

Traditional Nuosu Origin Narratives: A Case Study of Ritualized Epos in *Bimo* Incantation Scriptures

Bamo Qubumo

Muvu paqugo
mujjy avu su;¹
mudde nramogo
bbopat avu su.

In the white father heaven
sparkling stars are incalculable;
in the black mother land
origin stories are innumerable.

A Nuosu *lubi* (“proverb”)

The starting point for this essay is the word *bbopa*,² whose common meaning is “origin” or “origin-narrative” in the Nuosu language. *Bbopa* refers to the creation of the world, to material and non-material creations of Nuosu society, and to “the way of speaking” about a remote past. *Lubi* are the salt of everyday Nuosu life, while *bbopa* is the prelude to ritual life. Throughout this essay, I underscore the consistency and diversity of Nuosu

¹ The romanized form of standard Nuosu orthography indicates tone by means of an iconic “musical scale” graph: “t” indicates a high tone, “x” a mid-rising tone, no graph a mid-level tone, and “p” a low falling tone. The standard romanization is here applied, except for the omission of tone marks so that, for instance, experienced English-language readers do not misinterpret the “p” icon as a bilabial stop.

² *Bbopa* has many more connotations than its synonym *ddurlabo*, or “the point at which something originates,” which is much closer to the word “origin” in English; for example, the phrase *ne ybbopa bi, wo yobbopa sha* (“you recite the origin of water; I chant the origin of sheep”). There is also the phrase *ashy pamu ddieddur laxity*, or “the point at which something comes into existence,” signifying creativity; for example, the usage *shanbie shaqi sulima, Ayo Axie bosumge* (“the tools for weaving woolen cape were invented by a man named Ayo Axie”). The term *bbopa* is a compound word. The first part, *bbo*, can function in a sentence as a noun, meaning “origin,” “source,” “beginning,” and “invention”; or as a verb, meaning “to originate,” “to rise,” “to grow,” “to bring into being,” and “to create.” *Pa* in ancient Nuosu means “father,” “root,” and “ancestry”; as a verb, *pa* means “to give birth” or “to grow.”

oral traditions. These few observations only begin to illustrate the many diverse generic categories of Nuosu oral traditions; included among them is *bbopa*, a rich and complex traditional narrative that encompasses a number of oral forms, styles, and genres.³ The *bbopa* constitute the case study for this essay.

Ethnographic Context

A subgroup of the Yi people, the Nuosu number more than two million residents in the Cold Mountains (Liangshan) in the Sichuan Province of China.⁴ Up until the last fifty years, the region lacked a central political structure. The Nuosu community consisted of numerous patrilineal *cyvi*, or clans, subdivided into four castes: the *Nuoho*, or black Nuosu of the nobility; the *Quho*, or white Nuosu of the commoners; the *Mgajie*, the serfs; and, finally, *Gaxy*, the slaves. The Nuosu were the last slaveholding society in China, as manumission took place only in the 1950s. The *suyy*, or clan chief, handled clan affairs, while the *ndeggu*, or arbitrator, adjudicated customary law cases. The subject of this paper, the *bimo*, or ritual specialist, together with the *sunyi*,⁵ or shaman, acted as the mediators between human and supernatural beings.

³ Sometimes the *bbopa* genre is also referred to as *bbobo bbopa* or *bbolu palu* to allow for meterical rhyming in performance. Nuosu words are often rhymed or alliterated in the following patterns: AABB, ABCB, ABAC, or ABCD.

⁴ The Nuosu are the largest of the Yi subgroups. There are nearly seven million Yi people, almost all of them in the Yunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi provinces, with some few in Vietnam and a small number who are emigrants to Southeast Asia.

⁵ In addition to the *bimo*, there is another religious specialist, the *sunyi*, or “shaman,” whose authority is derived from spirit-possessed inspiration rather than from book knowledge; unlike a *bimo*, a *sunyi* may come from any clan, even from the serf or slave stratum, and could be either a man or a woman.

If we look at the respective etymologies of *bimo* and *sunyi*, we see that the terms embody two different styles of ritual specialist. The *bi* element of *bimo* means “reading,” “chanting,” or “reciting.” The *mo* element, here as a suffix, denotes “the practitioner.” So, *bimo* refers to a man who engages in religious activities by reciting scriptures. Meanwhile, the *su* in *sunyi* means a person, and the *nyi* means shaking while dancing and beating a drum. A *sunyi* is akin to a shaman, or a religious practitioner who beats a drum, shakes, and dances exuberantly. The actions of a *bimo* are calm—he simply recites scripture; in contrast, a *sunyi* uses body language. If asked to describe the difference

Natural factors such as high mountains and deep valleys, as well as hostile relations with the surrounding Han Chinese, help account for the uniqueness of Nuosu culture and religion. Some foreign scholars have referred to the Nuosu region as an independent realm, and to the people themselves as the “independent *Lolo*,” using the Chinese name formerly used to designate the Nuosu. In 1956 democratic reform greatly changed the political system in this area. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Nuosu traditional culture declined disastrously. Since the 1980s, however, the relaxation of outside political control and a policy of national equality have brought about a dramatic revival of traditional culture (cf. Harrell, Bamo Q., and Ma 2000:3-9).

Today there is little outside influence, and the Nuosu maintain their indigenous traditions intact. They believe that their ancestors, nature gods, spirits, and ghosts are able to influence the health of people, the success of the clan, the bounty of the harvest, the fertility of cattle, and the harmony of the community. Rituals serve as the main vehicle for the expression of beliefs and feelings: they are the primary means for balancing and adjusting the relationship between human and supernatural beings. An important part of Nuosu traditional religion springs from beliefs about health and illness—indeed, most rituals are healing rituals. As professional ritualists, the *bimo* are high-status religious specialists in Nuosu society.⁶ There is a native saying, “If a ruler knows a thousand things, and a minister a hundred, then the things a *bimo* knows are without number,” meaning that there is no better source for advice on living than the words of a *bimo*, because the *bimo* recite all kinds of texts and perform all sorts of ceremonies. For the living, the *bimo* divine auspicious days and times, exorcize ghosts and expel evils, replace misfortune with good fortune, and regulate ethical behavior. For the dead, they provide offerings, lead the way to the world of the ancestors, and ensure peace in the next world.

Nuosu is a unique language that preserves a rich and dynamic verbal life associated with the traditional rituals of Nuosu society. The experience of geographic isolation so typical of mountain-dwelling peoples has shaped their oral traditions. In their rugged mountain homeland, the Nuosu world is permeated and ordered by ritual, ceremony, poetry, vocal and instrumental

between *bimo* and *sunyi*, a Nuosu would tell you that a *bimo* is mild while a *sunyi* is wild; a *bimo* gracefully chants while a *sunyi* violently shakes.

⁶ According to the 136 *bimo* generations of *bimo* Qubi Shuomo’s genealogy as recorded in the *Bibu* (see Liangshan), and estimating one generation at about 25 years, the profession of *bimo* in its developed form has existed for well over 3,000 years.

music, and a variety of oral traditions concerning life and death, bravery and beauty, glory and grief, and fate and loss.

The Nuosu also possess a rich written culture, recorded in an independent writing system, that the *bimo* have passed down for millennia. These scriptural transcriptions are couched without exception in poetry. The sacred texts contain different genres of traditional poetry: myth, legend, tale, wedding song, lament, curse, epic, lyric, riddle, and proverb. These texts, fixed yet fluid, are revocalized and revitalized in oral performance.

Since 1991, my research has focused on long-term fieldwork in Meigu County, the heartland of the Nuosu. The Nuosu account for more than 95 percent of the 160,000 inhabitants of Meigu county; it is considered the area where traditions are best preserved⁷ and ritual life is very important (cf. Bamo Q. 1998). This study considers *bbopa* as a traditional mode of narrative poetry in Nuosu rituals and ceremonies. By examining the long narrative song *Nyicy Bbopa*, or “The Origin of Ghosts,” as performed by the *bimo* Qubi Dage,⁸ this essay raises three basic questions about *bbopa*: Why are there so many origin narratives? Why is origin storytelling needed? Why will origin narratives always be necessary? Though I have asked myself these questions time and again, it is not the purview of this essay to answer them in full. There is, nevertheless, good reason for pondering them: searching out recurrent polarities and relationships in the expressive dynamics of *bbopa* can reveal more about how specially sanctioned Nuosu narratives operate than could be achieved by merely isolating static universals. The remainder of this article examines the polarities and other dynamic patterns that have come to the fore of discussion of *bbopa*.

Ritual/Genre

The word *bbopa* has two levels of basic meaning, each dependent on syntactic relationships. The first refers to the creation of the world—for instance, “the making of heaven and earth,” “the twelve offspring-branches

⁷ The number of *bimo* in Meigu, one of eighteen counties of Nuosu Autonomous Prefecture, is a good index of tradition. In 1996 there were 6,850 *bimo* (males only), representing four percent of the total population and eight percent of the male population. The variety of religious rituals exceeded 200, and the number of religious scriptures reached a staggering 115,000 copies (Ggahxa, Shama, and Mosi 1996).

⁸ This performance took place in Village Jjolo, Township Hxoggurluo of Meigu County, on April 14, 1992.

of the snow clan,” “the origin of thunder,” “the origin of women’s fertility spirit,” and so on. The other envelops the civilization of Nuosu society, for example, “the origin of fire,” “the origin of scripture,” “the origin of *bimo*,” and “the origin of sacrificial offerings to ancestors.” The *bbopa* are best understood, however, through comparative analysis with other oral genres and by attending to questions of intertextuality and genre.

If, before embarking on the study of *bbopa*, one were thoroughly familiar with Nuosu oral genres, one would find that *bbopa* texts consist mainly of *bbudde*, or “ancient words of the remote past,” in which the mythic time of creation is set forth and the origins of the Nuosu people are revealed. The original roots can be traced back to the wellspring of storytelling about our first ancestral inventors and their inventions—tales about the first artisan, the first blacksmith, the first craftsman of lacquerwork, the first distiller of liquor, or the first maker of woolen capes. Having acquired a general model of narration, *bbopa* or *bbopa teyy*⁹ draw upon a repertoire of mythology, histories, and legends which are recited in poetic ways. In my collection of *bbopa*, the length of the texts varies from 86 to 1,455 lines. *Nyicy Bbopa* subsumes the mythological, historical, and legendary repertoire and in its range resists assignment to the typical genres defined by folkloristic or anthropological criteria.

With the advent of “the new folksong movement” in the 1950s, scholars began studying Nuosu verbal arts in terms of Chinese words, genres, and even concepts. This work produced a “translation” from Nuosu language into the dominant cultural format: some *bbopa* poetry was quoted out of its cultural context and categorized as “creation songs,” “ancient songs,” or “creation epics,”¹⁰ terms that were taken from Chinese folkloric concepts of creation epics (*chuang shi shi shi*), origination epics (*qian xi shi shi*), and heroic epics (*ying xiong shi shi*). These Chinese formulations of

⁹ All Nuosu texts are couched in poetic lines called *teyy*, meaning “scripture” or “book.” Thus, *bbopa teyy* means “the book of origins” or “the collection of origin poetry.”

¹⁰ In China the concept and definition of epic are quite different from the working assumptions of Western scholars. Within the circle of Chinese epic studies, and even in Chinese folkloristic theories, scholars have usually divided epic songs into three types, a so-called trichotomy: (1) creation epics, (2) origination epics, and (3) heroic epics. Until the 1980s, the consensus was that heroic epics existed only in the north and northwest of China, including Tibet. Further exploration and publication, however, have shown folklorists that epics exist among many southern ethnic minorities, such as the Nakhi, Dai, Dong, Miao, Pumi, Zhuang, and Yi. The seemingly sensible “trichotomy” of genres thus only confused generic notions of oral epics.

genre imperfectly describe the reality of the Nuoso “poetic narrative about the creation of the world.” In fact, *bbopa* poetically integrate a great number of *bbudde*, a traditional oral genre. These myths, legends, histories, and folktales are all types of prosaic storytelling that are conceived, transmitted, and perceived orally. As interpretive instruments, then, literary criticism and folklore genre theories are only partially applicable to the complexity of Nuosu tradition; such analytic categories provide us with but a part of the complete picture available in the multiform mirror of the tradition per se.

The relationship between genre and ritual can be highly complex, as *bbopa* poetry illustrates. In the Cold Mountains there is scarcely a ceremony, a ritual, or a rite of passage that is not accompanied by the recitation of traditional *bbopa* songs. *Bbopa*, then, are performed only in a public space. A performance of *Yy Bbopa* (“The Origin of Water”), for example, always includes *nimu vijjie* or “the ritual for dividing a clan into branches and migrating,” and *vyny tege*, or “the ritual for combining branches into a clan.” The *Nabbu Bbopa* (“The Origin of Disease and Ailment”) and *Ggobboxy Bbopa* (“The Origin of Death”) are part of cremation ceremonies. *Furiju Bbopa* (“The Origin of Marriage”) and *Xyxi Bbopa* (“The Origin of Wedding Ceremonies”) are performed at marriage events. After the *bbopasha*, or “origin-narrating,” the *bimo* begin chanting the two classic books of the Nuosu: the creation epic *Hnewo teyy* and the didactic gnomology *Hmamu teyy*. In practice, there is a strict correspondence between different kinds of ceremonial contexts and different *bbopa* songs. When funeral ceremonies are concluded, for instance, there is a great gathering in the village and the young men, wearing long white yak tails and carrying swords in one hand, perform ancient warrior dances to open the way for the soul of the deceased to the realm of his ancestors. At the same time, the *zomo zosse*, or storytellers, narrate *Yimo Bbopa*, “The Origin of the Sword.” Beauty contests, horse races, wrestling matches, and other traditional sports that lend gravity and warmth to the funeral ceremonies follow. All of these activities demonstrate the positive attitude toward death among the Nuosu. Cremation ceremonies embody optimism about the end of life and are a way of actively valuing the living instead of the dead.

The *bimo* typically performs *bbopa* songs at the very beginning of a ritual, and continues inserting them into the sub-rituals as the need to articulate the objects or artifacts being employed at that very moment arises. The *bimo* uses his voice, gestures, and body to enact and interpret the *bbopa*. Every Nuosu can explain the meaning of this narrative mode, and most are keenly aware of a general expectation that the *bimo* employ this traditional mode when reciting *bbopa* in rituals. To the ears of the Nuosu, the constant

repetition of the core word *bbopa* or *ddurlabo* is required so that the telling of the origin story “sounds convincing and sacred.”

Text/Performance

The cultural context of each *bbopa* song—oral or literary—is crucially important. This essay probes the relationship between textual performance and ritual process by examining a specific song, *Nyicy Bbopa*, or “The Origin of Ghosts.”¹¹ Analysis of *Nyicy Bbopa* offers a glimpse into the complexity and diversity of *bbopa* songs.

Of the various ritual songs performed by the *bimo*, one set is devoted to healing.¹² Addressed to supernatural representatives from the ghost world and spirit world, these incantation songs adjust the relationship between ancestors and descendants, the dead and the living. The *bimo* chants the scripture in order to bring the supernatural beings together and to help ensure the success of the ritual. The performance of *Nyicy Bbopa* described and quoted below was recorded during a ritual performed by the *bimo* Qubi Dage.¹³ This particular performance came about because lightning had struck the household of a villager named Jiji Zuogge a few days earlier. To the Nuosu, something unfortunate is sure to befall anyone who is affected by thunder or lightning because these meteorological phenomena can transmit leprosy and other contagious diseases through trees and other media. Thus it is necessary to have a *bimo* perform the *curjy*, or “exorcism,” to expel “the ghosts of contagious disease.” This is done by telling an ancient story about the origin of ghosts; in the Nuosu tradition, to exorcize ghosts one must first recount their origin. Rituals such as this are only one of the many functions that *bimo* perform in Nuosu society.

A *bimo* had divined that the auspicious time for the ritual would be April 15. The chief officiating *bimo* was Qubi Dage, who was assisted by

¹¹ *Nyicy Bbopa* is known in both five- and seven-syllable verse types. There are many variants throughout Liangshan.

¹² Incantation songs belong to the category of *bimo* text entitled *Ssyrrre bburre*, which contain spells or counter-spells whose primary purpose is to relieve illnesses. Nuosu often classify these rituals as *namgusu*, which means “curing illness.” Nuosu believe that ghosts cause illness, and that these rituals expel the ghosts and evil spirits that are haunting peoples’ bodies, thus putting an end to their misfortune. In other words, using rituals to control ghosts is equivalent to curing an illness.

¹³ See the Appendix for the full text.

more than ten other *bimo*. The ritual clients were eleven households in Jjolo village who draw drinking water from a common spring; the chief client was Jiji Zuogge himself. On the evening of April 14, each of the households involved performed a small-scale *xi'o bbur* ritual¹⁴ to protect themselves against evil spells. The household of Jiji Zuogge performed a larger ritual, *nyicyssy bi*¹⁵, to exorcize ghosts.

The first step in *bimo* rituals is *muguci*, or “rising smoke.” A fire is lit and the rising smoke hastens the supernatural beings to assemble and aid the *bimo* in his ritual performance. At dawn on April 15, each household brought the “ghost boards”¹⁶ of Curbu, the ghost of leprosy, used in the spell-protection ritual of the previous night, to the place where the exorcism was to be performed. Larger than the other ghost boards, and piled on top of them, was the ghost board used by the household of Jiji Zuogge.

Scholars frequently assume that Nuosu scriptures of “sacred text” are neatly defined by clear boundaries. My fieldwork reveals that scriptures are treated in Nuosu society as both bounded and open. In particular, more and more evidence of this state of affairs emerged from the comparison of oral *bbudde* and written *bbopa* texts. It is important to recognize the extent to which the idea that “scripture” has a single fixed form and expresses a single concept as “sacred text” has dominated scholarly thought. *Bimo* scripture is most often a creation of the transmission from oral culture to written culture. It is, nevertheless, a form with which literati have continued to re-create the

¹⁴ *Xi'o bbur* is a family ritual usually held in early spring to ward off evil spells and prevent curses originating from other households.

¹⁵ The constituent parts of *nyicyssy bi* may be broken down as follows: *nyicy* means “ghosts,” *ssy* means “curse” or “drive away,” and *bi* literally means “chanting scripture,” but it can also mean “to perform or conduct a ritual”—thus *nyicyssy bi* is a chanting ritual for driving away ghosts.

¹⁶ Nuosu “ghost boards” are used in creating spells directed at ghosts. Before an exorcism ritual begins, it is necessary to make straw and clay ghosts, as well as these ghost boards. *Bimo* use bamboo pens that they make themselves, the blood of sacrificial animals, and black soot burnt on the bottom of pots to draw the ghosts to be exorcized on the front side of prepared slabs of wood. On the back side they write the incantations and spells to exorcize the ghosts. When the ritual is almost over, the straw and clay ghosts are discarded and the ghost boards thrown away to show that the entities they represent have been expelled from the household. After the ritual, an assistant takes the ghost boards to a crossroads facing in the direction of Ndabbu Luomo, the ghost mountain, and hangs them on a tree at the side of the road to show that the ghosts have been sent back to their proper realms.

oral-aural experience of words. Written texts are not so essential to the *bimo* for a ritual performance such as the *bbopa* recitation.

Nyicy Bbopa is an example of narrative epos in the form of *bimo* incantation songs.¹⁷ It is also well known under two other titles: *Nyicyssy Teyy*, or “Scripture of Ghost-spelling,” and *Zyzy Hninra*, or “The Beautiful Zyzy.”¹⁸ The following two excerpts are from this tale:

After Hninra [a beautiful ghost] had left, Awo Nyiku [her husband] quickly summoned 90 *bimo* from the upper end of the village and 70 *sunyi* from the lower end of the village to his house to read texts and perform rituals.

“Let me chant out loud with a full and strong voice. Zyzy Hninra, you use flattering words and a pretty appearance to baffle human beings, and you use your witchcraft to mislead common people. You’d better submit to magic arts immediately! Zyzy Hninra, you are the spirit of the trees on the wild mountains and the licentious bird in the sky. Now your witchcraft has lost its effect and you’d better submit to the magical arts immediately! I will dispatch the flood dragon to the sea so that you will not be able to hide yourself in the water! I will dispatch the divine snake to the earth so that you will not be able to hide yourself in the earth! Casting curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away!

(Episode 10)

Many tribes and clans were all destroyed by the ghosts descended from Zyzy Hninra, so the *bimo* and *sunyi* of every tribe and every clan all curse her with a thousand curses, and all say that Zyzy Hninra was the origin of ghosts. *Yya kekemu!*¹⁹

(Episode 13)

¹⁷ There are two kinds of epos in the Nuosu tradition. One is *syji yiehxo*, “narrative epos,” in which the story is told in the third person. For example, *Gamo Anyo* (Liangshanzhou 1993:536-63; see also Shi, Gan, and Bai 1998) takes its name from its principal character, in this case a beautiful woman who probably lived during the Ming Dynasty. The tragic story of the heroine has been sung by bards for several hundred years throughout Liangshan. Scholars have recently collected and collated this material in a book. The other kind of epos in the Nuosu tradition is *mgojju yiehxo*, “lyric epos,” in which the story is sung in the first person.

¹⁸ *Zyzy* is the name of a kind of bird.

¹⁹ The ending formula, literally “Casting curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away!”

The idea of a fixed text of *Zyzy Hninra* is unfounded and inaccurate, because it fails to account for the diversity inherent in the tradition. We must be aware that what we consider the most typical oral text in Nuosu society has, in form and concept, culturally indigenous origins and is thus the product of a long historical process. We also need to recognize that textual form and meaning were never static: the forms and concepts of sacred texts handed down in *bimo* circles over centuries have been continually changing and influencing oral culture. The mythical story of *Nyicy Bbopa* may be understood as floating down different streams that flow from the same headwaters, the wellspring of *bbopa* stories.

<i>Nyicyssy Teyy</i>	→	“Scripture of Ghost-Spells”	→	Incantation text
<i>Nyicy Bbopa</i>	→	“The Origin of Ghosts”	→	Origin Narrative
<i>Zyzy Hninra</i>	→	“The Beautiful Zyzy”	→	Epos

Figure 1. Book titles for different variations derived from the same text

Nyicy Bbopa is an oral-derived text that recounts historical legends and heroic songs about the warrior *Hxoyi Ddiggur*.²⁰ The story accurately mentions several historical places and describes a war between two famous ancient tribes believed by many Nuosu to have in fact taken place in Nimu, their ancestral homeland. Many generic elements overlap and interact in a performance of this typical Nuosu epos. *Nyicy Bbopa* exemplifies a particular *bbopa* song-type: its style is quite different from most of the *bbopa* songs that use similar narrative strategies (e.g., a movement from heaven to the earth) or mythic story-patterns. It is also much longer than other *bbopa* songs. It is clear that the beginning and ending formulas closely follow the general incantation song style. The *bimo* chants the story by heart without reference to a written text, and the story itself reveals much about traditional Nuosu customs and patterns of thought. As *bimo* Qubi Dage has said, storytelling is the best way to explain a profound meaning with a simple device.

An incantation may be defined as a kind of ritual song that exhibits a given set of stylistic characteristics (cf. Bamo Q. 1996). Among the classics

²⁰ Ggelu 1986. *Hxoyi Ddiggur* takes its name from its principal character, a warrior-retainer of the famous *nzymo* Miajy. In the course of recounting the exploits of its hero, the heroic song gives detailed descriptions of life in his era, which was probably sometime between the Dong-han and Tang periods. Several versions of his story were recorded at various times during the Ming and Qing periods at different places in Liangshan.

in the *bimo* repertoire, *Zyzy Hninra*, one of the *bbopa teyy* and an older epos, is found both in written form and in living oral recitation. The version of *Zyzy Hnira* discussed here is a long *bbopa* song composed of thirteen episodes totaling 1,455 lines. It is a traditional epos; the plot is wholly continuous, the protagonist is a female, and the other main characters are historical figures. As the need arises, a Nuosu individual invites the *bimo* to his home to perform the ritual exorcism of ghosts. While the *bimo* begins reciting the story, his *bisse*, or assistants, slaughter goats as a purifying sacrifice. They draw all kinds of ghosts and write all manner of spells on the wooden ghost boards that depict the ghosts being captured and then sent back to the ghostly realms in the direction of the ghost mountain Ndabu Luomo. *Zyzy Hninra* is most readily identified with a poetic narrative composed, performed, and transmitted orally. There are other instances, however, in which a textual performance is oral in only some of those senses. For example, a passage of an incantation song may be composed during the writing of curses on the ghost boards, then transmitted and performed orally. Conversely, it may be composed and performed orally but enter into writing during the ritual process. Ghost boards, spirit pictures, and other visual patterns create a connection between text and performance, between thought and word, and between sound and voice (cf. Harrell, Bamo Q., and Ma 2000:58-64).

Qubi Dage's performance employs a remarkable variety of ritual objects. This young, knowledgeable *bimo* illuminates the relationship of each item by chanting, a process known as *bbopabi*. His chanting is vivid, poetic, imaginative, and metaphorical. Before initiating a ghost story, six different *bbopa* songs are performed: (1) "The Origin of *Bimo*," a recitation of the patrilineal genealogy of the *bimo*; (2) "The Origin of the Cock," for divining with the skull of a cock; (3) "The Origin of Herbs," for sending smoke to inform gods and ancestors about the ritual; (4) "The Origin of Water"; (5) "The Origin of *Lurca* Stone," for purifying the ritual site with water and steam; and, finally, (6) "The Origin of Fire," for lighting the fire in the hearth. The recitations inform the spirits attached to these objects and elements of the purpose of the ritual, and counsel them to help the *bimo* fulfill his ritual duty. Once the ritualist/performer has convinced the spirits that he knows the origins of each and every one of them, and is able to control them, he begins reciting the epos and tells how the first ancestor of the ghost called *Zyzy Hnira* was crushed and overcome by the power of a *bimo* incantation. It is the performance of the narrative that rescues the client in this world from the calamities that have befallen him or averts impending disasters. After this recitation, the *bimo* summons his protective

spirits and many generations of his ancestors before proceeding with the important scripts of the particular ritual.

Orality/Literacy

The juxtaposition of orality and literacy is “a false dichotomy”; as John Foley has pointed out, “oral traditions are many and various, and they bridge the supposed gap between orality and literacy, between performance and texts” (Foley 1999:18, 21). In the case of *Nyicy Bbopa*, “scripture” seems at first to refer necessarily to written texts and their status as inscribed objects. But that is not the end of the matter. It is crucial to understand the rich multiplicity of scripture as a part of the living oral-aural communication experience. “Scriptures” among the Nuosu have never been considered mere *texts* to be read silently with the eyes but *words* to be recited loudly with *fubi* or “voice.” Their vitality lies in their being activated and reactivated in performance and interactive reception.

Poetic narratives in the old Nuosu language and written styles like *bbopa* continue to circulate within the clans. Frequent oral performances imply that there is normally little reliance on written texts. Fixed written texts are passed from one *bimo* generation to the next, normally as part of the training of the apprentice. Usually, a *bimo* recites *bbopa* only on the ritual ground, according to the episodes he learned from the written text or memorized. In my field observation, almost every *bimo* chants *bbopa* songs, even the long epos, without having the transcript at hand.

The written text of *Nyicy Bbopa* does not play an important role in its performance. In its absence, the chanting of the oral text is more intense and more demanding. Discovering the ways a *bimo* takes the main elements of plots, settings, episodes, and tropes from the written text and molds them according to his individual style and his insight on the ritual ground is a fascinating study. As narrators, *bimo* are not content to simply reiterate received word-for-word verbalizations from the past, but adopt new ideas and develop new forms that build upon the old ones. There is, then, a shift between text and no-text, between memorization and extemporization.

By comparing the scripture-text version with the recorded-text versions of two different performances by *bimo* Qubi Dage, we find many recurring riffs embodied in the performance process, especially in transitions between scenes. The diction is notable for its freshness and vividness; skillful prosody and neat tropes are highly polished by the *bimo* compilations. The comparison of texts and performers that follows illustrates the reality that,

far from being mutually exclusive, orality and literacy interact significantly in the textual performance.

Two types of sacred text: oral and written

For the *bimo* there are two types of “scripture”: *kemgo kehxa eyyma* (“oral text”) and *teyy eyyma* (“written text”). *Nyicyssy Teyy*, “Scripture of Ghost-spelling”—another name for *Nyiy Bbopa*—is an example of *teyy eyyma*. Ritual texts are the most valuable of a *bimo*’s tools. They are the principal authority and vehicle for the symbolic meaning of the incantation ritual. Oral texts, as the term *kemgo kehxa* implies (literally, “words pierced mouth, voice clutched tongue”), derive their power from the language itself, from the vibrancy of spoken words, and from other oral genres.

Some oral texts, *Qubu Ddoma Teyy* (“The Analects of *Bimo* Master Qubu”), for example, consist primarily of rules and instructions for training *bimo*, mainly in the form of oral proverbs. During ritual performances, especially rituals against ghosts, however, the *bimo* never recites according to the written text. Orality plays a fundamental role in Nuosu tradition, and this is so whether the mode of expression for a text is oral or is principally “carried” by some other mode—writing, painting, and so on. Thus, the category “scripture” may be subdivided by medium into two types. Although the division between oral text and written text can be said to mark the divergent frontier between orality and literacy, *kemgo kehxabi* (chanting an oral text) and *teyybi* (reciting a written text) converge in a single performance. The chanting of *Nyicy Bbopa* abundantly demonstrates that in practice no boundary separates *teyybi* from *kemgo kehxabi*; instead, they are merged. But even this merging does not necessarily exhaust the interaction between modes. The sound of the word emerges more clearly through the following *bimo* song known as *Bibu*²¹:

Bimo depend on their books,
The brown text pages,
Transmitted to sons and grandsons,
With their wise and perceptive words,

²¹ *Bibu* (“The Genealogy of *Bimo*”) is a popular scripture that the *bimo* usually chants at the beginning of a ritual. It traces the origin of the *bimo*, recounts their history, and invokes the guiding presence of the famous *bimo* masters along with the *bimo*’s own ancestors. *Bibu* is a text handed down from one generation of Nuosu *bimo* to the next. The verses quoted herein were preserved by the Liangshan Prefecture Museum of the Yizu Slave Society.

From the father to the son to hold dear,
 The *vytu* and the *kuhlevo*²²
 Passed from elder to younger generation.
 Perceptive people become mediators;
 Brave men wield the knife and spear;
 Rich people herd their cattle and sheep;
 Our generations are intelligent and continue the *bimo* tradition
 And chant the sound of texts.

Two kinds of performer: literati and non-literati

As a traditional mode of poetic narrative, *bbopa* has been shared in common between literati and non-literati. As lettered persons, the *bimo* are greatly respected in traditional Nuosu society; some scholars call them the “village intellectuals.” From the *Bibu Eyyma*, or “Scripture for Offering Sacrifice to Ancestors,” we know that *bimo* had no written scriptures during the early period; their chanting was handed down orally. Not until the time of Qubu, a legendary figure in the Nuosu tradition, did the *bimo* begin to document their scriptures in writing, thereby initiating the literate period.²³ From then on, scriptures served as the groundwork for the *bimo*’s performance of the recitations. For the literate *bimo*, mastering written scriptures and being highly skilled in all the oral traditions are prerequisites for carrying out ritual performances and communicating with gods, ghosts, and ancestors. In an oral/aural context, the professional education of the Nuosu *bimo* has depended on writing, and books circulate within *bimo* circles.

As a textual performer, the *bimo* has authority to chant or recite scripture, or to ritualize different kinds of texts. *Bimo* are: (1) ritualists of the indigenous religion of Nuosu society, (2) authentic singers of the epic manuscripts identified among the Nuosu people, and (3) qualified performers of the ritualized poetic texts defined by *bimo* institutions. Culturally their role in Nuosu society has multiple significances (cf. Bamo A. 2001). Becoming a *bisse*, or a student of a *bimo*, requires some recitation of written texts, but writing is secondary to oral training. Even for the *bimo* himself, writing is not a major part of his tradition. The most important and

²² A *bimo*’s ritual implements (Bamo A. 1994).

²³ Qubu, also known as Qubu Shyzu, a well-known *bimo* master in Nuosu ancient history, lived 99 generations earlier than the current *bimo* master Qubi Shuomo. The creation of five kinds of *bimo* ritual implements is attributed to Qubu, and Nuosu *bimo* regard him as the founder of Nuosu written culture.

fundamental aspect of *bimo* training is learning face-to-face performance. Traditionally, a new apprentice masters a ritual text or song by vocal mimicry—following his teacher’s chanting word by word on the spot. The results of this traditional method of learning ritual texts are embodied in Jjyke Kehxa, a six-year old *bisse*, who by imitating his father, Jjyke Ggufu, was able to recite more than sixty texts by oral dictation, including fluent versions of *Zyzy Hninra*.

In most social rituals, another group of *bbopa* performers act as “storytellers.” These are the *zomo zosse*.²⁴ As a verb, *zo* means “to encounter,” and *Zomo zosse* means literally “storytelling-mates,” or “storytelling-partners,” indicating that the performance is conducted by two storytellers paired for ceremonial occasions. These storytellers perform *bbopa*, as well as other oral genres, in song-and-dance duet form, usually at weddings or funeral ceremonies. Their *bbopasha*, or “origin-narrating,” always involves two voices in duet, echoing and supporting one another. The Nuosu regard *zomo zosse* as traditional singers, orators, and storytellers, according to the specific ritual context.

The *zomo zosse* style of *bbopasha* is markedly different from that of *bbopabi* conducted by a *bimo* or a *bisse*. Older, and often more experienced, storytelling partners recite their *bbopa* at an unhurried, almost methodical pace around the floor hearth. They much prefer subtle shifts in pitch or pacing to flashy gestures and wild intonation. The personal style of my informant Abi Quti is more animated and his pace much quicker than either his father or uncle. Abi Quti likes to start slowly, gradually increasing the narrative tempo. Like his elders, he tends to maintain a very serious expression while telling an origin narrative, never betraying so much as a smile.

Many *bbopa* songs are shared between *bimo*, *bisse*, and *zomo zosse*, between the literati and non-literati. But only the ritualist *bimo* can perform the *Nyicy Bbopa*, since it is regarded as a classic *bimo* text and a primary incantation. Even ordinary *bimo* who lack certain skills are normally unwilling to perform such rituals.

²⁴ *Zo* and *zomo* are equivalent terms. The suffix - *mo* occurs in many nominal forms, often indicating largeness or seniority, and is sometimes opposed to -*sse*, meaning “small” or “junior.” Thus, to recap, a *bimo* is a priest; *bisse*, a disciple; and *gemo*, a senior artisan. *Gemo* may also mean “a large wardrobe,” while a *gesse* is a small chest of drawers.

Variability/Stability

The polarity between variability and stability has long been recognized as being at the heart of the phenomenon of oral tradition and has captured the attention of many scholars (cf. Honko and Honko 1999). This kind of polarity inheres in *bbopa*, the richest form of Nuosu narrative poetry. The relationship between variability and stability in Nuosu traditions, like the debate over “a song” versus “the song” in many oral traditions, has exercised great influence over the study of these verbal arts. In Nuosu traditions, there are rules that govern what is variable and what is invariable. Depending, then, upon such elements as subject, function, and pertinence of the ritual, the Nuosu generally divide their rituals into two categories: *ggahxa*, “above the road,” are rituals performed for gods while *ggajjy*, “below the road,” are rituals for ghosts and enemies.

The *bimo* say that there are 120 scriptures for incantations and 48 scriptures for sacrificial offerings. These two different genres illustrate the rules of variability and stability in the recitation of scriptures. In a ritualized performance, sacrifice scriptures contain very special hymns and odes. The strict rules and formulas that govern this type of song symbolize a divine or special format that the *bimo* is not at liberty to alter.²⁵ As the saying goes: “If the sacrifices and spirit sticks are insufficient, the client may be harmed; if the textual recitations are simplified, the *bimo* may be harmed.”

Incantation songs,²⁶ on the other hand, aim at a changing, uncertain, and capricious ghost, and demand that the *bimo* rise to the occasion using curses, spells, or incantation songs. For instance, in *Nyicyssy Teyy* the Nuosu character for the ghost may have more than one hundred different handwritten forms. The variant forms call attention to the dangers of not taking these metaphors seriously and testify to an ongoing understanding of textual truth and language power among those who cherish these texts. In

²⁵ In the *bimo* institutions, reciting a dedicatory hymn or offering an ode to the gods and ancestors while chanting *mulu musy bi* (the invocation of natural gods, and especially the Mountain Gods, to ensure the success of the ritual) is comparable at the level of pragmatics to the performance of an incantation song against ghosts. Furthermore, the genre functions similarly in both cases to activate and reactivate a kind of ceremonial or ritual occasion.

²⁶ In *bimo* incantation ritual, the way of *ttyybi* (“to chant or recite the book”) often involves exclaiming formulas that signal incantation songs—*cymgo ggututu* (“to chant out in a loud and long voice”) at the beginning, and *yya kekemu* (“casting out curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away”) at the end of a canto.

my field work, *bimo* recite this story in different *fubi* or “voices,” imitating the sounds made by a bee, a tiger, an eagle, a deer, river water, rustling leaves, a storm, rain, and thunder. Vocal mimicry brings melodic variety to the chanting. The performance is lively, and the *bimo* amplifies and embellishes the events throughout the storytelling. For example, in *Nyicy Bbopa* the mother of ghosts undergoes seven transformations: from a white river deer (episode 2) into a grove of trees with red blossoms (episode 5), into the beautiful *Zyzy* (episode 5), into a red-winged kite (episode 9), into a banded jackal (episode 9), into an otter (episode 9), and, finally, into a light gray mountain goat with a red tail (episode 11). It is evident that as the girl changes so also do the main threads of the narration. Each transformation occurs at precisely the point where the *bimo* stops chanting curses and begins specific incantations of the ritualized text. Recognizing this correlation helps account for the many variations in *Zyzy Hninra* or *Nyicy Bbopa* storytelling, and points to contingent, historical manifestations that reflect different circumstantial expansions of the texts.

Function/Meaning

To recap, *bbopa* is a typical mode of Nuosu oral tradition. It constitutes a narrative dimension of Nuosu expression and reveals a traditional way of Nuosu thinking. The structure of the *bbopa* resembles most forms of oral narrative, or *bbudde*, that we distinguish as myths, folktales, or legends. Thematically, *bbopa* are typically stories associated with the creation of the world, cultural heroes, gods and ancestors, ghosts and demons, migration and history, the creation of life, the origins of customs and laws, and the structure of caste and clan. As an aspect of the dynamics of communication, *bbopa* in poetic meter constitute the curriculum and school through which the Nuosu learn their traditional culture. With regard to the circulation of transcriptions, performance, and reception, *bbopa* are regularly used in religious rituals and folk ceremonies, mainly rites of passage, either as textual commentary on the ritual or as ritual dramatizations.

Originally, I intended to examine the *bimo* scriptures related to Nuosu ghost beliefs and incantation songs because they seemed to address questions of religion and oral-textual topics from the standpoint of a ritualized interpretation of ghosts. The poetic rhythms and traditional referentiality of this narrative storytelling fascinated me. By studying a dozen of the texts employed by the *bimo* in rituals for expelling ghosts and for healing, I noticed that although they were ostensibly cursing the ghosts,

their narration became a so-called “fact” of a ghost’s origin, and informed people how and why to expel the ghost and how to obey social regulations, customs, and taboos.

What was the social structure of Nuosu society before 1956²⁷ and what survives of it? Liangshan society was, and remains, a clan society—clans being patrilineal, strictly exogamous, and geographically scattered—and this is of fundamental importance. Known in Nuosu as *cyvi*,²⁸ the clan is the dominant social institution, especially as regards marriage. After nine generations a black Nuosu²⁹ son can open a new clan branch, thus enlarging the possibilities for matrimonial alliances; the required period for a white Nuosu son is seven generations. Alliances are also determined by the caste system. The Nuosu believe that clan loyalty is the basis of social well-being—of peace and order as opposed to strife and warfare—so in village life clan elders, called *suyy* or *ddeggu*, play an important role in resolving disputes and ensuring social order.

Consider this example. In Episode 8 of *Zyzy Hninra*, Awo Nyiku takes ill. One day he asks Zyzy Hninra about her genealogy and origins, and she tells him a plausible story. His suspicions aroused, Awo Nyiku then invites the *bimo* and *sunyi* to curse her. Why does he seek to destroy Zyzy? In Nuosu society, *bbopa* (here meaning the “origin” of a particular person) means not only parentage or ancestry, but also bone and blood, root and caste. In this context, *bbopa* resonates with ritual performances such as the *Nyicyssy* “Ghost-exorcism,” in which *bimo* cast their curses at a beautiful woman who has dedicated her life to her beloved husband. Recalling Episode 2 of *Nyicy Bbopa*, we now see that “White-river deer” is a social metaphor. Zyzy had no origin, no ancestor, and no roots. Above all, she has no noble blood, nor a strong clan to defend her. In addition to all this, she has no experience of motherhood. Her childlessness means she has no stable

²⁷ “ Beginning in 1956, the Communists instituted what they called the ‘Democratic Reforms.’ This was a comprehensive effort to abolish what they saw as the exploitative and oppressive aspects of what they termed the ‘slave society’ in Liangshan, and to set the Nuosu, along with the rest of the citizens of China, on the road to socialist modernization” (Harrell, Bamo Q., and Ma 2000:8).

²⁸ The literal meaning of *cyvi* has two parts: *cy* means “generation” and *vi* means “bone.” The hierarchical order of castes, and even of clans, was demarcated by the degree of “hardness of bones” or “the purity of blood.”

²⁹ The colors black and white here refer to social status. A black Nuosu is a nobleman, or upper-class member of Nuosu society. A white Nuosu is a commoner.

position in her husband's clan;³⁰ she is like water that has no source or a tree that has no roots. She is the victim of a rigorous caste-system of social control. By falling in love with a woman of questionable ancestry and dubious background—one whose social status was undefined owing to her unknown origins—Awo Nyiku acted contrary to the morals and ethics of his noble clan. This is why he falls ill: it is a metaphorical punishment visited upon him by his ancestors.

As an origin narrative, the story implies much about the traditional Nuosu conceptions of individual and community, man and woman, blood and bone, and “the pollution of women.” These abstract ideas are all illustrated by a dramatic account of an animal metamorphosed into a female. It coincides with, and makes reference to, mythic narratives about why and how black goats are selected for ritual sacrifice as “scapegoats.” The use of color expresses the profound relationship between human and superhuman beings, expressed through the symbolic agency of language. The storytellers use language, whether it is lively and quaint or amplified and embellished, to express meanings that fit commonly recognized patterns of the social charter.

As ritual songs or chants, *bbopa* not only subsume genres, they represent a typical mode of traditional narrative as well as provide insight into a fundamental way of thinking in Nuosu society (cf. Bamo Q. 2000). *Bbopa* reflect the Nuosu worldview, value, social charter, and clan politics, not to mention ritual poetics.

Diversity/Identity

Among the Nuosu nothing seems more natural and universal than the *bbopa bi*, or “origin-narrating,” performed at public ceremonies. For a Nuosu villager, there is no river or stream in the Cold Mountains, however “slow,” without its source of water, and there is no clan or family in Nimu (the land of the Nuosu), however “small,” without its root of father-son genealogy. As a subgroup of the Yi people, the Nuosu have maintained their own indigenous cultures and zealously preserved their oral traditions.

The Yi are linguistically and culturally a diverse people. I cannot agree, however, that “this great linguistic and cultural diversity raises the

³⁰ Nuosu believe in many different spirits. For example, women have a fertility spirit (*gefe*), men have a protective spirit (*quose*), families have a hearth spirit (*shaku*), and even property has a spirit (*kepo*). In this case, if a woman lost her fertility spirit, she could not become pregnant, or her children would die young.

question of what makes the Yi people a *minzu* [a ‘minority’ or ‘nationality’]” (Harrell 2001:7-9). Though for a long time few of them were known to outsiders, “origin narratives” are recorded as classical poetry in other ancient Yi books (cf. Bijie 1990-93). Seen in the light of Yi terminological taxonomy corresponding to their ritual functions (cf. Bamo Q. 2000), “origin-narrating poetry” is a major genre among the ten types of Yi scriptural literature. The many origin-narrating songs and poems collected by the *bimo*—who wrote them into the ancient books at different times and places in the various dialects of the Yi subgroups throughout the Sichuan, Yunna, and Guizhou provinces, and passed them down—reveal that every Yi community possesses similar creative representations. The seven volumes of *Wushi Jilue* (“The Origins and Genesis,” Bijie 1990-93) compiled by local scholars in the Guizhou Yi area include 179 origin-narrating songs—some longer, some shorter in length—on the creation of the world and on the early myths and legends of the Vusa and Azi tribes of the Yi.³¹ Although for the most part disconnected, and in part obscure in sense and allusion, these poetical narratives are original, profound, and powerfully imagined events.

In the typical fashion of traditional verbal art, the origin-narratives have changed and developed over the years. However, every song from the river of time retains certain basic features and qualities, and even local color, that reflect the deep sense of “root-bone”—the maintenance of father-son genealogy, ancestor worship, and the promotion of knowledge. Although bearing specific cultural markers—the Yi writing system, the *bimo* institution, the worship of the first ancestor Apu Dumu after the Flood period (cf. Bamo A. 1994), and the cultural hero Zhyge Alu—the circulation of origin narratives surpasses the geographical scope of the Yi region in China, and can be taken as a cultural pattern that helps us understand the identity of the Yi. There is no doubt that “origin narratives” can be defined as a traditional genre of poetic expression, in both ancient Yi records and in the present-day living oral performance.

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³¹ A Chinese collection of Yunnan Yi origin narratives entitled *Chamu* is similarly extensive. Generally speaking, there are fewer texts translated and published from the Liangshan area than from the Yunnan and Guizhou Yi communities.

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Appendix

Nyicy Bbopa ("The Origin of Ghosts")

Episode 1

Cymgo ggututu.³² Once upon a time (the time has already passed), when heaven and earth were in chaos; once upon a time (the time has already fled), in the age of the six suns and seven moons. . . .

At that time the cock crowed at dawn, the swallows soared in the clouds, and the dawn was brightening. Towards the direction called *zyzy puvu*, in the land of the noble Nuosu Ajy clan, the old man arose and made the fire, the old woman arose and set the pot, the maiden arose and prepared the dog food, and the child arose and tied bands to the dogs. In the land of the Nuosu, the Ajis had been raising hunting dogs for three years, and they had been weaving dog cages for three months. Three young men arose and whistled to their hunting dogs to go to the mountains for the chase. The white hunting

³² The beginning formula used in every incantation song; literally, "to chant out in a loud and long voice."

dogs rose like sheep; the black hunting dogs rose like bears; the multi-colored hunting dogs rose like magpies; the red hunting dogs rose like badgers; the yellow hunting dogs rose like tigers; the gray hunting dogs rose like wolves. The three young men whistled to their hunting dogs and left, they left for the forest.³³

Episode 2

At this time, responding to a dog's bark, a **white river-deer**³⁴ was driven out of a bamboo grove. As the deer was fleeing, he came round three hilltops while running out of nine acres of woods; he jumped three gullies while wading through nine rivers; he reached the bank of Anning River from the mountain Sypy Ggehxo.

At this time, responding to a dog's bark, the deer butted into the chief hunter Nzy Miajy. He drew his silver bow, fixed a golden arrow, and shot at the white river-deer. But the arrow flew towards the clouds; no one knew where it fell.

At this time, responding to a dog's bark, the deer butted into Moke Ddizzi.³⁵ He drew his copper bow, fixed an iron arrow, and shot at the white river-deer. But the arrow flew towards the mist; no one knew where it fell.

At this time, responding to a dog's bark, the deer butted into a world-famous hero, the warrior Hxoyi Ddiggur.³⁶ He drew his huge wooden bow and fixed a bamboo arrow. While he was aiming at the white river-deer, it suddenly spoke out at the last second . . . :

Episode 3

“Hxoyi Ddiggur, don't shoot me. Ddiggur, don't shoot me. You were born a human being in Momupugu; I was born a beast in the same place. So we share the same birthplace. Ddiggur, don't shoot me.” And she explained again and again: “I am the divine beast with a single horn. Even if I am a beast to be aimed at, I am not supposed to be hit. Even if I am hit, I am not supposed to fall down onto the ground; even if I fall down, I am not supposed to be butchered; even if I am butchered, I am not supposed to be cooked; even if I am cooked, I am not supposed to be eaten; even if I am eaten, I am not supposed to be digested. Such a white river-deer as I would either break nine strong bows or injure nine archers if they were to shoot me; either break nine long swords or hurt nine butchers if I were to be flayed; either damage nine iron pots or hurt nine eaters

³³ These are magic words: such descriptions of hunting dogs imply a successful chase.

³⁴ The transformations of Zyzy Hninra are in **boldface** type.

³⁵ The principal counselor of the ruler Ajy.

³⁶ Who was in the service of Ajy.

if I were to be cooked; either snap nine white teeth or hurt nine gluttonous tongues if I were to be eaten.³⁷

“Hxoyi Ddiggur, don’t shoot me. Ddiggur, don’t shoot me. You were born a human being in Momupugu; I was born a beast in the same place. So we share the same birthplace. Ddiggur, don’t shoot me.” And she explained again and again: “I have been looking for you for so long, since your parents asked me to send you their words. Your father was melancholy, for he missed you very much. Your mother was not herself, for she was always thinking of you. When your father missed you in the daytime he would wander at the entrance of the valley and take seven wrong roads, while at night he was so sad that he shed many tears that soaked his pillow and clothes. When your mother thought of you in the daytime her mind was uneasy and her eyes were dizzy. She would go to ten different places outside the village, while at night she cried so hard that tears poured from the hands with which she covered her eyes, and the tears would soak three layers of the soil.”

Hxoyi Ddiggur did not believe what the deer said. He drew his huge wooden bow and fixed a bamboo arrow. While he was aiming at the white river-deer, he cast spells at the last second:

“The sun rises in the east and my arrow flies like a dragon! The water in the rivers flows to the south and my arrow is ever-victorious! The sun goes down in the west and my arrow can sweep away all obstacles! The source of water is in the north and my arrow will miss no targets!”

No matter how the deer begged and cajoled, he could not stop the flight of Ddiggur’s lethal arrow. As the deer was hit, the arrow broke its neck and went directly through its tail.

Episode 4

Hxoyi Ddiggur, when he was five years old, went to play on the dam with the swineherd. He caught big snakes and played with them as if they were fish. He caught toads and played with them as if they were pieces of stone. When he was six years old, he hung around the hills with the shepherd. He caught gray leopards and rode them like horses. He caught red tigers and made them plough like oxen. He caught wild boars and rode them like horses. He caught old bears and made them plough like oxen, too. He led jackals and wolves like one leads dogs. He caught muntjac and river-deer and yelled to them as if they were domestic animals. When he was seven years old, he wove mats and put them on as armor. When he was learning martial arts, he would dextrously sit on the floor to prevent being hit by the stones flying towards him. On the battlefield, he would prepare to meet an approaching enemy head-on when the spear was thrust toward him. He walked like a jumping fish. He moved freely along a cliff among spears thick as bamboo and arrows falling like stars.

³⁷ These verses are joined like a string, and the rapidity of the voice is like a close-set chain of pearls.

Episode 5

When the hunters ran to the place where the deer had fallen, they could not see the deer's shadow. At this time they heard the sound of a hunting dog barking in front, so they went forward, following the sound to investigate. They found the whole pack of hunting dogs barking around **a clump of trees with red blossoms**. Ddiggur thought there was probably something hidden in these trees, and anxiously he fixed an arrow and shot toward the trees. He shot off a branch that fell to the ground and disappeared, and standing in front of him was a maiden, the incomparably beautiful **Zyzy Hninra**.³⁸

Episode 6

Look at Zyzy Hninra: her plait is black and glossy with smooth, soft hair; her forehead is wide and flat; her nose is in exactly the right place; her neck is slender and upright; her lips are thin and delicate; her cheeks are soft and tender; her eyes are bright and shining, with upturned eyelashes. Look at Zyzy Hninra: her fingers are delicate and slender, her arms are soft and dainty, her legs are plump and round, and her dress is long and graceful. Oh, Zyzy Hninra! Her appearance is as beautiful as the charming moon on a Fall night; her carriage is as elegant and sharp as the river in the sloping fields; her speaking voice is as melodious as a skylark in a vast field. She is indeed a pretty maiden!

Episode 7

One day, the head of another Nuosu tribe, Nzy Awo Nyiku, took his hunting hounds to the forest to look for game, and soon was face to face with Zyzy. He was stricken at first sight, and Zyzy Hninra followed Awo Nyiku to his own clan's village, where the two lived happily together.

Episode 8

In the first year, Hninra was a beautiful wife, with a face like flowers and a bearing like the moon, and in the second year she was a wise and capable spouse. But in the third year, Zyzy Hninra began to change, to become nasty, evil, and cold, and in the village people began dying, one after another, for no apparent reason.

She was born with two pairs of eyes, which were set separately in the front and at the back of her head, with the front ones to watch the roads and the back ones to see human beings. She was born with two mouths, which were also set in the front and at the back of her head, with the front one to eat food and the back one to devour human beings. She was born with two pairs of hands, set in the front and at the back of her body with the front ones to collect firewood and the back ones to dig out human hearts. She would eat the corpse whenever someone died in the village, and she would devour the remaining bones when a corpse was burned on the mountain.

³⁸ Zyzy is the name of a kind of bird, while *Hninra* means "the beauty." Her name implies that she has no clan, and thus no origin—an important point.

In the fourth year, Awo Nyiku took ill. One day he asked about Zyzy Hninra's genealogy and origin, and she told him a plausible story.

Episode 9

Awo Nyiku was very afraid, and began to plot to control Hninra. He pretended that his illness was worsening. Hninra tried to cure him, and one day she turned into a **red-winged kite**, and flew in an instant to an island in the middle of the sea to bring back a swan egg; another day, she turned into a **banded jackal**, and in the blink of an eye ascended a tall mountain, boring into a black bear's chest to steal the bear's gall bladder; another day, she changed into **an otter**, and instantly dove to the bottom of a river to bring back a fish's heart. But none of this had any effect.

One day Awo Nyiku said that nothing could cure him except snow from the peak of the great mountain Minyak Konkar. Zyzy Hninra was determined to save her husband, and decided that, no matter what, she would go to that distant mountain to fetch the snow. Before she left, Zyzy asked Awo Nyiku for a promise:

“After I go, don't burn the stone used to exorcize evil spirits at home, or one will get a headache. Don't burn wood, or one will get asthma. Don't burn the fire made to exorcize evil spirits in front of the house, or one will feel dizzy. Don't sweep the rubbish in the house, or one will feel nervous. Don't let a *bimo* speak in the village, or one will become deaf. Don't pick up the exorcizing branch, or one will get a backache.”

Episode 10

After Zyzy had left, Awo Nyiku quickly summoned 90 *bimo* from the upper end of the village and 70 *sunyi* from the lower end of the village to his house to read texts and perform rituals.

“Let me chant out loud with a full and strong voice. Zyzy Hninra, you use flattering words and a pretty appearance to baffle human beings, and you use your witchcraft to mislead common people. You'd better submit to magical arts immediately! Zyzy Hninra, you are the spirit of the trees on the wild mountains and the licentious bird in the sky. Now your witchcraft has lost its effect and you'd better submit to the magical arts immediately! I will dispatch the flood dragon to the sea so that you will not be able to hide yourself in the water. I will dispatch the divine snake to the earth so that you will not be able to hide yourself in the earth! Casting curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away!”

Episode 11

At that time, Zyzy Hninra had suffered a thousand travails and was on her way back from the snowy peak. Because of the spells and curses cast by the *bimo* and *sunyi* she slowly changed into a **light-gray mountain goat with a red tail**, and the snow that she had fetched for Awo Nyiku stuck to her hooves, caught in her wool, clung to her ears, and fastened to her horns. She knew that her life was almost over, and she wanted to ride the wind back home from the snowy mountain. She wanted to bring back the snow, to express her undying love for Awo Nyiku.

Episode 12

But Awo Nyiku summoned ninety young men, and shot with an arrow a tired old goat, which they bound and took into a cave in the mountainside. Before long, the goat that Zyzy Hninra had been turned into was washed out of the cliffside cave into a river, and fell into a cloth fishing basket being used by three herders from the household of Vusa Jjujjo. There it was skinned and eaten by people who knew nothing of it. As a result, the people who died from eating the goat that Zyzy Hninra had turned into became ghosts who injure people everywhere.

The goat was pulled out of the water. With a slate for a cutting board, nine herdsmen skinned the goat and then the skin was stretched on the ground. Seven young girls dealt with the goat intestines, putting the mutton on a bamboo sifter and cutting the goat intestines with a reaphook. But many people died of poisoning after eating the mutton.³⁹

Episode 13

Many tribes and clans were destroyed by the ghosts of Zyzy Hninra, and so the *bimo* and *sunyi* of every tribe and every clan all curse her with a thousand curses, and all say that Zyzy Hninra was the origin of ghosts. *Yya kekemu!*⁴⁰

³⁹ Eating mutton is taboo in everyday Nuosu life.

⁴⁰ The ending formula literally means “casting out curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away!”