The Nuosu Book of Origins

Bender, Mark, Luo, Qingchun, Zopqu, Jjivot, Harrell, Stevan

Published by University of Washington Press

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

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81756

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3084804
Notes

PREFACE

1 “Aku Wuwu” is the standard Chinese pinyin romanized version of his Nuosu Yi name, which (including the tone indicators) is Aku Vyvy / Apkuup Vyty (the latter including the tone indicators of Northern Yi, explained in the pronunciation guide). Aku’s official Chinese name is Luo Qingchun.

INTRODUCTION

1 See Glotfelty and Fromm 1996; Garrard 2011; and Thornber 2012.
2 The following sections provide background on The Book of Origins, a Nuosu tradition that exists in a dynamic interplay between oral performance and written formats. Much of the information on local culture is drawn from Aku Wuwu’s personal experiences growing up in the Liangshan region, and our mutual fieldwork with dozens of local tradition-bearers that took place on yearly fieldtrips to the Liangshan area from 2004 to 2015. This introduction also draws heavily on the work of many other scholars and folklorists, particularly Lin Yaohua (Lin Yueh-hua), whose cultural survey of the Nuosu was made in the early 1940s, and more recent work of Bamo Qubumo, Bamo Ayi, Ma Erzi, Stevan Harrell, Thomas Heberer, Ann Maxwell Hill, and others.
4 Genome studies indicate complex genetic relationships of ethnic groups in southwest China with other areas of Asia (Lin et al. 2010).
Thousands of traditional Yi texts reside in script and digital formats in archives around the world. The Cultural Palace of Nationalities (Minzu wenhua guan) in Beijing has a collection, as does the ancient scripts museum on the campus of the Central Minzu University. Along with a significant collection of Tibetan texts, the Southwest Minzu University in Chengdu, Sichuan, has a large archive of Yi texts. There are also holdings at local research centers in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan. Significant collections are housed at Cambridge University, Harvard University, and other locations outside China.

In recent years new contexts for epic performance have emerged. These include recited passages by Aku Wuwu and other poets at poetry readings in China and abroad, recitals in college classrooms by Nuosu professors or invited tradition-bearers, recitals of portions of the epics by bimo for groups of scholars at international conferences, and performances by Yi college students during poetry readings at high-end bookstores in Chengdu. In 2005, more than sixty bimo participated in ritual reenactments at the International Yi Studies Conference held in Meigu County. Such events draw attention to both transmitters of the tradition as well as to the epic itself.

The major devices and structures that make the text a powerful poetic medium are explored in the following paragraphs, drawing on terminology and interpretive strategies from the performance school of folkloristics and related approaches to epic literature (Bauman 1977; Toelken 1996; Bamo Qubumo 2003, 160–92; Honko 2000; Webster 2006).

It is fascinating that many of Lin Yaohua’s observations on the daunting geographical and unique social features of Liangshan resonate with descriptions in The Book of Origins, including overlooks, dense forests, precipitous trails, and mixed communities of Yi and Han (Lin 1961, 2–25).
4. GENEALOGY OF LIGHTNING / MURZYM CY

1 “Genealogy of Lightning” does not have a title. The editors have added a title here for stylistic conformity. This is the first of many appearances of lightning in The Book of Origins. Lightning storms are common in the Liangshan Mountains, and lightning appears in many other traditional narratives. The mythic culture-hero Zhyge Alu, introduced in part 8, is said to have used a copper trident and copper net to tame lightning that was striking people’s indoor cooking fires. Mueggler (2017, 44–46, 88–89) provides information on beliefs about the “god of lightning” from Yi (Lolopo subgroup) in northern Yunnan, noting that the god “claims the soul at the moment of death,” and the living relatives must appease it to allow the soul to go on its journey.

2 This line has a meaning similar to that of “beyond the blue sky” in English.

5. SEPARATION OF SKY AND EARTH / MUVU MUHIE PO

1 Sysse has the meaning of “a son who dies and lives again,” or generally just “spirit.”

2 In this tradition, the source of all rivers is in the north, and their estuaries are in the south. Rivers figure in the origin and migration accounts of many peoples of the Eastern Himalayas.

3 This sentence exhibits an omniscient voice that employs a common rhetorical pattern of, “If not . . . , then must . . . .” This device appears elsewhere in the poem. This and other sorts of shifts in narrative point of view occur quite frequently in the text, often with no foregrounding. These features may also reflect the written medium, which exists in relation to a more fluid tradition of oral performance.

4 This line does not appear in the Jjivot text. It is reconstructed here from the Feng (1986, 8) version. The line may have been omitted when an earlier version was copied.

5 The metal balls (understood as giant metallic rocks) were put in place to keep the earth from rising up; the pillars were erected to keep the sky from falling.

6 The ancestral grounds are the site of the activities of the earliest mythic ancestors of the Yi.

7 Another name for the being who is mentioned in the previous line.

8 The meaning of these lines is that the gods went into action.

9 Hoes with long wooden handles and steel heads are still important implements for working earth in the rural areas.
6. GREAT BIMO / AWO SHUBU

1 Horses with supernatural powers, including the ability to fly and even speak, are part of the folklore of many peoples from Mongolia through Tibet. Another “heavenly steed” appears later in the Hnewo, as a companion of the mythic culture-hero Zhyge Alu. In drawings by bimo and in sculptures and portraits by contemporary artists, Zhyge Alu is often depicted with his horse. In part 12, the daughter of the sky god brings horses to earth for use by the Nuosu. Traditionally, small horses were used by the Yi and other upland peoples, such as the Miao.

2 These ritual instruments are still in use by Nuosu bimo priests. The vytu is a bamboo tube, described as an arrow container; one end is carved like a bear’s mouth (Harrell, Bamo, and Ma 2000, 52–54).

3 The Nuosu word sho refers to many types of fir trees (Abies) and spruces (Picea) found in southwest China. These tall, straight trees appear frequently in Nuosu lore. Numerous deer of several species appear in The Book of Origins.

4 Here, as elsewhere, “nine” means “many.” Numerous grasses, some with ceremonial usages, grow in the Liangshan area and appear throughout the narrative.

5 A kind of small bird or sparrow (N: jusse or zyju; Ch: yunqie).

6 Refers to a kind of insect.

7. GENEALOGY OF SPIRIT MONKEY / ANYU DDUSSY CY

1 This being is in the form of a monkey. In some versions, he is called Anyu Jussy or other names.

2 The sacred Turlur Mountain often appears in Nuosu myth and folk literature.

3 Purification ceremonies held at the four corners of the house show the importance of directionality and boundaries in traditional thinking. In part 12, the Bbuvu “drilled holes in the foundation of Hxuo’s house,” in an instance of rivalry and sabotage that helped break the links between sky and earth.

4 The seven shanyie stars are known as the “Seven Sisters” (qi jiemei) in Chinese and as the “Big Dipper” in the West. The chyku stars are a constellation of six stars. Constellations mentioned below are made up of the number of stars indicated. Many constellations and individual stars are identified in Yi astronomy, although many names in The Book of Origins are now obscure.

5 Chickens figure prominently in many rituals conducted by bimo ritualists, and like other sacrifices serve as vehicles for ridding a person or situation of malevolent forces.
6 Ferns (Ch: juecao; *Pteridium aquilinum*) are used at New Years’ time to scorch the hair off butchered pigs, done out of respect to the ancestors and the pig itself. The plant is regarded as ancient, and it has many uses among the rural folk, including a food source in the form of the young fiddleheads. *Paqiqu* grass, mentioned in subsequent lines, is also a common plant and is used to feed livestock.

7 Water deer (*Hydropotes inermis* [N: le]) are numinous creatures that often appear in Nuosu lore. They are sometimes shape-shifters. For instance, in the story “Origin of Ghosts,” a water deer transforms into a beautiful woman with monstrous powers (Bamo Qubumo 2001).

8. ZHYGE ALU / ZHYGE ALU

1 In Yi folklore, dragons usually live in water, though dragon lore varies among the Yi groups. In some Yi areas in Yunnan dragons are thought to inhabit forests near water sources and are the focus of many rituals to ensure adequate water supplies. In some Nuosu areas, a small legless lizard is identified as a dragon. In some Yi areas, snakes are regarded as immature dragons. The Nuosu words for mature fish, immature fish, and fish fry, are respectively *hxeshy*, *hxebbu*, and *hxesse*.

2 Honeybees are kept by many Yi groups, including the Nuosu. Hives are made of hollow logs and fastened under the eaves of a house. References to bees as messengers or go-betweens are common in Yi folk literature.

3 Along with water deer, muntjac (N: *qi*; *Muntiacus*) are sometimes shape-shifters and considered as numinous beings. Magical powers are attributed to the musk of both deer.

4 Many places in *The Book of Origins* are associated with beings or legendary persons that are now obscure.

5 According to Jjivot Zopqu, this name refers to a famous beauty in the region.

6 This is likely a reference to a famous person named Bamboo Stalk, a resident of the area. This may be an incidental addition to the poem made by an earlier transcriber.

7 A mountain in Xide County.

8 This is likely a reference to Mount Lushan near Lake Qionghai in Xichang, the capital of the Liangshan Yi Nationality Autonomous Prefecture.

9 This is the only genealogy of a female person in this version of *The Book of Origins*.

10 The weaving implements and practices mentioned in these lines are still in use today, as explained in the introduction.

11 The eagles are likely male golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*). In later lines, hybrid “dragon-eagles” appear.

12 N: *Ndaniuobbo*. 

---

NOTES TO PART 8
A “pervert ghost” (shufi) is thought to be the cause of abnormal pregnancies.

This is the most detailed depiction of bimo priests (of various ranks) and their accoutrements in the narrative.

Visitors enter at the “head” of the village and exit at the “tail.” Village structure may vary according to the terrain. One traditional village, surrounded by a low stone wall, is located on the road between Yuexi and Xichang in Liangshan Prefecture. The villagers claim the layout is in the shape of a fish—with a head, middle, and tail.

An apprentice bimo is known as a bisse.

The apprentice bimo is sitting on several layers of mats on top of a box of sacred scrolls. The bamboo mat (nbiega nbiedda) would probably be similar to those used when fluffing cotton with a metal bowstring. The reference to a felt mat (wonbo zziehly) suggests ancient technological, if not cultural, links to more northern parts of China or Central Asia, where felting was once an integral part of nomadic life. Note that the muntjac and water deer are again mentioned, this time directly in association with a bimo. The top mat is made of loose tangles of deer hair, pulled or scraped off in the skinning process. The hair is loose because it lacks the meshing fibers of wool, which when wetted can be made into felt.

The description here seems to indicate the scriptures were, as is typical, constructed of folded sheets of paper sewn together with cord. Such texts have been collected in many Yi areas, along with scrolls and sewn volumes made up of single pages. Such scriptures are typically carried in mesh bags made of hemp string. The individual scrolls are often protected by thin cloth bags.

This willow branch (zziego hxobbo) is dipped in water during rituals and used by the bimo to tap one or more live chickens that will be sacrificed. Gefi is the life spirit, consisting of both male (ge) and female (fi) aspects. The spirit attaches itself to young women and “activates” each time a pregnancy occurs. Like the creatures at the beginning of this part, the Gefi is said to enjoy playing in forests and lakes (Bamo Ayi 2001, 125). A yellow hen is considered lucky, and today they are sacrificed and eaten at the birth of a child in the hope of having a healthy and prosperous life.

The uniqueness of the mythic future culture-hero Zhyge Alu is augured by the time and date of his birth and certain signs such as the white mist emitted by his mother and his unusually precocious actions after birth. His dragon lineage manifests after his mother sends him to live with the dragons and he immediately acculturates. The place he was born, Lu Ddi Ho, is the term for “southeast” and contains the word for “dragon” (lu). Likewise, the lu in Zhyge Alu’s name means dragon. Dragons are conceived of in various ways throughout the Yi areas. In Liangshan, illustrations in the bimo scriptures often show Zhyge Alu accompanied by a supernatural reptilian
called Bbahxa Ayuosse, a creature regarded as being related to dragons (Harrell, Bamo, and Ma 2000, 62–64). Some people we interviewed claim to have seen dragons, though the creatures were very small, in some cases lizard-like.

21 Compared to the pig pens, located near Nuosu homes, the areas where sheep and goats are grazed tend to be relatively far away from the settlements. These lines also describe the arming of the future mythic culture-hero with bows and arrows in various gradations of strength (along with other hunting/warrior accoutrements) in accordance with his age rank. The line “those conducting their affairs” refers to capable persons in the community who resolve problems and disputes.

22 The magic weapons, steeds, and hunting dogs resonate with similar images in heroic epics of the Mongol and Tibetan peoples to the west and north of the present Yi areas. The reference to the “homeland” (which here is Jotur-muggur) is the site of the original Yi peoples, who later divided into the Six Tribes and moved to various places in southwest China, including present-day Liangshan Prefecture. An alternate name for the original homeland is Zzyzzypuvu. Some Yi scholars suggest the homeland was near the present city of Zhaotong in northeastern Yunnan. Such sites where peoples divide and migrate in different directions are found in the lore of many peoples in the Eastern Himalaya region, including Miao in Guizhou and Tangkul Nagas in Manipur and Nagaland, Northeast India. Boundary stones, sometimes with Yi and or Han engravings, have been located in some areas of southwest China once controlled by Nanzhao (thought to be founded by ancestors of the Yi peoples) and other ancient kingdoms (Wu Gu 2001, 25). Stone megaliths, for various purposes, are also found in parts of Southeast Asia and North East India (Marak and Jangkhomang 2012, 67–70).

9. SHOOTING DOWN SUNS AND MOONS / GGE NBIE HLE NBIE

1 Ndabbo (Pteridium aquilinum) is one of several ferns known as juecao in Chinese.

2 The branches on the vomosywo shrub (Tetrastigma formosanum; Ch: yan-pateng) arch outward into the ground, and new suckers grow up from the tips.

3 The horse mulberry (N: jy sy; Ch: masang; Coriaria sinica). It appears in the myths of some other peoples of southwest China. For instance, in the creation epics of the Miao people from southeast Guizhou, the hero Hsang Sa (“Hsangb Sax” with tone indicators used in Miao Romanization in southeast Guizhou) also stands in the top of a horse mulberry to shoot down the extra suns—and the tree was later punished for its complicity, resulting in its short stature (Bender 2006, 66–70). In the Yi version, Zhyge
Alu finally succeeds in his task by standing in the top of a fir tree, which actually benefits from the association and is praised for its future use to humankind. Again, Turlur Mountain—whose whereabouts is presently unknown—is the major mountain in the mythic world of the narrative.

4 Horsesflies are called yomu.

5 This episode of Zhyge Alu “downsizing” the insects is often counted as among his greatest contributions. Evidence of giant creatures abound in southwest China, and both Sichuan and Yunnan are well-known for their dinosaur excavations. It is interesting to speculate about the relation—if any—between dinosaur fossils and the imagery of insects and dragons in Yi folk imagination. Some local people are known to have found dinosaur bones and teeth, which they keep as curiosities.

10. CALLING OUT SINGLE SUN AND SINGLE MOON / GGE DI HLE DI GU

1 Bake Arra is a mythical character remarkable for his unusual dress and for appearing in this epoch when the sun and moon were hiding. These lines also relate the folk idea that a needle is associated with the “eye” of the sun, reveal the origins of certain traits of roosters, and tell of a white dog that barks at the sun. The rooster in the myth is very powerful and can resist forces from every direction. Chickens are widely used in rituals in southwest China. The idea of a “heavenly/celestial dog” (Ch: tian gou) that eats the sun during eclipses is common in the folklore in Sichuan. This passage is pivotal in the epics, as once the sun and moon came out of hiding, life as we know it could flourish on earth.

11. TWELVE BRANCHES OF SNOW / VONRE SSE CINYI

1 The name of this magic object is nijju; the place-name is obscure.

2 The literal phrasing is “fathers,” though carrying the meaning of parents, or ancestors.

3 This is a reference to an early species of human—literally the “fir tree sons.” Yi myths from other areas also recount former ages of “protohumans” or anthropomorphs. In Chuxiong Prefecture in Yunnan, the epic Chamu of the Nisupo Yi describes the ages of the single-eyed people, the protruding-eyed people, and finally the horizontal-eyed people (Guo and Tao 2009, 16–81). Cuotaji, a type of folk drama (Ch: noo) from the Yi of eastern Guzhou, relates the various stages in human evolution from monkeys and other anthropomorphs (Qu, Xu, and Schechner 1989, 104). Various forms of noo drama have been documented in southern China among several ethnic groups, one common feature being the use of wooden masks.
4 The sometimes short-tempered sky spirit is understood as living with his family in a palace in the sky. He seems to spend quite a bit of time looking down on the world below, though he does not have direct control over the activities there. In the following passages, the origins of many things, including the shape of spiders, are explained.

5 His wife was losing her sight, possibly to cataracts. This ailment is common in the higher uplands of Asia.

6 Spiders thereafter have only heads and tails. Because of their appearance in *The Book of Origins*, it is against tradition to kill spiders in Nuosu homes.

7 It is understood here that the magpies were flung off by the *bimo*’s guardian spirit.

8 Refers to the Ssussevoge anthropomorphs described above.

9 The following passages contain many sexual metaphors and deal with the mysteries of pregnancy, including the life-bringing *Gefi* spirit.

10 Taboos are divided between white and black. A common, or white, violation, is when a woman passes over rather than around a hearth. A serious, or black, violation, would be eating dog meat or killing a relative. In this passage the *bimo* had to perform the rituals in order for the creatures to evolve into real humans.

11 The cypress (N: *shubo*; Ch: *baishu*; Cupressaceae) appears frequently in Yi traditional lore. The tree is regarded as sacred and is used by *bimo* in certain rituals. Fir trees (N: *ssubo*; Ch: *shanshu*; Abies) likewise are sacred and highly regarded trees. These trees also have utilitarian uses in architecture. Fir shingles are used to cover some rooftops.

12 *Punuo* grass (Ch: *changpu*; *Acorus gramineus*) has medicinal value, especially for curing loose bowels. It is also used by Han people in parts of Sichuan to bathe children during the Dragon Boat (Ch: *duanwu*) festival in late spring in order to ward off disease and bring good luck.

13 Some Nuosu speak of having seen a small green frog that is thought to bring luck into the home.

14 Local officials or overlords (Ch: *tusi*) were appointed by the imperial government and ruled many parts of southwest China in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Thus, a *tusi* dragon is the most powerful of (local) dragons. The Nuosu term *nzymo*, or simply *nzy*, refers to the upper ruling caste from which *tusi* officials were recruited. *Tusi* were part of a system whereby the Chinese imperial government used local leaders to control ethnic minority areas in southwest China (Whitaker 2008). The role was gradually phased out in the Qing dynasty as the ethnic areas came under direct government control by officials from outside.

15 Possibly Lake Dianchi in Kunming, Yunnan.

16 A small hawk or kestrel (Ch: *yao*). The exact species represented in the epic is unclear.
This is likely a reference to the Asian black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*). A stable family unit consists of a mother and two cubs (Domico 1988).

Monkeys in southwest China include Tibetan macaques (*Macaca thibetana*) and the threatened golden snub-nosed monkey (*Rhinopithecus roxellana*).

The sparrow is known as *jusse* or *zyju* in Nuosu. The Chinese term *yunque* can refer to various sparrows.

The above passages enumerate many of the native species once common in parts of Sichuan and surrounding areas. However, horses are an example of non-native domesticated creatures that occasionally appear in *The Book of Origins*.

The following story of the waters of wisdom and dullness and the relation to human speech is a very important point in the myth narrative. It marks the end of the era when all creatures could speak to each other.

*Shuoma* is the Nuosu name for a variety of flowers in the huge rhododendron genus. The flowers frequently appear in Yi folk literature, especially in reference to women’s beauty. There is much folklore about the flowers, including *bimo* chants.

The wooden eating bowls and spoons, as a set, are known as *kurbbur iesa*.

Although crows are regarded as intelligent, they are seen as harbingers of evil and are much disliked by the Nuosu.

### 12. Genealogy of Shyly Wote / Shyly Wote ssy

1. All of the men mentioned above are considered to be sons of the early ancestor Shyly. This episode is the basis upon which Chinese scholars have suggested that in fairly recent times the Yi were matrilineal, in an age when men had no fathers and had to search for them. Many customs surrounding marriage are attributed to events portrayed in this part.
2. The term “Gni” (or “Ni”), is an early name for the Yi and often appears in texts from Guizhou. It appears occasionally throughout this version of *The Book of Origins*. In this context, the term refers to the Nuosu, and we have used the term “Nuosu” in the translation.
3. In this context, “Han” is a term for the local groups of Han Chinese people. The Nuosu name is “Hxiemga,” a term that will appear later in the parts narrating the migrations after the great flood. A more traditional name, “Shuo” (which literally means slaves, or those without clans), also appears in the latter part of the text.
4. The fruits mentioned in these lines are edible.
5. As explained in the introduction, the Nuosu word for the local ruler known by the Han Chinese term “tusi” is *nzymo*, or simply *nzy*.
6. A person from “down the road” is not of the same social standing. The questions posed by the *nzymo*’s daughter have echoes in the “riddling song”
(Ch: *pange*) traditions common in southwest China. It is interesting to note that Shyly Wote can solve these questions only with aid from his youngest sister. In the Tibetan epic of Gesar, the hero often relies on the aid of his three celestial sisters to shepherd him through difficulty (Hummel 1974, 5–6).

7 This line and the next are not part of Jjivot’s version. The lines have been reconstructed following the Feng (1986) version and the context of the narrative.

8 Various types of local drama collectively known as *nuo* were historically part of many cultures in southern China, including some groups of Yi. In many cases wooden masks were used by the performers. In some versions of the riddle, the answer is “foxes.”

9 In other words, the pheasant cannot make sounds like a domesticated chicken.

10 These containers, which hold one of a person’s souls, are kept in the home for a certain length of time (determined by a *bimo*) until they are ritually interred in mountain crags.

11 Certain Asian deer, particularly roe deer (*Capreolus*) and muntjac, have several inches of skin on the pedicles (bases) of the antlers.

12 The war armor is a sort of carapace comprised of a top part covering the breast and upper back made of pieces of leather, and a sort of waist-skirt of laminated rectangles of leather, not unlike Mongol and Japanese samurai armor (Bottomley 2017, 184). Certain parts of an animal’s hide are thinner or thicker and thus used in making particular parts of the armor. A part of a boar’s neck is especially thick and useful in making warrior’s armor.

13 The knee skin of bovines is cuplike when properly dried and could be used to form the flanges on the rear of the war carapace or other parts. In various places around the globe, such knee skins were once used to protect the firing mechanisms of flintlock firearms from inclement weather.

14 Several types of sheep and goats are kept by Yi herders, and many meanings are associated with the animals. Goats are sometimes said to represent the Han people (Hxiemga) while the noble sheep are associated with the honorable traits of the Nuosu. Thus, when ritual sacrifices are made, goats may be killed with a knife, but sheep must be smothered by gripping their mouth and nostrils. (Among the ancient northern steppe cultures, nobles sentenced to death were smothered in carpets so as not to spill their blood.)

15 Shyly must consult with his sister Nyingemo Ala about the betrothal gifts as it was unseemly for a bride, especially a noble, to discuss these details. The number of the betrothal gifts is a sign of the status of a bride’s clan. The *nzymo*’s daughter, of course, has an extremely high status. It is interesting that Shyly’s sister innovates the templates of propriety for this first marriage, requiring that persons of certain social status and enacting
certain roles be given proper treatment and face in what is both a social and economic dynamic. These rules of propriety still factor prominently in Nuosu weddings today.

16 As explained in the introduction, the soul of a deceased parent is kept in a small vessel made of bamboo hung on a household wall. All other things aside, the care, placement, and ultimate disposal of the vessel mark the emphasis on kin relations in Nuosu society, as Nyingemo Ala’s directions to Shyly exemplify. Thus, in this first marriage after the era of “no fathers,” Shyly must understand how his future lineage will be charted and maintained.

17 These lines explain the origin of the custom of hanging the bamboo soul containers in the home, after which they are eventually interred in crags in the mountains.

18 These lines refer to the origin of customs concerning treatment of guests and helpers at weddings. Those sitting are elders, who have higher status; those standing are younger or less connected to the family. As this was the first couple to marry, the proscriptions became guidelines for future generations, down to today.

19 The lines above outline social hierarchies and protocols. The nzy’s daughter is saying in an indirect way that Shyly Wote, who is referred to as “cousin of the Legge family,” is of suitable background and wealth to marry her, despite being from “down the road.” The number and type of livestock used in specific situations (especially involving honored guests) are still of great importance today. Large numbers of livestock may be butchered during festivals and life cycle events like weddings and funerals that involve all relatives and huge numbers of guests from within the surrounding areas.

20 The layers of the mat recall the seat of the bimo in an earlier part of the epic and may indicate high social status.

21 In other words, the relationship will not have problems.

22 These lines specifically mention the Hnewo in an instance of reflexivity that helps identify the text and secure its place in ritual, historical, and genealogical discourse.

23 The above lines indicate Shyly’s indifference and haughtiness—traits not well thought of by the Nuosu. Once he tempered his proud behavior, he was assimilated into the group. The cloaks are of favored colors, black signifying solemnity, white as purity, blue as vitality. The pairs of creatures offered him reflect the pairing of humans in a wedding.

24 This reference is obscure. Nuosu males traditionally wore a coiled braid, or “warrior’s horn” (Harrell, Bamo, and Ma 2000, 20–21), above the forehead, thought to be the locus of the soul. About 500 hundred miles east of the Nuosu areas, in the Arunachal Pradesh state of Northeast India, is a Tibeto-Burman-speaking people known as the Apatani. Apatani men traditionally placed pointed metal skewers in the knotted braids above their
foreheads (Blackburn 2010, 145). Based on the reference in the text, a similar custom may have once been practiced in some Yi areas. Also, wooden or metal frames or skewers have been a part of local hairdos in many areas of the southwest. An extreme example is the huge wooden “buffalo horn”–shaped frames used by Miao women in Suoga village, southwest Guizhou.

The woods mentioned in these lines are traditionally used to make specific parts of plows. The shuoma wood is cut from large rhododendron trees. Mgehni is a species of paperbark cherry (the exact scientific name is yet to be determined) that is also used to make large containers, the trunks being of greater circumference than the shuoma trees.

The elder in black clothes is an ancestor who has come from the sky to warn the people of the impending disaster launched by the sky god Ngeti Gunzy.

The elder in black clothes then relates the story behind the sky god’s anger and warns of a great flood that will destroy the earth. Only the kindhearted third son survives. Comparable flood stories abound in Chinese mythology, especially in local traditions of southwest China (An, Yang, and Turner 2008, 21–24).

Livestock must be fed salt to keep them healthy. The salt is usually mixed with water in a wooden trough. Goats and sheep are also led to natural salt licks in the mountains.

As noted in the introduction, the voma turnip is used as a staple food, and possibly predates the potato as a root crop.

An obscure bird name.

It is unclear where the mountain is located.

As in the Chinese lunar calendar, animals correspond to months, days, and segments of the day in traditional Yi solar and lunar calendars.

The items were kept inside so that the youngest son’s vessel would not sink and to provide provisions during the flood.

The old man in black clothes tells the kindhearted third son to place the parched flour and grain inside the vessel in order to serve as provisions during the flood and as seed stock thereafter. The other brothers were drowned by the weight of the metal in their beds.

In these lines, the youngest son’s name is repeated in two different forms in a parallel formula.

As mentioned elsewhere, chickens are important sources of food and are used in many Yi rituals. Eggs are used to diagnose the causes of illness.

The sky god looks down onto the flooded earth and sees wild and domestic animals clinging to life in various places. Only one plant, a stalk of hemp, survives.

As noted in the introduction, there are taboos against killing frogs and snakes, though many Nuosu today consider crows as harbingers of ill luck.

This may refer to the custom of using dried grass found in animal dens as tinder.
Tobacco is another crop introduced from the Americas. Today it is an important cash crop in many Yi communities in southwest China.

Various creatures bonded with Jjumu Vuvu after he rescued them from the flood. This is the reason for the taboo against killing frogs and snakes.

This is a reference to Ngeti Gunzy’s daughter. The god is referred to as a tusi, the same term once used for local rulers appointed by the Imperial government. In these passages, tusi alternates with the Nuosu term nzymo, meaning elite ruler.

Here the number twelve means “many.”

The clever frog made him well and ill in turn in order to convince him to marry off his daughter.

Names for the soul container include maddu, hieqy (rat scat), and ni. The cures in the previous lines are folk remedies still in use.

In some instances, the text says heaven and earth were joined by metal columns; in other places, the term “metal threads” is used, which may refer to how the pillars were raised. In any case, iron and gold once joined heaven and earth.

The “turnip” here is the bulbous tuber (N: voma; Ch: yuangen) common in the Nuosu diet. Heavy, because of high water content, they are not filling.

In the sky, hemp seeds can be distilled for alcohol, but after the curse, not on earth.

“Sweet” or common buckwheat (N: mgeqy; Fagopyrum esculentum) is regarded as being nutritionally inferior to bitter or “black” buckwheat (N: mganuo; Fagopyrum tataricum), which is the desired strain. Both are used to make a variety of steamed or baked cakes. It is said that sweet buckwheat cakes are not filling. The characteristics of the two buckwheats are often used in love songs to describe a lover’s attributes.

The reference to “wild food” indicates that horse meat is not considered as proper “domesticated” meat like pork or beef. According to Harrell (personal communication, 2015), it has hanging claws (in this case, dew claws) and is thus in the vondi category of animals that cannot be eaten. Hunted meat made up an occasional portion of the Nuosu diet, but there were taboos against killing and eating many sorts of animals.

This is an etiological story about why this species of pheasant (Phasianus colchicus) has red spots on the sides of its head.

Calabash gourds were used as storage containers for a variety of things, including foodstuffs and gunpowder. The calabash figures in many creation myths from southwest China, often as a vehicle for surviving a great flood (An, Yang, and Turner 2008, 21–24).

This is the most famous bird in Nuosu mythology. It is called xiao baique (little white sparrow) in Chinese. The exact species is unclear.

The sound of bursting bamboo is explosive.
56 The Tibetan peoples (Ozzu) in the Liangshan areas are also known as Xifan in Chinese, and as Ersu and other names in their own languages, which some scholars have classified as Qiangic rather than Tibetan, though opinions vary on where to place them in the Tibeto-Burman family (Wu 2006, 120–21). The Qiang (Ch: Qiangzu) are an official ethnic group living mostly in southwest China.

57 This expression representing a local Tibetan dialect and the following in Nuosu and Hxiemga languages are all exclamations made when touching something hot.

58 These people are regarded as groups presently designated as Han.

59 The “outer groups” refer to those groups that already migrated from the area, while the “inner groups” still live there. These lines relate that early on some groups left for another place.

60 The division between “black” and “white” Han may parallel the Nuosu idea of black as upper-caste (muoho) and white as lower-caste (qoho). The settling of the black Han in a particular settlement might indicate a seat of power, with the white Han dispersed throughout the vicinity.

61 “Bbu” and “Hlur” are rendered as “beastly” by the suffix “sse.”

62 This passage seems to be a reenactment of the portioning of the waters of wisdom described at the end of part 11.

13. OZZU (TIBETAN) LINEAGES / OZZU CY

1 All of the following parts include long lists of genealogies, somewhat similar to the “begats” in the Christian Bible. The structure of these names, whether Ozzu, Hxiemga, Foreigner, or Nuosu, all follow the style seen in other Nuosu traditional texts. As Ma Erzi has explained, there are only a limited number of large Nuosu clans, but the names of the clans making up these large clans “are innumerable” (Ma 2001, 81). As can be seen in the following lists of names, part of a father’s name is linked to part of a son’s name. As Ma explains: “When one recites the genealogy, one ordinarily leaves out the clan name and the birth-order name, and uses only the third level [father’s name] of the system to link names together. In order to make a recitation easier and prevent omissions one can change this to a recitation in a linked fashion: Abo Ddezze—Ddezze Zuluo . . . ,” etc. (2001, 92–93).

14. OZZU (TIBETAN) MIGRATIONS / OZZU MUCHE

1 In these lines, two terms, ladda and yydda, mean “valley.”

16. HXIEMGA (HAN) PEOPLE’S MIGRATIONS / HXIEMGA MUCHE

1 See part 12, note 60, concerning black and white Han.
17. FOREIGNERS’ LINEAGE / Yiery cy

1 This lineage is unique to the Jjivot version of the text. Who these “foreigners” actually are is unclear, but the reference seems to be to a people who are neither Han, local Tibetan groups, nor Nuosu. As the next part shows, they are associated with what may be a golden dwelling or palace.

19. NUOSU LINEAGES / Nuosu cy

1 Emperor Ddibo Vomu is an obscure reference. It may refer to an early local ruler, warlord, or possibly a tusi official, of which there were many in southwest China in ages past.
2 The mention of a lama (a Tibetan monk) indicates that the Nuosu, though not practitioners, had at least a peripheral awareness of some version of Tibetan Buddhism and its adherents.
3 These lines seem to indicate chickens being sacrificed at the confluence of these rivers. One line, “yellow paired with yellow,” seems to have been omitted. It is reconstructed here based on the structure of the passage. White (qu) and yellow (shy) can also mean the precious metals silver and gold.

20. EMPEROR VOMU AND NI AND VI GENEALOGIES / Vomu Ni Vi cy

1 A structural multiform is repeated over and over in the verses of this part. The form begins by naming an era, then listing the places where local rulers governed, using variations on the pattern of “head,” “tail,” “left,” and “right,” often including specific place-names.
2 Sysse Dihni and Bake Arra are beings that appear in the earlier parts of The Book of Origins.
3 The graph representing the vi in this instance does not have the falling p tone marker as in the original Northern Yi title. This is an instance of Jjivot using a graph for its general sound value, reflecting the folk nature of the text.

23. GENEALOGY OF NZY CLAN / Nzyzzur pu

1 Here “Ni” and “Shuo,” respectively, mean “Yi (Nuosu)” and “Hxiemga,” presumably the people known today as Han.
2 This grass is called punuo ry in Nuosu.
3 The image of “bells” hanging from the tree may refer to pine cones, the sound of the wind in the trees, or icicles. The “silver garments” and “head ornaments” may refer to frost on the tree branches and ground.
Plows are needed to break the soil for planting crops. Plow beams, which hold the iron plowshares, must be made of hardwood. Tree trunks are carefully selected for strength and curvature in order to make plows that handle properly. See part 9, note 3 for more on horse mulberry.

This is a reference to a rite for calling back wandering souls of the ill. Only certain tree branches are used in the rite, though the species may vary. The “sumac” is also known as Chinese sumac (N: posür; Ch: wubei; Rhus chinensis). The gall nuts (Ch: wubeizi) of this small tree are used in herbal medicine.

According to present Nuosu custom, the spirit containers of the parents are kept in the youngest son’s home. This passage graphically highlights sibling rivalry and offers a script for dealing with family disputes in real life.

The respective positions correspond with the lower-class quho (white) bimo, the upper-class nuoho (black) bimo, and the apprentices (bisse), the latter of whom are assigned to sit in the least desirable spot.

The lines in this passage detail steps and accoutrements in various rites dealing with souls of the dead. This refers to waving about a small pine tree to gather up the soul at a cremation site; the pine then becomes a vessel where the spirit resides. Later in this passage, bamboo is used to make the soul vessel that is hung in the home, a common practice today. After a couple dies, the soul vessel (of whatever type) is deposited in mountain crags.

Again, the imagery has to do with frigid conditions in which flora is covered with ice.

At festivals like the midsummer Torch Festival (N: Dduzi; literally, Fire Festival), powdered pine resin is thrown onto blazing torches to make fiery bursts.

Two hands cupped together to hold liquid is a traditional form of measure.

In ancient times, Gguho and Qoni were elder and younger brothers, respectively. They formed two major moieties (which incorporate all sorts of clans) and migrated into the Liangshan regions. Many Nuosu in Liangshan are part of these clans.

24. HIGHPONTS OF MIGRATIONS OF GGUHO / GGUHO CY BO

Nimu is a name for female shamans. Today female shamans are often called monyi.

In some places people seek shade in trees, sometimes dallying there while making music by blowing on folded tree leaves, singing, or chatting.

These lines refer to some sort of canid, most likely the dhole (N: hxele; Cuon alpinus), also known as Asian wild dogs, which are native to parts of Sichuan.
4 As seen in several instances in the migration genealogies, stress is placed on constructing and reinforcing hierarchies that are still current in living memory. The appearance of the “high” and “low” in the text may in some ritual contexts have served to legitimize and explain the origins of the status quo.

25. MIGRATIONS OF QONIE / QONIE CY BO

1 Normally three kinds of animals (cow, goat/sheep, and pig) are used in major rituals.
2 Again, the colors refer to lower (white) and upper (black) social divisions.

26. CHANGES IN HXUO VILLAGES / HXUOQO HXEQO

1 Puho Anzi was the father of the sons who fought against the spirit army. He sacrificed animals in a ritual. After his death his sons founded the Gguho and Qoni clans, the two major moieties in Liangshan, and they and their families quarreled over their father’s estate.
2 The lower road indicates those of lower social status, such as slaves.
3 This and the following rituals were held to resolve disputes, and each involved sacrificing and eating a cow.
4 Literally, the following lines all say “do not grow white.”
5 The term for clan groups is cy.
6 The directionality (left and right) may indicate points of entry into the Liangshan region from outside areas such as northeast Yunnan or Guizhou.

27. GENEALOGY OF GGUHO / GGUHO CY

1 The final “nisse” that is part of this and other names in the next two parts of the text means the person is a Yi and, in this context, a Nuosu. The word ni is an ancient word for “black.”
2 The inner and outer Gguho refer to the relation among various groups in the early settlements of the Gguho moiety.

28. MIGRATIONS OF NINE SONS OF GGUHO DURZHY DDIWO / KURDIE GGUHO DURZHY DDIWO SSE GGU CY

1 The multiform pattern used in this part relates how the nine sons of Durzhy Ddiwo migrate and find places for their respective lineages to settle. This pattern is used elsewhere in the migration accounts.
2 Shuo are Han troops of the era; possibly referring to the Han general Zhuge Liang’s incursions into and settling of the southwest territories early in the third century AD.
3 The names in this and the following lines refer to the dispensation of the various clan groups in the conflict. The Nuosu designations *nuoho*, *quho*, and *shuo sse* refer to upper, lower, and lowest classes of Yi.

4 Again, the “emperor” is likely a local or regional ruler. The nature of the *xuobbur* rite is to create harmony between the conflicting sides.

5 An illegitimate child stayed with its mother and was traditionally of lower social rank than its peers.

6 Qiesa is a clan name.

7 The record of a *bimo’s* line of descent is called *bibbu*.

8 *Nuoho* is literally “Black Group,” often understood as “Black Yi,” indicating an upper class.

9 Literally, the “Black Hxi.”

10 Alu is a family of Black Yi.

29. Genealogy of Qoni / Qoni cy

1 This seems to refer to a custom in which permission to marry was sought from paternal uncles.

2 A *nzy* is a native local ruler (often translated by the Chinese term *tusi*, meaning a government-appointed native official), whereas a *mo* is a judge-like official (both terms are shortened forms of *nzymo*).

3 *Ni* is a term similar to *nzy*, a kind of native local official.

4 The term *vaku* literally means “chicken thief.” This is an example of a Nuosu naming practice (see Ma 2001, 88–89).

5 The vultures were likely the common *Aegypius monachus*.

6 The Vazha and Lohxo families were both upper-class *nuoho* (“Black Yi”).

7 An upper-class *nuoho* family.