

white represents purity and is the principal hue associated with *G'ui sha*, while yellow is the colour of the Buddhist monk's robes and has also come to be associated with *G'ui sha* by these Lahu ¹⁴. Both colours are contrasted with red, which is associated with the spirits (perhaps because the more malicious of these bring bloody death to their victims). Some villagers say that these sacred flags, representing the all-good, all-powerful *G'ui sha*, frighten evil spirits away from the village; others say that the cloth strips, fluttering in the breeze, cry out (*bvuh ve*) for the health and prosperity of the villagers. The use of such flags almost certainly derives from the similar Shan and Northern Thai practice of erecting flags around Buddhist temple buildings. These flags, commonly called *tung chai* or "victory flags" in Thailand, are set up, according to Thai folklorist Rajadon (1967: 179), "to avert ill or evil spirits and secure good fortune." This corresponds exactly to the Lahu conception of their *hto pa*.

In the front courtyard of the temple in my study village were a number of roughly carved posts known as *kaw mo taweh* (etymology obscure). These posts usually had a series of circular incisions around their tops (fig. 1). According to the headman of this village there should be three such incisions, each representing a different wish: freedom from sickness, success in agriculture and prosperity of the livestock. But no other informant proffered such an explanation, and the posts often had more than three cuts. As with the temple flags, villagers' opinions varied as to what these posts signify. A common view was that they were earthly replicas of *G'ui sha*'s divine *kaw mo taweh* in heaven, said to be of white stone representing indestructible, undecaying permanence. Thus, when the villagers erect a similar post, desiring long and indestructible life, they strip off the bark so that the white wood will resemble *G'ui sha*'s white stone post (see Text 2B verse 6). Another explanation is that the posts are

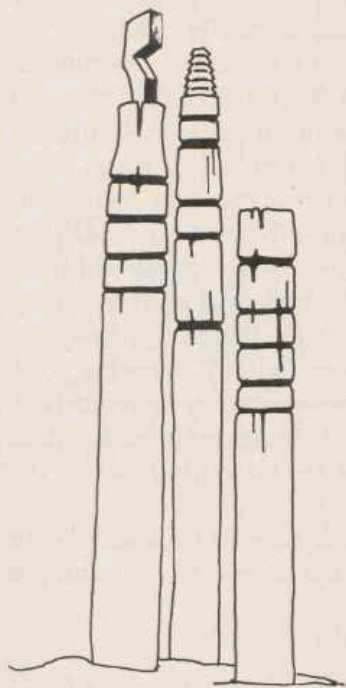


Fig. 1: *Kaw mo taweh*, sacred posts outside the village temple

Mvuh naw hk'o, G'ui ma a daw, G'ui ma ca li, to bo, a ca, sa la, la shaw pa, la shaw ma caw ve yo. Mvuh naw hk'o ma caw k'o, neh chaw ya geh ma caw pui.

In heaven there is a divine headman, divine blacksmith, a *to bo, a ca, sa la, la shaw pa* and *la shaw ma*. If they do not have it in heaven, then we certainly cannot have it amongst men.

¹⁴ Spiro (1971: 263) reports that among the Burmese "The yellow robe of the monk has great magical power. It is especially potent as a protection against evil supernaturals: witches, spirits, demons, and so on – for few of them would have the audacity to harm a 'Son of the Buddha'." I understand that similar beliefs are found among the Tai peoples, whence they have come, in part at least, to the Lahu.