The Nuosu Book of Origins

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In this book, Northern Yi (Nuosu) words are represented using a romanization system introduced in the 1970s. Although the Yi have both classical and modern script traditions that use graphs to represent sounds, romanization was developed to make reading easier to learn.

Each syllable of a Yi word is a separate unit consisting of an initial consonant and a vowel. These syllables, depending on context, can represent different words. For example, bbo (the graph written as ꍱ in the modern script) can mean “go,” “tree,” “mountain,” etc. In some cases, two or more syllables are combined, as in pobbo ꍱꏳ (flag). For a complete guide to the sounds and pronunciation of modern Northern Yi graphs and romanization, see Nuosu Yi–Chinese–English Glossary, compiled by Ma Linying, Dennis Walters, and Susan Walters (2008, 6). Their glossary also offers a table comparing Northern Yi romanization and the International Phonetic symbols for the language (ibid., 804; http://nuosuyi.webonary.org/?lang=en).

Like Chinese, Yi is a tonal language. In the Northern Yi romanization system, the speech tone indicators are attached to the end of a monosyllable. They represent the tone contour of the word. The tone indicator letters are not part of the spelling of the word and should not be pronounced.

The four tones are:

\[ t = \text{high tone} \]
\[ x = \text{mid-high tone} \]
\[ [\text{no letter}] = \text{mid-level tone} \]
\[ p = \text{low, falling tone} \]

For example, the word bimo ꍱꏳ (Yi priest) is written bimo\(x\) with the tone indicator \(x\) attached, indicating that bimo should be pronounced with the mid-high tone. Since the tone indicator convention can be confusing to
readers not familiar with the system, tone indicators are not attached to Yi words in this book with the following exceptions: passages of Northern Yi romanization in the introduction (to illustrate the tone patterning of the epic), the version of the table of contents in the appendix, the glossary, and the official names of some contemporary Nuosu people (such as Jjivot Zopqu). When the tone-indicating letters *t*, *x*, and *p* are included, they are distinguished with bold type, with the exception of several contemporary names. In some places, words both with and without tone indicators are provided to aid specialists.

Double consonants (bb, dd, gg, zz, ss, rr, jj) represent certain sounds (phonemes) at the beginnings of syllables. Other initial sounds not found in English or standard Chinese (Mandarin) phonology are: hm, nd, hn, mg, ng, nr, nj. Many names with these features appear in the epic text, especially in the early and final sections. Words are pronounced as a series of monosyllables, which are made of either vowels alone or a consonant and vowel unit. The letter “r” is sometimes used as a final consonant, although most syllables consist of or end with a vowel.

Here are a few examples of names with the syllabic breakdown in parentheses (without tone indicators):

Ngeti Gunzy (nge ti gu nzy)
Anyu Ddussy (a nyu ddu ssy)
Dishy Shuonuo (di shy shuo nuo)
Pumo Hnixyyr (pu mo hni yyr)
Bilu Hendi (bi lu he ndi)
Nyirrry Aho (nyi rrry a ho)
Anre Bburfur (a nre bbur fur)
Jodda Tihxa (jo dda ti hxa)
Hxorryr Lynge (hxo rrry ly nge)

Care should also be taken in attempting to pronounce place-names such as Syrodazhy (syr o da zhy) and Milinduxy (mi li ndu xy). A complete chart of the sounds of Northern Yi is included in the Ma, Walters, and Walters (2008) glossary.

Finally, conventions vary on how to separate romanized syllables. For most nouns and proper names we have linked the syllables together (*bimo*, rather than *bi mo*). Nuosu (N:) and Chinese (Ch:) words are distinguished as necessary in the text. The lines in the epic text generally follow Jjivot Zopqu’s version as copied into Northern Yi. In some cases, however, long lines have been divided, with the runover line indented.