

Chapter 4

Analysis of Bisu Supernatural Being

4.1 Summary of Data from Worldview Questionnaires

This section summarizes the results of both worldview questionnaires. This information was useful for drawing an approximate schema of Bisu Cosmology and to discover appropriate indigenous terms for spiritual beings and religious activities.

4.2 Bisu Worldview Overview

Ang cao (ອາງຈາວ) is the greatest spirit in the world. *Ang cao* is a *daeya* (ແດ່ຍາ), the general Bisu term for spiritual beings, but *ang cao* is not commonly referred to as a *daeya*. Rather he is referred to by the name *ang cao*. He is considered to be male in gender, and he is regarded as the father of the Bisu people. He is the benevolent spirit who takes care of the Bisu village and ensures the happiness of its residents. *Ang cao* is territorial in nature in that the particular *ang cao* who is in charge of one village is not the same *ang cao* who is in charge of another village. However, each one is still called *ang cao*. From an outsider's perspective, this fact would appear to contradict Bisu subjects' statements that *ang cao* is the greatest spirit in the world. However, it does not seem to be regarded as such in the Bisu worldview.

Bisu say that they like *ang cao*, and it is considered a good thing to have knowledge of him. The Bisu have no origin story associated with *ang cao*, nor do they have any stories about the origin of their people.

Ang cao is concerned if Bisu people 'sin' (*ang si*, ອາງສີ) or fail to respect him. He is the one who divided the peoples of the world into their tribes and languages, and specifically divided the Bisu from non-Bisu people (*Bicham*, ປີ່ຮາມ). *Ang cao* has omniscient qualities in that he is able to immediately perceive Bisu people's thoughts. He knows all things. It is not possible to hide from him. Neither is it possible to deceive him under most circumstances.

Poverty is seen as due to fate/destiny. *Ang cao* cannot help you to rise out of poverty. You must work to remedy this situation on your own. If Bisu people wish to seek spiritual help, they must do so through the spirit priest. Often Bisu people will need to communicate with the spirit world if they become ill and they suspect the cause of their illness may be that they may have offended a spirit. Only the shaman can intercede between Bisu people and the spirit world. While the shaman intercedes with many spirits or *daeya*, the village priest communicates only with *ang cao*. The village priest does not attempt to communicate with other spirits. No special language is required to communicate with *ang cao*. Bisu language is the only language used to communicate with him. A ritual sacrifice is offered to *ang cao* three times a year. The village priest is charged with performing this sacrifice. No defective animals may be used. Once the sacrifice is completed, the animal may be eaten. On the day the sacrifice is offered, no Bisu person is allowed to work.

Other lesser spiritual beings are referred to as *daeya*. These lesser spirits have no particular hierarchy among them, though all of them are inferior to *ang cao*. They are differentiated according to the aspect of nature in which they reside or by a kinship term if they are an ancestor spirit. They do not have proper names. There are many different kinds of lesser spirits including Grandfather and Grandmother spirits, Mother and Father spirits, two different types of household spirits (*yum dae* 'house spirit'), a forest spirit (*song khong dae* 'forest spirit'), spirit of the local Buddhist temple, spirits that possess people, spirits of those who have died and have not yet been reborn, and spirits that lurk around graveyards (*pum dae* 'grave spirit') and cremation sites. Most of these spirits reside in the forest and some live in trees. The forest spirit tends to possess people on occasion. Usually this is a result of an offense unknowingly committed against that spirit.

There is another particular kind of spirit, *daephakdae* (แด่พากแด่) that possesses people. When possessed by this spirit, the individual's voice will often change and the person will act strangely. This spirit will also make the person ill and is thought to eat the innards of the possessed person.

Bisu are generally not interested in these lesser spirits to the extent that they are interested in *ang cao*. Conversely, these lesser spirits are not interested in Bisu people, as long they are not offended. Bisu fear these spirits because they can sometimes be harmful to people.

Ancestor spirits are a special kind of spirit that demands that their descendants pay attention to them. It is possible to deceive ancestor spirits. The continued goodwill of these spirits is contingent upon their being properly propitiated. Notably, fear of spirits was not the greatest fear for the Bisu, but nonetheless, the fear of spirits is a powerful force in their lives. The thing that Bisu people fear most is natural disaster caused by windstorms and fire. There is a strong belief in agentive causation. Illness, accidents, natural disasters and other types of misfortune are attributed to discontented spirits.

Bisu people believe that it is good to confess an offense against another person and ask for forgiveness. The greatest offense that two people can commit is for an unmarried woman to become pregnant within the boundaries of the village. It is believed that if people can avoid committing offenses within the boundaries of the village, then village residents will be healthy and happy.

In the past, *ang cao* prohibited Bisu from making noise in the village during certain daytime hours. This prohibition did not include funeral rites. If these noise rules were broken, villagers could get sick. These rules are no longer observed today. If an offense against the spirits is committed, the guilty party must perform a ceremony. An offense is still an offense even if others don't know about it.

It is very dangerous to commit offenses against spirits. The spirits will kill Bisu people for these offenses. If a Bisu person becomes ill for a prolonged period of time, they must have offended the spirits and must perform a sacrifice to make it right again. Once the sacrifice is completed, no further action is necessary.

At the birth of a child, Bisu parents call upon the mother and father spirit of that child and claim the newborn child as their own. If this is not done, the mother and father spirit may reclaim the child as theirs. Bisu people believe that after they die, they enter a dreamlike state of being.

Bisu people believe that the person who has the most power in their lives is His Majesty the King of Thailand.

4.3 List Potential Key Translation Terms

The following is a list of terms elicited during worldview interviews that could potentially be used as key translation terms in the New Testament.

Table 9: Tentative List of Bisu Terms Taken from Worldview Questionnaires

Bisu pirit	Description	Bisu Spirit	Description
<i>ang cao</i> (อางจาว)	Greatest of the Spirits	<i>Bisu</i> (บီซู)	Bisu people
<i>ang si</i> (อางซี้)	To do wrong	<i>hkam</i> (กาม)	Fate, destiny
<i>daeya</i> (दैया)	Spiritual being (class noun for all spirits)	<i>Ang cop</i> (อางจอบ)	To deceive, trick
<i>tue si tue lae</i> (เตอ ซี้ เตอ แล)	To make a mistake (Minor Implications)	<i>Putang</i> (ปู่ตาง)	Spirit priest, one who takes care of <i>ang cao</i> (อางจาว)
<i>bicham</i> (บิชาม)	Non-Bisu people, esp. Dai-speaking peoples	<i>Subaa</i> (ซูบ่า) ⁷	to forgive
<i>gamhkan</i> (กามคาน)	To promise or oath	<i>ang hkong ang la</i> (อางคองอางลา)	Soul
<i>ang pong dae</i> (อางปองแด)	Father spirit	<i>Gu dae</i> (กูแด)	A Large group of spirits of dead people
<i>Ang ba dae</i> (อางป่าแด)	Mother Spirit	<i>htam dae</i> (ทามแด) ⁸	Cave gravesite spirit
<i>Ahuu dae</i> (อาฮูแด)	Grandfather Spirit	<i>pum dae</i> (ปู่มแด)	Graveyard spirit
<i>Ahpui dae</i> (อาพีแด)	Grandmother Spirit	<i>hto lo ni</i> (ทอ ลอ นี)	Spirit of the Crops
<i>Shong hkong dae</i> (ชรวงคองแด)	Forest Spirit	<i>lang dae</i> (ลางแด)	Water Spirit

⁷ No Bisu word for 'to forgive' was elicited. The Bisu indicate that they believe this term is borrowed from the Northern Thai language, also known also *Khammuang*. However, the Northern Thai is pronounced 'su-maa' and is itself a borrowing from Pail/Sanskrit.

⁸ The word for 'cave' here is Northern Thai.

Bisu pirit	Description	Bisu Spirit	Description
<i>Yum dae</i> (ยุมแด่)	House Spirit	<i>lang tu dae</i> (lang tu dae)	River Spirit
<i>Wat dae</i> (วัดแด่) ⁹	Temple Spirit	<i>tasae dae</i> (ตาแซแด่)	Mountain Spirit
<i>Daephakdae</i> (แด่พากแด่)	Possession Spirit	<i>Nam bo dae</i> (นาม บอแด่) ¹⁰	Spirit of the Well

4.4 Bisu Spirit World Overview

The following chart provides an analysis of the lesser Bisu spirits grouped according to their common componential features. These eleven components were determined from the collection of components derived from worldview questionnaire transcripts. These eleven components are: *Supernatural, Kinship Link, Require regular attention, Territorial, Formerly human, Require Regular Appeasement, Helpful, Harmful, Nature, Gender and Personal Name.*

The component *Supernatural* indicates whether or not that particular group of spiritual beings can be considered as being *daeya* (แด่ยา), the Bisu class noun for independent supernatural (i.e. non-material) beings. The feature *Kinship Link* indicates whether or not that group of spirits is perceived as having a family relationship with the living. The component *Require Regular Attention* indicates that these spirits desire the attention of human beings in some way, so as to continue to be in a positive relationship with human beings. The component *Territorial* indicates that these spirits are perceived as occupying a particular locality. Outside their particular locality, it is not necessary to be concerned about these spirits. The component *Formerly Human* indicates these spirits were at one time human beings and will one day be reborn as human as opposed to spirits who have never been human nor will ever become human. The component *Helpful* indicates that this spirit can be counted upon for assistance in some manner. The component *Harmful* indicates that the spirits in this group are

⁹ The term for 'temple' is borrowed from the Northern Thai language. Bisu traditional religion does not have any formal temples. This term refers to a Buddhist temple spirit. Bisu belief in this spirit is likely an import from Buddhism as practiced by the Northern Thai people.

¹⁰ The word for 'well' here is Northern Thai. Before water wells were installed in the Bisu villages, water was fetched from the local stream.

perceived as being generally harmful to human beings rather than helpful. The component *Nature* indicates that this group of spirits tends to be associated with some aspect of nature such as a river, a field or the forest. The component *Gender* simply indicates whether or not this group of spirits is perceived as having a male or female gender. Lastly, the component *Personal Name* indicates whether or not any of these beings has a personal name attributed to them.

Table 10: Componential Analysis of Bisu Spirit Beings

Componential Features	Spirit Category			
	Familial	Protector	Nuisance	Nature
Supernatural	+	+	+	+
Kinship Link	+	-	-	-
Require Regular Attention	+	+	-	-
Territorial	-?	+	+	+
Formerly Human	+	-	+/-	-
Require Regular Appeasement	+	+	-	-
Helpful	+	+	-	-
Harmful	-	-	+	+
Nature	-	-	-	+
Gender	+	-	-	-
Personal Name	-	-	-	-

From the above chart, the components common to all *familial* spirits are that they are supernatural beings who are *formerly human*, maintaining the *gender* they had when they were human and who have a *kinship* link to the living, from whom they require regular attention as well as appeasement in exchange for assistance to the living kin.

The components common to all *protector* spirits are that they are territorial supernatural beings with no kinship link to the living, who have never been human beings and who require regular attention and appeasement in exchange for providing assistance in some form.

We can see from the above chart that *familial* spirits and *protector* spirits are separated by three components. *Familial* spirits have a kinship link with the living whereas the *protector* spirits do not. They are also *formerly human* and have *gender*.

Also summarized in the above chart are the *nuisance* spirits. The features that are common to all *nuisance* spirits are that they *territorial* supernatural beings who are sometimes *formerly human* and sometimes not and who can be *harmful* to human beings.

Lastly, the above chart illustrated the features common to all *nature* spirits. These features are that they are *territorial* supernatural beings who are associated with an aspect of *nature* and who can be *harmful* to human beings.

4.4.1 Bisu Familial Spirits

All the *familial* spirits listed below would also possess all of the features mentioned under familiar spirits in Table 7. The features for *Grandmother* spirit, *Grandfather* spirit, *Mother* spirit and *Father* spirit are: +1 *Generation* and +2 *Generation* and *Male* and *Female*. +1 *Generation* indicates that this spirit is removed from the living relative (ego) by one direct generation. +2 *Generation* indicates that this spirit is removed from the living relative by two generations. What is important to note here is that after a *formerly human familial* spirit such as *Grandmother* spirit moves beyond +2 Generations from ego and are still not yet reincarnated, they move into the category of *gu dae* (ꨀꨁꨂꨃ). These are spirits that for whatever reason were never able to reincarnate (at least not yet) and therefore have become angry and lurk around the village at night. They have lost their *kinship* link to the group, as their families no longer make offerings specifically for them. This is important to note when talking to Bisu speakers about the nature of the soul and what happens to it after death. Any key term for using the Bisu term for 'soul' must take these beliefs into consideration.

4.4.2 Bisu Nuisance Spirits

The following chart illustrates the componential features for individual Bisu *nuisance* spirits. Again, the features that are common to all *nuisance* spirits are that they are *territorial* supernatural beings who are sometimes *formerly human* and sometimes not and who can be *harmful* to human beings. Terms for each of the types elicited from questionnaires are listed at the top of the chart. The componential features for particular *nuisance* spirits are: *Formerly Human*, *Formerly Familial Spirit*, *Group*, *Cemetery* or *Cremation Site*, *Cave* and *Possession*. The feature *Formerly Human* is the same as the previous chart. However not all members of the category of *nuisance* spirits share this feature, so it is necessary

to place it here again. The feature Formerly Familial spirit indicates that this spirit was previously one of the *familial* spirits, but no longer has a *kinship* link with the living. Their children and grandchildren are now deceased. They have not yet been reborn as humans, and there is no longer anyone to pay attention to them. The feature *Group* indicates that this term is used to denote not any individual spirits, but a collection of them. The feature *Cemetery or Cremation Site* indicates that this spirit is believed to reside in the vicinity of anywhere where people have been buried or cremated. The feature *Cave* indicates that this spirit resides near a cave where people have been buried. The feature *possession* indicates that this particular spirit may on occasion enter into the body of a human being, causing harm to the person being possessed.

Table 11: Componential Analysis of Bisu Nuisance Spirits

	<i>Gudae</i> (ဂူແດ)	<i>Pumdae</i> (ປູມແດ)	<i>Htamdae</i> (ຫາມ ແດ)	<i>Daephakdae</i> (ແດພາກແດ)
Features				
Formerly Human	+	+	+	-
Formerly Familial Spirit	+	-	-	-
Group	+	-		-
Cemetery or Cremation Site	-	+	-	-
Cave	-	-	+	-
Possession	-	-	-	+

The above chart summarizes that the term *gu dae* (ဂူແດ) denotes a group of nuisance spirits that are formerly human and formerly familial spirits. The term *pum dae* (ປູມແດ) denotes an individual nuisance spirit that is formerly human, residing near a cemetery or cremation site. The term *htam dae* (ຫາມ ແດ) denotes a nuisance spirit that is formerly human and residing in or around a cave that has been used a burial site. The term *daephakdae* (ແດພາກແດ) denotes a nuisance spirit that is not formerly human and occasionally possesses people.

The above chart illustrates that the term *daephakdae* (ແດພາກແດ) denotes a type of spirit that has the fewest features in common with other *nuisance* spirits in that it is not *formerly human*.