Introduction

The Nuosu Book of Origins tells the story of the creation of the world, centered on landscapes in southwest China. Transmitted in oral and written forms, the epic has circulated for centuries among a people known today as the Nuosu, whose former upper-caste members were once overlords of vast tracts of farmland and forest in the uplands of southern Sichuan and neighboring provinces. Versions of the narrative are performed by priests called bimo and other tradition-bearers familiar with its content. The story unfolds as an all-encompassing genealogy that generation by generation plots the origins and relatedness of celestial bodies, landforms and waterways, and the plants, animals, and peoples that populate the diverse ecological niches of earth, water, and sky.

This relatedness between the environment and its inhabitants is in ways similar to contemporary themes in the emerging fields of literature of the environment and ecocriticism.¹ Some ecocritics see life-forms, the landscape, and ultimately the cosmos as part of a diverse “pluriverse,” a view that has been influenced by the worldviews of some indigenous peoples, especially in parts of South America, who recognize a connectedness and relatedness between humans, other life-forms, and the environment (de la Cadena 2010). Although the Nuosu model of connectedness expressed in The Book of Origins is different in certain major ways from the societies on which pluriverse thinking focuses—given that traditionally Nuosu society was highly stratified and located on the fringes of imperial China—the idea of being genealogically linked to a family tree of life-forms is inherent in traditional Nuosu mythology (Bender 2011, 274). Nuosu connectedness also bespeaks an intimacy with local conditions and the knowledge of agriculture and livestock-rearing needed in the diverse upland environments of southwest China.
Since the 1950s, Chinese scholars have seen the creation epics and narrative poems from the various ethnic groups in southwest China, including *The Book of Origins*, as “encyclopedias” of local knowledge (Zuo 2006, 127). The detail given to aspects of the landscape and life-forms that appear in such texts could be aptly described as “cosmographic,” a term coined by the late nineteenth-century anthropologist Franz Boas that has been revived by the indigenous-literature scholar and ecocritic Joni Adamson (2013). As a repository of knowledge of human culture and environmental lore, *The Book of Origins* (in its many written and oral versions) is the cosmographic urtext among the ancient narratives and rituals of the Nuosu.

*The Book of Origins* begins with an era of transformation in which nascent life-forms are carefully placed within the newly made landscape by a god sent from the sky. In what might be called an “animistic” era, all living beings possess supernatural powers, and all creatures can speak (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 472–74). This phase, however, is cut short by a period of intense warming caused by the presence of too many suns and moons. The crisis of overheating is resolved by the intervention of a mythic archer who stands atop a fir tree and shoots down all but one sun and one moon. Thereafter comes a reseeding of life on earth, brought by red snow that falls from the sky. Multiple life-forms again populate the landscape, and human customs and protocols take shape; but this age is also cut short by an inundating flood.

Only one earthingling survives this second era of destruction. The youngest of three sons, he manages with the aid of animals rescued from the floodwaters to ascend to the sky and wed the youngest daughter of the sky god. Ultimately, the couple’s progeny divides into groups that fan out and integrate into their respective places in the rugged landscape. Even in the early decades of the twenty-first century, many customs and practices described in the epic continue to serve as templates for marriages, rules of hospitality, sacrifices to the spirits, and the genealogies of Nuosu clans.

The Nuosu, who number more than 2.3 million, are regarded as the largest division (out of more than eighty subgroups) of the Yi ethnic group (Ch: Yizu). One of China’s fifty-five official ethnic minority groups, the Yi are a diverse people of around 10 million whose many dialects are classified in the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. The Nuosu speak a cluster of dialects called Northern Yi. The Yi homelands are in the uplands of southwest China, also home to other peoples, such as Tibetans (Zang), Pumi, Naxi, Lisu, Hani, Lahu, and Han (China’s majority ethnic group) (Harrell 2001, 130). Most Nuosu live in the southern part of Sichuan, though about two hundred years ago some families migrated into the border area between Sichuan and northwest Yunnan near Lake Lugu.
Where *The Book of Origins* was first written down and its earliest area of circulation are still in question, though hints from ancient Yi writings, oral tradition, and historical and archeological evidence suggest the textual hearth is the area that includes northeast Yunnan, the western quadrant of what is now Guizhou, and parts of present-day Liangshan Prefecture in southern Sichuan (Harrell, Bamo, and Ma 2000, 128). The epic continues to exist in many written versions handed down by generations of *bimo* priests and other tradition-bearers. The ritual specialists perform portions of the epic orally during rituals, sometimes cued by the written scripts and sometimes from memory. At certain life-cycle events, particularly weddings and funerals, folk singers elaborately extemporize passages of the poem, based on oral or written versions with which they are familiar. Thus, the epic is not considered as solely a text of ritualists (that is, a *bimo teyy*, or *bimo* book) but is shared among differing transmitters whose versions comprise the epic in all its written, orally dynamic, and imagined forms. Along with the written texts, oral performances, and the singers’ mental templates, themes and
motifs in the epic are found in many other aspects of Yi verbal art, including folktales, origin chants, and proverbs.

The sum of these variegated expressions of the epic and epic material make up what might be called the “pool of tradition” of The Book of Origins, available to transmitters, audiences, and the occasional ethnographer (Honko 2000, 218, 223–26). Similar narratives about the origins of peoples and things are also part of the cultural heritage of many other ethnic minority groups in south and southwest China, including Miao (Hmong), Yao, Dong, Zhuang, Wa, Lahu, Lisu, Hani, and Naxi. Some themes and motifs in The Book of Origins and in other epics from the southwest are also found in ancient myths associated with local cultures of the Han people, as well as among some tribal groups in Southeast Asia and Northeast India.

PEOPLE, PLACE, AND CULTURE

The term “Yizu” (Yi ethnic group) was officially adopted in the 1950s as part of a larger census and ethnic identification project in which the Chinese government gave “minority nationalities” (shaoshu minzu) official recognition and status (Harrell 2001, 39–45). After linguistic, cultural, and historical data were analyzed, several dozen local cultures in southwest China, going by many different names, were recognized as being similar enough to be classified in the single Yizu category, despite often stark differences between them at the “on-the-ground” local level (Mullaney 2010, 6–7). Some of these peoples were once known to outsiders as “Lolo,” a term that often carried a pejorative meaning though in some instances was a self-referential name, especially in certain areas of Yunnan (Mueggler 2001, 15). The name “Ni” (sometimes written as “Gni” and “Niₚ,” with the addition of the falling tone marker, p) is a very ancient name for many of the cultures likely making up the contemporary Yizu. The term “Ni” appears in the latter parts of The Book of Origins that relate the migrations of the early Yi groups.

As noted, the Nuosu are the largest subgroup of the Yi ethnic group. They speak Nuosuhxo, also known as Northern Yi. Northern Yi has several mutually intelligible dialects, although the dialect spoken in Xide County is the official standard. Like the other Yi languages (also called Loloish, Ngwi, or Nisoic), Northern Yi is in the somewhat problematic grouping called Tibeto-Burman, a subset of the Sino-Tibetan language family (Bradley 1997, 43; Lama 2013, 1–5). Tibeto-Burman includes hundreds of languages in southwest China and the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau, parts of Southeast Asia (especially Myanmar), and hundreds of small groups in Northeast India and westward into Nepal. The dozens of Yi subgroups speak different,
often mutually unintelligible languages (Bradley 2001, 206). Among these subgroups are the Lolopo, Lipo, Nisupo, Nesu, and Gnipa of north and central Yunnan, and the Sani, Azhe, and Axi of east-central Yunnan, east of the provincial capital, Kunming. Western Guizhou is the home to many Yi people, often self-referencing as “Nasu.” A few Yi speakers are also found in the western part of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Although most Nuosu now live in the Liangshan Mountains of southern Sichuan and nearby northwest Yunnan, written records and oral traditions suggest the Nuosu ancestors were once a prominent presence in the broken uplands of northern Yunnan and western Guizhou. Though the origins of the Yi ethnic group are continuously under debate, it is likely that in ancient times there were cultural links to areas farther north (in what is now northern Sichuan, Qinghai, and beyond), facilitated by migrations and intermixture between immigrant and local populations (Harrell 2001, 84–85). Intrusions of Mongol troops into the southwest in the thirteenth and the Manchus by the seventeenth are more recent links to the north. Among the “northern” cultural features still observable among the Nuosu are felting, shamanism, horse and herding culture, styles of armor and weapons, eating utensils, and household arrangement. The questions of origins is complicated by the fact that many Han and people of other ethnic groups were captured and assimilated as lower-caste slaves, a practice that continued into the early 1950s (Lin 1961, 107–8).

**LAND AND WATERS**

With their population of more than 2.3 million, Nuosu in southern Sichuan and bordering areas of northwest Yunnan comprise about 51 percent of the area’s population of more than 4.5 million. The area is a rough triangle encompassing Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (Liangshan Yizu Zizhi Zhou). Liangshan Prefecture, at roughly 60,423 square kilometers, lies in the center of southern Sichuan. It includes the seventeen counties and urban zones of Mianning, Zhaojue, Dechang, Yuexi, Yanyuan, Huidong, Huili, Xide, Ganluo, Meigu, Leibo, Puge, Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Jinyang, Ningnan, Butuo, and Xichang City. Other areas with large Nuosu populations are the Ninglang Yi Autonomous County (Ninglang Yizu zizhi xian) in northwest Yunnan, near Lake Lugu; Yanbian County in Panzhihua Municipality; and Ebian and Mabian Counties at the eastern extreme of the Nuosu areas, close to Mount Emei and the Sichuan basin. Throughout this work, the term “Liangshan” refers to the areas of Liangshan Prefecture.
Xichang, the rapidly developing capital of Liangshan, is the most prominent administrative and urban cultural center in the Nuosu areas. Other major cities and large towns include Puge, Yuexi, Zhaojue, and Mianning to the north and east of Xichang. Meigu, lying farther to the east, is regarded as a stronghold of traditional Yi culture, with a population of over 98 percent ethnic Nuosu.

In his ethnographic survey made in the early 1940s, Lin Yaohua described the Liangshan region as being dominated by mountain ranges running north to south, as well as a series of eight ridges extending east that made the whole region seem like a “multiple-legged insect” (Lin 1961, 3). The average elevation in the Liangshan Mountains is around 2,300 meters. The Hengduan range borders the west of the Liangshan area; the Sichuan basin lies to the northeast. The area is earthquake prone, and landslides on the mountain roads are common. The major rivers in the Yi regions in Sichuan are the Jinsha (Upper Yangtze) River to the south and the Dadu River in the north. Other large rivers include the Anning and Yalong. Lake Qionghai, near Xichang, is the largest lake in the area. In Mianning County lies Lake Yihai, the site where in 1935 Chinese Communist troops on the Long March negotiated with Nuosu leaders (including a bimo ritualist) to be granted passage through the Nuosu-controlled mountains.

Until recent decades, large forests of pine (*Pinus yunnanensis*), fir (*Abies*), cypress (*Cupressus*), spruce, alder, oak, and willow covered many upland
areas. Logging, carried out periodically since the 1960s, created extensive deforestation in many areas of Sichuan, including Liangshan, though widespread cutting was ended in 1998 (Shapiro 2015, 43–44). Numerous other species of trees, shrubs, grasses, sedges, and medicinal herbs inhabit the region in zones that range from subtropical to alpine (Poling et al. 2003). Of the many flowering species, varieties of rhododendron (N: *shuoma*) with white and pink blossoms are found throughout the mountains and are an important feature in Nuosu folklore, representing beauty and wisdom.

Among the animals historically inhabiting the area are hares, monkeys, musk deer and other cervids, Asian black bears, red pandas, serows, foxes, otters, leopards, tigers (now extinct in the region), weasels, eagles, hawks, vultures, songbirds, waterfowl, and various frogs, toads, snakes, fish, and insects. As will be seen below, many plants and animals found in the area are mentioned in *The Book of Origins* (Bender 2008, 16–21).

**CLAN AND FAMILY**

Clan and family affiliation are paramount in the social relations among the Nuosu. For several centuries—the dates are not clear—the Nuosu were a stratified caste society based on a fairly limited number of patrilineal clans (*cyvi*). These clans were in constant armed feuds over natural and human resources that sometimes involved cycles of revenge killings. As late as the 1950s, the caste system was still overtly in effect. In the former system, the population was divided into four castes: the relatively small upper-caste *nuoho* (Ch: black Yi); the larger caste of serfs (Ch: white Yi), consisting of a caste called *quho*, a yet lower caste called *mgajie*, and the caste called *gaxy*, which included slaves of the lowest status. This last caste was partially comprised of peoples captured from other ethnic groups—especially Han living in outposts within the Liangshan area or in settlements on its margins. Both *mgajie* and *gaxy* were typically without clan affiliations.

The upper-class group known as *nzymo*, even more powerful than the *nuoho*, were affiliated with the imperial regime by the *tusi* system. This system, which was utilized in the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, was based on the principle of granting official titles to native leaders as a means to control the mountain areas of the southwest (Harrell 2001, 81–87; Whitaker 2008). From at least the Ming, some of the *nzymo* elites were ensconced as *tusi* (Wu Jingzhong 2001, 35–36). The word *nzymo* (or simply *nzy*) appears numerous times in this version of *The Book of Origins*, especially in part 12, “Genealogy of Shyly Wote,” when
recounting the marriage of Shyly Wote. In the present text, the term is usually synonymous with the word *tusi*.

Among the upper classes there was strict caste endogamy, meaning these elites could marry only among themselves. Punishments for infractions against this code could be as harsh as death. The caste system was dismantled in the late 1950s in one phase of the national land reform movement during which private property was taken under state control. In the Nuosu areas this event included the suppression of a prolonged insurgency led by upper-class *nuoho* in the late 1950s whose status was threatened by the policies of change being implemented by the new Chinese government (Harrell 2001, 88–89; Winnington 2008, 76–87). Today, descendants of the previous castes are aware of the former divisions (marked, for instance, by subtle nuances in designs used on women’s traditional clothing), which still informally influence certain social situations, especially the selection of marriage partners.

**RITUALISTS: BIMO AND SUNYI/MONYI**

The most respected ritual specialists of the Nuosu are known as *bimo*. In areas of Yunnan and Guizhou the *bimo* are called *beima*, *bumo*, or other similar names. The *bimo* priests conduct rituals connected with births, marriages, coming of age, deaths, and community welfare (Lin 1961, 127; Bamo Ayi 2001, 125–28). Rituals also include sacrifices to departed ancestors, calling back wandering souls, purification rites, and divination (Bamo Ayi 1994). The grandest ritual is the elaborate *Nimu cobi*, a rite in which one or more *bimo* direct the soul of a dead person to the land of the ancestors. Other rites are enacted to protect an individual, a family, or village against maladies and disasters. Such calamities are invariably attributed to a huge variety of ghosts, including ghosts of smallpox, leprosy (a rare but endemic disease in Liangshan), skin maladies, and hereditary diseases. During the rituals a *bimo* determines that a certain number and complement of chickens, sheep, goats, pigs, or cattle (the latter being a very serious offering) are to be sacrificed.

*Bimo* are virtually all male and inherit the role from fathers or uncles. A distinguishing mark of a *bimo* is his ability to read the traditional scriptures and perform passages from them in the various rituals. *Bimo* are regarded as specialists learned in ritual, genealogy, astrology, local geography, history, and traditional lore who can engage with the spirit world. *Bimo* do not charge set rates for their services, though it is customary for clients to give foodstuffs (often portions of sacrificed animals) and cash in acknowledgment of
services rendered. Most bimo rely on other means of support, such as farming, to sustain their families. In a number of instances *The Book of Origins* mentions the acts and genealogies of important bimo.

In Liangshan, the accoutrements of a full-fledged bimo typically include a ritual hat (*hlevo*) of bamboo and felt, a brass bell (*biju*), a special fan (*qike*) of bamboo (or copper) with a cherrywood handle carved with animal effigies (representing sky, earth, and waters), a spirit quiver (*vytu*) in the shape of a wooden tube (with one end styled as a bear’s mouth) used as a weapon against malevolent ghosts, and a mesh bag (*hxiekuo*) of plant fiber used to hold the sacred written scriptures (Harrell, Bamo, and Ma 2000, 52–59). In the course of a ritual, the bimo will erect an assemblage of sacred grasses and shrubs and use the blood of sacrificed animals to paint “ghost boards” (*nyicy sypi*) depicting various mythical figures. Such boards typically include images of the culture hero Zhyge Alu, along with his dog, a great snake, a peacock, and spirit winds. Among the types of ghost boards are those named Scabby Head Ghost, Purification Rite, Unnatural Death, and Harmful Creatures.

To combat ghosts, the bimo may also employ effigies (*rybbur*) of them made of intricately twisted bundles of grass which are burned after the rituals. In some areas, small clay figurines (*zabbur*) of ghosts are also used. Among these figures of grass or clay are the Wicked Spirit, Flatland Ghost,
Cattle-Eating Ghost (used when cattle are sacrificed), Riverside Ghost, Bride-Protecting Ghost, Insane Person Ghost, Critical-Illness Ghost, and others. In grand ritual events, such as the Nimu cobi, the bimo create intricate pathways of peeled sticks that serve as the route of travel for the departing soul. In some places, the ritualists place a large buckwheat cake pierced with a hole within the stick pathway, signifying the passageway between this life and the realm of the ancestors.

The soul-calling rituals (yyrhila) are commonly held for a person (often a child) who seems despondent or is otherwise out of sorts. The Nuosu believe that the life essence or spirit, Gefi, is attached to the body of all Yi women at birth, allowing them to become pregnant. It is commonly held that during life a person has a soul (yyr) that may sometimes leave the body due to illness. The rituals for recalling lost souls first involve the bimo setting up a mguva, or assemblage of ritual objects, in one corner of the main room in the afflicted person’s household. The items in this space typically include clumps of sacred yy yyr grass (Ch: maidong; Ophiopogon japonicus), some leafy willow (N: yy hxo; Ch: liushu; Salix babylonica) branches, wood-chip “bullets” for throwing at ghosts, a container of sacred water, small rocks (which are heated during the ritual), ghost boards, etc. The ritual process entails the performance of a long series of chants that typically concern the genealogies of heaven and earth, the hero Zhyge Alu, the local clans and family, ghosts, and so forth. Content often overlaps with that found in The Book of Origins. The soul-calling rites always include the initial sacrifice of one or more chickens (in some places a big red or black rooster is used) or even a small pig to draw away the harmful ghosts and malevolent forces. During the ritual the wandering soul is entreated to return, lured by promises of food, drink, and the joys of home life. At the climax, the returning soul follows a hempen thread leading from a needle stuck in the lintel of the doorway into a lidded wooden jar placed beside the bimo. Once the ritualist has determined that the soul is inside the container, he slams the lid shut, exclaiming, “Ha!”

Soul-calling may be combined with home-purification rites, still very common today and usually held in the main room of a house (including urban apartments). At one point in the ritual, the family crouches together in the center of the room and the bimo waves a live chicken around them several times to gather the harmful forces. The chicken is sacrificed and cast out the door—hopefully landing with its head pointing outward. It is generally understood that the souls of the sacrificed creatures carry away the harmful ghosts to a remote area distant from human inhabitation. Around Yuexi and Ganluo such a place is a great ravine known as Ddabbulomo.
Gorge. By custom, the meat of the sacrificed animals is ritually cooked and divided among the *bimo*, his helper, the family, and all guests present.

Other ritualists in Nuosu society are the (male) *sunyi* and (female) *monyi*. They share many attributes with shamans in North Asia and the Himalayas (Sidky 2011; Blackburn 2010, 134–39). These Nuosu shamans are recruited to the vocation by experiencing bouts of mental and physical illness that can be alleviated only by becoming a practitioner. Both *sunyi* and *monyi* typically go into trance states while beating a hand drum made of wood and leather. A trance state is attributed to the presence of a tutelary spirit called a *wasa*. Some of the *sunyi* demonstrate their powers by whirling a water-filled bowl or burning board on their head, licking hot plowshares, fire-walking, fire-eating, running barefoot through pots of burning oil, and other feats. One well-known *monyi* lifts a dead sheep by her teeth and twirls it around while in a trance state. Although normally unable to read the Yi script (which a *bimo* priest can do), some *sunyi* and *monyi* do display written scriptures during their rituals, especially when soliciting business in marketplaces. Shamans are usually engaged by individuals or families to deal with illnesses caused by lesser malevolent ghosts and to conduct fortune-telling practices using raw eggs or sticks nicked with tiny cuts.
Either a *bimo* or a *sunyi* may participate in some phases of a young child’s life. Three to five days after birth, a child is taken outside into the sunshine for the first time and is washed by a ritualist. For a girl, a fertile married woman trims the infant’s hair and places it in an amulet tied to its clothes. A red or white thread is tied on a baby’s arm—left for a male and right for a female. A boy has his left ear pierced; a girl has both ears pierced. Thread loops are placed in the ears. A child’s name is important and multilayered, reflecting clan and birth-order status as well as positive aspirations that include livestock, gold or silver, mountains or waters, wild animals, and other powerful or worthy items or concepts (Ma 2001, 83–90).

Marriage customs play a prominent role in *The Book of Origins*. In part 12, the early ancestor Shyly Wote goes looking for his father. Some Chinese scholars, following anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan’s idea that primitive matrilineal societies existed in North America since pre-Columbian times (an idea that influenced Marx and Engels’s theory of social evolution), interpret this process of searching for a father as reflecting a supposed ancient transition from matrilineal to patrilineal structures in Nuosu society. Content-wise, the story relates how Shyly Wote becomes married to an upper-caste *nzymo*’s daughter—thus establishing Nuosu marriage customs. Later in the same part, Jjumu Vuvu, the lone survivor of a great, cataclysmic flood, marries Hnituo, a daughter of the sky god Ngeti Gunzy. Their marriage eventually results in the rupture between the gods in their heavenly palace and the relatively poorer earthlings. Before the bonds with the sky are broken, the celestial bride secretly brings to earth staples of the Nuosu lifestyle, including buckwheat, hemp, and the turnips (Lepidium) called *voma* in Nuosu (Ch: *yuangen*) (Chen et al. 2015, 654).

Traditional marriages in Liangshan today follow a general pattern, though there is much local variation. In the recent past, wedding customs differed significantly between the castes in the traditional hierarchy. Many weddings are now a combination of Nuosu, Han, and Western traditions. One aspect that ties present-day traditions with earlier ones is the concept of a suitable pairing. The ancestral lines of the bride and groom are examined carefully by the respective families to determine if the young people are of equivalent status, lineage background, and wealth. Besides incompatible bloodlines, other factors that could derail a potential marriage are grave illness in the family line (especially leprosy) and offensive body odor—though historically pairs sharing this condition could marry. Cross-cousin marriage between the children of elder brothers and sisters was once the norm, and even today...
permission must be gained from the groom’s maternal uncle if other arrangements are made (Lin 1961, 70–74). Normally, a female go-between of some standing in the community will investigate the respective families, and if one side attempts to hide or withhold faults, conflict will result.

An outline of the traditional marriage process includes the following steps. As noted, the first step is the connecting of elders of the two families by way of a go-between (furgumga). In some cases, this engagement occurs when the children are very young. In the past, the future couple did not meet before the actual marriage (though that is not the case today). Once suitability has been established, the next step is the formal engagement (vussamu), which includes selecting the date of the wedding and the presentation of a predetermined amount of money by the groom’s family to the bride’s family, who kill a pig or sheep for a mutual feast. The gallbladder of the slaughtered creature is examined carefully. Ideally, it is heavy with gall—if not, or if it cannot be located—the marriage may be called off.

At her coming-of-age ceremony, usually held at age fifteen or seventeen, a girl changes her single braid into the two braids used to tie over her new headdress. She will also exchange the red strings in her ears for silver earrings and her light child’s skirt for a full-length, pleated young woman’s skirt (which is pulled on over her head during the ritual). Thus, though pants or other modern clothes are usually worn in everyday life, she is ritually marked as a young adult. Until they marry, young adults are free to be intimate with anyone in their status and age cohort other than members of one’s own clan. Eligible males, however, cannot force intimacy on their female counterparts. One folk belief related to this taboo is that deer musk applied to an overly aggressive man’s privates will make him impotent. It is said that even before modern birth-control there were few premarital pregnancies; those that occurred were regarded as a loss of face for the clan. Young women were said to be skilled in counting the days in their cycles, and deer musk applied to the body could prevent conception. Young women today normally marry after age seventeen, depending in part on age taboos and the results of divination. After the engagement date is set (which may be years earlier) and gifts and money are exchanged, the bride may no longer have casual relations with the opposite sex, giving up the freedom gained at the coming-of-age ceremony.

On the night before the bride departs for the groom’s home, women in her village sing bridal laments all night long. The bride passively internalizes the lyrics and prepares emotionally to leave her family. One of the most popular laments is called “Mother’s Daughter” (Amo hnisse). It tells of a
young woman who initially resists leaving home to marry but is eventually persuaded to go. Here are a few lines showing the reasoning behind her reluctance:

“If daughter is sent away,
who will tend the sheep and pigs?
If daughter is sent away
who will care for mother and father?”

The lament is regarded as a template of proper filial behavior in Nuosu society, the bride showing reluctance to leave home. The next day male representatives of the groom’s family arrive at the bride’s house and escort her to the groom’s home. The bride has been kept on a restricted diet so she will not have to answer nature’s call during the trip. For at least part of the way she is carried on the back of a young male relative from her father’s side. In the cross-cousin marriage arrangement, the appropriate carrier is determined by generational and family relationships. During the carrying process, it is bad luck for the bride’s family if her feet touch the ground. If the groom’s home is some distance away, the escort party may use horses or motor vehicles for much of the way. A reception is held at the groom’s home at which guests and relatives from the groom’s family and village are served meat, potatoes, buckwheat cakes, other edibles, and alcohol. After three or so days (in some cases one day is enough), the men who brought the bride escort her back to her family, along with gifts of alcohol, meat, and other food items. During her stay at the groom’s home, the bride is with her new female relatives and has no physical contact with the groom. She may visit the groom’s family several times before moving in permanently. Afterward, the couple may begin to have children. Many aspects of the traditional marriage process have been altered in recent decades due to government policies, formal education, the improved economic situation, interaction with other ethnic groups, and movement of young people to urban areas in search of work.

FUNERALS

Bimo and other tradition-bearers have different ideas about the nature of souls, ghosts, the afterworld, and intricacies of funeral rituals. As there is no universal doctrine among the various Yi or Nuosu groups, beliefs and customs vary significantly. That said, scholar of religious studies Benoît Vermander argues that among the Nuosu, at least, there is a recognizable “world
vision” regarding the relation between humans and the spirit realm that is communicated through the rituals and beliefs (1998, xii).

Beliefs concerning souls vary widely and are subject to interpretation. Some say that a person has up to three souls, while others say there is in fact only one soul, but it may move about, especially after death. Some believe that at death three souls are present: one that remains at the cremation (or burial) site, one in the bamboo soul container that is kept in the home, and one that is guided to the land of the ancestors. Others say it is the same soul in all these instances.

The plaited bamboo soul vessel (maddu) plays important roles in customary behavior and ideas about lineages. Each year, or every specified set of years, household members must attend to the proper upkeep of the vessel. For instance, depending on local custom, white wool thread is added to the tiny bamboo carving inside the vessel that represents the deceased. Though upkeep details differ, there is a consistent emphasis on proper maintenance of the soul vessels.

After a certain number of years, as determined by a bimo, a ritual is held to inter the soul vessel, which has been hanging in the house, in a cave or crevice on the sunny side of a cliff. Such a position is associated with fecundity, as a sunlit slope is optimal for growing grain. Ideally the site is surrounded by verdant forest, representing flourishing descendants (Bamo Ayi 1994, 69). The importance of the bamboo soul vessel is reflected by the many references to it in The Book of Origins. In part 12, Shyly Wote is instructed by his elder sister on the importance of properly caring for the soul vessel. Later, animal agents from earth foul the sky god’s palace and steal his family’s soul vessels. In part 22, “Migration of Ahuo,” when the three sons of Puho bicker over how to divide their mother’s inheritance, the result is the establishment of protocols for hanging soul vessels in the home.

Funerals are complex events that can play out over several years. The bimo are chiefly responsible for chanting a scripture that guides the soul of the deceased on a long journey across the landscape to Zzyzzypuvu, the ancient homeland of the Yi ancestors, which by some accounts is near Zhaotong in northeast Yunnan, though ideas on the location vary (Bamo Ayi 1994, 63–74; Huang 2012, 13–15). (For instance, another name for the ancestral hearth is Joturmuggu—sometimes spelled “Joturmuggur”—which may be the place of the same name referenced in part 23, “Genealogy of Nzy Clan.”) During the ritual the bimo gives the soul specific directions about navigating mountains, rivers, and towns encountered on the way. The soul-guiding chant is known in Liangshan as gguhma ggahma, or “pointing/directing the way.” The term for these chants in Chinese, often used by researchers, is zhilu jing
(pointing-the-way scripture). The soul-guiding ritual itself is known in Nuosu as *Nimu cobi* and may be held years after the initial funeral and cremation, in accordance with the directions of a *bimo* and the ability of a family to bear the substantial costs to host the ceremony. Family members parade to the ritual site dressed in their best traditional clothing, the men holding colorful clan banners. The *bimo* chants at various stages of the ritual in the presence of the soul vessels and their contents. Some provisions used by the soul on its journey are part of the ritual assemblage, including paper images of clothing and money and foodstuffs such as buckwheat and oats. Such soul-directing rituals are common among the Yi subgroups (though going by different names) as well as among some other ethnic groups in southwest China and the Eastern Himalayas (Blackburn 2010, 74–76, 276).

While the death of a young person is unlucky, dying is considered the natural end of this life for elders. Funerals for those with progeny are lavish, expensive affairs replete with sumptuous food and drink. Unlike weddings, where all but the bride wear plain clothing, women dress in their finest for funerals of elders. Funerals for those not following ideal life patterns are less lavish. Souls of unmarried persons or those without children are subject to becoming ghosts that will be denied access to the land of the ancestors. Souls of suicides, murderers, or those killed in unnatural calamities may become extremely harmful lingering ghosts that must be ritually dealt with by the *bimo*.

The steps in the funeral process include washing the corpse and dressing it in fine clothes (often prepared years in advance) for viewing on a bier. All relatives from far and wide must, if possible, attend the nightlong wake. During the viewing, groups of women of blood kin and nonblood kin perform folk songs. As described below, young men may participate in a kind of antiphonal song and dance known in the Xide area as *vazyrhli*. In such a performance, two singers stand opposite each other and turn from side to side as they sing origin stories (*bbopa*) and parts of *The Book of Origins*. These exchanges begin with a style of rhythmic delivery like the common *kenre* riffs performed all over Liangshan by folk singers to invoke good luck and fortune. These passages are part of the first stage in the performance called *gebi*, which as the performance unfolds will include the singing of the *bbopa* origin stories. The second stage of the performance, which is held only if singers capable enough to perform are present, is known as *mazyr* and consists of reciting of passages of *The Book of Origins*. Such performances may include two pairs of singers. One pair, known as the “lead oxen” (*lesi*), begins the story, which is echoed, passage by passage, by the other pair, the “plow oxen” (*lemosu*). These antiphonal exchanges are a contest of knowledge and
verbal skill, and the competency of the singers is subject to informal evaluation by the listeners (Bauman 1977, 12).

Later in the night, the bimo begins to recite various origin narratives, including the creation of life on earth and the origins of the local clans, finishing before dawn. The recital is held in front of the bier, to which a black pig is tied. The pig is said to aid the soul in rooting through various barriers on the way to the land of the ancestors. Visitors sleep where they can and eat the meals of meat, buckwheat cakes, potatoes, and soup in rotating groups. Early the next day the corpse is transported to a secluded spot in the mountains and cremated, leaving behind no trace of earthly existence. A stack of nine layers of wood is used to cremate men, and seven layers for women. For cremation, a woman is laid on her right side, whereas a man is laid on his left side. It was once common for Nuosu women to tattoo their hands, often with the shapes of circles. At death, these circles are considered as money for buying water on the journey to the land of the ancestors as well as an identifying mark in the other world.

It is believed that when a woman dies, a female child is born somewhere, and likewise with males. In some instances, a living widow may choose to have her funeral at the time of her husband’s death. In the interim between that time and her own physical death, she leads a simple and reserved existence in a medial state known as jjobiqi. Although her body is in this world, her soul is already in the land of the ancestors.

**MATERIAL CULTURE**

Many items of material culture—the objects of everyday life and the processes surrounding their manufacture and use—are mentioned in The Book of Origins. Some of the items are still part of local traditions in Liangshan, though modern products are rapidly displacing the once handmade culture. The largest expressions of material culture are the farm and village settlements, consisting of architecture and field patterns that vary somewhat within the Liangshan region. Many upland settlements consist of a few homes, stock pens, and outbuildings, often placed in niches on steep hillsides above or near a water source. Potato, maize, and buckwheat fields tend to surround dwellings, and every available inch is cultivated. Homes are made of adobe brick, rammed earth, logs, or even boards. In the lowlands along the banks of the Anning River, where many Nuosi farmers raise rice and cash crops, houses are adobe or fired brick structures with courtyards similar to Han styles (Harrell 2001, 57–58).
Traditional upland Yi houses are rectangular, with a large central room and smaller rooms for storage and sleeping on each end. Courtyards, where many activities take place, are common. Many homes have open timbers in the ceilings, a fire pit to one side of the main room, and no chimney. Smoke exits through cracks in the roof; the insides of older homes are black from years of accumulated soot. The hearth may have a three-legged iron trivet, or three granite hearthstones cut like giant commas that arch over the fire pit. A wooden or bamboo rack is typically hung above the fire to hold certain utensils and to dry foods and animal bladders (used as containers for liquids). According to *The Book of Origins*, the Apuyoqo bird, after eavesdropping on a conversation between the sky god and his wife about the secret of human speech, flew through such a hearth in the sky palace and burned off its tail feathers.

Furnishings in traditional Nuosu homes tend to be sparse. Most have several large storage chests and a chest-like family altar in which heirlooms and valuables are stored. Sometimes families sleep hunched up in their felt cloaks around the hearth or on low wooden or bamboo pallets covered with animal hides. Dirt floors are typical in traditional upland homes.

Architecture varies and certain patterns reflect the former stratified society. For instance, some houses in Meigu County feature the intricately carved and pointed wooden gables and roof beams that were once a mark of upper-class Yi houses. In the poorer upland areas with access to timber, some homes are made of debarked logs, carefully fitted together with a minimum of mud chinking. Such homes have roofs of split shingles or slabs of bark, often secured with lines of field stones. In recent years newly styled villages with modern accommodations and standardized decorative patterns painted on the outsides of houses have been erected in Mianning, Puge, Zhaojue, Butuo, and elsewhere, which may signal the future of rural “Yi-style” housing and village organization. Some modern housing projects have been built specifically for families relocating from the uplands into the valleys.

Despite the increasingly rapid inroads of modernization, some traditional crafts are still practiced today (Harrell, Bamo, and Ma 2000). These include weaving, embroidery, blacksmithing (for making knives, axes, hoes, and other tools), silversmithing (for making jewelry), carpentry, woodworking (including the use of foot-powered lathes to shape bowls), stonework (for creating the uniquely arched hearth stones), and the crafting of musical instruments such as brass mouth harps. In *The Book of Origins*, tools used by the spirits involved in the work of creating the earth include blacksmith hammers, tongs, a forge, and bellows (traditionally these were wood or bamboo pump-bellows or sewn animal hide bags pressed by hand), axes, metal
forks (once used in hunting or warfare), hoes, and a tool for tamping earthen floors and constructing rammed-earth walls.

Other traditional craft items (some now made only for the antique replica market or as festival garb) include leather body armor and arm guards, bows and arrows, steel swords and spears, wooden and leather saddles, other horse tack, muzzle-loading firearms, cattle horns for storing gunpowder, and various tools for fishing, hunting, farming, and household implements. Certain items, particularly wooden eating utensils and saddles, are painted with traditional yellow, red, and black patterns (Harrell, Bamo, Ma 2000, 32–33). Examples of many of these items are on display at the Museum of the Liangshan Yi Slave Society in Xichang.

The production of felt, usually done by men, is an important skill for making a common type of cloak (jieshýr) and bed mats. The felting process, associated with cultures of the northern steppes and Central Asia, involves shearing sheep for wool, washing the wool, separating the fibers, shaping large pads of wet wool into cloaks or bedding material, dyeing (an optional step), and rolling the felt to lock the fibers. In the final steps of cloak making, the folds and creases are set in wooden drying frames, and drawstrings are added. Though felting is also practiced by Qiang, Tibetans, and a few other groups, it is foreign to most cultures in southwest China. Weaving wool or hemp was once a requisite skill for all Nuosu women and is still practiced in

![Folding pleats in a traditional felt cape, Zhaojue, Liangshan](image-url)
Foodways, or the customary manner of preparing and utilizing food, are often mentioned in *The Book of Origins*, and there are many recognizable parallels to contemporary Nuosu eating and hosting customs in the text (Toelken 1996, 200). Basic Nuosu food consists of buckwheat flour (prepared as pancakes, boiled or steamed cakes, or roasted flour mixed with honey or water), potatoes, and maize (both imported to China from the Americas by the sixteenth century), the *voma* turnip, and soups called *ducha* or *dulieba* made of dried turnip greens cooked with soybean meal. Dishes were traditionally eaten without seasoning, or with flakes from a tart-flavored root known as *hmuku* (Ch: *xiangzhang*; *Cinnamomum camphora*).

Meat was rarely eaten by the common castes, though chicken, eggs, pork, and goat meat were prepared at special events. If affordable, beef was served to honored guests and at major ritual sacrifices, a custom that continues today. In some areas, however, poor hosts can still substitute two chickens for an ox. It was (and sometimes is) customary for animals to be killed within hearing range of the guests—as the squeals attest to the freshness of the proffered meat. Due to economic gains in the early twenty-first century, there was a marked increase in animal slaughters at weddings and other occasions involving guests. Since clan, family, and individual “face” and connections depend on adherence to such gifting rituals, some families and even whole communities brought economic hardship on themselves by trying to keep up with or outdo their peers. In response, government restrictions were issued on the number of cattle slaughtered.

A traditional home meal involves the family squatting around two or three wooden bowls filled with potatoes, buckwheat cakes, chunks of meat (if available), and a soup, positioned on the ground near the hearth. Each person has a wooden spoon (*ichy*) with the handle affixed on the side rather than the end. There are no individual food bowls. Everyone is careful to dip out just enough soup or broth so as not to drip into other food bowls. Chunks of meat (with bones), innards (which may include lungs, livers, or braided small intestines), potatoes, and buckwheat cakes are taken gingerly with the right hand and often looked over slowly before eating. Potatoes,
roasted or boiled, are deftly skinned by hand. Guests and elders eat first, and younger people and children eat last. A good guest does not eat too much, does not take the best pieces, and eats quickly, knowing that others are waiting for a share. Such an arrangement is very practical at events like funerals or weddings in which dozens or many hundreds of guests must be fed (a task often divided among the local families, who each feed a certain number of guests). In some instances, guests are expected to bring gifts (hlypu) of food or money to help communally defray the financial burdens on the host family. In an increasing number of homes (and at banquets) chopsticks, individual bowls, and tables, along with hot pepper sauce and a more diverse range of dishes, are popular, especially in areas influenced by urban ways.

Any visit or festive occasion calls for liquor—at least among male participants. Besides commercial alcohol (Ch: bai jiu) and beer there is home-brew made from a volatile mix of grains and herbs fermented like beer in crocks. In some places, homebrew was commonly sipped from a large communal crock with long straws.
Since 1949, collections of oral, and when relevant, written texts have been assembled by scholars, cultural officials, and publishers to form the literary traditions of each of China’s fifty-five ethnic minority groups, creating and recognizing a new literary category within the tradition of Chinese literature—that of “ethnic minority literature” (Ma, Liang, and Zhang 1992; Bender 2016, 261–62). These texts, some of which were collected in the pre-1949 era, include traditional oral songs, stories, proverbs, and epics, as well as modern-style works of authored fiction and poetry. Most works in both categories are published in standard Chinese (whether as translations from native tongues, or as original compositions). In some cases the oral texts are published in bilingual or multilinear formats, and there are bodies of contemporary authored literature published solely in Mongolian, Uygur, Tibetan, Korean, Kazakh, and Yi. About twelve groups had traditional written scripts, though many groups now have romanization systems of modern invention that are used in varying degrees. In a process similar to the recognition of literatures of other official Chinese ethnic groups, a body of oral and written texts have since the 1940s been identified as Yi literature. Thus, the translation of a written version of The Book of Origins in the present volume can be understood as an example of Chinese ethnic minority literature as well as a representative of traditional Yi literature from the Liangshan Mountain region within China and globally.

Written versions of The Book of Origins are part of a vast array of texts written by hand in various Yi scripts (orthographies) that have survived the ages. The texts—all of which are cast as poetry—include lyrics for rituals dealing with harmful ghosts, worshipping dragons, mountain gods, other local gods, and reverencing ancestors; “pointing the way” lyrics and other funeral chants; chants to call back wandering souls; moralistic texts like The Book of Teachings (N: Hmamu teyy) that give advice on proper conduct; historical accounts (including narratives of the great flood and battles with outsiders); clan genealogies; origin stories; astronomy and divination texts; folk medicine; poems; folk stories and songs; long narrative poems; treatises on poetics and philosophy; and translations from traditional Chinese literature.

The Yi literary tradition features both written and oral dimensions. Written texts have been produced for centuries, if not much longer, by bimo and possibly other tradition-bearers. These written texts, however, can be either read or recited from memory by the ritualists. Thus, they can be considered as “oral-connected” texts that exist as written texts yet are subject to oral
delivery. Moreover, versions of some texts are performed by folk singers who cannot read the written Yi and have a different delivery style from the ritualists. All told, the relation between orality and writing is complex and multifaceted in the various Yi script and oral performance traditions. Additional layers of complexity are already being added as traditional texts move by various avenues into the print and digital world.9

The content of texts from the various Yi areas is often quite different, and narratives, for instance, known in one area were not known in other places or are markedly different variants on a theme. For instance, the story of Ashima, a folk heroine of the Sani people of the Stone Forest area of eastern Yunnan, was confined to that area in both written and oral forms until the 1950s and 1960s, when Chinese translations and a film were popularized (Zhao 2003; Bender 2009). A somewhat similar oral narrative of a Nuosu heroine named Gamo Anyo, from the Ebian area of southern Sichuan, was not only unknown among other Yi groups in southwest China but was unknown until recently in many other areas of Liangshan (Wang Changfu 2003, 140–43). Another example is Chronicles of the Southwestern Yi (Ch: Xinan Yizhi), a corpus of texts from Guizhou assembled by Yi scholars that is rich in historical, genealogical, cosmology, and folk knowledge and that differs in specific content from texts documented elsewhere (Wang Yunquan 2008). A number of similar collections of texts, again with different content, have been collected in Yi areas throughout Guizhou, Yunnan, and in Guangxi.10 Variants of the Nuosu Book of Origins (including the version in this volume) that have been documented in the Liangshan Mountains share some themes and motifs with origin epics such as Chamu (typically represented phonetically in Chinese, as there is not an official romanization system for the local dialect) from Chuxiong Prefecture in northern Yunnan and those in other Yi areas, but are otherwise distinctly different and should be considered as local traditions (Guo and Tao 2009). It is only in recent decades that scholars have created an awareness among Yi intellectuals and others of a common, but multifaceted, Yi literary tradition.

Yi traditional literature seems to have been composed and transmitted largely by the bimo priests. That said, some evidence suggests that other sorts of persons may have known the script. For instance, the existence of Yi graphs on stone or bronze objects from Guizhou and Yunnan may indicate there were once literate administrators and officials in the hierarchies of local Yi polities (Bamo Qubumo 2000).

Since the early twentieth century, large numbers of texts have been collected from Yi areas in the southwest, especially in Guizhou and Yunnan, as well as southern Sichuan. The scripts used to write these texts are a unique
creation of early cultures in southwest China and are one of two major writing systems invented in China—the other being the Chinese script. The Chinese term *Yi wen* (Yi script), the present catchall term to describe traditional forms of Yi writing, became popular only after 1949, when the term “Yizu” was first used to categorize the various Yi subgroups. The Yi script tradition, however, may date to nearly two thousand years ago, and its variants have had many names in different times and places. Other written languages of southwest China and border areas of Southeast Asia include Chinese, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Dai, and Burmese. Southwest China also has highly localized traditions of writing such as Naxi “pictographs” of the Lijiang area of northwestern Yunnan, Shui writing of Guizhou, and ancient Bashu pictographs (Ch: *Bashu tuyu*) of Sichuan.

Chinese scholars have identified four major orthographic traditions associated with Yi groups (Huang 2003, 36–37; Bradley 2009, 170). Like the spoken languages (of which there are six large divisions), each of these local script traditions varies considerably from the others and has local variations. The scripts consist of graphs that represent syllables, unlike alphabets, which use combinations of letters to represent sounds. Thus, the traditional scripts have been described as syllabaries, though “less systematic and standardized” than syllabaries for other languages such as Japanese (Ramsey 1987, 259). That said, certain scholars consider some of the graphs as pictographs, ideograms, or logograms, and debate continues among scholars in China about how to characterize the traditional Yi writing system.

The earliest examples of what some scholars consider Yi writing are inscriptions on pottery, stone tablets, and bronze castings dating back well more than one thousand years. Texts written on paper, which are of most concern here, date to at least as early as the late Ming dynasty. These and later texts were transmitted by a process of hand-copying by *bimo* priests in a teacher-to-student dynamic. None of the scripts were standardized beyond the demands of the various lines of transmission by the *bimo*. Thus, even texts by different lineages of *bimo* in an area show variation, including certain differences in script. Whereas the local variations can be explained by intentional or unintentional changes introduced in the transmission process, the larger differences between the regional script traditions invite other explanations.

One theory suggests this variation could come about only after lengthy periods of separation of the groups, which supposes that at one point the Yi peoples lived in a cultural core area from which many (or all) emigrated or were otherwise separated. Some scholars argue that since the Yi groups are descendants of early Qiangic peoples who lived in present-day Gansu and
northern Sichuan, the possible birthplace of antecedents of later Yi scripts is somewhere in that area. Scholars have even proposed a very early link between a now-lost Qiangic script that influenced both the creation of what would eventually become the Yi scripts and Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE) oracle bone writing—the earliest form of written Chinese (Huang 2003, 91–96).

Yi texts from the Ming and Qing dynasties relate that in the past a population of Yi (or whatever the ancient names, such as “Gni,” may have been) lived together for generations under the sway of local rulers. This place may have been located on the borders of Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou. After many formative generations, the local clans held a massive ritual marking the separation and dispersion of the so-called “Six Tribes” (Ch: Liu Zu). The clans or tribes migrated along the regional rivers in search of new settlements. Accounts of migrations, whether attributed to the Six Tribes or later groups, are part of many Yi written texts and oral epic performances. Some accounts relate the diaspora event to a great flood that supposedly occurred near the end of the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE) (Bamo Qubumo 2000, 101; Herman 2007, 20). Accordingly, the diversity of later Yi scripts is attributed to this early breakup, at a time when the script was supposedly more uniform.

Ultimately, however, like many other events in these texts, the dates of the breakup and migrations cannot be pinpointed. It is assumed (or wished) that the accounts detailing early events were copied and recopied over the centuries and that many of them are of great age. There are several names of persons who either re-created or attempted to standardize the Yi script that appear in both Yi and Han records of the Han, Tang, and later dynasties. One name often cited is A Ke from northern Yunnan, who is thought to have lived in either the Han or Tang dynasty and is said to have created 1,800 graphs (Huang 2003, 85–89). However, all told, there is not strong enough evidence to say exactly who did what when. Thus, the dilemma is whether to consider the ancient genealogies, migration accounts, events, and personages as at least legends with some historical basis or to regard them as rhetorical compositions created to gain or maintain some sort of legitimacy within a family, clan, or other form of social organization.

Some scholars have attempted to date the origin of a given text by factoring the lists of generational “begats” linked by the clan genealogies that are often present in the texts. Thus, using a figure of between seventeen and thirty-four years (depending on local tradition) to represent a generation, a text that is dated to a certain known date (such as the presumed great flood) is used as a starting point in the calculation. For instance, a surviving copy
of a work from Guizhou known as “Discussion of Yi Poetics,” attributed to an early, great *bimo* named Jushezhe (in Chinese transliteration), has a date of 1664 (early Qing dynasty) written on the text. But using dates estimated in relation to legendary/historical figures, the final calculation puts the composition of the original text at about AD 550, using twenty-five years as the length of a generation (Kang et al. 1997, 24–25; Shama Layi 2010, 1–10). Following this idea of early origins, the long period spanning the Wei-Jin (AD 220–420), Tang (AD 618–907), and Song dynasties (AD 220–1279) is thought to be the developmental period of the script and rituals associated with their use (Bamo Qubumo 2000, 105–8).

One of several Chinese names for what seem to be antecedents of later Yi scripts, is Cuan wen (Cuan script). This term appears in local administrative documents written by government officials in Yunnan in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The name Cuan is associated with a powerful clan or ruling group dated to at least AD 339 and lasting into the twelfth century, at times controlling much of what is now the eastern areas of Yunnan and parts of western Guizhou and Guangxi (Bradley 2001, 201; Huang 2003, 51–53). The capital of the Cuan kingdom (which had Eastern and Western phases) was located around Lake Dian (Dian Chi), in the present provincial capital of Kunming. Though not a Yi term, the term “Cuan script” was used by Han administrators and scholars well into the twentieth century. Other historic Chinese names for the Yi script tradition used at various times and places include Wei shu (interpreted as “standard graphs”), Lolo wen (Lolo script), *yi zi* (“savage” characters), *bimo wen* (*bimo* script), and kedou wen (“tadpole” script), related to names for local styles, local cultures, ritualists, or, in the latter case, the shape of the graphs (Huang 2003, 49–58).

The earliest purported examples of the Yi script tradition are inscriptions in natural and worked stone, bronze castings, pottery, and bone.11 Among the inscribed items are a crudely cast bronze “mortar” and a carved stone tablet that were found in Guizhou and have been dated to the Western Han period (206 BC to AD 9). On the casting, which includes figures of frogs, snakes, and floral motifs, are five graphs that some scholars claim are words meaning, “Pass on the Mortar of the Ancestors Forever.” The tablet, of which only a part remains, is dated to the Jian Xing period of the Shu Han period (AD 223–37) and is titled “The Tablet Commemorating Tuo Azhe.” Fifteen incomplete lines in graphs that are clearly Yi remain in the surface of the stone. Other stone inscriptions from Guizhou and Sichuan date to the thirteenth century, including one in a cliff face at Tiantai Mountain, Sichuan, that has been translated as “Stairway to Heaven.” A cast bronze bell from Guizhou, dating to the Cheng Hua reign of the Ming dynasty (AD 1465–87)
has both Yi and Chinese inscriptions. A large tablet commemorating the building of a bridge over the Dadu River in Dafang, Guizhou is dated 1592 in the Wanli era of the Ming dynasty.

These and other examples clearly demonstrate the use of Yi in formal contexts by the early Ming and point to earlier origins of the script. Aside from these and other inscriptions and castings, the earliest Yi texts written on sheepskin parchment and various sorts of paper date to around 1500 and have been found in northeastern Yunnan and Guizhou. Thus, while the era and locus of invention are still being debated, historical and textual evidence suggests that by the Ming dynasty, variant forms of the Yi script were in use within Yi communities spread across a large region comprised of eastern Yunnan and western Guizhou.

Chinese scholars presently recognize four related, but not wholly mutually intelligible, major script traditions that constitute the Yi script tradition. Assuming the varieties of written Yi originated from an initial form or a close-knit group of forms, it is difficult to ascertain which graphs were among the ur-forms and which were later added in local varieties. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that there is only about 60 percent mutual recognition of graphs between the varieties (though this varies case by case) (Zhongyang 1996, 70–71). Even texts from the same dialect area show variation, such as those collected from the three major subgroups of Northern Yi speakers in the Liangshan area. These local traditions of Yi script are part of what can be considered the regional textual traditions of Yi literature, in which both script and content vary significantly.

The Yi regional textual traditions can be roughly divided (as there is overlap) into the Eastern (western Guizhou and northeast Yunnan), Southeastern (southeastern Yunnan), Southern (southern and parts of central Yunnan), and Northern (southern Sichuan and some contiguous areas in Yunnan) (Bradley 2001, 202). Texts have also been collected in western Guangxi. Although it appears that there were attempts to standardize the scripts at points in the ancient past, bimo familiar with different script traditions have difficulty reading texts from other areas without considerable training (Bradley 2001, 206–12).

In parts of Yunnan, these scripts are known as si (or similar-sounding words in the various dialects) and “bburma” among the Northern Yi speakers. Some scholars have noted that the term si is similar phonologically to the word for “blood” and suggest that the term for writing is linked to the use of blood of sacrificed animals as ink when writing on wooden slats used in rituals dealing with the supernatural (Huang 2003, 49–51). The script traditions vary in number, composition, shape, and details of the basic strokes.
making up the graphs. There are also differences in the sounds (phonetic and speech tones) associated with the graphs and in punctuation in the texts (if present). Other differences include orientation of the text on the page, differences in delivery format (pages or scrolls), the style and incorporation of illustrations (which can also vary within a tradition), cartouches, colored ink, and content in terms of customs, beliefs, narrative plots, etc. (Zhongyang 1996, 63–68). Pagination is present only in relatively recent texts. Some scholars believe that early texts with five graph lines did not need punctuation, but when conventions of differing line lengths developed (alterations between three- and five-syllable lines, for instance), punctuation was needed and developed independently from systems used in other script traditions such as Chinese (Huang 1993, 107–9).

Most early texts and many later ones have no author, and even later ones may only include the author’s name or the name of the copyist’s parents in an attribution such as “the son” of “so and so” (Huang 1993, 77–80). This phenomenon may be due in part to the transmission process, involving both oral teaching and actual copying, used by the ritualists who customarily copy versions of the texts. Attributions of authors, such as the great bimo Jushezhe or the influential female bimo and poet Amaini, are rare.12 Dates in texts are also rare, though are encountered, sometimes in a mix of Chinese and Yi dating systems. Likewise, prefaces are found only occasionally and are often more in the vein of a “disclaimer of performance” about the author’s lack of knowledge than commentary on the content of the work (Bauman 1977, 21–22). For instance, the preface to Shidi tianzi (named for a great bimo in the time of the mythic Yi ancestor Apu Dumu), a religious narrative from Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan, includes examples of several of these phenomena:

My inclination for copying this book is to let the reader be somewhat moved by the story. At sunrise on the day of the pig, in the 12th month of the year of the snake, in the 19th year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu, [I] began to copy it, and finished it on the day of the cow, hour of the dog. This mother’s son, ah, copied this at age 36; this mother’s son, ah, doesn’t know many words, and is familiar with few books, and copies books following no standard, the words written poorly. [I] can’t write, ah, it is like one word too high, one word long, one word short. (Shi 2006, 147)

In the Northern Yi areas, the transmission of the texts from teacher to student differed somewhat depending on the age of the student (Zhongyang
1996, 46–52; Huang 2003, 175–81). Sons of a bimo could carry on the family tradition in a process of homeschooling and were the usual transmitters. In some cases, however, a student from another family could be apprenticed to a bimo. According to interviews with bimo in the Liangshan Mountains, male children of the teacher’s family or other students would begin learning the ritual texts around age seven or eight. The process involved daily lessons—usually given in the evening when the distractions of daily life were minimal. The bimo teacher would recite a passage, and the student would repeat it and then be required to memorize the entire lesson that night. The next morning the student would recite the lesson to the bimo, who would correct any mistakes. In some cases a more advanced student would be required to write out what was memorized orally the night before. The process would begin again later in the day.

One bimo schooled before 1949 recalled that his bimo teacher wrote portions of a text with a wooden stylus on a slip of smooth wood and hung it on the student’s cloak. When out herding or otherwise working, the student would memorize the graphs and be tested on writing them later in the day. When taking a bimo as a teacher, younger students (accompanied by older relatives) would bring homemade wine to ritually toast him. Foodstuffs and even money would also be given. Throughout the learning process, which could last five to seven years, the student was exposed to aspects of bimo practice and eventually participated in rituals and the copying of texts before ending the apprenticeship. For adult students the procedure was less formal, though wine and nominal gifts or sums of money were given. The same process of first an oral version, then a written one seems also to have been followed by the adult learners, some of whom had already studied with other bimo and wished to increase their knowledge.

The number of component parts that comprise the graphs in the traditional Northern orthography is twenty-six, whereas in southern areas (such as in the Southeastern Sani texts) it is twenty-five. The basic shapes of these parts vary significantly from place to place, and though they appear similar can often be written in several ways. In more complex graphs there is a main part and at least one secondary part. When writing, the parts are combined thus: top/bottom; top/middle/bottom; to the left of the main element; to the right of the main element. Except for those graphs written with only one stroke, each graph has one prominent component part, which is written first, and one or more secondary elements. Also, while certain component parts can be combined to form graphs, others cannot.

Traditionally, many Yi texts in Yunnan and Guizhou were written and read from top to bottom and left to right (unlike early Chinese, which was
written and read top to bottom, but right to left). However, when the Northern script traditions are read (horizontally right to left), the graphs appear to southern readers to be written sideways because alignments on the page differ between north and south. Thus, bimo in Liangshan will turn the southern texts sideways when reading them.

The graphs are written using a small stylus of wood or bamboo, or with brushes fashioned of hair, wool, vegetable matter (even pine needles) fastened in a bamboo, wooden, or a makeshift hempstalk handle (Huang 2003, 180). Ink was sometimes made of charcoal or soot mixed with pig blood. Paper was made of bark and other plant material or, like better-quality ink, obtained from Han merchants. Rectangles of paper were folded over a bamboo slip to create double pages and bound as books with string, or made into scrolls. Wood slats, used in rituals, and processed goat hides were other mediums for writing. In many texts collected in the Southeastern Honghe region of Yunnan, graphs are written within columns of red ink lines.

Though attempts are under way to develop a universal Yi script, there is presently no standard Yi writing system in use throughout all the Yi areas. Thousands of books and scrolls written in Yi have been collected by scholars since the late nineteenth century and especially during the 1940s. Unfortunately, many were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when traditional cultural practices were violently suppressed all over the country. Nevertheless, thousands of volumes have been archived in collections in China, Europe, and the United States. An undetermined number of texts are said to still be in the hands of bimo living throughout the southwest (Bamo Qubumo 2001, 456n7). Many bimo continue to copy the traditional texts by hand or with photocopiers; apprentices (bisse) must commit the texts to memory under the guidance of elder ritualists. In the Liangshan areas, at the death of a bimo his scriptures are left to his sons or apprentices, which is an important factor in the transmission and preservation process.

The Liangshan Standard Yi Script was created and popularized between the 1950s and early 1980s (Huang 2003, 164–67; Su et al. 2017, 134–39). The 819 graphs are based on older scripts in the Northern Yi area of Liangshan, and therefore the script is useful only in the northern areas. Thousands of texts have been published in the Liangshan Standard Yi Script, ranging from official documents, to newspaper articles, to literary works—including versions of traditional ritual and epic texts, which sometimes appear in bilingual Yi/Chinese multilinear versions) (Harrell and Bamo 1998, 64; Bradley 2001, 206–7).
It is this standard script that Jjivot Zopqu used to record the version of *The Book of Origins* translated in this book. After copying the content of an ancient scroll once belonging to a local *ndeggu* wise man into the Mao notebook, he cast the original graphs, one by one, into the new standardized writing system, copying that version in the notebook with the modern young woman on the cover. Jjivot’s original intention seems to have been to make a copy in the new script that was easier to read for those not necessarily schooled as *bimo* and as a more secure means of preservation.

**HNEWO TEYY: THE BOOK OF ORIGINS**

The Nuosu title of *The Book of Origins, Hnewo teyy*, has been interpreted by scholars in several ways (Zhongyang 1996, 283–84). The word *teyy* means “book” in Nuosu, which refers to various sorts of handwritten scrolls and string-bound volumes. Such texts, written on handcrafted paper or goatskin parchment with a bamboo or wooden stylus or brush, are known as *bimo teyy*, or *bimo* books. Another general term is *teyy shybo*, or books of history. The term *ka mga* literally means “comes out of the mouth” and can be used to describe oral delivery of the texts (Bamo Qubumo 2001, 465). More problematic is the meaning of *hnewo*. The term may mean “passed down through mouth and ears,” or “turn pages,” as by a ritualist in a recital. Another possible meaning is “segments” or “joints” (as in a stalk of bamboo)—an interpretation that recognizes the stages in the narration of the creation of the world and could be related to steps in ancient rituals. More than twenty versions of portions or complete texts of the *Hnewo* have been edited and published in Chinese translation, and in some cases in bilingual, multilinear formats (Bamo Qubumo 2003, 121, 251–52; Ganluo xian n.d.). (The translators chose to translate the present version because of its direct links to the folk context, rich content, and the rapport developed with Jjivot Zopqu. Beyond minor standardizations of some graphs, he did not alter the original *bimo* scroll text when he copied it and transcribed it into standard written Northern Yi.)

Probably the best known of the published versions is Feng Yuanwei’s Chinese-language translation, released in 1986. That text is based on eight versions collected in the city of Xichang and Zhaojue, Meigu, and Butuo Counties, which Feng edited into a master version comprised of thirteen parts (Feng 1986; Bamo Qubumo 2003, 22–23; Zuo 2006, 206). The texts Feng consulted varied in length and content. By careful editing he spliced together an enriched text that exhibits more content than any single version. The creation of a composite version, in which a number of similar texts
are collected and melded into an ideal version, has been a common method used in Chinese folklore studies since the 1950s. Although the individual nature of a given version and its social context may not be well represented in the final product, if done conscientiously (without intentional distortion for political correctness or other reasons), such texts do serve the purpose of presenting a readable and informative “master text” that represents the tradition to contemporary and future tradition-bearers and various reading audiences (Bender and Mair 2011, 9–10; Bender 2012). In contrast, the present version is based on one folk version of the text copied by Jjivot Zopqu from the bimo scroll.

Several passages in the Feng version are similar to those in the version copied by Jjivot, though other collected versions differ quite radically from either of these. One major difference between the Jjivot and Feng versions is length. The Jjivot version has twenty-nine parts, in which the last seventeen are genealogies and migration accounts of various Yi clans. In the Feng version, only one part is devoted to these migrations. Another difference is the ordering of the major episodes. In the Feng version, the “twelve sons of snow” section, in which animals and plants transform from red snow, appears before the age of multiple suns and moons that parch the earth. In the present version, the offspring of snow reseed the earth in a second phase of creation after the extra suns and moons are shot from the sky by the hero Zhyge Alu.

*The Book of Origins* is characterized in the folk culture in several ways. According to Eqi Luoluo (as written in Chinese *pinyin* romanization), a seventy-eight-year-old *ndeggu* wise man from Meigu County interviewed in 2005, the content of *The Book of Origins* (*Hnewo teyy*) can be divided into sections concerning specific events and genealogies, and into major portions that cover the origins of the gods and culture heroes such as Zhyge Alu. According to Yi folklorist Bamo Qubumo, who interviewed Nuosu tradition-bearers in the late 1990s, some parts of *The Book of Origins* are known by tradition-bearers as the “black *Hnewo*” (*hnewo nuo* or simply *anuo*) and “white *Hnewo*” (*hnewo qu* or simply *aqu*) (2003, 144). The black portions concern the origins of gods, culture heroes (especially Zhyge Alu), and the living beings that dwell on the earth, in the waters, and fly in the sky. These portions are performed primarily by *bimo* as part of the complex funeral rituals. The white *Hnewo* portions concern accounts of early ancestors of today’s humans and the final genealogies concerning the migrations of the descendants of the three sons of Jjumu Vuvu and Hnituo, daughter of the sky god. The white portions feature passages such as the marriage of Shyly Wote (in part 12) that are performed at weddings and other festive occasions.
The parts that describe the creation of animals and plants—that is, the beings with blood and those without blood—were once known by the now obscure term “mottled Hnewo” (hnewo azzi). The color differentiation may be related to ancient Yi clan groups or may even reflect a pattern of hierarchy similar to that of the former categories of social order that distinguished between “black” (upper) and “white” (lower) castes in Nuosu society (which before the 1950s was characterized by a small ruling elite and several lower divisions of commoners, serfs, and slaves [Lin 1961, 99–101; Harrell 2001, 93–96]). Alternately, the first seven segments detailing the creation of the sky and earth are sometimes referred to as “male” (abu) parts, and the latter parts recounting the actions of protohumans, para-humans, and humans on earth are called the “female” (amo) parts (Bamo Qubumo 2003, 139).

*The Book of Origins* is enmeshed in a strong intertextual tradition. In the taxonomy of Nuosu folk literature, the text is considered as a megaversion of the sort of origin narratives that Bamo Qubumo has called “ritualized epos” (2001, 453). Such origin narratives are chanted in a verse format as part of various rituals and performances of the song-and-dance form called vazyrhli. These short oral origin narratives are called *bbopa* and, when written, *bbopa teyy*. The stories tell the origins, typically in the form of a genealogy, of things as diverse as water, disease, tobacco, iron, sheep, dogs, hemp, the *voma* turnip, buckwheat, and oats, as well as rites of clan division and unification, marriage, death, ghosts, and the origin of *bimo* ritualists (Liangshan 2006, 82–152). The “Genealogy of Lightning,” related in part 4 of *The Book of Origins*, is very similar to these shorter *bbopa* and could stand alone as such, as could several other parts of the epic. In both *The Book of Origins* and the shorter narratives, the origins of everything is either directly attributed to the sky god Ngeti Gunzy (or his agents), or to the sky, clouds, mountains, fairies, or the ancestors. In some areas *The Book of Origins* and its panoramic narrations of the creation are also referred to as the “Grandfather Hnewo” (Apu Hnewo), whereas the shorter *bbopa* stories of the origins of very specific things are called the “Grandmother Hnewo” (Ama Hnewo).

The *bbopa* are typically performed near the beginning of rituals and in some contexts before recitations of passages from *The Book of Origins*. As Bamo Qubumo (2001, 458) notes: “The *bimo* typically performs *bbopa* songs at the very beginning of a ritual, and continues inserting them into sub-rituals as the need to articulate the objects being employed at that very moment arises.” Although origin accounts may be told as individual stories or chants in contexts apart from recitations of parts of *The Book of Origins* per se, ultimately many of the stories are related to events conveyed in the epic.
Elements of what folklorists call myths, legends, proverbs, and a style of folktale that the Nuosu call *bbudde* also echo throughout the written and oral versions of *The Book of Origins* (Bamo Qubumo 2001, 457–58). Many *bbudde*, collected from all over Liangshan, are related to events transmitted in the origin stories called *bbopa teyy* and *The Book of Origins*. Often the tales themselves offer differing versions of events from the origin verse narratives, though they can be seen as part of the greater *Hnewo* tradition. For instance, one published collection of folktales from Yuexi County has four stories about Zhyge Alu, including the shooting down of the extra suns and moons (and details about where the extras went), punishing the lightning spirit, setting things in order on earth after downing the suns and moons, taming water buffaloes, and dealing with a fierce dragon (Zhang and Yang 2005, 226–32). In other written versions of *The Book of Origins* some of the tasks attributed to Zhyge Alu are accomplished by other beings, while certain episodes in the folktales may not appear at all in some epic versions. As is to be expected in oral literature, most of the folktale versions both echo and diverge from written ones. In many instances, the tales are more fleshed out than in written versions of *The Book of Origins*, which suggests that in one sense the epic in its written forms is a relatively stable repository of themes and motifs that is subject to referencing, explication, and enhancement in performance at the will and needs of the *bimo* or other tellers. Whether *The Book of Origins* is the source of these tales, or whether it was constructed in part from oral folktales is a subject for continued research.

**ORAL DELIVERY**

When Jjivot Zopqu reads passages of *The Book of Origins* aloud, he chants verbatim the words of the epic, following the version he transliterated into the Liangshan Standard Yi Script. At some points, he may recite parts from memory, though the text is always at hand. His idiosyncratic style of delivery, however, differs from both performances by *bimo* ritualists and skilled folk singers in the local communities.

Depending on the performer and situation, specific portions of *The Book of Origins* are delivered in various oral or oral-connected formats at births, marriages, and funerals, as well as at house-raisings and festivals. The vocal tradition-bearers may be *bimo* ritualists, *ndeggu* wise men, or folk singers. Portions of the epic are also performed inside homes during rituals of curing, calling back lost souls, and home purification. At the home events, a *bimo* and his assistant(s) will mark out a corner of a room and erect a small
structure of sacred grass and green branches that indicates the presence of their bimo ancestors. Seated on mats, the ritualists proceed to recite the genealogies of the family and local clans, perform the compulsory short origin narratives (bbopa) (which may include passages similar to those found in versions of The Book of Origins), and offer sacrifices to drive off ghosts and bring good fortune (Bamo Qubumo 2001, 453–58). At any event where a bimo performs, the handwritten teyy texts are on-site and often displayed prominently within the bimo’s performance space. As tangible items related to recitation, the texts are numinous objects that, like the bimo’s hat, bell, fan, and the “ghost-catcher” quiver, lend authority to the ritualist and enhance a sense of ritual efficacy.

The oral performances by folk singers of The Book of Origins have been well-researched by Bamo Qubumo. She has described situations in which ndeggu or skilled local folk singers (called zoma zosse or other names) perform content from bbopa origin narratives and The Book of Origins in the verbal dueling genre known in the Xide area as vazyrhli or kenre (riffs) elsewhere (Bamo Qubumo 2001, 467; 2003, 160–66). The style of delivery impacts form and depends largely on the performance situation.
An example of the dueling style is a performance (witnessed by the authors) that took place in the summer of 2007 at the funeral of an elderly Nuosu man in the suburbs of Mianning, near the border of Xide County. The wake was held in the courtyard of an older apartment complex where hundreds of kinfolk and guests gathered for the event. Designated members of the family registered the gifts of food and money near the entryway. The attendees sat or stood in small groups near the bier, under which was attached a live pig that would help guide the deceased’s soul to the land of the ancestors, led by the chants of a bimo. As the evening unfolded, successive groups of kin were fed in a dining hall from tubs full of freshly steamed buckwheat cakes, potatoes, and boiled beef.

At moments, small groups of young and older women stood in front of the bier in traditional dress. They sang laments while facing the other attendees, many of whom were bustling about the courtyard. The atmosphere was at times charged with emotion generated by the singing and conversation. At one point, a pair of young men walked before the bier. Each was a representative of one side of the deceased’s family. They proceeded to perform the antiphonal vazyrhli, mentioned earlier in the discussion of the funeral process. Though dressed in modern street clothes, they borrowed traditional
cloaks from two of the women singers. Thus appropriately garbed, they performed portions of a narrative about the origin of death, moving back and forth in front of the bier. Standing about five feet apart, they sang energetically, alternately shifting right then left and back again in half turns. This style of turning is also used by male epic singers in the Meigu County area. Women in Ebian County employ a similar technique when singing bridal laments about the ill-fated runaway bride Gamo Anyo (Bender 2007, 215–20).

After that performance, several other young men linked arms and sang similar lyrics about origins that overlapped with the content from *The Book of Origins*. This performance was followed by a group of women singing more laments, who were in turn followed by other singers. Later in the night, other singers, as well as a *bimo*, sang passages from *The Book of Origins* about the origins of the sky and earth and the “sons of snow.”

While the various singers during the funeral were an obvious presence, they were not necessarily the focus of everyone’s attention. They were a necessary, expected part of the happening. The songs needed to be sung to fulfill the ritual content of the event. Moreover, the ordering of the various passages that were sung did not conform to the typical chronology of the written texts that have been collected. This performance of content that, compared to a fixed written text, is “out of order” or otherwise different is typical of live epic recitals around the world and a direct result of the “multiplicity of performance contexts,” as seen in the Nuosu performance situations (Honko 2000, 223–26).

**POETIC AND RHETORICAL DEVICES**

The outstanding feature of Nuosu epic verse is the process of entwining and unfolding various combinations of poetic and rhetorical means. Among the many expressive devices woven into the structure of the written *Book of Origins* are differences in line lengths, rhyming of words, patterning of speech tones, repetition, parallelism, and shifts between narration and the speech of characters in the story.

Although a frequent unit of expression in Nuosu oral delivery is a line with five syllables, in the act of performance there may appear syllable units of four, five, six, seven, nine, eleven, thirteen, or other groupings. Written texts also have variants on the common five-syllable line. During performance, the line units can be manipulated to create, maintain, and alter the pace of delivery. In many cases patterned chunks of text, or “multiforms,” are utilized in the presentation of various scenes in *The Book of Origins* (Honko 2000, 19–20). Multiforms are used to depict typical social situations.
and action-rich scenes. In Nuosu epic poetry, weddings, feasts, battles, leave taking and returns, and other events are organized in multiform structural formats. Multiform passages may be only a few lines in length or comprise much longer passages. They may share similar forms and themes, though the specifics vary. The latter parts of the epic in which the clan migrations are described are especially formulaic and consist largely of repeated multiform structures.

Although rhyme occurs in *The Book of Origins*, regular rhyme schemes are not a part of the prosodic structure of the poem. Short parts may have either head or end rhyme, but the patterning is local. More common is the patterned repetition of speech tones. Like Chinese, and many other languages of the region, Northern Yi (Nuosu) is a tonal language. The “standard” Xide dialect has four speech tones: high (t), mid-high (x), mid-level (no marking), and low falling (p) (Ma, Walters, and Walters 2008, 6). A number of prosodic features (including the tone markers) are present in the following passage from part 8, “Zhyge Alu,” concerning the lineage of Pumo Hniyyr (Pummpop Hnixyyr), mother of the epic hero:

1. sup sse lur sse yur, A
2. ggup chox cho hxo jjip. B
3. ggup chox cho hxo ne C
4. ggup mop ax rrryr yur; A
5. vop ndip hlyt qu jjip. B
6. hlyt qu hni nrat yur, A
7. di shy shuo nuo jjip, B
8. di shy ma jie yur, A
9. o lux zzip vop jjip B
10. zzip mop hni mo yur A
11. op rro ndap ssyp jjip B
12. zyt zyr ap my yur A
13. zyt ap my qit ddu jjip B
14. git ap my pup ddu jjip B
15. pup mop hni suo yur A
16. pup jy ma jy ddu jjip, B
17. pup mop max ma ma ddu jjip B
18. pup mop hnxix yyr zzy D

A dragon was born in the fir forests, and lived in Ggucho Chohxo.
Ggucho Chohxo was
where Celestial Swan Woman, Ggumo Arryr, was born.
She later lived at the mountains in Vondi Hlyqu,
where the beauty of Hlyqu was born.
She later lived in Dishy Shuonuo,
where Dishy Majie was born.
She later lived in Olu Zzivo,
where Zzimo Hnimo was born.
She later lived in Orro Ndassy,
where Zyzyr Amy was born.
A woman of the Zy family married into the Gi family;
a woman of the Gi family married into the Pu family,
and gave birth to the three daughters of the Pu family.
The Pu daughter Jy married into the Jy family;
the Pu daughter Ma married into the Ma family,
leaving only Pumo Hniyyr, who did not marry.

In this passage, the end rhyme patterning is: ABC, AB, AB, AB, AB, AB, BA, BB, D. The regularity of the rhyme shifts as the focus of the content highlights Pumo Hniyyr and her strange condition of not marrying. The passage also exhibits parallel head rhyme, as in lines 2 and 3 (gup), 6 and 7 (di), 11 and 12 (zyt), and 15 to 18 (pu p). There are various other kinds of repetition and parallelism, especially in lines 11–17. The tone patterning is very complex. In lines 2, 5, 11, 16, and 17 the dropping p tone appears at the head and end of the line; moreover, the p tone is the dominant end tone for most of the passage. The overall structure of the passage can be considered as a multiform—a template for a certain kind of content. In this case, that of a genealogy. The Book of Origins and similar origin texts contain many genealogies. This is one style of an origin or genealogical multiform structure.

Repetition and parallelism are common structural features of the poem. In part 5, “Separation of Sky and Earth,” the gods raise pillars in the four directions to separate the sky from the earth and allow the creation to proceed. In this passage cardinal directions of the newly coalesced land are associated with named mountains positioned at the point of the rising and setting sun or the headwaters or tail waters of the earth, corresponding to the names of the directions East, West, North, and South in modern Nuosu. Each position of a pillar is presented in the repeated parallel formula consisting of two lines, the entire sequence creating a multiform structure:

mux ly ddp wa dur
ggex ddp la mgex jox
Four pillars that supported the sky and earth
stood in the four directions, supporting them.
In the place of the rising sun,
Muvu Hande Peak was the support.
In the place of the setting sun,
Muke Doli Mountain was the support.
In the place of the headwaters,
Nimu Hxosa Mountain was the support.
In the place of the tail waters,
Huomu Dici Mountain was the support.

Part 12 contains many examples of direct speech—usually in the form of monologues but with occasional short dialogues. The content concerns the marriage between Hnituo, the daughter of the sky god, and Jjumu Vuvu, the honest young man who survived the great flood. The pair wed and produce three mute sons. The Apuyoqo bird flies to the sky and succeeds in obtaining the key to speech by overhearing a conversation between the sky god Ngeti Gunzy and his wife: In this passage, the narration shifts between the third-person narrative mode into the direct speech of two characters:
The Apuyoqo bird
was sleeping soundly,
sleeping until the roosters crowed.
Ngeti Gunzy’s wife asked,
“If you know the reason,
why don’t you tell them?”
Ngeti Gunzy said,
“My ill-fated daughter, in her in-laws’ home
must use her hands to wipe the door frames.
If I wasn’t so angry with them,
I would just
go to the human world—
to the top of Nzyolurnyie Mountain
and cut three stalks of bamboo,
then heat them to scare the three mute sons.
Boil three pots of water,
dip the water out, then splash it on the three mute sons—
who would then naturally begin to speak.”

During performance events, the situation determines the content of *The Book of Origins* performance. The origins of the sky and earth and other early portions of the narrative are usually performed at funerals. During weddings, there is a tendency to perform parts intricately describing the marriage of Shyly Wote, a descendant of the original “sons of snow,” that appear early in part 12 of the present version. Another important scene later in the same part is the marriage between Hnituo and Jjumu Vuvu, mentioned above, whose union results in the creation of various ethnic groups and Nuosu clans. At weddings, knowledgeable male singers from each side create a song dialogue in which each side praises its knowledge and ability in singing songs concerning wedding lore. The singers usually begin with *kenre*-style recitations about wedding themes and then, depending on the skills of the singers, shift to content of *The Book of Origins*. These passages are
regarded as propitious and describe factors highlighting a happy, prosperous life replete with good harvests, ample offspring, and adequate food, clothing, and shelter.

Any performance of The Book of Origins or related tales is a dynamic process in which the ritualists or singers constantly shift between the means of expression, even in the recitation of a static written text. In some performance situations, the shifting involves the physical turning of the bodies of two or more folk singers (who are standing half-facing each other) and the use of a limited range of eye and facial movements when speaking in the infrequent character roles. There are also shifts in volume, speed, and voice quality, especially when acting in the mode of a character in the story, but at other moments as well, depending on the content. The recurrence of shifting between the various means of performance helps to attract and retain audience focus (which may vary from rapt attention to passing interest) and allows the performers to mentally and physically sync with the delivery. Bimo, however, tend to sit when reciting passages of the epic, thus making their performances less physically dynamic. Depending on the proclivities of the ritualist and the situation at hand, the pace, volume, intensity of the delivery and postures may shift, but these Nuosu traditions typically do not feature the highly stylized and intricately patterned hand, facial, and bodily movements found in certain styles of professional Chinese storytelling in Sichuan or the Yangzi delta that have been influenced by traditions of Chinese opera (Bender 1999).

**Outline of the Epic Narrative**

One important thread in The Book of Origins is the relation between the realms of sky and earth. Life originates in the sky, and there are crucial points of contact between these different realms in the text. Mythology may encode ancient knowledge and may include keys to events and practices that are now in the murky realms of the distant past (Barber and Barber, 2004, 1–4). Knowledge of long-past events, such as the eruptions of volcanoes and even the effects of retreating glaciers on water tables, is available to those moderns who can crack the mythic code of a text (Dundes 2000, 133). A theme frequently encountered worldwide describes the original links—and the cutting of those links—between the earth and sky. Although it is difficult to imagine what could trigger such an event, it is an example of a theme that appears in many mythologies and raises (and often answers) numerous questions. Some of the questions relating to the account of the separation in The Book of Origins are: How close is the earth to the sky realm? What are the
ultimate origins of life on earth? What does the epic say about the relations between humans and other beings on earth and the beings in the sky? How do beings travel between the sky and earth?

Indeed, these questions on passages describing the separation of the sky from the earth in the early parts of *The Book of Origins* resonate strongly with similar mythic traditions in the ancient Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, North America, and elsewhere, as does the theme of the great flood in part 12, “Genealogy of Shyly Wote.” Moreover, both the themes of the flood and the separation of the earth from the sky are very prominent in many mythologies of ethnic minority groups from southwest China and Southeast Asia (Yang, An, and Turner 2008, 20–24, 66–67).

A few names in the genealogy of Zhyge Alu’s mother correspond to geographical places, and a few appear in the latter parts charting the clan migrations. In other cases, the prominence of lightning and the local conditions described in the latter parts of the epic may have links to actual environmental features and remembered experiences. Exploring these and other themes involving environmental dynamics and aspects of Nuosu cosmology may help us to better understand traditional Nuosu conceptions of being and situate their beliefs within the context of other cultures of southwest China and contiguous regions in Asia and beyond.

THE GENEALOGY OF THE SKY AND EARTH

The initial two parts of the epic that relate the genealogies of the sky and earth are the first of many origin accounts in the text. It cannot be overstated that a trope of genealogies underlies the entire *Book of Origins*, and multi-forms cast in a genealogical format are commonly repeated throughout. This structure is closely linked to the pervasive Nuosu interest in clan genealogies. *Bimo* and clan tradition-bearers claim that some clans can be traced more than seventy generations into the past. Whether or not to some degree fictive, these deep genealogies suggest huge webs of family relations. In everyday life, it is of extreme importance that clan affiliations be clarified in any major social situation, such as weddings and funerals, as well in daily situations where those unfamiliar with each other meet. Indeed, the entire content of the latter part of the epic concerns the movements of various early clans. These clans are thought to be offshoots of the original Six Tribes who at some early date split apart at a cultural hearth in northeast Yunnan and went their various ways, some entering the Liangshan region of southern Sichuan.
Among historical events that could have prompted clan ruptures and mass migrations in southwest China are the invasion of Zhuge Liang in the early third century CE, the rise and fall of the Nanzhao-Dali kingdom (a regional power from the seventh to thirteenth centuries CE), which fell during the catastrophic Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, the rise and fall of small powers in western Guizhou, and the flight of the last Ming emperor to the southwest (and his capture by Qing troops on the Burmese border in 1662). Another factor during the Ming and Qing could have been the gaitu guiliu policy enacted in southwest China that sought to gradually replace native rulers (who at points in the process were often given the title of tusi) with non-native officials. Like so many other things in The Book of Origins, the migrations of the clans are all cast within the frame of genealogies, and it is difficult to link most of the place-names with places on today’s maps. It could be said that the Nuosu stance toward the past is genealogical rather than historic.

The first part of The Book of Origins, “Genealogy of Sky,” begins:

In the most ancient past,  
in the vast expanse of the heavens,  
was the home of the sky spirit, Ngeti Gunzy.

The passage ends:

And thus is the genealogy  
of the sky above.

In part 29, “Genealogy of Qoni,” the epic ends with a pattern that has dominated the last thirteen parts and parallels the form in which Nuosu males recite genealogies today (minus the rhetorical “ggo” at the end of the line) in everyday life:

the generation of Bivie Jjizha, followed by  
the generation of Jjizha Bburvie, followed by  
the generation of Bburvie Age, followed by  
the generation of Age Qidda, followed by  
the generation of Qidda Aqo, followed by  
the generation of Aqo Liwo, followed by  
the generation of Liwo Nzyggu which settled at Syyi Loggu.
This is the genealogy of the Alunuo bimo family.
The genealogy of the great bimo Asu Lazzi is included here.

The genealogy of the sky and earth is comprised of a description of how the sky god enlisted various capable supernatural beings to stand on various mountains to herd the sun and moon into the clouds and hammer the rising mists into dark clouds, which then emitted sunlight, brightening the earth below, which according to its genealogy was a place that still did not exist—but if it did, it would not have forests, trees, water, or grasslands. In part 3, “Transformation of Sky and Earth,” things shift over several generations of beings until the spirits go to work in the realms of the sky and earth:

Four sides of the sky were opened,
and four pieces of the earth
were bound together by copper and iron.

Thus, for the first time in the epic, a pathway connecting heaven and earth is noted. A subsequent part relates the genealogy of lightning. Lightning often appears in the epic and is personified as “twelve types of iron wire” that sleep with their mouths shut during spring, when they live beyond the skin of the sky and emit snores that sound like thunder. Overall, in the first three parts there is a concern with the sky and the state of the forthcoming realm of earth. There are also hints of the realm of the sky god, which seems to have some features of the ensuing human world.

THE SEPARATION OF THE SKY AND EARTH

Part 5 concerns the separation of the sky and earth. The directionality of the earth has been determined, and there are rivers in each cardinal direction. At this point Ngeti Gunzy’s family produces forty-eight immortals, four of whom are associated with the cardinal directions. He assembles them all to discuss the separation of the sky and earth. During this grand palaver, which lasts nine days and nights, they slaughter nine cattle and drink nine crocks of wine. In other words, the gods behave in very much the same way as the latter-day Nuosu do when having a great feast. Finally, giant metal forks are forged and used to pry apart the cracks between sky and earth. Some light comes through the cracks, and Ngeti Gunzy “looked down on the world below.” Seeing that the sky and earth were still not separate, he directs others into action. This occasional peering down from the heavens occurs at several
other points in later parts. The sky god seldom seems wholly engaged with what happens on earth and prefers to delegate rather than directly interfere. Finally, the four giant copper and iron balls are placed on the land to hold it down. Nine fairies are given metal brooms and proceed to sweep the sky to where it is today, leaving a vast, barren land. Once all is set in place, four pillars stand on mountains in each direction to support the sky. Afterward, various gods set to work contouring the land and preparing it for life.

**Implantation of Life on Earth from the Sky: Stage One**

In part 6, “Great Bimo,” the *bimo* Awo Shubu descends from the sky on a heavenly steed, wearing his ritual hat and clothes, carrying his ritual texts and ghost-defeating accoutrements, leading along his in-laws. After seeing the earth has no trees, grasses, animals, birds, or insects, the *bimo* brings seeds and creatures down from the sky and places each in its niche. This is the first instance in the epic of life on earth coming directly from the sky, the earth literally being seeded with life. In the parlance of scientific theory, this is comparable to an act of “panspermia” in which life on earth is stimulated by seeding from a comet or other vehicle from the sky (Hoyle and Wickramasinghe 1981, 35–49). However, this first age of life, seeded by the will of the sky god, ultimately ends in fire, during a period of intense warming. The end of this era begins when the spirit monkey, Anyu Ddussy, sacrifices a chicken and ritually calls out the stars, suns, and moons. The earth soon begins to overheat, until all the trees shrivel and die, all waters dry up, and grasses and crops disappear. Nothing is left but a special water-retaining fern, a stalk of hemp, a white-clawed cat, and a gray water deer. Thus, a minimal number of beings from the realms of the wild and domestic survive, but most perish. Only a hero can solve this problem.

**Earth-Sky Link as a Response to Catastrophic Warming**

In part 8, the response to the crisis is the birth of a chimera, or in the modern parlance of genetic engineering, a “para-human” named Zhyge Alu (Bender 2016b, 93–95). The part begins with the birth of a dragon that has relations to both the sky and the earth. As the genealogy unfolds, the mother of Zhyge Alu, who is an unmarried woman of the Pu clan, Pumo Hniyyr, appears in the story. One day, while weaving under the eaves of her home, she spies several dragon-eagles flying overhead and wishes to go play with
them. Three drops of blood fall from the eagles in the sky and splatter her body, making her pregnant. Under the care of a bimo, she gives birth to a strange and “perverse” child named Zhyge Alu who refuses to nurse, sleep in his mother’s bed, or wear clothes. Eventually she abandons her son in a cave, where he is raised by dragons. As the boy grows to manhood he assembles his weapons, along with magical hunting dogs and horses. As noted earlier, in one of his first acts as an adult, he seeks out his roots in the sky and earth, then demarcates the borders of his homeland by shooting arrows in each direction.

In part 9, “Shooting Down Suns and Moons,” Zhyge Alu sets out to shoot down the extra suns and moons that are overheating the earth. In this role, his actions echo heroes in other Chinese myths, including Hou Yi of Han classical literature and Hsang Sa in Miao (Hmong) oral epics in southeast Guizhou (An, Yang, and Turner 2008, 75–76; Bender 2006, 66–70). In this Nuosu version of the archer-hero myth, Zhyge Alu stands on various shrubs and trees until he finds a fir tree that gets him close to the sky. He then shoots down the extra suns and moons—but so terrifies the remaining sun and moon that they must be coaxed out, bringing with them regular divisions between day and night. Thus, a being with roots in both sky and earth acts in the defense of life on earth to literally save the planet for the next expansion of life.
The Second Seeding and Subsequent Flood:  
Stage Two

Part 11, concerning the reseeding of life on earth, is one of the most dynamic and detailed in the entire text. In some versions this passage comes before Zhyge Alu’s shooting down of the suns and moons, but the Jjivot text seems to be more complete than many other versions, and the placing of the second seeding of life on earth is logical in the story-world of the epic. The key element is a spirit talisman that falls from the sky and begins a raging fire that burns day and night. The burning is essential to transformations of life. The fires are followed by elements such as copper and iron to aid in the process. Yet it is only when yellow and red snows fall from the sky that things start to happen. However, the creatures produced are nothing more than freakish prototypes of humans.

Finally, the most advanced of these anthropomorphs sends a spider to the sky to see what is going on. Ngeti Gunzy treats the spider poorly, ripping it to bits. This eruption of personality foregrounds later angry outbursts by the impatient sky god, who seems ambivalent about life on earth. However, the burst of temper costs him dearly—his wife soon grows a spider web in her eye, which is surely a cataract, an ailment common throughout the reaches of the Himalayas. Ngeti Gunzy then does what future generations of Nuosu would do in the case of an illness. He searches for a bimo, who consults his written scriptures and tells him that the spider was sent from the earth. The sky god sends rats, then otters to search for the pieces of the spider to make amends.

Hunting dogs eventually find the head and tail—but not the waist—which is why spiders have no waists today! A bimo is invited to the earth, and sacrifices are made to rid the anthropomorphs of parasites living on their bodies. But they still are unable to become real living beings. Finally, the life force called Ge falls from the sky. After it rots for three years and red snow falls three times and melts for nine days and nights, the direct ancestors of contemporary living beings transform:

Then ice became bones,  
snow became meat,  
the wind became breath,  
falling snow became blood,  
stars became eyes,  
and in the end they became the people of snow—  
the twelve sons of snow.
These twelve “sons” or “tribes” or “offspring” of snow (interpretations vary), however, are divided into two groups: those with blood, and those without blood. Trees and grasses make up the bloodless beings, while frogs, snakes, birds, bears, monkeys, and humans make up the beings with blood—humans being the sixth and final beings listed. Humans and animals are divided by drinking either the waters of dullness, or waters of wisdom from the petals of a lovely rhododendron flower. Thus, the creatures of the earth are seeded from the life force falling out of the sky. The text does not say clearly whether this life force was sent by the sky god or has another origin. Nevertheless, the genealogy of life is traced back to the sky.

A CELESTIAL AND AN EARTHLING WED

A descendant of the second seeding from the sky is the “son of snow” Shyly Wote. As described in part 12, he was born in an era before the institution of marriage. Thus, he sets out to find a father—but ultimately finds a wife. Though first tempted by the daughter of an upper-caste nzymo leader, who asks him a series of questions he can answer only with the help of his wise younger sister, he rejects the marriage and sets off to roam the land. Finally, after many travels and the rejection of many brides, he “stuck an arrow in his hair, / and wrapped his hair high above it” and accepted a suitable woman as his wife. The couple become the progenitors of generations of descendants.

In the process of finding a wife—and becoming a father—templates for many protocols of Nuosu social interaction, especially the treatment of guests and comportment in social situations, are illustrated. These examples still carry weight in Nuosu society today. However, the age of Shyly Wote is only another unfolding segment in the narrative of creation.

After several generations, three brothers are born with the name Jjumu. One day while guarding wild lands they have just plowed, they are approached by an elder who is wearing black clothes and leading a wild yellow hog. While the two elder brothers cry out that they should kill or beat the man, the younger brother suggests they first question him as to his motives. The man declares to them that he is an incarnation of their ancestors and has come down from the sky. He reveals that the sky god Ngeti Gunzy sent a fairy named Sisse Abbu to earth to harvest crops. One of the helpers, the hero Ddiwo Layi, decided to take on the earthling hero Ssedi Shuofu. In the end Ddiwo Layi was insulted and then killed by the earthling, and sparrows reported the death to the sky god. In a rage, Ngeti Gunzy decided to flood the earth in revenge for this untoward conduct. After making his report, the
man in black then instructs each of the sons to prepare an enclosed vessel described as a wooden bed. The mean-hearted elder brothers are instructed to store heavy metal tools inside, while the honest younger brother is told to store life-sustaining grain. The flood inundates the earth.

As the waters begin to recede, Ngeti Gunzy looks down and spies only a few animals on the peaks of the highest mountains. As for the brothers, Jjumu Vuvu survives and, with the aid of chickens, calculates when to open the wooden bed. As he looks out on the receding floodwaters, Jjumu spies a rat, a snake, a frog, a crow, and a ring-necked pheasant, all creatures that will later help him connect with the sky. After a while, Ngeti Gunzy again peers down and spots a spire of smoke rising from atop a mountain and realizes there is human life on earth. Meanwhile, with the help of the wise Frog King and his animal helpers, Jjumu tries to connect with the sky in search of a bride, since he is the only remaining human.

Jjumu manages to gain consent from Ngeti Gunzy after a rat steals the bamboo vessels holding the sky god’s ancestral spirits, and a snake bites the god’s foot. After consultations with many bimo and long negotiations with representatives of the sky god, a compromise is reached in which the god will be cured of snakebite and the all-important soul vessels will be returned to him. In return, Ngeti Gunzy lets down iron and bronze wires and helps Jjumu Vuvu to raise iron and bronze pillars on earth to connect with the sky. He allows his youngest daughter, Hnituo, to marry the poor earthling, who brings only a black mountain goat as an offering.

All goes according to the agreement, and Hnituo and Jjumu Vuvu (who appears to have traveled up to the sky after the Frog King enacted the cure) accompanies her groom to earth. When leaving, however, she stealthily takes along her horses, as well as the seeds of three Nuosu staples: the voma turnip, hemp, and buckwheat. Once Ngeti Gunzy discovers the theft, he makes eating horse meat disagreeable and curses the flourishing food plants, making them harder to grow and process than other crops—which is why the Nuosu have such a hard life in the high mountains today. He also seems to have severed the links between sky and earth. This is made clear later when the couple have three children, all of whom are mute.

Though easy access to the sky has ended, a series of animal creatures attempt to get to the sky palace to learn the secret of speech. A spider, several birds, a rabbit, and snakes all fail, and even despoil the palace with feces. Finally, the Apuyoqo bird succeeds in overhearing a conversation between the sky god and his wife and flies back to the earth with the secret. Following directions, the couple boil pieces of bamboo on the highest peak, Nzyolurnyie
Mountain. As the bamboos burst, the sounds stimulate the children to speak, giving voice to the different languages of the region: Nuosu, Hxiemga (presumed to be Han), and Ozzu (the Nuosu name for several local peoples classified as Tibetan by the government). Thereafter, the various clans of these people spread out across the land.

Twenty-one years later, it seems that Hnituo has somehow returned to the sky, and news of her illness stimulates Jjumu to revisit the sky palace once more, again leading a black mountain goat as an offering. Jjumu later returns to earth accompanied by other women from the sky. However, conflicts between them soon arise, and after one sabotages the foundations of another’s house, heaven and earth “were no longer joined in marriage.” In the final lines of part 12, there is a reference to the sky god placing gold, silver, and wooden bowls of water atop sacred Turlur Mountain. Each living being on earth drinks the water, and in the end, only humans can speak. After this, Ngeti Gunzy is not mentioned in the passage, and neither he nor his palace appear in the last fifteen parts of the epic text.

The major difference between life in the sky and on earth is that the latter is a place where humans toil at a subsistence level, their crops sometimes even harvested by visitors from above. All told, the earth is a sort of inferior colony of the sky, which is a place where grains flourish, vegetable crops are easily harvested, and hemp seeds are made into wine. Those in the sky are immortal, but an earthling’s existence lasts only until death, when his or her soul is directed by the bimo across the landscape to the home of the ancient ancestors. Yet, inhabitants of the sky palace, like the sky god Ngeti Gunzy, have emotions and values similar to those of the earthbound Nuosu. They also have a record, when in their best interests, of responding to negotiation and clever scheming of the inferior earth dwellers. Or at least that is what The Book of Origins relates. Thus, like Chinese emperors of the past, the sky god is far away, with an attitude toward earth that is indifferent at best. The more immediate concern for everyday Nuosu is dealing with the spirits of ancestors who failed to make it to the land of the ancestors and wander as malevolent ghosts on earth, wreaking havoc and causing all sorts of disasters.

THE EPIC AS COSMOGRAPHIC REPOSITORY

“Cosmographic” folk knowledge (Adamson 2013, 170–71) is common to traditional societies like the Yi, whose ways of perceiving the world reflect an intimacy and relatedness with their environments (both the “natural” world and human society) that has its own validity and logic. Parts 1–12 have the
richest examples of cosmographic knowledge in passages that detail the various phases of the creation and the seeding of life on earth.

The projected sense of relatedness places humans in a family tree of other sentient beings that is explicitly consanguinal—the beings are all among the offspring of red snow, though some have blood (fauna) and other have no blood (flora). Toward the end of the first twelve parts, actors from sky and earth form affinal bonds through marriage, yet the sense of kinship with the nonhuman world is still maintained through relationships based on mutual aid (Carsten 2000, 4–5). One example is flood survivor Jjumu Vuvu's rescue of several creatures from the waters, some of whom later attempt to help him establish contact with the sky god. The content and presentation of these parts tend to be more intricately descriptive than the material presented in the final parts of the epic (discussed below) that report migrations of clans and ethnic groups who are the forerunners of contemporary humans within Liangshan.

The folk knowledge and ideas in the epic can be combined with contemporary accounts of Nuosu life created by folklorists, anthropologists, and other specialists to understand the cultural context of the narrative. Images and allusions in oral literature are metonymic in the sense that references to places, objects, or names often are linked to rich extratextual knowledge (Foley 2002, 117–21). Thus, the mention of a name, item, or place will have certain meanings to those aware of the associations behind the references. This factor of “traditional referentiality” is certainly a feature of *The Book of Origins*. Many images in the text are rich in associations if understood in the context of traditional Yi culture. While there is a great deal in *The Book of Origins* that can be compared directly to contemporary practices in less assimilated areas, there remain images or passages that are troublesome even to the most learned of *bimo* and elders today.

Along with the everyday cosmographic knowledge embedded in the text, the grand scale of mythic knowledge allows a panoramic view of the epic. In its totality of perspective, the embedded knowledge can be broken down into general categories:

- Primary information about the events of creation and transformation, such as the genealogies of the sky and earth
- Insight into the dynamics of the cosmos, such as the relation between metals and lightning and the movements of celestial bodies
- The relations between the realm of humans and nature and the beings of the sky
Primary accounts of mythical beings, such as the Great Bimo, Awo Shubu; the Spirit Monkey, Anyu Ddussy; and the culture-hero Zhyge Alu
The relation to and position of the Yi (Ni, Gni, Nuosu) within the local environment
The origin of creature traits, such as the rooster’s comb and spider’s body shape
Templates for ethical, ritual, and customary behavior, such as the treatment of various ranks of guests and protocols for weddings and sacrifices
Information on traditions of writing and performance, such as a bimo’s scriptures and the use of riddles in the marriage process
Information on material culture, such as felt cloaks, martial armor, weaving and blacksmithing implements, architecture, herding, farming, and foodways
Morphologies of creatures and plants, often in lists and categories, as in the twelve “sons of snow”
Genealogical information of the early Nuosu clans
The origins, via a sort of evolutionary dynamic, of the present-day Nuosu people and their neighbors
An intertextual dimension shared with many shorter origin tales, folk stories, songs, and proverbs related to events in The Book of Origins

The text holds referential keys to a wealth of knowledge about the Nuosu conceptions of the various dimensions of the cosmos as they perceived it.

**LAYERED REALMS, LIGHTNING, DIRECTIONS, AND CALENDAR**

The traditional Nuosu world consists of three layers: the sky realm (shymu ngehx), where gods such as Ngeti Gunzy dwell; the realm of humans and other living beings (jjumu); and the underworld (shymu ngejji), where diminutive troglodytes called ddeco exist (Laoban Salong 2012, 24–28). The major content of The Book of Origins concerns the origin of the sky and earth, their separation, and the successive eras of life-forms in the middle jjumu realm. In the present version, no mention is made of the underworld, but many passages are dedicated to relations with the sky.

The Book of Origins carries information on celestial bodies, weather phenomena, and coordinates that demarcate the expanse of the earth and the specific territory—at least in myth time. Some of this information is relayed in parts dealing with catastrophic events including a scorching die-off of
life-forms, strange meteorological conditions at the time of reseeding, and a great flood. There is much folk knowledge about natural phenomena like lightning that have highly dynamic traits capable of creating the dramatic—or traumatic memories that Barber and Barber suggest underlie some myths and beliefs. In part 4, we hear of “two loud sounds” that arise from certain mountains and are accompanied by white mists and clouds. The skies continue to thunder, rousing lightning (muhlit)—which is described in human terms as raising its head and stretching out its hands to “pull down treetops” and chomp and kick rocks with its teeth and feet. There is also mention of a family of “twelve types of lightning” that live “in the crags where the sun rises” and that, in the three spring months, “lived beyond the skin of the sky.”

Aspects of lightning, which comes in an awesome array of forms, remain unexplained by science (Oliver 2005, 451–53). It sometimes strikes in columns from cloud to earth (and sometimes back), sometimes within or between clouds, and as ball lightning or other forms that appear strange even to modern observers. Lightning can be triggered by volcanic eruptions, has the power to scorch or explode trees, and may even strike loose sand or soil, the intense heat sometimes creating glass channels in the earth.

The epic notes the conductivity of copper as well as iron, and this phenomenon is crucial to a tale about Zhyge Alu taming lightning. Although the incident is not part of this version of The Book of Origins, other versions, and many folktales, tell of this great service to humankind. In the gist of the story, Zhyge Alu comes upon an idyllic mountain village where he discovers a hospitable old woman who—like her neighbors—is afraid to dry buckwheat seeds over her household hearth and must resort to drying them in the fields. Discovering that this inefficient practice is due to fear of lightning striking the hearth each time someone starts a fire, the hero decides to face the lightning by donning a copper cooking pot for a helmet, holding a net bag of copper (similar to cord bags used to hold dried grain stuffs), and wielding a copper club. Hiding on the roof above the hearth, he instructs the old woman to light a fire. When the smoke rises, lightning strikes. A bolt hits Zhyge Alu’s helmet and slides off into the copper bag. The hero quickly closes the bag and beats the lightning with his copper club until it promises to return to the sky and never strike household hearths again (Zhang and Yang 2005, 227–28). Images of Zhyge Alu on ghost boards and scrolls usually show him wearing the copper helmet and holding the copper tools.

In part 10, “Calling Out Single Sun and Single Moon,” the being Bake Arra, who affixed the single sun and moon in the sky (once Zhyge Alu had shot down the others), is born at a moment when “man-eating” lightning “screamed three times.” In fact, the being looks rather like
lightning—described as having a red topknot, a band of yellow hair on his waist, and white hair on his feet. He also gives an iron needle to the sun—which becomes its eye—suggesting a relation between the sun in the sky, iron/conductive metals, and the earth in the form of sunlight and lighting strikes. It is notable that in part 5, during the separation of the sky and earth, the earth is held down by giant copper and iron balls, and various metal tools are used by gods and fairies in the separation process. In part 12, Ngeti Gunzy’s sky palace is at one point linked to earth by iron and bronze strands or pillars.

The four cardinal directions and acts of locating and centering things within terrain feature prominently in the early parts of The Book of Origins and relate to Nuosu traditional concepts of where they are in the cosmos. In the separation of the sky and earth, several passages involve the directions and ideas about where light, water, and wind go during the cycle of day and night that comes to pass. When the being Ddebbu Sysse is given a metal fork, he goes to open a small crack at the place the sun rises (East), and as he does so a glimmer of light appears, and the wind comes out. In the place where the sun sets (West), he also opens a crack, where a glimmer of light appears, and the wind goes back in. Sysse Dihni was sent to separate a place “at the northern headwaters,” a place that also allows a glimmer of light to emit, as well as the waters, which flow south (as do most rivers in Liangshan Prefecture) to the crack that Momu Sysse has opened.

Soon after, four wooden pillars are installed to support the sky—one standing in each of the directions just named. Furthermore, the four pillars connect the four directions to the ancestral lands, like a “rope,” and stones are brought from the cardinal directions to stake out the Yi lands, thus affixing them in time and space. It is interesting that in common parlance today, the Nuosu name their directions as East-West-North-South, in accord with the mythic directions, in contrast to the East-West-South-North order of directions in classical records of the Han people. The Nuosu directions are further subdivided into East-South, West-South, West-North, and East-North. According to Nuosu astrology, the four directions are associated with stars having these animal names: East (White Tiger, laqu), West (Red Dragon, luhn), North (Red Cow, nyuhnike), and South (Peacock, volenjy).

In part 9, when Zhyge Alu grows to manhood (marked by his acquisition of a wooden bow), he carries out another act of centering and orientation. After seeking out his ancestors and his roots in heaven and on earth, he measures the ancestral grounds on horseback (magic horses and dogs in tow) and stakes out the boundaries of the Nuosu world by shooting arrows
East-West-North-South. According to the text, there are still marker stones to prove the feat and verify the borders.

Female persons are associated with North, whereas males are associated with South. Before age two (understanding that the child’s time in the womb is considered a year), a boy will not be taken anywhere in a southerly direction, and likewise a girl will not be taken northward, out of fear of calamity. Great attention is also paid to the direction of movement within the four directions—especially in distinctions between in-group and out-group and between the living and dead. Among traditional Nuosu, gesturing counterclockwise with the right hand indicates “in-group,” or “one of us.” Gesturing clockwise with the left hand indicates “out-group,” or “not one of us.” Also, in some local traditions, food prepared for the living is stirred counterclockwise, whereas offerings to the dead are stirred clockwise. Likewise, food given to living people is presented in at least two spoonfuls, whereas to the dead only one is given. These customs are further indicators of the constant Nuosu emphasis on proper protocol, an overarching concern reified in many places in *The Book of Origins*.

In Yi rituals, everything is clearly positioned in the ritual space so as to alert the spirits where the event is taking place. This is echoed in part 7, “Genealogy of Spirit Monkey,” when the spirit monkey Anyu Ddussy sacrifices a heifer, a sheep, and a chicken in separate purification rites and places pieces of the roast meat in the “four corners of the house” before calling out the six suns and seven moons, two groups of seven and six stars, respectively, the lone *ta* star, and finally, four other stars.

In ancient times the Yi also developed or adapted at least two calendar systems. One is a lunar calendar similar (and undoubtedly related) to the Han calendar of twelve months in a year based on sixty-year cycles (Luo 1984, 124–25). The ancient Yi in Yunnan used a ten-month solar calendar, as represented in the elaborate Ten-Month Solar Calendar Park in Chuxiong, Yunnan, which features carefully arranged columns carved with images of beings from Yi myth. The animals representing the months in the two types of calendars were similar, though otters, serows, and pangolins were also included in some systems in Yunnan (Wang and Zhang 2012, 122).

**ECO-GENEALOGIES OF THE PLURIVERSE**

Theorists studying literature of the environment, or “ecoliterature,” have probed the place of humans in relation to other life-forms on planet earth. In the Anthropocene epoch, as long imagined in religion and myth, humans have finally achieved a position in which the fates of the planet and its
life-forms are in the hands of governments and controllers of technology. At the same time, voices are also raising alternative models of the relations between life-forms on earth. An interest in the social and political rights of animals and plants and the idea of “multispecies ethnography,” in which species besides humans are acknowledged, are two recent trends in thinking (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 248–49). Joni Adamson has reflected on contemporary ecocritical writing, especially the work of Marisol de la Cadena that links traditional ideas from the heritages of indigenous cultures in Peru and other parts of South America with contemporary concerns over both indigenous rights and the environment (Adamson 2012, 146–49; de la Cadena 2010, 341). In discussing perceptions of the “pluriverse” by many indigenous groups in the Americas, Adamson emphasizes how indigenous voices, in alliance with the voices of animals, plants, and the terrain, can challenge contemporary trajectories of development and “recognize the right of Mother Earth to maintain and regenerate the cycles necessary for the survival of life” (2014, 188). Thus, the perceptions of the relatedness between species detailed in *The Book of Origins* can be understood, in contemporary terms, as an indigenous discourse that offers opportunities for thinking about not just the local concerns of the Yi in relation to their world, but also to the interactions of a plurality of “other indigenous and nonindigenous groups in the twenty-first century” from all over the globe.

That said, the realities of traditional Nuosu life suggest that the view toward the connectedness with the natural world is tempered by agricultural practices that require exploitation of local environments. On one hand, it seems that the natural world of the mountains that surround the local villages is a source of many products for sustaining life, yet on another level, the creation myths narrate that humans are directly linked into and emerge from the created worlds. At times they must radically modify the environment for survival—clearing fields and protecting their crops from raiding animals. Yet, the idea is always present that there is a connection with the primal forces behind the unfolding of the chronological ages of creation and the power of certain places in the landscape where spirits reside that may affect human activity (such as mountain gods and hunting). Thus, the human relationship with the environment projected in the epic should be considered as “complex, nuanced, and multifaceted and deserve more sophisticated treatment involving both textual and field studies to fully understand and appreciate” (Bender 2011, 274–76).

Many creatures and plants native to southwest China are mentioned in *The Book of Origins*. The origins of these beings is conveyed within
genealogies, much like the genealogies that appear elsewhere in the text for the various ages of humans. These origin accounts link the life-forms, including groups of humans, to exacting niches in the environment. I have suggested the term “eco-genealogy” to describe the relatedness of humans and other creatures to the natural world as depicted in the genealogical framework of *The Book of Origins* and other epics from southwest China. A defining feature of such eco-genealogies are the specific and intimate ways of linking the origins of particular creatures, including humans, to niches in the environment presented in the narrative, which, in the case of *The Book of Origins*, are local and regional environments recognizable today (Bender 2016b, 93–95). An example, described elsewhere, is that of Shyly Wote, a direct descendant of the first humans created from falling red snow after the era of catastrophic warming, who searches the landscape for his father. In the process, many natural features and creatures are described, the details of which increase in subsequent parts dealing with the migrations of later generations of local peoples. Contemporary humans are thus linked by myth to earlier generations of humans, protohumans, other creatures, sky beings and gods, not only by blood but also by the local environments in which they dwell (Ingold 2000, 42).

Two parts of the narrative provide catalogues that comprise a folk taxonomy of “what” lives “where” in the Liangshan bioregions—although it is unclear whether the twelve “sons of snow” listed in part 11 are based on life-forms found in Liangshan, farther east in the Yunnan-Guizhou borders where the forebears of the Nuosu lived before migrating into Liangshan, or elsewhere. The offspring of red snow are comprised of those groups of creatures with blood and those without blood, somewhat along the lines of Aristotle’s classification of animals with blood and those without (Leroi 2014, 111–19). *The Book of Origins* lists the six groups with no blood first, naming several grasses and trees, including ones very useful to humans like the cypress and fir (the Nuosu term *shu* also includes spruces). The list of groups with blood shows greater variety, though both lists are still meager in comparison to the actual diversity of species dwelling in the southwest. Besides humans, which are listed last, the “with blood” list has frogs, snakes, several birds, and some mammals. Several creatures are humanlike in shape (frogs, bears, monkeys), suggesting a sort of Darwinian evolutionary principle. The lists can also be understood in the framework of Nuosu folk taxonomy, which, according to Stevan Harrell, divides creatures as either *vondi* (with claws, dangling digits), *bindi* (with hoofs, except horses), and the bird taxon of *ddurndi* (pers. comm., October 2015). The following passages
give the eco-genealogy of the “twelve sons of snow” (vo nre sse ci nyix) without blood and with blood:

Of the twelve snow tribes, six groups had blood; six groups had no blood. Of the six without blood, one group was grasses. Black-headed grass grows in the grassy places, in three hundred grassy places. The second group was trees—white cypress was a snow tribe. The third group was fir trees—the fir trees growing in the high mountains. The fourth group was bbyzy grass—the long-legged bbyzy grass was a snow tribe. The fifth group was punuo grass—black punuo grass was a snow son, the punuo grass growing in the marshlands. The sixth group was green vines, growing at the foot of trees and in caverns. The six groups with blood were:

One group was frogs. The frog groups had three brothers, living in the marshy places. The frog tribe’s eldest son, became Uoba Nyuomgu, and lived in the black earth place. The frog tribe’s second son was Uoba Qihni, and lived in the marshy places. The frog tribe’s youngest son, became the frog species Frog God, and lived in people’s houses. And there were more and more types of frogs.

The second group was snakes.
Became a *tusi* dragon,
and lived in the high, barren cliffs.
The snake tribe’s second son
was the *shygobbohlyr* snake,
that lived in the top of the fields.
The youngest son of the snake tribe
was the *bbujjiekehni* snake,
that lived in the muddy places.
The snake tribe became larger and larger.

The third group were large vultures,
the king of the winged creatures;
the vultures of the vast sky,
living in the white clouds and mountains.
The *tusi* of the winged creatures
was the peacock,
living at the Diepa Shunuo Sea.
The head of the winged creatures
was the swan,
living in the Ggucho Chohxo Gorge.
The second son of the vulture
was an eagle.
The eagle’s eldest son
was the big-headed black eagle,
living in the fir forests.
The eagle’s second son,
was the spotted-face white eagle,
living in Shuonuo Mountain.
The eagle’s smallest son,
was the short-winged cliff eagle,
freely soaring around.
The vulture’s third son
became the red-winged hawk,
living in the Ganluo area.

The fourth group was the old bears.
The black bear had one mother and two sons.
They spread out into the fir forests,
and the black bears became plentiful.
The fifth group was monkeys.  
The red monkeys had one mother and two sons.  
They spread out into the forests, 
and the red monkeys became plentiful.  
The sixth group was humans.  
The humans lived in the human world, 
and the humans, in their realm, became plentiful.

Although the list is not comprehensive, many more life-forms and their specific niches in the environment are named in other parts of The Book of Origins. One category of wild animals, for instance, not mentioned in the “sons of snow” catalogue is deer—in particular, species of musk deer that inhabit the region. The Northern Yi term *qyle* is a compound designating the muntjac (*Muntiacus*) and water deer (*Hydropotes inermis*) (Geist 1998, 44–48, 26–28). Both are primitive deer with fangs—the muntjac with short antlers, and the water deer without antlers, but with long fangs that measure more than 50 mm in some males. The water deer appears frequently in Yi folk literature, including The Book of Origins, and is a prominent image in modern Yi poetry (Bender 2009, 131–33). Many beliefs surround the water deer, and children once wore charms made of its thin sharp teeth. The creatures like grassy, reedy environments, though are sometimes found on shrubby slopes. There are several varieties of muntjac in China and South-east Asia. Like water deer, they subsist on easily digestible plant life (shoots of grasses, fruits and seeds, soft types of bark, etc.) and occasionally birds’ eggs or small creatures. When mating, both deer make a variety of calls (buzzes and whines, among them) that Yi hunters learned to emulate. Though it is presently illegal to hunt both deer, in recent times hunters would trail them with dogs and sometimes employ nets or snares to capture them.  

Predators mentioned in the epic are red foxes (*ajju*), leopards (*ssy*), and tigers (*la*). Bears (*wo*) appear in several places and are probably races of the Asian black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*). They are found in mixed conifer and hardwood forests and eat a variety of fruits, insects and larvae, inner tree bark, and any larger mammals they can capture (Domico 1988, 113–15). Although giant pandas (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) and red pandas (*Ailurus fulgens*) have ranged in confined parts of Liangshan, they are not mentioned in this version of The Book of Origins. Monkeys (*anyu*), both supernatural and natural, appear in several places in the text and are among the “sons of snow.” Raptors, including kestrels and hawks, are mentioned, as well as magpies, several species of sparrows, crows, and wild ducks. The megaraptors,
eagles, and the mythical creatures, dragons (lu), both appear in part 8, in connection with the birth of the hero Zhyge Alu. Among the various “creepy crawlies” are frogs, snakes (bbushy), horseflies (yomu), honeybees, grasshoppers, and spiders—some of which were huge monster-like creatures until Zhyge Alu mashed them to their present sizes and sent them to their respective niches in the Liangshan environment. In part 12, spiders lost their waists—after being ripped apart by the hot-tempered Ngeti Gunzy. Advised by a bimo to make amends, the sky god delegates a pair of rats, an otter (probably a small-clawed otter, Aonyx cinerea), and two splendid hunting dogs (kevie) to find what they could of the dispersed parts.

Some Nuosu hunting customs can reveal traditional attitudes toward animals and nature. Animals were considered the property of the mountain god. A god of a mountain range is called musi, or of a single mountain, bbosi. When an animal was killed, the hunter cried out, “The animal ran away!” and the prey was covered with grass in an attempt to hide the kill from the god. In Xide County, hunters offered chickens and wine in a sacrifice to the mountain god before a major hunt. Although hunting has been largely curtailed since the late 1990s, many middle-aged and older men are conversant in hunting lore. According to an elder informant in Meigu County, hunters once performed purification rituals before setting out. A hot rock was put in water (at a fire outside the home), and the hunter would let steam touch his body, his dogs, the leash, gun, and other hunting accessories.

Since wild creatures have souls, they had to be skinned according to protocol (like large domestic animals), with crosscuts on opposing feet. With the animal lying on its back, hunters of the quho commoner caste cut the right leg (just above the hoof or paw), then the left rear leg, then the left front leg, and the rear right leg. The lower-caste mgajie hunter began on the left front leg, then right rear leg, right front leg, and left rear leg. When skinning, a hunter had to chant, “I have committed a crime by killing you, but,” then adding reasons for taking the life. The tongue and two other cuts of the meat were cooked on-site and offered to the mountain god. Meat was distributed to family and neighbors (differing cuts, depending on the relation), and anyone met along the way home was given a share. Skins were tanned with animal fat and herbs. Rules regarding hunting and dividing meat are followed strictly, or else violation would impact future success in hunting.

In Liangshan there are many taboos against killing certain animals. Snakes, regarded as small dragons, and frogs should not be killed, though they are regarded as unclean. Cuckoos (since they signal when to begin planting corn), magpies, pandas, and monkeys are also spared. Animals that
could traditionally be killed included tigers, leopards, foxes, and deer (as long as not pregnant), though the meat of carnivores (classed as *vondi*), such as tigers, leopards, and eagles could not be eaten. The feet of eagles were used as legs for wine cups, and the heads were once part of some *bimo’s* ritual accoutrements. If wild geese were killed, it would evoke the wrath of the sky god. Crows are regarded very negatively by the Nuosu as they are said to breathe the smoke of funeral pyres and are thus harbingers of bad luck. On the other hand, a cuckoo’s cry is a link to the world of the ancestors.

There is also lore on ways to deal with threatening wild animals. The grandmother of a twenty-eight-year-old scholar recalled that she told him to escape from a black bear attack by running downhill, so that the bear’s fur obscured its eyes. One must stand one’s ground against a wolf or dhole—howling and staring at it to acknowledge that you—like the wolf—feel lonely and in need of company. Other hunters speak of escaping from wild boars by suddenly turning direction, as it is said pigs can run only in a straight line. Some hunters had the ability to cry like an eagle and could draw one down from the sky.

The first domesticated livestock in *The Book of Origins* appear in part 5 during events leading up to the separation of the sky and earth, when the family of Ngeti Gunzy prepares feasts of meat and drink during the discussions on how to proceed. Thereafter, when the four gigantic copper and iron balls supporting the earth are to be moved, young horses, heifers, goats, and pigs are sent to attempt the task. These creatures sent by the sky spirits may be considered numinous beings (or the property of spirit beings, later dwelling only in the sky), as their mortal counterparts had yet to populate the earth. It is also interesting that after the separation, the places that receive first attention are the mountains and valleys—followed immediately by the goat-herding area, flatlands (for farming and dwelling), rice fields, bull-fighting grounds for festival entertainment, and higher up on the hills, plots for buckwheat. Once places that would eventually support the livelihoods of humans are refined, in succeeding passages the waters, forests, and grassy areas are made, and the great *bimo* Awo Shubu determines the ecological niches of the flora and fauna of the natural world beyond that of the later human settlements.

Trees, shrubs, ferns, and flowers appear frequently in the *Hnewo*, often in contexts that belie a deep, practical knowledge of the interconnectedness of subtle features of the local biotic community that seem to go beyond simple personification (Stewart 1995, 161). In part 7, as the earth is parching, there is mention of a now unknown fern that “knew how to interact with the invisible Lake Amoshurti”—a lake that had dried up, leaving only the
hxosyr ndadi fern to survive on its now invisible waters. Several identifiable plants come into play when Zhyge Alu attempts to shoot down the extra suns and moons. The characteristics of these plants today still recall the event: the ndabbo ferns and vomosywo tree (actually, a shrub) bend over toward, or into, the ground; bamboo is jointed; pines don’t grow suckers after being cut. The worthy fir tree on which the hero made his successful shots is still split and used as shingles on some upland homes. In many Yi areas, especially in Yunnan, sacred groves (with names like “dragon tree forests” [Ch: long shulin]) are kept near villages and cutting is not allowed. Ancient, solitary trees traditionally are also not cut. Violating these taboos could bring calamity upon individuals or the community.

The epic mentions a few domesticated plants and ancestors of plants later domesticated. The sole survivor of the catastrophic warming era is a stalk of hemp (Cannibis). Hemp (N: mu) is still a common cultivant in many Yi areas and was an important source of raw material for rope and clothing (Mueggler 1998; Harrell, Bamo, and Ma 2000, 18). Part 8 of The Book of Origins recounts how Pumo Hniyyr, the mother of the hero Zhyge Alu, sets aside her weaving to go and “play” with the dragon-eagles, whose blood falls from the sky and impregnates her. The weaving process is presented in these lines:

Pumo Hniyyr
for three years prepared the weaving equipment,
took three months to set up her backstrap loom.
The ground spike was like a star;
the batten glimmered like eagle wings;
the shuttle moved through the warp like a honeybee;
the loom beam jumped up and down;
the weft threads were like a rainbow.

The details of the backstrap loom are wholly recognizable to Yi weavers today, and such devices are still found in other communities in the eastern Himalayas. Among the Nuosu, the common practice is to attach one end of the long weft threads (that are braided together) onto a wooden or metal spike that is driven into the ground. In some areas several women may attach their looms to one stake and arrange themselves in a circle as they sit on the ground weaving and chatting.

Beings that appear in the epic, such as Shyly Wote, who on his search for a father ends up marrying the nzymo’s daughter, utilize ladles, carts, fabrics (silks and satins), and other items associated with daily life—and even
upper-class wealth. A number of specialized items—the bamboo vessels used to hold family souls in the home, cloth, and warrior’s armor—are mentioned in the riddles the nzymo’s daughter asks of Shyly Wote. His younger sister, Nyingemo Ala, supplies him with answers:

“The three dogs that cannot hunt are puppets in the Nuo opera.
The red-cheeked chicken unable to cry is the fern-dwelling wild pheasant.
The three pieces of wood that mustn’t be burned are the three bamboo soul containers in the home.
The three pieces of cloth that can’t be woven are the rainbows in the sky.
The three piles of wool that can’t be fluffed, are the misty mountain clouds.
The three jin of salt that can’t be eaten, are the icicles in the deep forest.
The upper part of the war armor—the war vest with the front and back—is missing a piece made from antler skin.
The middle part of the war armor—made of 6,600 leather plates—
but lacking one,
is made of the thick skin on a wild boar’s neck.
The rear part of the armor—
that has two plates—
is the skin of a water buffalo’s knee.”

SEARCHING FOR AN IDEAL PLACE: NICHE SELECTION IN THE ANCESTRAL MIGRATIONS

The last fifteen parts of *The Book of Origins* describe migrations of Nuosu clans across landscapes of what appears to be southwest China—though migration stories through landscapes similar to those in the epic are told in the folklore of many other peoples of the Eastern Himalayas (Blackburn 2010, 59–60). The migration passages are in some ways the most enigmatic in *The Book of Origins*. Overall, they lack the detail and action of the first
twelve parts that concern the various phases of the creation. The passages mainly relate the migrations of individual groups throughout the postflood world. As noted, all of the flora and fauna catalogued as the “sons of snow” were assigned specific ecological niches in the landscape and were part of the domains of water, sky, or earth. Various trees and grasses all had their specific place, as did the frogs, snakes, birds, monkeys, and bears. Although the sixth group of creatures with blood was humans, the passages do not specify their niche.

According to legend, many generations ago the Gguho and Qoni clans migrated into the Liangshan region from a place called Zzyzzypuvu, which may be somewhere in the Yunnan-Guizhou borderlands. These migrating clans were part of the Six Tribes said to have migrated in different directions to populate the Yi areas in southwest China (Bamo Ayi 2001, 101). Accounts of these early migrations are comparable to those of other Yi groups, many ethnic groups in southwest China (including Miao, Dong, Jingpo, Naxi, Lahu, and Han), and other peoples in contiguous areas in Southeast Asia, Northeast India, and Nepal. Some of these migration narratives may be linked to actual experiences of the forebears of contemporary clans, especially in the details of searching for suitable places to settle and criteria that instigate actual settlement. Among the reasons for migrating are depletion of local resources, overpopulation, and warfare. One or more of these factors motivate the migrants to begin a search for a place with better conditions or at least amicable ones. The searches are processes by which groups of a given people move through a landscape on foot or by boat as they encounter situations of varying degrees of favorability and unfavorability. Thus, one way of appreciating the latter part of The Book of Origins is to examine structure and content in light of criteria for finding a suitable or “ideal” niche in which to settle and prosper (Wu Jingzhong 2001, 38–40).

As the story of Shyly Wote and the first generation of the “sons of snow” unfolds, there is much cosmographic information about the environment, especially in the mention of plants and animals specific to southwest China. There are also references to crops, geographical locations, and adaptations to local environments that give clues to the sort of places the ancestors lived. After the great flood destroyed life on earth, the survivor Jjumu Vuvu and Hnituo, his wife from the sky, initiated the present descent lines of several peoples in southwest China by bearing three sons. These children, however, were mute. After the Apuyoqo bird brought back the secret of speech from the household of the sky god Ngeti Gunzy, Jjumu Vuvu followed the instructions and boiled three pieces of bamboo until they exploded, and then splashed the boiling water on each mute son. The children were thus shocked
into speaking—but each spoke a different language. The groups are identified as “Hxiemga” (probably Han people), Ozzu (local groups now classified as Tibetan who speak Tibetan or Qiangic languages), and several Nuosu clans.

Parts 13–20 outline the genealogies and migrations of these groups and how they spread out and fill various niches in the landscape. Although not mentioned in the previous sixteen parts, parts 17 and 18 of *The Book of Origins* acknowledge the existence of “Foreigners” (Yiery), who seem to be people other than those indicated as descendants of the three once-mute brothers. This reference to peoples originating outside the pairing of Hnituo and the earthling flood survivor is noteworthy, as other published versions of the epic do not include the parts on “Foreigners.” Who these foreigners are is unknown, although French, English, and American explorers had entered the Liangshan Mountains by the early twentieth century. Several American pilots crashed in the region during World War II and were rescued by local Yi villagers. Given the many oral and written forms of *The Book of Origins* and the custom of copying versions by generations of bimo, it is possible that fairly recent content could find its way into the epic.

As the original groups spread out, all find suitable niches in the landscape and are thereafter associated with these places. The Hxiemga live in the lowlands, the Ozzu somewhat higher up, and the Nuosu in the still-higher areas. The text also gives clues or specific criteria on the merits of places to settle. Unlike animals and plants, who entered their niches naturally, humans must go in search of them. The decision to settle in or reject specific places demands the meeting of certain quite specific criteria. Although nearly all of the migration accounts in parts 13–20 make some mention of searching for a suitable place or suitable conditions for settlement, the criteria for settling are most detailed in part 23, the “Genealogy of Nzy Clan.”

In part 23, the various families wend their way through the landscape in search of ideal places to settle. In some places, they leave behind a few families; in other cases, it seems the entire group moves on. The text very explicitly states whether a place is suitable or unsuitable to the migrants. As the trek continues, certain criteria for suitability accrue. By examining these criteria, we can begin to imagine what sort of “ideal niche” the Yi migrants were searching for and what sorts of places some of them accepted. The part begins with the passage:

The Wuwu Gizy,
when they came to Sagukenyie,
they looked at the place Aqybiliu.
At Aqybilu,
black cows plowed the earth,
spoons with broken handles were used to eat.
It was not a suitable place to settle down,
the Nzy were not willing to migrate there to live.

In these lines the lineage called “Wuwu Gizy” is explicitly named. In succeeding parts, the group is referred to either as the “Nzy” or by a pronoun such as “they.” The first eight lines contain a multiform structure that is repeated throughout the rest of the passage. The multiform consists of four moves: (1) arrival at a vantage point; (2) surveying a place within sight; (3) assessment; (4) decision. In the first move, the group comes to a particular place, and from that vantage point they enact the second move by looking at (surveying) another place. The surveying results in an evaluative comment on unsuitability or suitability. At this point a decision is made either to settle (or settle part of the group) or leave.

Throughout part 23, this multiform pattern is repeated twenty-five times. The basic four moves are repeated in each instance, though the length and degree of elaboration is different in each case. There is no set line length, and many of the multiforms are as short as eight or nine lines; a few are many lines in length. The spatiality evoked in moves 1 and 2 suggests a landscape of hills and valleys that can serve as overlooks onto territory waiting to be crossed or avoided. The landscape is often already inhabited, though in some cases wild areas are described or implied. In this first passage, two factors are judged as negative: the cattle used to plow, and spoons with broken handles. The reference to “black cows” may show a preference for another type of cattle or buffalo, or the term may be a marker for a certain caste or economic level. In any case, the implication is that the local cattle (assuming they are cattle and not a symbol for something else) are markers of an unsuitable place. The other unsuitable factor is that the locals use spoons with broken handles to eat—suggesting the area is very poor—and therefore not a suitable place to settle. Thus, the Nzy continue on their way, not settling there because the “niche conditions” have not been met.

The next passage replicates the multiform structure:

They stood at Aqybilu,
and looked at the place Nieyylurjjo.
At Nieyylurjjo
one’s skin burned in the day,
and long clothes were needed at night.
The Ni came there and ran off,
The Shuo came there and ran off.
It was not a suitable place to settle down;
the Nzy were not willing to migrate there to live.

Here again, we have the moves of arrival, surveying, assessment, and decision. In this case, there are also two unsuitable factors: the sun is extremely bright during the day, and it is so cold at night that special clothes are needed to keep warm. These conditions may entail high altitude and lack of cloud cover, or other factors. The conditions are so unsuitable, so hostile that neither the “Ni” (an ancient word referring to the Yi or Nuosu) or the Shuo (Han or “Hxiemga”) people can bear them. Thus, the search continues.

In the next passage, cultural mixing is the basis of the negative assessment:

They stood at the place Nieyylurjjo,
and looked at the place Leggeorro.
At Leggeorro
Ni people spoke Hxiemga speech when born,
Shuo people grew Nuosu braids when born;
water buffalo and yellow cows plowed side by side,
plowed in one direction,
and split up when finished plowing.
Ni and Shuo customs were mixed,
Going outside together,
but returning home to two places.
Shuo people grew long braids,
Shuo women wore long pants.
It was not a suitable place to settle down;
the Nzy were not willing to migrate there to live.

What is apparently a mixed community could be an area where Hxiemga and Yi people lived in close proximity and some customs were shared. Although similar in many ways, cultural distinctions were maintained. Speech, draught animals, and ways of braiding hair seem to have been borrowed mutually or in one direction. Today, in common Nuosu parlance, water buffalos (*yy nyi*) represent Han people, whereas black cattle/oxen (*nuo nyi*) represent Nuosu. In the lines, the Hxiemga women are differentiated by wearing pants. Historically, Nuosu women have worn long,
pleated skirts, though many Yi women in Yunnan and Guizhou wear pants. Such mixed communities have been documented in places throughout southwest China (Lin 1961, 12; Harrell 2001, 153–55; Ma 2001). Nevertheless, the mixing renders the place unsuitable for the Nzy, who seem to haughtily disdain the situation, wishing to maintain their pure ways.

In the next several passages the Nzy confront environmental niches they find unsuitable. There is much grass, but few trees and shrubs.

They stood at the place Leggeorro, and looked at the place Mutedoli.
At Mutedoli, the trees and shrubs were very few, but wild grass grew everywhere; the children and grandchildren looked very poor. It was not a suitable place to settle down; the Nzy were not willing to migrate there to live.

Herding sheep and goats in grassy areas is an important part of Nuosu culture, though they are not a grasslands people in the sense of Mongols or some Tibetans. The forests of the Nuosu regions supply trees and shrubs for raw materials for dwellings, tools, and ritual paraphernalia. Thus, vegetation or its lack is a determining factor for moving on. Many more examples could be pointed out in the remaining lines of part 23.

In sum, the “niche criteria” embedded in The Book of Origins offer insight into the sort of environmental niches that the migrants in the text found to be unsuitable or suitable for settling. The negative criteria that caused the migrants to avoid settling in certain places include general ones such as weather, geophysical state of the locale, poverty, unacceptable social relations, harmful supernatural beings, freakish animals or animal behavior, lack of mutual languages, lack of resources, lack of ritual flora, unsuitable food, and contamination by death. The positive criteria that induced the Nzy migrants to settle are very specific: Hillsides for tending sheep, grasslands for grazing horses, and wet spots for pigs all meet the “suitable” criteria. A varied diet including fish is available, as are pine resources for light and fuel. In the long-sought place domestic animals prosper in ways that seem “magical”—growing quickly and sturdily. The strong, fecund livestock that wear out plows and supply copious oil and lard show the suitability of the place. As the generations pass, the self-sufficient martial power of the group is reflected by the glimmering swords and horses, reinforcing the self-image
Introduction

of the Nzy as a dominant, highly successful force in their environmental and cultural realm.

A CONTINUING TRADITION

The Book of Origins today exists in many formats. All clans in Liangshan are connected to it by ritual as the origins of each local clan must be recited in any given ritual event. In this way The Book of Origins is an open-ended text that expands to include new versions at every recital. Weddings,funerals, and the various rituals introduced above continue to be sites for live performances. At such events, the performers may be bimo priests with their scriptures, or young male folk singers who deliver portions antiphonally while standing and turning. Unique tradition-bearers like Jjivot Zopqu may recite passages from memory or directly from a written text. These contexts, however, depend on the continued desire of individuals, families, and communities to include portions of The Book of Origins within life-cycle events.

As urban and global influences increase, new contexts for the expression of the epic content have appeared. These include the government-sponsored midsummer Torch Festival held in Xichang, readings and writings by urban-based poets, school performances, pop songs, television shows, children’s
books, ethnic tourism, ethnic-themed restaurants, public art, and rituals tailored to the needs of urban based populations. For instance, in May 2017, a group of Aku Wuwu’s Nuosu college students garbed in traditional dress recited the opening passages of *The Book of Origins* in Nuosu language as the opening performance at an interethnic poetry event held in a major Chengdu bookstore. Thus, a narrative recounting the genealogy of humans in connection with other life-forms inhabiting the earth and sky of southwest China continues to extend its meanings locally among new generations of Nuosu and increasingly onto the global stage.