenses for the household, after spending such a large amount of money on weddings.

Other than the four types of expenditure outlined above, there is one trader who has struggled to earn the cash needed to achieve another aim. Na Ga migrated from Burma into Thailand eight years ago, with her husband and children. A lack of Thai nationality has made it difficult for her household to make money, so they have had to depend economically on her mother, who lives near her house in the same village. She has struggled in such a way for eight years. However, since she started work as a trader, by borrowing her sister's ID card, she has tried to get Thai nationality. She has the chance get it, as her mother and sisters already have Thai nationality, so she has earned 20,000 baht a month, vending for two months, to spend 40,000 baht on getting Thai nationality.

To sum up, these expenditure types are meaningful for the Lahu vendors. What it indicates is that they, especially the temporary vendors, use their cash income

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<sup>88</sup> The division of the wedding costs among the bride's and groom's households depends on them. In some cases the groom's household may bear all of the expenses for the wedding, as in the case of Na Hkalaw's niece as well as Na Hkalaw's sons. On the other hand, the bride's household had to pay 20,000 baht and the groom's household 10,000 baht towards the wedding expenses in the case of a villager in Village C.

from vending to maintain their households, as well as maintain their social status in the village. Lahu vendors set a high value on sending their children for a formal education, on owning a wooden house, and on being able to welcome guests with sufficient food, especially during ceremonies. The cash economy is thus closely interrelated with the life of the Lahu, so closely that the value system of the Lahu has changed as a result. The Lahu vendors look to gain access to this economy by themselves, and do not wait for it to come to them at home, like some of the northern Thais.

#### **5.4 The Meaning of Mobility**

Vending is valued, in particular by the vulnerable Lahu women, as a means of earning cash and maintaining the household. However, it is not the best choice for some women, and there are some who regard vending as shameful. Some villagers look down on Na Hpui and Na Yaw because they sell in the markets. They say that they would rather choose wage labor than sell. Na Yaw also told me that unmarried Lahu women do not choose vending as their occupation, since they are ashamed of it. The Tribal Research Center(1970:35-36) has noted that trade between the Lahu and northern Thais is practiced regularly. It is a habit of the northern Thais to go to the Lahu villages, rather than vice-versa. In the case of the opium trade, the Lahu have been smugglers of the drug from Burma into Thailand; some of them have also been middlemen, selling opium to the northern Thais coming to the village. This indicates that the Lahu seldom go down to the lowlands to trade. The shame accorded to vending by some of the villagers and the unmarried Lahu women may come from unfamiliarity with the trade within the history of the Lahu.



Some Lahu women have tried vending but quit, due to a number of difficulties. Firstly, the vendors have to have social networks in order to succeed in the trade, and it is difficult for a newcomer to construct this network in a short time. Second, they also have to deal with some of the discomforts experienced at the market, such as having to carry heavy produce, sleeping on the bridge and so on. They also have to deal with problems created by the non-Lahu traders and the authorities at times. While the merits of vending have attracted many Lahu women, the negative aspects of the life have caused some to give up the occupation. For Ma Ta, her key points were the lack of a social network, not being able to secure a selling space, and missing the Sunday service each week. Ma Ta traded at the Tonlamyai Market for about a month, which she found very difficult because her sales were not good, because she could not secure a space sometimes. She also did not want to sell rice on Sundays. She has recognized that wage labor is a better choice for her; she already has connections with an employer and she can earn a certain 180 baht if she works for a day, while vending, for her, was unstable work. Even experienced vendors experience difficulties sometimes. Na She complained that she cannot save money, even though she earns more than 10,000 baht per month, because she has to raise two children and pay their school expenses. Moreover, the sales she makes are sometimes not profitable, as she spends 1,000 baht as capital each day. She spoke about her hardships and that she now wishes to work in Japan.

What vending provides to the Lahu women is not only cash income and hardship, but a social space for them to operate within. Since the status of the Lahu women who engage in vending varies, some find themselves in a vulnerable situation, as mentioned above, while others face few difficulties. Na Maw (pseudonym - 60

years old) started selling at the same time as Na Yaw. She now lives alone since her husband died twenty years ago. She has three sons and one daughter and her son lives near the house. According to Na Hpui, Na Maw has no need to earn cash by herself, as her son takes care of her and she has also saved money from lending cash to Na Hpui, as well as Na Yaw, on several occasions. Her main reason for engaging in trade is not to earn cash income, but to interact with friends and other people. Staying at home in Village C, she does not work in the field since her son does that. However, her friends, such as Na Yaw, work in the fields or at the markets in Chiang Mai, so it is difficult for her to visit them or invite them to her home. During my research I heard of some vendors speak about the boredom of staying at home without anything to do, and it is this that motivates them to work as vendors. For them, selling at the marketplace has social meaning.

Meanwhile, vending provides an opportunity to cover both social and economic needs. Compared to other vendors, Na Hpui now has more choice since she has greater social and cultural capital. She has graduated from a vocational college in cosmetics and now has experience working in salons in Chiang Mai city. If she wanted, she could live and earn quite good cash income in the city; however, she has chosen to stay with her mother in Village C. Na Hpui worries about her mother who would have to live alone if she went away, but she is tired of working in someone else's salon. She knows that living in Village C will not give her the best chance to improve her wealth; however, she has to make money to live as well as for her children. Vending is therefore the best choice for her, as it enables her to make money and also to go home regularly. In other words vending shortens the spatial and

temporal distance between her and her mother, whilst fulfilling the need for cash income at the same time.

### 5.5 Female Lahu Vendors and their Beliefs

As we have seen, the lives of Lahu vendors vary; some face difficulties while some succeed. What I noticed during my research is that although they often talk about the hardships they experience while vending, as well as in their life, some of them are quite positive in practice. The basis for such an attitude may stem from their belief in Christianity. In order to bear the unbearable, they apply the doctrine of Christianity and crave for the state of *G'uisha*, as Kataoka (2007:344) reveals. For instance, Na Fa seems to follow the rule of *G'uisha*. One day, I asked her why she sells produce at such a cheap price compared to the other northern Thai traders, to which she replied “the Lahu should not sell at a high price; *G'uisha* said so.” In addition to this, she follows *G'uisha* in her everyday practices, such as not attending events based on other religions such as *LoiKrathong*, and giving money to beggars. She believes that following her belief in the ways of *G'uisha*, based on Christianity, is more important than money. Na Yaw does not own a field so she borrows both a normal field and a paddy field, but expressed her feelings about this land, saying “we do not own any land now. But there is our land in heaven as *G'uisha* has prepared for us.” It is her hope to be saved by *G'uisha*, based on the Christian doctrine. Na Tii has experienced hardship in her marriage, occupation and in terms of her mobility. When looking back over the past, she interprets it “the same way what Jesus did in preaching.” By thinking like this, she has overcome the hardship experienced as a mobile Lahu trader and transformed it into joy, as a Christian.

Relying on beliefs in order to overcome current hardships can be seen in the practice of the Lahu vendors, especially those who are middle-aged or old; however, it cannot be generalized that it is a tactic used by every trader. One seldom hears young vendors talking about using their beliefs as a tactic, although they try to practice being Christian, like Ma Ta, who complained about not being able to attend Sunday service due to vending.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

Although Lahu society has accepted the cash economy and modern agricultural methods in order to improve the lives of its members, the results have sometimes been negative, and while the villagers struggle to sell their produce at a good price, many of them, including the women, have chosen instead to be migrant workers. While there are a variety of occupations available in the lowlands as well as in foreign countries, the social vulnerability of the Lahu women has limited their choices. For them, vending is one of the limited, but positive choices. Before engaging in selling, their lives are often full of hardship, as the life histories of the three Lahu vendors in this study show. Each of them has chosen a different tactic in order to survive; them as well as their children. Among the various tactics used, occupational mobility has helped them to live within a market economy, from which vulnerable people tend to be excluded.

For the Lahu vendors, earning cash income is not only a way to survive a lack of profit from their agricultural activities, but also helps them to survive the changing values system of Lahu society. Sending the children to school, constructing or refurbishing the house and spending money on important events, indicates how the

Lahu vendors interpret the cash income they earn, using it as a tool to align with Lahu values in the present. Though it provides them the opportunity to be Lahu, it is not easy to succeed in their vending activity, and some decide to quit. In addition, some villagers, including the unmarried women, regard vending as bringing a kind of shame upon them. However, there are actually many Lahu vendors who have succeeded in earning a decent amount of cash income through their vending activity, and some also found a social value in the occupation, over and above earning cash income.

The lives of Lahu vendors are diverse; some have experienced moving from one place to another many times, while others lack money and/or land. Many have struggled. Selling in the markets of Chiang Mai has helped them to overcome their economic difficulties, while, as part of their daily life struggles, a belief in Christianity has also acted as a motivation to help them move forward.