

# Cultural Factors of Lisu Ethnic Tribe in Kachin State

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**Abstract:** This research is conducted with the aim of investigating the culture of Lisu ethnic tribe in Myanmar, the area of study which has been unexplored. This research paper deals with good historical evidence of Lisu ethnic group in the circle of Lolo Ethnic group during the 9th century A.D. They lived in their own states in the regions such as Bhamo, Putao and Loilin. Therefore, the tribes are named after their respective regions, such as Bhamo Lisu and Loilin Lisu. They were in the north, holding strong power in Yunnan Province called Nan-Chao. Their prestige remained for as long as their traditions, their own religion and their dressing (costume) and the way they earn their living, culture and literature aspiring national faith of Lisu.

**Key word:** Culture, religion, ethnic, tribe, social.

## 1. Introduction

Lisu tribes originally settled in the valleys between Hukun of China and Khaung-Lan-Phu of Myanmar. The meaning of Lisu is stated in the research paper. Historical evidence shows that Lisu tribe has been existing since the 9th century A.D. The author has referred to the books and historical records that described the descendants of tribes compiled by the famous historian Dr. Than Tun. He expressed the background history of Lisu tribe with their rituals and customs in his book. The author obtained the facts about Lisu tribe interviewing the Lisu people who are the natives of Putao and collecting books and records about them. Lisu tribe Literature and cultural troupe joined the Fine Arts and Performing Arts Association, University of Yangon and performed their traditional dance and music. The performance at Yangon University Diamond Jubilee Hall on 11th February 2013 to hail the Union Day, the performance at Science Fair to entertain the vice-president Dr. Sai Maunk Kham in the Arts Assembly Hall in 2014, the performance at the English Language Skills competitions to entertain the President U Thein Sein in Myanmar Convention

Centre in 2014, showed the development of their traditional dances. Survey of the tribe has been done since the year 2010 up to now. The author's efforts resulted in success. By interviewing Lisu elderly people, native people as well as young people of Putao Township, the author has come to know that other tribes in the Union of Myanmar ought to learn about Lisu tribe, because very few people learn about them. Lisu Literature and culture has rarely been expressed in books. Although they used to be unknown among the tribes of Myanmar, they have begun to emerge out of the past. They are trying to do the job to the best of their abilities for the good of the Union of Myanmar.

## 2. Method

- Group discussion
- Social mapping
- Interviewing with native people
- Searching for evidence
- Data collecting

Lisu tribe was descended from Mu-Ku-dee called Mongolia Heights. According to the anthropologists and historians, they are descendants of Lolomoso group which is also a member of Tibeto-Burman. Their original location was Normu which is the upper part of Thanlwin River. They migrated to various

parts of Myanmar in three groups, one group settled down in Sawlaw region in A.D. 900. Another group resided permanently in Cheephwe region in A.D. 850. The third group got established in Shan state in A.D. 1200. Some of them migrated to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and India.

Likewise some of the tribe spread to Myitkyina, Bamaw and Sadon in Kachin State from Phyamar region. Some of the tribe went down the River Mekong and got to Thailand. Some of the tribe descended to Charkaw region, Khaung-Lan-Phu Township in Kachin State via Lardarkaw pass, Mekiko pass and larwada pass from China in the 9th Century A.D. Then they settled down in Naungmon, Putao, Machanbaw, Swanparabwan, Myitkyina and Tanaing Townships. Some also migrated to Khanti Township in Sagaing Region. Some of the tribe also descended to Myanmar via Chibyakaw pass, Marshi pass, Taukarhauk pass, etc. from China. Some of the tribe also descended to Kokang through the River Thanlwin from Yarhar region in the year 1300 A.D. This Lisu tribe is descended from Lolo tribe, Lisu tribe and Lahu tribe are included in Lolo group. Hill people of Lolo tribe live in hilly regions of Yunnan Province and they are not recognized as Chinese people. Actually Lisu is of Myanmar Lolo tribe. The population of Lisu is estimated in national census of Myanmar. Myanmar-Lolo also comes from Tibet-Myanmar family. The tribe Lisu can stand as native of Myanmar. The background history of Lisu has been observed from evidences, folk-tales and oral history and interview with the Lisu elders. Besides, the researcher referred to translated versions and Myanmar encyclopaedia. Lisu tribe has scattered in different regions such as Putao and Bamaw in Kachin State and Loilin in Shan State. They appeared long before the invention of writing. Although they have different dialects, there are not many differences among Lisu people.

There are various species in Lisu tribe. They are Lar, Ngua, Bya, Chu, Thaug, Leimai, Waw, Naw and so

on. They refrain from marrying their relatives. If they do so, they are publicly disgraced. They never marry their first cousins.

### 3. Lisu Language

Lisu people enjoy living in rural areas. They know jungle tracks well. They symbolize their farmland cutting a notch with a chopper on the trees' stems. When they see the beehives, they mark them erecting bamboo poles or clearing around the place.

Since writing had not been invented at that time, incidents could not be recorded. Signing was used instead of writing. Signing is a symbolic system in which signed symbols represent words. For invention of letters and bonds, they made a notch with a knife on planks. In ancient times, if two villages were at war, they declared war sending each other chilli, feather and wood charcoal which were put in a bamboo quiver.

Lisu people have their own language. Although there are different species of Lisu, their spoken language does not have several dialects. There are three different sub languages such as (a) original Lisu Language (b) Lisunaw Language and Lisu Lamei Language. However, most of the original Lisu language is mostly used.

Nowadays, Lisu Language has been invented. It was invented by the British Mission Mr. J. O. Fraiser and Kayin national U Ba Thaw based on Roman letters. U Zimbar, U Gu-ah-wu, Li Zaw-Ka-na-Lu, U Khaw-bu and U Ngwar-tar contributed to the invention of Lisu Language. Lisu Language is now used for education, social affairs, business and religion.

There are forty alphabets in Lisu Language based on Roman Letters. They are as follows:

B P d D T T G K K J C D  
Z F F M N L S R R V V H  
G G W X Y A A E E I O U  
U L L B

#### 4. Lisu Literature

Literature is essential for a people. Lisu letter had been invented based on Chinese Language three hundred years ago. Later, Lisu letter was invented based on Thai Language, English Language, Kachin Language, Roman Language and Myanmar Language. The earliest letter was invented by J. O. Fraiser and Sayagyi U Ba Thaw in 1918. It is easy to use. The first book written in Lisu Language was known as M-I-MI OO. It was published at Moulmeur China.

Its recognized number was GBcPONO 421 SECR-9(6) 15-7-1922 under the British rule in Myanmar. Lisu literature became world acknowledged in 1923.

Therefore culture has been developing gradually since the invention of writing. There are music and dance during the Lisu New Year Festival. There are differences in ritual and traditions according to the regions. However recognized language and culture of Lisu can be observed in Putao Township, Kachin State.

#### 5. Lisu Clothes and Ornaments

Even inside one country, there are differences in Lisu clothes and ornaments as they are worn in different areas. There are various types of clothes. Nevertheless there are only six kinds of costumes. They are Putao costume, Myitkyina costume, Bamaw costume, Mogok costume, Southern Shan State costume and northern Shan State costume.

Putao Lisu people and Yunnan Province Lisu people weave their cloth on their looms themselves. The raw materials for their cloth are hemp fibres. They grow hemp for their own use. Every woman can weave cloth on looms. Putao Lisu women wear long dresses in blue, green and black colours. A white long dress with black and white stripes is very beautiful. It is worn when Lisu women go to ceremonies.

Therefore, one of the Lisu tribe's ceremonies is house warming ceremony. When they have

constructed a house, all the invited guests who are drinking Khaung-ye have to dance and jump on the floor in order to know whether the floor is well-built or not. The names of their popular dances are Che-ngo-che dance and Shar-pe-ta dance.

The Shar-pe-ta dance is the kind of dual dance which is danced by both man and woman drinking khaung-ye together touching each other's cheeks. They drink Khaung-ye with relish till it spills out onto the floor from the bamboo vessel. Lisu literature and ritual associations have been established since the year 1900 in Puto and other regions.

Lisu people's Union spirit, responsibility and accountability and their attitude have been recorded in history.

The authorities who are concerned with Lisu literature and Culture Committee have been implementing the development of their language and culture. Two hundred thousand copies of books written in Lisu Language for kindergarten, first standard and second standard school children have been distributed and taught. The curricula and syllabi are compiled by members of five committees for religion. Staff of Myitkyina University also helped them a lot. School children in sixty five villages among seventy five villages are learning Lisu language at present. There are approximately two hundred Lisu words which are similar to Myanmar words.

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Present Executive Committee Members of Myitkyina are as follows.

President—U Ah Hsi (Kachin State Regional Minister)

Vice-President—U Lah Mya Wu

Secretary—U Hsa Ki (jeweller)

Present Executive Committee Members of Yangon  
 President—Khwah Ah Gah  
 Vice President—Joe Lay Hwah  
 Secretary—James Khwa Ra Shah

## 6. Results and Discussion

It is known that the tribe of Lisu has been living in Chakaw region, Khaung-Lan-Phu Township, Kachin State since the 9th century A.D. Such conclusion is drawn by historical evidences and field research. From Chakaw, they migrated to Naungmon, Putao, Machanbaw, Swamparabwan, Myitkyina and Chibwe. During the field research, the author met and interviewed some natives who settled down permanently. Facts mentioned in the book *Life of Lisu Tribe* by writer Myat Toe, are the same as what I know. I learn some more facts about them during my research. I come to know their present life and future prospect and inventive mind. There are local militia units in their region and it shows that they would like to safeguard our independence and sovereignty. It is delightful to see the enthusiasm of local militia units.

Concerning religion, they profess Christianity, Buddhism and others. The populations of Christians are more than that of Buddhists owing to the attempts of Christian missionaries. The author also interviewed regional pastors.

With regard to clothes and ornaments, they differ regionally. They wear their national colourful costumes in order not to break the tradition. Lisu tribe language and literature have been developing gradually. Although they have dialects, there is a common Lisu language. Seventy percent of Lisu language is commonly used by every Lisu.

Nowadays even ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries are interested in Lisu culture. In the cruise around ASEAN countries in the year 2014, youths of Myanmar entertained the youth from ASEAN countries with Lisu traditional songs and dances. Such dances and songs were rehearsed in Yangon University Fine Arts and Performing Arts

Association centre. It was known that youths of ASEAN countries appreciated Lisu performance. To represent the Union of Myanmar, Lisu cultural group also paid a goodwill visit to Vietnam for cultural exchange.

Although there are not many Lisu educated persons a few Lisu youths are attending some universities learning higher education. It shows signs of improvement in education.

Since Lisu people are natives of Myanmar who settle down mostly in northern part of Myanmar they should be encouraged in their literature and culture by other natives in the country. It takes all sorts of natives to make a union. Other races should meet and exchange culture with Lisu people so that they know tradition of Lisu more. It will be of great help for e-tourism.

There is also a new finding. It is said that Lisu tribe used to live in the caves of a mountain in the far northern part of Myanmar. Pictograms can be observed on the walls of the caves. Such pictograms are estimated to have been written during the Neolithic age. Hence, it can be inferred that they are the ancient indigenous people of Myanmar.

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Dispersal of Lisu tribe

