

Between the Oral and the Literary: The Case of the Naxi Dongba Texts¹

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*“...it is not the case that words are one thing and the rite another.
The uttering of the words itself is a ritual.”*

(Edmund Leach 1966:407)

Shafts of sunlight stream through the crooked rafters, piercing the heavy smoke from the fire. Before you sits a *dongba* ritualist. He reads from the beautifully written manuscript in his hands, singing of the Naxi ancestors and their encounters with spirits—good and ill. He closes his eyes, lost in memory. He has stopped reading, but he keeps on singing. This *dongba* ritualist, unlike the Tibetan paper singers, is fully literate; and unlike a priest reading a sermon from the Bible, he is versed in the craft of oral poetry. The book in front of him can, unlike the prop of the paper singer, be read, for it is a receptacle of the written word; but unlike the Bible, it can never be read with the same two combinations of words.

Research into oral traditions has long been centered on contrasting what is perceived to be “oral” with the “literary,” as if the two stand on opposite sides of some unbridgeable chasm. This began in earnest with the work of Milman Parry,² who divided literature precisely into these two forms: “the one part of literature is oral, the other written” (1933:180). Even today, after Derrida’s opening up of the oral versus written dichotomy, and in spite of research on living oral traditions in cultures that use writing for other social interactions, the two forms are still perceived as essentially separate. They can co-exist, but can they co-exist within the same text? If so, how? And what if there was a tradition of literature that could be shown to bridge this divide?

It is my argument that not only can the ritual texts of the Naxi³ people of southwest China be proven to be demonstrably oral in nature, but that they also exist in a realm of potentiality that occupies the uncontested territory between the two extremes of oral and written: they are truly

¹This essay is mainly derived from the second chapter of my Ph.D. dissertation, “Rescued into Extinction? The Case of the Naxi Texts in translation.” See Poupard (2017).

²Although it was Friedrich August Wolf in his *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) who first argued that Homer was a non-literate bard who could not have composed the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as we know them today.

³One of China’s 56 ethnic groups, the Naxi are a 310,000-strong people who live in and around the Lijiang basin in the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan.

transitional texts. Oral literature, in terms of Parry's Oral-Formulaic Theory,⁴ has traditionally been identified by its repeated phrases or "formulas," and this formulaic nature is key to its composition. In comparison, written texts have fewer repeated phrases, with unique lines and unusual words employed to non-standard effect. Parry's work has come to be regarded by a number of modern scholars as an outmoded phase in Homeric scholarship (and in the field of oral tradition that sprung from it). Some say that oral theory itself is a "myth," because the Homeric hexameter is dependent upon the written alphabet (Bellamy 1989:307), others that we can "put a pen in" Homer's hand (Shive 1987:139). This understanding does not resolve our problem: if "oral epics" are written and not oral, then we are no closer to discovering an in-between stage, texts that are demonstrably both oral *and* written.

The debate as to whether much literature that is perceived of today as "oral" was in fact orally composed is always hampered by the fact that we are reading and analyzing the texts in their written form. In essence, the pen is *always* hypothetically in Homer's hand. As Parry himself said: "If one wishes to think that Homer composed his poems orally, and then sat down and wrote them out, there is little that can be said in disproof, and little that needs to be said" (1930:144). The question we are asked to ponder here is whether or not Homer used the technology of writing to compose his epic poetry, and what effect might this have on our understanding of oral vs written composition. On this point, Merritt Sale has argued, "we may think it improbable, but an oral poet could have learned to write" (1996:375). But why is it improbable in the first place that a ("primitive") oral poet could write? It is our chirographic bias that teaches us so.

Jakobson and Bogatyrev made the famous claim that oral works of folklore exist only "potentially" as "as a skeleton of actual traditions," while a literary work exists "concretely apart from its reciter" (1971:91-92). If this fixity, this concreteness, is the primary marker of literary texts, then the real difference between oral and written might be discovered in the relationship between sound and written word. After all, ever since the birth of Saussurean linguistics the written word has been seen as a secondary sign, a written codification of spoken language that acts as what Ong calls a "commitment of the word to space" (2002:7). The notion that writing systems represent what is said has been challenged by Olson, who makes the case that "writing is not the transcription of speech but rather provides a conceptual model for that speech" (1994:89). But this model only supplies the illusion of completeness, for as much as writing represents, there may be just as much that it does not represent. Perhaps to better understand the relationship between orality and literacy, or between sound and word, we need to go beyond the texts and intertexts of the usual discourse in oral traditions, beyond Homer and the Finnish or South Slavic epics, to a culture at the foothills of the Himalayas.

This essay analyzes the ritual texts of the Naxi people of Lijiang and its environs, the majority of which are written in the logographic dongba script and performed by the Naxi ritual

⁴It was Oral-Formulaic Theory that first compared living oral epic traditions of the former Yugoslavia to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, indicating that the Homeric poems were once oral poetry.

practitioners, known as dongba.⁵ First a note on terminology, for at this juncture the question “How can a *text* be oral?” may justifiably be asked. Here I use the word *text* to refer to a kind of cultural performance. Oral texts are voiced performances, while written texts are chirographic ones. The historian and philosopher Walter Ong associates the word “text” with the root meaning “to weave,” which does not make it incompatible with oral utterances, despite the fact that the term oral literature is for Ong anachronistic and self-contradictory (because it etymologically refers to “letters,” *litterae*) (2002:13). Foley warns us against the “slippery slope” thinking “if letters, *littera-ture*,” saying that the invention of literacy in a culture does not necessarily indicate libraries full of books (*ibid.*:25). The Naxi texts are not normally written word for word, but are rather a complex amalgam of characters, many of which act as metonyms that recall traditional allegories. They can be read, but only by those who have been initiated into the dongba cultural tradition, and generally only as part of a sung oral performance. Chinese scholars have referred to them as texts written according to a “reminding” form of shorthand (*tixing jushi* 提醒句式), (see Niu 1999); while western scholars usually settle for the adjective “mnemonic” to describe them.⁶ They can only be read by those who already know the “story,” as the texts themselves are predominantly ritualized narratives that contain the epic poetry and folklore of their culture.

Here a link could be established between musical notation and dongba writing: in his 1958 article, Charles Seeger (184) identified the difference between prescriptive and descriptive music writing (prescriptive being a notation intended to be read during a performance, and descriptive being a written record of a particular performance), and dongba texts could be said to embody a kind of “prescriptive notation” intended for a performance.⁷ As musical notation tends to be incomplete, leaving out certain aspects of tonal and rhythmic functions, so the dongba texts are incomplete, leaving out certain words and, perhaps, sentences that are supplied by memory. Of prescriptive musical notation, Seeger says (1958:186):

Yet no one can make it sound as the writer of the notation intended unless in addition to a knowledge of the tradition of writing he also has a knowledge of the oral (or better, aural) tradition associated with it—i.e., a tradition learned by the ear of the student.

This is our direct link to the oral textual traditions of the Naxi.

⁵ Dongba (the Chinese for the Naxi, *dobbaq* [toɬ mbaɬɬ]), which probably derives from the Tibetan *stonpa*, (“teacher”) also serves as the name of their logographic script (dongba script, *dongbawen* 东巴文) and their local culture (dongba culture, *dongba wenhua* 东巴文化).

⁶ Reminding, of course, is different from “mnemonic.” A mnemonic is a device that aids the memory, a reminder is used in place of it. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Thamus tells the God of writing, Theuth, the following about his invention: “You have invented an elixir not of memory but of reminding” (North 2005 [1914]:563). Those who cultivated the art of memory in the classical world, such as the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, would have probably looked down on any method of written mnemonics.

⁷ More accurately, a prescriptive notation such as a lead sheet supplying only the essential elements of a performance, as might be used in jazz, upon which the jazz performer builds and improvises.

The Orality of the Naxi Texts

To support my claim that the Naxi texts are in fact “transitional,” belonging neither entirely to oral or written tradition, we must understand just how oral, and just how literary, they are. Because of our chirographic bias, orality is always harder to prove; especially when, as in our case, we have at hand a corpus of authentic written compositions. Our first task is to present them as essentially oral in their performative nature, and to do this I will first look for evidence of a kind of specialized oral language within them: the language of epic singing. Parry laid the groundwork for scholars of oral tradition with his identification of the oral formula in Homer, famously defining the formula as “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (1930:85). His work was continued by Albert Lord who also believed that “the fundamental element in constructing lines is the basic formula pattern” (2003:36). For Parry and Lord, the Homeric hexameters are composed of identifiable formulas, of which the epic poets had a vast vocabulary that they then combined in various ways to create their traditional epics.

The traditional method for indicating whether a text is “oral” or “literary” is that of formula analysis. It is assumed that an oral text will contain a large number of easily identified oral formulas, while the remainder will be to some extent “formulaic,” with a “small number of non-formulaic expressions” (Lord 2003:130). Since Parry, formula analysis has been applied to the epic poetry of over a hundred cultures beyond those of ancient Greece, including the *Shijing* (sometimes translated as the “*Book of Odes*”) in China.⁸ As Foley has said, “virtually every single one of the fifty-five officially recognized national minorities in the People’s Republic of China, for example, possesses a thriving oral poetry” (2002:25); indicating that there is a wealth of distinct oral traditions within China itself, of which the Naxi tradition is but one small part. While a full quantitative analysis of formulas in the Naxi ritual texts is beyond the scope of this article,⁹ I believe that suggesting their formulaic nature (and roots in oral composition) by the presence of identifiable formulas is eminently possible.

If a formula is employed under strict metrical conditions, then we must first identify the metre of the Naxi ritual texts. The texts are mostly comprised of units of five, seven or nine syllables, and can be sometimes longer. Each line, as scholars such as He Jiren have noted, is comprised of “an odd number of syllables” (2006:4), and this is the primary metrical requirement. While the metre is not as linear as the Homeric hexameters, the dongbas use formulas to ensure that their utterances are predominantly five, seven or nine syllables in length.

What are we looking for in a formula analysis? Common sense dictates that the names of the protagonists, the mythic folk heroes, and the adverbial expressions of time and place, will be the most frequently used. These are the “common ideas of poetry” (Lord 2003:34). The Naxi ritual texts as they are written seem to follow the pattern of oral formulas in that the majority of the words are the names of the “actors,” their actions and the time and place of their occurrence.

⁸See Wang (1974). More recently, scholars such as Eugene Eoyang have suggested that there is no need to ask whether or not the *shijing* belonged to an epic tradition; its innate orality as “ancient oral Chinese song” is self-evident (Eoyang 1993:204).

⁹A “torturous way” of tabulation and charting of statistics, in the words of C. H. Wang (1974:126).

In terms of the names of epic heroes, Naxi ritual texts often employ simple adverbial epithets. The four syllable name of the Naxi creation hero, $\text{ts}^{\text{h}}\text{o}^{\text{t}}\text{J} \text{ze}^{\text{t}} \text{[u]r}^{\text{t}} \text{xu}^{\text{t}}$ (Naxi pinyin *Coqsseileel'ee*¹⁰) is often written $\text{ts}^{\text{h}}\text{o}^{\text{t}}\text{J} \text{ze}^{\text{t}} \text{[u]r}^{\text{t}} \text{xu}^{\text{t}} \text{xu}^{\text{t}}$ ¹¹ with an extra final syllable, xu^{t} , to make the name fit into one whole intonation unit of five syllables (a “line” of Naxi poetry). The reduplicated final syllable (xu^{t} , meaning “good” in Naxi) in this instance emphasizes the worthy, virtuous nature of the post-flood ancestor; a mini-epithet that turns the name into an oral formula.



Fig. 1. Naxi dongba script for the creation hero, *Coqsseileel'ee* (Fang 1981:363).

The opening line of the majority of the Naxi ritual texts is perhaps the tradition’s most famous and easily identifiable oral formula. It is uttered in a unit of either five syllables, $a^{\text{t}} \text{la}^{\text{t}} \text{m}^{\text{a}}^{\text{t}} \text{s}^{\text{a}}^{\text{r}} \text{J} \eta^{\text{t}}$ or its variant, $a^{\text{t}} \eta^{\text{t}} \text{la}^{\text{t}} \text{s}^{\text{a}}^{\text{r}} \text{J} \eta^{\text{t}}$, or the seven syllable $a^{\text{t}} \text{la}^{\text{t}} \text{m}^{\text{a}}^{\text{t}} \text{s}^{\text{a}}^{\text{r}} \text{J} \text{be}^{\text{t}} \text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{u}^{\text{t}} \text{d}^{\text{z}}\text{u}^{\text{t}}$. The formula is usually represented in the written text as a tiger’s head.

He Jiren explains the whole unit simply as meaning “before,” and the tiger as representing the ancient Naxi pronunciation for “and,” la^{t} . His word-for-word translation of the five syllable phrase is “yesterday and the day before yesterday” (2006:3). In fact, the single character of the tiger, la^{t} , acts as a textual metonym for the formula; a part (la^{t}) standing for the whole ($a^{\text{t}} \text{la}^{\text{t}} \text{m}^{\text{a}}^{\text{t}} \text{s}^{\text{a}}^{\text{r}} \text{J} \eta^{\text{t}}$). For Naxi scholar Fu Maoji, the tiger represents the seven-syllable Naxi phrase $a^{\text{t}} \text{la}^{\text{t}} \text{m}^{\text{a}}^{\text{t}} \text{s}^{\text{a}}^{\text{r}} \text{J} \text{be}^{\text{t}} \text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{u}^{\text{t}} \text{d}^{\text{z}}\text{u}^{\text{t}}$, which means “in the very beginning.” Fu (2012:20) also believed the tiger’s head to have the symbolic meaning of suppressing evil spirits. Joseph Rock explains the seven-syllable phrase as such (1937:7):

A is merely an exclamation, la-ancient, muan=nothing or void, sher-distinct, ba=do, t'u=that, dzhi=time. A is equivalent to the Tibetan letter ཨ (A) and the meaning is implied that in the beginning, before there was anything, there was A. The sentence must be understood to mean “when there was no one to do anything,” or in other words “in the beginning of time.

In Rock’s words, “nearly all books commence with this phrase, and the head of the tiger, often colored, precedes all other pictographs” (1937:7). This utterance is clearly an oral formula, used to fit a particular metrical pattern, and can be likened to the oral formula still found in fairy tales today—“once upon a time.” Other examples of formulas common to the Naxi texts are $z^{\text{r}} \text{d}^{\text{z}}\text{o}^{\text{t}} \text{J} \text{la}^{\text{t}} \text{l}^{\text{a}}^{\text{r}} \text{J} \text{d}^{\text{y}} \text{J}$, meaning the lush green earth, or just, “the earth”, used in place of $\text{d}^{\text{y}} \text{J}$, ground; and $\text{m}^{\text{u}}^{\text{t}} \text{t}^{\text{e}}\text{a}^{\text{r}} \text{J} \text{t}^{\text{s}} \text{e}^{\text{t}} \text{J} \text{h}^{\text{o}} \text{J} \text{t}^{\text{y}} \text{J}$, meaning the eighteenth level of heaven, where the gods are said to reside, or just “the heavens,” used in place of $\text{m}^{\text{u}}^{\text{t}}$, sky. These five syllable phrases are frequently used as units that form enjambment unto themselves in the spoken text.

Perhaps because what I have identified here as formulas are usually depicted with a single or a compound dongba character, the oral utterances could be said to be “bigger words” in

¹⁰ Naxi pinyin is a system formulated by Naxi scholar He Jiren alongside a team of Naxi language investigators in 1958. Naxi pinyin records the tonal features of Naxi with the final consonants q and l, unlike the tone diacritics of Hanyu pinyin

¹¹ See, for example, the *Annotated Collection of Naxi Dongba Manuscripts* (DWYS 1999 vol 80:42).



Fig. 2. Naxi dongba script for tiger (Fang 1981:186).

terms of Foley’s definition of “functional vocabulary items within the language of epic singing” (2002:18)— for the dongba, words are not strings of letters separated neatly by white spaces, for there is no unified utterance; they cannot be directly compared to the orthographic unit as we understand it. Hence the tiger’s head could be read “*aḷ laḷ məḷ ḡərḷ ḡiḷ*” or “*aḷ laḷ məḷ ḡərḷ beḷ ṭhuḷ dzuḷ*,” and either would mean “once upon a time.” However it is read, it operates as a single unit, a “bigger word.”¹²

Another recurring feature of oral composition is that it is additive rather than subordinative. To highlight the additive oral style, Ong uses the example of the Genesis creation narrative, which he claims is a text that preserves “recognizable oral patterning.” He quotes the Douay version (1610), as sticking particularly close to the additive original in Hebrew: “In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters.” Here the oral patterning is clear: a distinct lack of subordination, clauses simply placed one after the other in a non-periodic additive style, with no traces of the narrative flow that we might expect from modern literature. The beginning of manuscript MEB 481-4 from the Naxi manuscript collection at the Museum of World Cultures in Barcelona, a retelling of the Naxi people’s genesis myth, shows perhaps a starker additive orality. The text begins with the opening formula we have already discussed, shared by most ritual texts “*əḷ ḡiḷ laḷ ḡərḷ ḡiḷ*,” “a long time ago,” and continues with sixteen parallel units of increasing metrical length (five syllables to nine syllables to eleven syllables), but all sharing the base grammatical structure (noun, negation, verb, adverb of time), telling us that this time was so long ago that the universe as we know it had not yet been formed, and detailing each natural feature in a manner so copious that it would be a struggle for the modern reader of a written text to finish:

oḷ --- əḷ niḷ laḷ ḡərḷ niḷ o---e ni la sherḷ ni,	Oh...Long, long ago,
muaḷ məḷ t’vḡḷ tuḷ dzuḷḷ mee me tv tee rheeq,	When the sky had not appeared,
dyḷḷ məḷ t’vḡḷ tuḷ dzuḷḷ ddiuq me tv tee rheeq,	when the earth had not appeared,
biḷ məḷ t’vḡḷ tuḷ dzuḷḷ bbi me tv tee rheeq,	when the sun had not appeared,
leḷḷ məḷ t’vḡḷ tuḷ dzuḷḷ leiq me tv tee rheeq,	when the moon had not appeared,
kuḷḷ məḷ t’vḡḷ tuḷ dzuḷḷ	when the stars had not appeared,

¹² Naxi researcher Yang Jiehong (2015:18) has recently called for the adoption of oral tradition methodology, including the concept of “bigger words,” in studies of dongba ritual performances.

geeq me tv tee rheeQ,	
zaH mət t'vəH tuH dzuHJ ssaQ me tv tee rheeQ,	when the comets had not appeared,
ɕzuHJ mət t'vəH tuH dzuHJ jjuQ me tv tee rheeQ,	when the mountains had not appeared,
loHJ mət t'vəH tuH dzuHJ loQ me tv tee rheeQ,	when the valleys had not appeared,
ɕzuHJ mət t'vəH iH loHJ mət t'vəH tuH dzuHJ jjuQ me tv yi loQ me tv tee rheeQ,	when the mountains and valleys had not appeared,
səH mət t'vəH tuH dzuHJ ser me tv tee rheeQ,	when the trees had not appeared,
lvəH mət t'vəH tuH dzuHJ lv me tv tee rheeQ,	when the stones had not appeared,
ɕziHJ mət t'vəH iH k'æH mət t'vəH tuH dzuHJ jjiQ me tv yi kai me tv tee rheeQ,	when the waters and ditches had not appeared,
ɕzuHJ naH zoH loH laH mət t'vəH tuH dzuHJ jjuQ naH ssol lo la me tv tee rheeQ,	when the sacred mountain had not appeared,
hæHJ iH baH daHJ ɕə- laH mət t'vəH gəH tuH dzuHJ haiQ yi bba ddaq zzerQ la me tv gge tee rheeQ,	when the sacred tree had not appeared,
muH l uH daH ɕziHJ huH laH mət t'vəH suH tuH dzuHJ mee leel dda jjiQ heel la me tv see tee rheeQ,	when the sacred lake had not appeared
tseH tseH hæH lvəH meH laH mət t'vəH suH tuH dzuHJ zeil zei haiQ lv mei la me tv see tee rheeQ.	and when the sacred stone had not appeared.

In the written text, the whole passage quoted above is depicted with just 41 dongba characters (beginning in Fig. 3 with the tiger's head in the second panel from the top left, and ending with the panel before the chicken's head in the bottom right.)



Fig. 3. Naxi creation myth from the sacrifice to the wind ceremony (MEB 481-4 p. 29).

The first line after the opening formula (in fact all the following lines could be said to be formulaic, if not recognizable formulas) is *muł məł t'vł tuł dzułł* (sky / not / appear / that / time). The following lines follow the same structure, with more syllables added for the more complex nouns. It should also be noted that modal particles are added in places where the syllable count would otherwise end up even, such as *dzułł nał zoł loł lał məł t'vł tuł dzułł*, the modal “*lał*”, here an emphatic, is appended to holy mountain *dzułł nał zoł loł* to make the line nine syllables instead of eight.

Because the formulas or “bigger words” are not always equal to whole lines, the “lines” are perhaps better understood as enjambling units most recognizable for their rhythmic effect. Each unit builds on the last in a flow of addition. We can see that there is no formal punctuation in the written texts, merely boundaries where larger speech units come to a natural end. In translation and transcription, a wealth of punctuation marks must be added.

Alongside more recognizable formulae, then, we have intonation units, not “sentences” as we know them. The units in the dongba texts are, as we have seen, composed with an odd number of syllables, usually five, seven or nine in length. The intonation unit is linked to consciousness and memory, and can be understood as the verbalization of the amount of information that can be stored in the short-term memory, or what Chafe terms the “focus of consciousness” (Chafe 1994:140). The five to seven syllable units that comprise the majority of Naxi ritual texts are these intonation units. Bakker suggests that these intonation units, grouped together primarily for their metrical value, together with their ideal length, make for “the basic ingredients of epic discourse” (1999:39).

Ong expands the oral poet’s reliance on formula to something of a definition of oral culture as a whole. He posits oral formulas as “incessant” in oral cultures, “forming the substance of thought itself,” and that without them, “thought in any extended form is impossible” (2002:35). This cements the duality of the oral versus written worldview, the “great divide” as Foley (2002:26) puts it. Nuanced, non-formulaic thought becomes something unattainable for the oral culture. Of course, if words are signs that work on the memory, then all words are to some extent formulas. The distinction would be that oral formulas as we are to understand them in oral literature are more elaborate groupings.

While we can demonstrate that the Naxi texts are oral in nature, adhering to the tenets of oral composition as we understand them, we are still left with the problem of writing. They are still “read” by dongba and are still translated into complete texts in Chinese and other languages. So how oral can these texts really be? Walter Ong, a scholar who was at the spearhead of the oral turn in anthropology, comes out in defense of the divide between orality and literacy; a divide widened by perceptions that “primary oral” cultures are somehow more primitive than literate

cultures. Ong argued that the word “primitive” shares with “illiterate” the sense that something is lacking, highlighting a deficiency in culture (2002:170). In the west, a more nuanced, more positive understanding has now replaced these outmoded views. Nevertheless, the Chinese discourse still paints traditional Naxi culture as “primitive,” and the writing of the Naxi is also viewed as more primitive than the Chinese writing system, which is, at face value, more divorced from its pictographic roots.¹³ One indicator of the script’s primitivity is its status as a form of “picture writing” and an apparent lack of one to one representation of written characters to phonemes in the written texts. If we are to say that Naxi ritual tradition is primarily oral in nature, then the spectre of “primitivity” must be addressed. In fact, the ritual traditions of the Naxi, just like ritual traditions of other cultures around the globe, are a complex unity of parts performed by what Rothenberg would call “technicians of the sacred.”¹⁴ what we might simply conceive of as a poem belonging to an epic tradition that has been put to ritual use is not just a poem and a performer, but in fact a unity of man and world, world and image, image and word, word and music, music and dance, and dance and dancer. This unity of unities can be interrupted or dismantled by analytical appraisals. Where poetry and ritual are concerned, primitive can mean complex.

Ong explains how Lévi-Strauss suggested that the term “primitive” be replaced by “without writing” (2002:170). For Ong, this is still too negative, and he suggests the more neutral “oral.” Even with this adoption, I would argue there still exists a chirographic bias in Ong’s work (*ibid.*). He goes on to say that “literacy opens possibilities to the word and to human existence unimaginable without writing” and “I have never encountered or heard of an oral culture that does not want to achieve literacy as soon as possible” (2002:171). The dualism between “with writing” and “without writing” here is stark. But we should be aware that “orality” cannot totally define a culture, just as “with writing” cannot completely define our own. Rothenberg (1985:iv) has suggested the need to explore “the universality of writing/drawing as a primal form of language,” an exploration that might put an end to the “oral/written” dichotomy, and one that seems especially relevant when dealing with a culture whose script is logographic, and developed from rudimentary pictograms.

Here I align myself with the modern paradigm of research into oral tradition, with Foley, Bakker, and Honko, in calling into question the idea that oral and literate composition are mutually exclusive. Rather than employing a strict oral/written dichotomy, it would be better to understand “oral” as Bakker does, as a continuum, not necessarily incompatible with literacy. Writing, in Bakker’s model, can also be understood as a continuum between our modern sense of literate discourse, called composition, and a conceptually oral discourse, which can be called transcription. The distinction is one between the physical act of writing, of transcribing a text, and the written composition of a text, where the physicality is often taken for granted and in the modern world frequently not even necessary.

Of course, we must place the Naxi texts somewhere in this continuum, but where Naxi is

¹³ In 1959, a group of Chinese researchers described the Naxi logographic script as *yuanshi de xiangxing wenzi* 原始的象形文字, “primitive pictographs” (YMMWLD 1959:36).

¹⁴ The preface to Rothenberg’s anthology (first published in 1968, revised and expanded for the 1985 edition), *Technicians of the Sacred*, expounds his view of the complexity of oral literature.

concerned, oral and written intertwine in the texts, they are performed orally and partially written down. Instead of two parallel continua of oral versus literate, transcription versus composition, we might have to understand the model as more of a double helix, as the orality bleeds into the composition and the oral formulas become written formulas. The failure to truly resolve the oral vs written dichotomy is the failure to find a text that exists both “concretely” and “potentially.” The problem researchers of orality have encountered thus far is their inability to conceptualize a text that can be written down but does not represent a codification, a concrete, objective record of literary textuality. Many scholars (such as Havelock 1963 and Finnegan 1970) have hinted at the existence of a transitional text that bridges the “great divide,” but none have shown it.

Wang asserted that there are “good reasons for us to assume a “transitional period” in the making of *Shi Ching*,” a period of transmission from an oral formulaic stage to what we are presented with today: “a version coloured with scribal alterations and emendations” (1974:31). He suggests that the poetry labelled as *shi* 诗 signified a lettered composition from an author, whereas the word *ko* 歌 signified the act of singing, with no specific poet as composer (*ibid.*:15). Nevertheless, the transitional period can only be assumed, and not resurrected in its original form. Similarly, in texts he investigated to see if they were “transitional,” Lord (2003) found that although written in the style of oral epic, they were still written texts, like Andreaija Kačić Miošić’s Razgovor songs, written in rhymed couplets.

Despite these scholars’ search for a “transitional category” of a written text that carries what Lauri Honko calls the “anterior speech” (the internalized epic register) of orality, the very nature of writing *as we understand it* still represents “a codification of text” (2000:7). Honko labels tradition-oriented written epics “semiliterary” precisely because they contain “anterior speech”(14).¹⁶ But it is hard to argue that they are still not “literary,” in that we can all pick up and read a modern rendition of *Beowulf*, for example. I propose that Naxi ritual texts are “semi-oral,” a truly transitional category of text that does not just contain “anterior speech”; they simply cannot be read without knowledge of the oral tradition (in the same way that a lead sheet can only be interpreted by a competent performer). The texts cannot exist in complete form independently of their reciter.

Writing, But Not as We Know It

Writing is, empirically a communicative technology that denotes a system of inscriptions on a material substance. It is, at least superficially, “something permanent and stable, better suited than sound to constitute the unity of language throughout time” (Saussure 1961:25). Similarly, the formulaic patterns of orality are used in oral literature as a means of creating stability in tradition without writing. I would argue however that there is no exclusivity between orality and the mnemonic process of writing something down. If oral culture relies on intonation

¹⁵ “In view of the fact that *shih* 诗 instead of *ko* 歌 is mentioned in the four poems containing the author’s names (191, 200, 259, 260), these poems are lettered compositions, though they also have formulaic influences” (Wang 1974:30).

¹⁶ See the introduction of Honko (2000) for a discussion on “anterior speech” and semiliterary texts.


units that serve a mnemonic function, then surely the mnemonic function of writing, of written signs that recall sound sequences in our minds, is not vastly different.

So what does the introduction of writing mean for the oral culture? In the minds of western scholars, it means fixity of form, of recording the oral utterances of the poet. For example, Lord states (2003:128):

The use of writing in settling down oral texts does not per se have any effect on oral tradition. It is a means of recording. The texts thus obtained are in a sense special; they are not those of normal performance, yet they are purely oral, and at their best they are finer than those of normal performance. They are not “transitional,” but are in a class by themselves.

When we normally talk of writing down oral texts, we are referring to the transcription of the performance. These are not transitional texts, but, rather, merely written records of an individual performance (Seeger’s “descriptive notation,” 1958:192). The fact that the written texts of the Naxi are composed before the performance links them with the universality of the tradition; they do not fix the tradition in any one concrete form. This means that the texts can be re-created in each performance, not simply mechanically reproduced.

One of the major differences in oral versus written tradition is the change from “stability of essential story, which is the goal of oral tradition, to stability of text, of the exact words of the story” Lord (2003:138). For Lord, the fixity of text spells the “death” of the oral tradition (137). This stability of text, the of fixity of tradition, marks the transition from an oral society to a written one. Fixed texts are representative of a written society. To prove that the Naxi ritual texts are still oral, we must show that even in their written form they are not fixed (albeit not completely impromptu).

If the main identifier of writing versus pictures is that writing represents words, and has a distinct phonetic value,¹⁷ then the orality of Naxi texts is direct in their lack of a one-to-one representation of written words to spoken sounds. Some graphs can be read in different ways, which leads us to ask whether all the graphs in a dongba ritual text can be constituted as writing. The broad view of writing is that it consists of signs and graphs that have semantic meaning but don’t necessarily have to represent language. A narrower view sees writing as graphs and signs that must only represent the spoken language. Boltz (2011:53) uses the example of the no mobile phones sign  in explaining that under the broader view, the sign constitutes writing “because it has a meaning and conveys a message”—the communication of a message being the central function of language—even though it does not stand specifically for a set word or phrase in any language. Proponents of the narrow view would suggest that the sign is not writing because it does not have “permanence” in its interpretation. It is not consistently readable in that it does not “evoke the same speech response among all members of the sign-using community” (*ibid.*). Boltz points out in a footnote that we can in fact assign a phrase, as I already have done above, to the graph, but that will not stop other readers from saying “cell phones off” or “please don’t use mobiles” or any variations thereof (*ibid.* n2).

Zeng Xiaopeng (2013), in his discussion of the dongba writing in Eya in western

¹⁷ “[Phoneticization] is the crucial step that distinguishes writing from non-writing” (Boltz 2000:6).

Sichuan, notes how Li Lin-Ts'an (1953:xiv) observed in certain dongba texts the usage of the character for a hand bell (𪛗 *za laq* [tsæ˧ lə˧˥]) or a conch shell (𪛘 *seei* [fv̩˧ ze˧˥]), which represents the fact that at that point in the recitation the dongba should ring the bell or blow the conch. In this case, Li says that the two characters are not writing, but symbols, because they are not “phonetically marked” (*ibid.*). Zeng takes the broader view of writing, saying (2013:93):

Deciding whether or not [these characters] are writing, should not be based on whether or not they are read out; like how a secretary writes a speech for their superior, and includes the phrase “pause for applause.” This serves the same function as the hand bell or the conch in the dongba text. You can't say that because the characters are not read out means they aren't writing. In fact, many officials will read out these sections in their speeches, leading to an amusing moment for the audience.

The situation is not analogous to “pause for applause,”¹⁸ as there is only one accepted reading for these three words. The dongba character could be read simply as hand bell, or in its actual meaning “here the cymbal must be rung,” or may even be interpreted in a specific context as “ring the cymbal three times,” depending on the text in question.

A sign becomes writing at the moment when “it changes from being non-phonetic to phonetic,” and the change has to be “permanent” and “conventional,” in the words of Elizabeth Hill Boone (2004:313). If, leaving the possible definitions of “conventional” aside, we take this assertion as true, the above graphs are not writing—their phonetic values are neither permanent nor conventional. Boltz (2011:54), for his part, calls the visible marks that serve as the tangible signs of writing—both broad and narrow—“graphs,” and abbreviates this as “G.” Boltz attempts to circumvent the distinction between broad and narrow, both interpretations that he sees as valid and useful, but not useful enough to debate ad nauseam each time we want to talk about writing. To do this, he goes on to distinguish between glottographic and non-glottographic writing (*ibid.*). Graphs that represent spoken language are glottographic, and graphs that represent the broader sense of writing are non-glottographic. All these graphs have a semantic value {+S}, but they may or may not have a phonetic value {+P} or {-P} (Boltz 2011:55).

{S} and {P} are two independent binary variables that can describe a graph, G. This provides Boltz with the four-way distinction (2011:56):

1. G: {-P, -S}, non-writing
2. G: {-P, +S}, non-glottographic writing
3. G: {+P, +S}, glottographic writing type I (morphemic or logographic)
4. G: {+P, -S} glottographic writing type II (syllabic or alphabetic)

Obviously, English as an alphabetic writing system belongs to the fourth type, while Chinese belongs to the third. The dongba script has been previously conceived of as the second type (as a form of picture writing), but in fact it has been shown to be more conclusively logographic. What

¹⁸ The original Chinese here reads “此处有故障，稍停，” literally, “[at] this point there is applause, short pause.”

is interesting about the dongba script is that it can frequently be seen to cross these boundaries. The hand bell mentioned earlier can be simply a drawing of a hand bell and not represent any kind of writing (type 1), or it could be non-glottographic in that it serves to mean “ring the hand bell three times” or any number of variations (type 2), or it could be glottographic in that it is read as “*tsæɫ læɫɫ*” and means hand bell in spoken Naxi (type 3). Fang’s dictionary provides an entry to support this, giving us an exact pronunciation and a definition: “hand bell, made from copper” (1981:348).

Alongside the existence of graphs that have no fixed phonetic value are the missing words, or words that are read out and not written down. The text cannot function as desired without these gaps being filled in. The “empty” grammatical¹⁹ words are often missing. One of the early Chinese scholars to study the Naxi, Li Lin-Ts’an, called the missing words “gaps in the texts,” making the semantic process of reading them word by word “incomplete” (1953:xiv). Only a dongba practitioner can “fill in the gaps” via oral recitation, getting to the full meaning of the texts. The gaps mean that a dongba might not be able to read a text from a tradition outside of his own experience. Let us take the two sentences from Rock’s translation of *The Romance of K’a-mä-gyu-mi-gkyi*: “To put your trousseau into the bridal trunk, I will not come and bring your dowry.” Explaining how these two sentences are represented in the written text by just two Naxi characters, Rock says: “The first symbol represents a woman carrying the *ts’an* or dowry, the phonetic *2ts’an* is in the container on her back; the negation *2muan* is to the right above. The first two sentences are represented by these two symbols only, the remainder must be supplied by the reader (who must know, of course, the text or the story)” (1939:37).

Often, one character or group of written characters in a Naxi ritual text can be used to express several ideas at once, a whole part of a story, or even a story in itself. The breadth of meaning in each character gives rise to a breadth in interpretation. Command of this range of meaning is what sets the learned dongba apart from the poorly trained dongba, and this gives the skilled dongba room to utilize his literary and artistic creativity as an oral composer. If we are to claim that the ritual texts are in fact primarily oral, then we would expect that they are not “fixed.” That is, there should be no accepted version of the text, and each “performance” of the text will be in some way unique. Anthropologist and Naxi studies scholar Anthony Jackson tells us that “there is no such thing as a standard rite, as each *dto-mba* [dongba] had his own version—hence the proliferation of rites and texts and the seeming enormity of some rituals” (1979:26). Mu and Yang claim (2003:3):

At the ritual altar, by the fireplace, the same text, the same story, can become vibrant and moving when it emerges from the lips of a skilled dongba, captivating the hearts of the audience, turning one volume into two. A less skilled dongba can only read what is in front of him, adding no flourishes or touches of his own. Turning two volumes into just one.

This textual variation is possible because the ritual text merely gives the dongba an outline, the

¹⁹ One of the earliest western commentaries on a Naxi text asserts that the verbs are not present—“ideographic characters . . . merely convey notions of realistic objects without being capable of expressing the verb” (Laufer 1916:277); in fact, the main verbs and nouns are almost always represented in the text. Articles, adverbs and other particles are generally missing.

recitation in fact comes from memory, hence the texts themselves have been referred to as mnemonic: “little pictures (like the paintings used in Tibetan ritual) were employed to denote the important items and to jog the memory” (Jackson 1979:72). The characters are not pictures per se, as they have phonetic value, but they do serve to jog the memory.

Mu and Yang (2003) give us a startling example of the non-linear relationship between oral and written. They describe a commonly-occurring episode in Naxi myth, where the Naxi creation hero Coqsseileel’ee uses his bow to shoot a magpie for the three flax seeds it holds in its mouth. This episode forms part of the Naxi creation story. Here is the story as Mu and Yang tell it (3):

On the next day, the magpie had to rest, and rested on the fence. Coqsseileel’ee picked up his bow and arrow and took aim, but couldn’t aim straight. Ceilheeqbbubbeq, sitting at the loom, took out the shuttle and then touched Coqsseileel’ee’s arm, he fired his arrow and hit the magpie. From the magpie’s throat came three flax seeds.



Fig. 4. Story episode: “Coqsseileel’ee shoots the magpie” (Mu and Yang 2003:3).

The original passage in dongba script contains twenty-one characters, but when read in Naxi, Mu and Yang claim it can become 116 phonemes. In their Chinese translation it is some 85 characters (in the above I have translated it into 66 English words). But Mu Lichun goes on to inform us that “If [the extract] was read by a highly-skilled dongba, it could be even longer and contain even more sentences” (2003:4).

It might be wise to try and test the hypothesis. This episode can be found in many of the Naxi ritual texts used in a number of different ceremonies. If we study the different versions of this episode that have been published (mostly from the 100 volume corpus of Naxi texts, entitled *An Annotated Collection of Naxi Dongba Manuscripts* (纳西东巴古籍译注全集),²⁰ hereafter referred to as the “Collection”), we can find evidence of great disparity in the number of characters written down and the number of words read out, and no discernable correlation between the two. This comparison is made possible because the texts are usually reproduced alongside a transcribed “performance” with each phoneme carefully noted down. The presence of Chinese translations introduces a third number, although the translations tend to be based upon the Naxi word-for-word notation. Nevertheless, the fact that the translation is itself akin to a written performance can be seen in the varying amount of information carried over.

²⁰ The work was completed over two decades at the end of the twentieth century, during which Chinese scholars at the Institute of Dongba Cultural Studies in Lijiang translated over 1,000 ceremonial texts.

Table 1: Comparison of retellings of the episode “Coqsseileel’ee shoots the magpie”

Text	Source Characters (dongba script)	Read Syllables (Naxi)	Translation character count (Chinese)
<i>Chuangshiji</i> (1950) (unpublished manuscript) Zhou Rucheng (trans.)	12	n/a	51
<i>Naxi Dongba Guji Yizhu</i> (He L. and He Y., 1986:215-21) He Yuncai (reader) He Fayuan (trans.)	14	82	94
Avoiding disasters brought about by disagreement (DWYS, vol. 35:372-74) He Yunzhang (reader) He Pinzheng (trans.)	10	68	106
Cleansing ritual (DWYS, vol. 39:192-95) He Jigui (reader) Li Ying (trans.)	12	64	72
Closing the doorway to the realm of the dead, (DWYS, vol. 53:133-36) He Kaixiang (reader) Li Lifen (trans.)	9	72	99
Delivering the souls of the dead (DWYS, vol 56:180-82) He Shicheng (reader) He Fayuan (trans.)	12	50	108
Sacrifice to the wind, (DWYS, vol. 80:42-45) He Jigui (reader) He Baolin (trans.)	9	74	101

Dongba Gushiji (1994:2), 21 116* 85
 Mu Lichun (trans.)

*suggested length of oral performance, not recorded within text.

A comparison of the number of written characters with the number of read syllables will help show the non-fixed nature of these texts, and thus their inherent performability. For example, one of the shortest extracts in terms of number of written characters (nine), the episode in the *Sacrifice to the wind* ceremony (vol. 80) has one of the lengthier Naxi notations (74 syllables). When compared to the very similar passage found in the *Closing the doorway to the realm of the dead* ceremony (vol. 53), we can see the exact same number of source characters, but 72 syllables in the transcription. The extra two syllables in the *Sacrifice to the wind* version are a repetition of “seeds” in the final sentence:

lɔrl tɛ'yɪl sɪl lyɪ t'vɪl leɪ ts'ɪɪl
 lɛrl qiu sil liu tvɪ lei ciq
 [and he] plucked three seeds [from it]

More tellingly, the same dongba, He Jigui, is credited as reading two different versions of the same story episode. For the lengthier written text (12 characters) he reads ten fewer syllables. The story that these written texts show is essentially the same, but he recalls a different version, with more detail, when asked to read the same passage from a different ritual text (DWYS 1999:lxxx, 42).²¹ While the structure of the passage remains entirely formulaic across all versions, there are slight variations in terms of the amount of extra information expressed. Interestingly then, Mu and Yang’s chosen extract (they do not provide a source for the passage) contains by far the most source characters, and their proposed 116 syllable recitation (they do not offer a transcription) would also be the longest of all the equivalent extracts. Their suggestion that a skilled dongba may lengthen even this is, while plausible, unlikely—especially given their translation, which contains no more or no fewer words than the majority of the other translations.

The shortest oral performance here is the 50 syllable transcription of a twelve-character source passage, and this is notable for several reasons. Mu and Yang assert that an unskilled dongba turns “two volumes into one” (2003:3), and indeed this particular performance is not only brief in that it reflects merely what is written in the dongba script and nothing more; it also contains a number of inaccuracies. The passage opens in recital with the phrase “*muɪ sɪl əɪ muɪ ŋəɪ*,” which translates to “in the morning, at first light,” but the dongba script here clearly tells us that it is in fact the second day, “*soɪɪ ŋiɪ laɪ muɪ sɪɪ*” (“on the morning of the next day”), as can be found in the other versions. There is some variation across the versions here as to which five syllable oral formula for “tomorrow morning” is used, but “second” is unequivocal given that the dongba characters “two” (𑄎) and “day [sun]” (☀) start the passage (see below). The translator renders this phrase as “on the morning of the next day,” seemingly glossing over the discrepancy

²¹ This is presumably because oral poets do not repeat performances “word-for-word” as we would understand it. “Oral textualization is unattainable after its performance and there is no guarantee that a later appearance will manifest itself in the same form” (Honko 2000:14).

introduced by either the dongba or the transcriber.



Fig. 5. Coqsseileel'ee shoots the magpie, *Delivering the souls of the dead* (DWYS 56:180).

We can see an additional discrepancy in this extract. The “three seeds” of the story are referred to in the transcription as “*ɲi-l ly-l*” (DWYS 56:181), “two seeds,” despite the three seeds being clearly represented at the end of the written extract (see Fig. 5 above). If this is not simply an error in transcription—which though possible, would seem unlikely—what we are presented with is strong evidence for the primacy of the role of oral composition. The shorter recited texts, or those with such inaccuracies, are indicative of what Seeger calls an “unskilled” performer who cannot fill in the “gaps” between the notes: “The almost infinite variety of this interplay between and within beats defines more closely the fault so often found with the unskilled performer: that he rendered the notes correctly but ‘left out what should have come between them’” (1958:192).

The dongba reciting the extract in Fig. 5 is not necessarily “reading” the ritual text in a literal, word-for-word sense. Rather than reading out the “second day” or the “three seeds” that anybody can see, literate in dongba or not, he is guided instead by what he knows from his memory. The written passage merely acts as a frame of reference for him to recall the story as he knows it, not too far removed from how Tibetan paper singers might use a white sheet of paper or a page of newsprint during an oral performance, upon which to visualize the story of King Gesar as it is performed. For the Tibetan paper singer, the “text” is used as a talisman; it does not literally encode the story being sung.²²

The use of the written text as a reference tool would appear to lend credence to Mu and Yang’s assertion that a dongba of greater or lesser proficiency can lengthen or shorten the text as it is performed, “turning one volume into two” or vice versa (2003:3). Even further, we have clear evidence that the texts are not fixed, no two written versions are exactly the same (despite the variance in number of characters written down, they are also all hand-written), and no two transcriptions (or “voiced performances”) are the same, either. From the comparison we can see how Naxi folklore tales might be composed in performance. The fact that we can see individual episodes such as this recurring with slight variations within different ritual texts used in a variety of different ceremonies and adapted to fit the different ritual purposes of each, suggests that the entire episode is formulaic; a building block of the larger text. The rituals and ceremonies as a whole are composed of these formulaic building blocks—Jakobson and Bogatyrev’s “skeleton of

²² For more on Tibetan paper singers, see Foley (2002:2-3).

actual traditions” (1971:91).²³ Story episodes, common to many ritual traditions, are pieced together. Many story episodes are like individual elements that are lined up next to each other, and come together with other elements to make new stories. These elements have slight differences depending on the stories in which they appear, and can be made more complex or simplified.

In the *Sacrifice to heaven* ceremony, the Naxi forebears give birth to three sons, the progenitors of the three different races (Tibetan, Han Chinese and Naxi), because they conducted a sacrifice to heaven. In the *Sacrifice to the god of victory* ritual, the same story is recited, only the object of the sacrificial ritual is changed. The same story appears in different rituals, but with alterations depending upon the different purposes of the ritual in question. The largely mnemonic building blocks of the Naxi ritual texts are threefold: We have traditional Parry formulae, expanded into intonation units²⁴, and then formulaic episodes.

We are now breaking down some of the assumptions about writing versus orality. Lord believes that when writing enters the equation, the formulaic method of composition is compromised (Lord 2003:130):

The oral singer thinks in terms of these formulas and formula patterns. He *must* do so in order to compose. But when writing enters, the “must” is eliminated. The formulas and formula patterns can be broken, and a metrical line constructed that is regular and yet free of the old patterns .

I suggest that this thinking is a byproduct of conceptualizing writing along the lines of Saussure, who narrowed his definition of writing to encompass only two forms (2013:30):

- 1)The ideographic system, in which a word is represented by some uniquely distinctive sign which has nothing to do with the sounds involved. This sign represents the entire word as a whole, and hence represents indirectly the idea expressed. The classic example of this system is Chinese.
- 2)The system often called ‘phonetic’, intended to represent the sequence of sounds as they occur in the word. Some phonetic writing systems are syllabic. Others are alphabetic, that is to say based upon the irreducible elements of speech.

Saussure does not account for a system of writing where some words are not represented at all. Even Boltz’s divide along the lines of glottographic and non-glottographic does not fit the Naxi dongba script, which traditionally operates more contextually, outside of the boundaries of glottographic and non-glottographic representation. The tiger’s head, as we have seen, can be read in a multitude of ways— literally, as a tiger, *la*, as a metonym for the phrase “in the beginning,” *a la*, or as a metonym for the whole sentence “in the long and distant past,” which

²³ Lauri Honko would call these “multiforms,” essentially repeated expressions, such as “Episodic elements . . . which vary in length, degree of embellishment and emphasis” (2000:19), while Lord called the longer units “themes.”

²⁴ An example from our own story episode would be the two such units that appear in (almost) every single version: *k’æŋ buʔ siŋ lərŋ lərŋ*, *məʔ buʔ siŋ lərŋ lərŋ* “[Tsozee] aims three times and doesn’t fire, [and] cannot decide whether to fire or not to fire”; two rhythmic units that are very formulaic in structure but not recurrent enough to count as formulas.

itself has different readings. All of these are, in fact, conventional phonetic renderings for the same character in Naxi, and context will let the reader understand which convention is being recalled.

I would argue that the Naxi texts themselves straddle the with/without writing divide. They are at once with and without. In Derridean terms, the “gaps” we have looked at previously do not mark a lost presence, but rather the potential impossibility of presence altogether; a breakdown in the system of signification that words represent. This is the “potentiality” of the texts, the potential of making it longer or shorter, that is lost with direct representation of each syllable. The only way to reclaim these “gaps” in our normal conception of literality is to introduce them through poetry, or in prose, under erasure. In the dongba texts the erasure is taken for granted, as whole sentences might exist between the (metaphorical) lines. The writing is present, but it is not at the mercy of the phonetics like our modern texts. Here is writing, freed from the tyranny of the spoken word.

And now to deal with the myth of fixity. Lord also believed that the oral poet “has no idea of a fixed model text to serve as his guide. He has models enough, but they are not fixed and he has no idea of memorizing them in a fixed form” (2003:22). -Again there is room for nuance here, for a continuum of oral composition and written composition. Oral scholar Peter Friedlander has revealed the lack of fixity in Indian traditions, where the *panca-vani* and the *sarvangi* manuscripts “were never precisely fixed...every manuscript had slightly different contents” (2015:193). This suggests, in his words, a “continuous interplay between oral and written traditions,” wherein songs enter the written tradition from oral beginnings, with written versions showing how the songs were re-arranged, whole stanzas disappearing and verses changing in order (*ibid.*). But even here the oral and written are conceived of as two separate traditions. With the Naxi ritual texts we cannot separate the two. Of course, fixity even in modern literature as we usually understand it is something of a chimera, with editors, publishers, authors and translators revising texts long after their first publication.

In further conceptualizing written versions of oral performances, Lord hypothesized a kind of shorthand notation: “The resulting text might not have the exact niceties of odd forms or phonetic peculiarities that a more accurate method would provide, but a word-for-word text could be gotten in this way” (2003:125). The dongba do in fact employ a form of shorthand, but it is not *a posteriori* transcription—their texts are *composed* first in shorthand notation *prior* to their being performed.²⁵ We have already seen how a word-for-word text is not possible from this shorthand. We can get close, but there will always be variations, as one would expect from oral composition. The Naxi texts are not fixed, but the basic, traditional narrative model is, and this serves as a guide to the oral performer.

The idea of non-fixed manuscript traditions is not exclusive to the dongba, but theirs is the tradition where the exact same written manuscript can be “read” or “recalled” differently

²⁵ The dongba’s “shorthand,” or “reminding” writing, has more in common with the Greek mnemonic writing of shorthand symbols, a kind of “inner stenography” that probably formed the basis of the Tironian notes, than modern shorthand transcription. The Greek method of “inner writing” involved the memorization of every word. Out of this the Medieval tradition of *Ars Notoria* may have been born, a magical art that involved the practitioner gazing “at figures or diagrams curiously marked and called ‘notae’ whilst reciting magical prayers” (Yates 1966:43).

each time, as if it contained different words, because the interplay between oral and written skews more to the oral nature of the ritual. Nevertheless, the characters on the page do indicate a certain fixity of structure. Unlike the written texts primarily studied in oral tradition—where the orality is implicit in its being residual, and the texts are passed down in (more-or-less) fixed written forms—with the Naxi texts there is an explicit interplay between oral and written tradition within a single manuscript.

As Foley observes, all of the misconceptions we have identified are engendered by an insistence on “a Great Divide model, from setting oral versus written” (2002:36). Close reading of the Naxi ritual texts, especially “imperfectly” copied texts, reveals the final untenability of the binary “written versus oral” position. If we return to ritual manuscript MEB 481-4, on page 23 we see the author employ word-for-word dongba writing (mostly phonetic loan characters) to complain that a hand ailment is impeding his writing. He switches from oral composition to fully written composition, then just as swiftly back to oral composition.

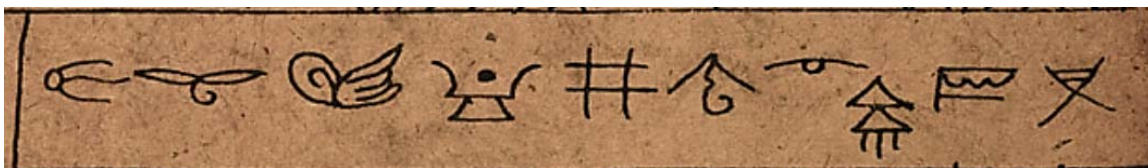


Fig. 6. A dongba writes about his ailing hand (MEB 481-4, p. 23).

The ten characters are read in Naxi pinyin thusly:

əɬ iəɬ, laɬ k'uaɬɬ guɬɬ ʃurɬ məɬ t'aɬ huɬ meɬ
 e ye, laq kuaq gguq shee me tal hee mei!
 Oh / Ah / hand / bad / pain / death / not / OK / particle / particle
 Oh, how my poor hand ails me!

This line presents one character per syllable, in a non-metrical aside that cannot be read in any other way than the above, a clear-cut case of written composition as we normally understand it today. Here there are none of Li's “gaps,” there is an even number of syllables, and no formulas to speak of. This is not a transcription of a performance, not a line meant for recital, but instead a written comment meant for the literate reader.

The text in the passage directly preceding this reads in oral mode, with only three compound characters representing the utterance:



Fig. 7. The dongba wishes good fortune on the household (MEB 481-4, p. 24).

ił dałł tš'urł durł džiłł, zurł šəłł hał ił, k'o yułł heł hułł, džił ił dəł šəł
 “yi ddaq chee ddee jjiq, ssee sherq hal yi, ko yuq hei heeq, jji yi dder sherl”

[May] the master's household (first character), live long in prosperity, hear good sounds (second character), [and may their] waters be full (third character).

A well-trained dongba, according to dongba He Guowei who participated in the translation of this manuscript, would add the phrase *gvł beł hoł* “*ggv bbei hol*,” meaning “good wishes” (at the end), and perhaps *leł nułł leł ołł*, *leł hułł leł tšəłł* “*lei neeq lei oq, lei heeq lei zhaiq*” (have happiness and plenty) at the beginning, none of which are present in the written text.

The dongba writes his word-for-word composition one character after the other, left to right, which differs from the somewhat more aesthetically balanced graphic composition of the passages in oral mode, where characters are often placed atop one another to fill in space. From the same page:



Fig. 8. An example of vertical composition. MEB 481-4 (24).

The example in Fig. 6 is of note for two reasons: while we know there are texts written in the dongba script that show word-for-word phonetic representation, with one character per syllable, these are mostly either secular texts such as land contracts, or ritual texts written either in transcriptions of Tibetan chants, or in the syllabic Geba²⁶ script. This text, dated to the late Qing dynasty, thus marks an early usage of complete phonetic representation within a dongba ritual text. Secondly, this is one of the only examples (that I have come across) in which the author breaks from epic, oral composition associated with the ritual texts to fully written, modern composition, like a jazz musician switching to prescriptive notation.

Such a passage may be seen as a flaw in the text, in that it interrupts the reciter's flow (and the narrative of the story). The texts chosen for translation tend to be as “complete” as possible, and a text such as this would not be found in any official Chinese translated volume, such as the *Collection*. Most importantly, this text constitute solid proof that there is middle ground between the oral and written, that even if we put the pen in Homer's hand, he can still be an oral poet. The dongba have bamboo pens, they have their own process of paper production, and they can write their own script with these tools, and yet, as has been shown, they are still oral poets.

Lord asked a question that I believe is worth recalling in full (2003:129):

²⁶ A syllabic script unique to the Naxi language that borrows glyphs from the Yi script, as well as Chinese and dongba characters. Geba manuscripts are always phonetically “complete.”

It is worthy of emphasis that the question we have asked ourselves is whether there can be such a thing as a transitional text; not a period of transition between oral and written style, or between illiteracy and literacy, but a text, product of the creative brain of a single individual. When this emphasis is clear, it becomes possible to turn the question into whether there can be a single individual who in composing an epic would think now in one way and now in another, or, perhaps, in a manner that is a combination of two techniques.

Not only can we show the existence of a “transitional” text, between oral and written style, but we can see that the dongba ritualists are capable of combining both techniques. They can think in one way and in the other, even as they compose their texts, further blurring the line between written and oral, and perhaps suggesting that writing as we know it did not emerge “fully formed” in the head of the first literate author.

This is a vivid example of the intersection between writing as a metonymic, mnemonic aid, and writing as a substitute for memory. The development of the dongba script can be said to have progressed from oral mnemonic texts to full written composition,²⁷ but the ritual texts preserve perhaps a transitional state. The missing link is the oral composer that can be shown to *write* both kinds of text: written and oral compositions, and that is what I believe the dongba are: oral composers writing down a literary composition that is still oral in nature, and able to segue into both forms at will. In the dongba ritual texts, the oral formulas are still present in both the text as it is written, *and* the text as it is performed. The dongba can draw from the wellspring of both oral and written tradition in the composition of their texts, and in all the guises of their performance. Bakker has suggested that “writing in the Greek archaic period must have been so different from our notion of writing, so “oral”, in fact, that the simple dichotomy between orality and literacy breaks down” (1999:36). Could Naxi dongba texts offer us a glimpse of what this early writing may have been, a form akin to the ancient mnemonic shorthand, and how it might have preserved its orality in the face of the written word? It is a final irony that the Han Chinese translations that have supplanted the Naxi originals, creating standard “fixed texts,” may be responsible for preserving the semi-oral nature of the original Naxi literature as it exists in performance even today.

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²⁷ See for example He (2007), which contains a variety of examples of modernized dongba texts, with one written character per read syllable.

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