The Nuosu Book of Origins
Bender, Mark, Luo, Qingchun, Zopqu, Jjivot, Harrell, Stevan

Published by University of Washington Press

Bender, Mark, et al.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/81756.

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Preface

On a mild summer day in 2005, Aku Wuwu and I traveled by jeep into a narrow valley in Xide County, in the Liangshan Mountains of southern Sichuan. Our mission was to find a folk version of The Book of Origins, which relates the origins of the life-forms of earth and sky, including the early human lineages. The epic is key to the ritual life of the Nuosu, the largest subgroup of the Yi ethnic group in southwest China. Versions of the epic are transmitted by way of oral performances and written texts in connection with various ritual events. We hoped to find a content-rich version written in Yi script, one suitable for translating into Chinese and English for local, national, and global audiences.

This folk epic is called Hnewo teyy in the Xide dialect of Northern Yi, which is recognized as the standard Yi dialect in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, the major administrative unit of the Yi areas in southern Sichuan. A lead from one of Aku’s former students brought us to Mishi (Mishi Zhen), a small town located at a crossroads alongside a winding stream within a patchwork of green fields, forested hillsides, cliffs, and hidden waterfalls. We settled there in the local government compound, where anthropologist Stevan Harrell and Yi scholar Bamo Ayi had conducted fieldwork on Nuosu culture in 1994. The red-brick buildings surrounding an empty courtyard contained all the offices needed for running the upland township.

The next afternoon we were joined by a diminutive elder named A Yu bimo, who had walked for hours down slippery mountain pathways to visit with us. He had taken time away from preparations for the upcoming buckwheat harvest for the journey. A Yu bimo was a ritual specialist, a kind of folk priest. The bimo are venerated for their knowledge of ancient script traditions and their ability to interface with the supernatural world.
In the summer of 2007, bimo priest A Yu traveled a whole day down a mountain road to meet Jjivot Zopqu, Aku Wuwu, and Mark Bender in the Mishi government office.

A Yu bimo wore a small black turban, a well-worn felt cloak, and muddy, knee-high rubber boots. Over one shoulder was slung a mesh bag made of hemp fibers filled with scrolls and ritual implements; over the other was a smoking pouch made from the soft leather of a water deer, known for its fragrant, magical musk. For Aku and the local Nuosu people involved in the project, the bimo’s presence throughout our visit legitimized our engagement with The Book of Origins text on the planes of both the mundane and numinous worlds.

Arriving later the same day from another upland village was a lanky, middle-aged man by the name of Jjivot Zopqu. One of the roles he played in his community was that of ndeggu. Ndeggu were the traditional conflict arbitrators and wise counsels in many Nuosu communities before those duties were taken over by government cadres during social reforms in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Harrell 2001, 96). Highly regarded for their wisdom and oratory, such wise men are still important bearers of traditional lore. Although ndeggu do not normally conduct rituals like the bimo priests, many have deep knowledge of ritual and related texts (Ma 2004, 90–92).
We soon discovered that Jjivot Zopqu was indeed a vast resource of traditional knowledge, and a good communicator in both Nuosu and standard Chinese. Aside from his informal activities as a wise man, Jjivot had served in the military as a young man and had held several local-level official positions (attested to by a small pile of certificates with red plastic covers he had garnered over the years). He also kept a farmstead high in the mountains at which he and his family raised goats, pigs, and chickens, and farmed potatoes, maize, buckwheat, and fruit trees.

Once we had settled into the deep leather chairs of the Mishi office, Jjivot drew from his pocket one of two notebooks he would eventually share with us. This first, smaller one had a picture of Chairman Mao Zedong on the cover. (The other cover, we would learn, featured a smiling young woman in modern dress.) As Jjivot opened the notebook, he revealed page after page of lines written in traditional Yi script. He explained that some years earlier he had copied the contents of a dilapidated scroll (now lost) that had belonged to a ndeggu who was related to a former upper-class family. Although the exact age of the scroll is unknown, it likely was one in a series of hand
copies that dated back many decades if not centuries. Sometime after transcribing the scroll, Jjivot recast the content word for word into the Liangshan Standard Yi Script. This modern syllabic script is based on the traditional local variant of traditional Yi script used by bimo of the Xide area. The standard script was formulated by government scholars in the mid-1970s and promoted at local levels as a way to increase literacy in the mother tongue. Aku Wuwu was proficient in reading both script traditions, making the discovery of the ancient script version and the modern revised script version opportune. Jjivot later allowed us to make photocopies of both notebooks. The translation in this volume is based on these written versions rescued and transliterated by Jjivot Zopqu. Though not a bimo ritualist, he acted in the spirit of the transmission tradition by copying and preserving the text.

Over the following days, both Jjivot and the elder bimo commented at length on various facets of The Book of Origins and local Nuosu customs that were paralleled in the narrative. Using the version in standardized graphs, Jjivot explicated the content line by line, speaking mostly in Nuosu and sometimes in Chinese. One day he read the entire poem aloud (in one long go) in order to convey to us his understanding of the sound and rhythm of
the Nuosu poetic register. At the beginning of the narration, about fifteen officials and office workers and a few of their friends and relatives were present, though the number dwindled as the event proceeded. Jjivot read at a rather even pace, vocalizing certain passages with more speed and intensity, especially the last few stanzas. The reading lasted well over two hours (for 112 pages of the handwritten text), with only a few short breaks when recording tapes were changed. During the delivery he smoked several cigarettes and afterward indulged in a handmade metal smoking pipe. In the years that followed, Jjivot read (or, at times, recited from memory) passages of the poem for us and other small audiences in the same rapid manner, with text always at hand.

The most memorable performance was at a gathering in the summer of 2009 held to mark our visit to his mountain home (Bender 2012, 240–42). The dwelling was a stockade of earth and wood positioned near the crest of a high hill bordered by a steep gorge on one side and higher cliffs to the rear. After hours of walking up the gorge, which was lined with pines, cypress, fir, and rhododendrons, our small group of folklorists and photographers crawled up a long, deep trench of earth and stone that led to the gate of the compound. We were met there by Jjivot, his family, and a representative of every family in the valley. They honored us with a feast of a freshly killed goat
and chicken, along with potatoes and buckwheat cakes, all washed down with store-bought beer. After the eating, Jjivot disappeared into a small adobe chamber connected to the main house. In a few moments, he reappeared wearing a black turban, black tunic, and broadly cut blue pants. In accord with custom, these were the clothes he would wear when cremated at the end of his earthly existence.

In Jjivot’s hands were six texts, all original or photocopied handwritten copies of traditional narratives and chants. He took a seat in the sunlight on one side of the courtyard and spread the texts out on the ground. One of the local men bent forward and straightened the reciter’s wide pant legs, allowing him to assume a dignified position. The ndeggu paused for a moment as the audience of thirty or so kin and friends assembled, and then proceeded to perform a kenre, a sort of oral poetry riff used to both welcome and cajole the guests. He then took up a text from the ground and, barely glancing at it, recited several passages of verse. The lines, which he seems to have memorized, were from the Nuosu classic on proper conduct known as The Book of Teachings (Hmamu teyy). After delivering the passages aloud,
he set down the text and took up a copy of *The Book of Origins*. In his quick and clipped manner, he read aloud the section on the origin of the sky and earth and a short passage about the birth of the mythic hero Zhyge Alu. This succinct performance was the highlight of our visit and provided an opportunity for Jjivot to revive awareness of the epic tradition among individuals in the community. Some audience members, such as his daughter, who was on vacation from her factory job in eastern China, are cut off from the daily flow of tradition due to work outside the community (Liu 2010, 18–19; Heberer 2014, 36–38).

After that first visit in Mishi, we began translating into Chinese and English the text that Jjivot Zopqu had copied in two formats from the ancient scroll. We returned many times to the Liangshan Mountains to experience and research aspects of culture related to the epic, and review the translation with Jjivot, who tirelessly offered explanations and advice. Jjivot’s helpful nephew Jjivot Yyzu, an official in the county cultural bureau who helped his uncle copy the epic into the standard script format, also answered questions about the meaning of certain passages, terms, and lore. We made every attempt to convey the meaning of each line, often spending hours on a single passage. We were also aided at points by Jjissyt Motie and Lama Itzot, Aku’s former graduate students in Yi literature who have strong backgrounds in English. Ziwo Lama, a professor of Yi linguistics at Southwest Minzu University, reviewed portions of the translations.

We decided to use standard Yi romanization (which, like the standard script, was created in the 1950s) for all Nuosu names and terms and to provide ample notes where needed. In some places the lines of the translation are unclear due to Jjivot’s occasional retention of nonstandard graphs from the original scroll in his version, graphs used in unusual contexts, unclear language, or obscure references. In a few places we reconstructed missing lines based on other existing versions and corrected obvious irregularities in the use of the Yi graphs in names. Despite all our efforts, however, certain breaches of understanding at the literal level of the text still exist. We have indicated several of these places in the notes. To supplement the translation, we have provided an introduction relating basic information on Nuosu culture, the local environment, and the epic tradition to aid readers in approaching *The Book of Origins* as a unique form of folk literature that exists both in written form and as oral performance. For those interested in the original language, the text written wholly in the standard Yi romanization may be accessed at https://doi.org/10.6069/9780295745701.s01.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The compilers of this volume would like to thank everyone involved in its production. We would especially like to thank the many persons who contributed to the project in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (especially those in Xide, Mishi, Meigu, Mianning, Zhaojue, and Ebian). We are grateful for the aid of many persons at Southwest Minzu University in Chengdu, Central Minzu University in Beijing, the Institute of Ethnic Literature in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, the Ohio State University, the University of Washington, and the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture. Special mention is due to Jjivot Yyzu, Bamo Qubumo, Huang Jianming, and Ziwo Lama. Stevan Harrell contributed in many ways, and we are especially thankful for his encouragement and expertise. We are thankful to Lorri Hagman, Caitlin Tyler-Richards, and all the other helpful persons at the University of Washington Press for their care in production. The project benefited from a Fulbright grant, funding from the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University, and resources from the Yi Studies Institute at Southwest Minzu University. We reserve special thanks for our respective families and friends for their untiring support.