sciendo

Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics 17 (1): 83–100
DOI: 10.2478/jef-2023-0007

SEEKING AN 'IDEAL PLACE' IN A NUOSU ORIGIN EPIC

MARK BENDER
Professor of Chinese Literature and Folklore
Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures
The Ohio State University, USA
e-mail: bender.4@osu.edu

ABSTRACT
The *Book of Origins* (*hnewo tepyy*) is a major ritual text of the Nuosu, a subgroup of the official Yi (Yizu) ethnic group of southwest China. The narrative, existing in both written and oral variants, is part of a living tradition, especially among priests (*bimo*) and folk singers, in the Liangshan Yi autonomous region in Sichuan province and nearby Yunnan province. The epic narrates the creation of the sky, earth, and living creatures through the frame of genealogies. After an age of scorching heat, life is re-seeded on earth and a descendant of the snow tribes of flora and fauna finds a bride. Many generations later this union results in the marriage between an earthling and the Sky God's daughter. The tropes of genealogy and migration intertwine in the storyworld as clans descended from the couple seek out an "ideal place" to settle and prosper in the local environment in a pattern that resonates with other epics from the southwest and the Southeast Asian Massif.

KEYWORDS: Nuosu • genealogy • migration • epic • Tibeto-Burman

INTRODUCTION

The *Tlou Rachaanad* is an origin epic of the Uipo (Khoibu), a small Tibeto-Burman speaking group in Manipur, North East India (Khaling 2018: 25). In a poetic format, the narrative recounts the activities of humans on the newly created land. The title literally means "spoken words" used to "teach and advise" (ibid.: 15). The translation of the epic, recited by Iaarung Ym. (Yama) Syeltrimran Saka, was published in 2018 in cooperation with the University of Tartu (ibid.). Though this volume was my first encounter with Uipo folk literature, certain features of the epic resonated with other origin epics from the Southeast Asian Massif, especially those of southwest China (Bender 2012: 231–235).[1] In particular, the Uipo story unfolds as a migration, in ways similar to the dispersals of humanity in an epic called the *Book of Origins*, which is a key narrative featuring in rituals and performance events of the Nuosu subgroup of the Yi ethnic group, southwest China, discussed herein.[2] The Nuosu narrative is part of a tradition of folk narrative transmitted by priests (*bimo*)[3] who base their oral recitations on texts written in the ancient Yi writing system and by folk singers who rely on oral traditional

ISSN 1736-6518 (print), ISSN 2228-0987 (online)

means. The epic (or more often, parts of the epic) is performed at rituals and lifecycle events within Yi communities in southern Sichuan province (especially in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture) and in nearby Yunnan province. The epic narrates the creation of the sky, earth, and living creatures through the frame of genealogies. After an age of scorching heat, life is re-seeded on earth and a descendant of the snow tribes of flora and fauna finds a bride. Many generations later this union results in the marriage between an earthling and the Sky God's daughter. The tropes of genealogy and migration intertwine in the storyworld as clans descended from the couple set out to find an ideal place to settle and prosper in the local environment (Bender et al. 2019: LXIV–XCIV).

In the Uipo epic, after emerging from a hole in the ground (which is an alternative motif to origins in the sky recounted in versions of the *Book of Origins*) the people confront many trials and tribulations on a series of migrations across the landscape. As the narrative proceeds, the migrants move from place to place in the mountain fastnesses, facing wild predators, resource competition with other peoples, the trauma of separation from kin, food deprivation, floods, oppressive heat, and deadly endemic conditions, in a series of disappointments as they seek an ideal place to settle and prosper (Blackburn 2008: 110–116; Khaling 2018: 29–35). At times they hold parleys and head counts and assign names to places and geographical features they encounter, often marked in the epic by an unusual event, sometimes a death. The act of ascending a high place and viewing what is below is mentioned at least once – a motif found repeatedly, as described below, in the *Book of Origins* – as well as the motif of the dismemberment of an ancestor or ancestral deity. Along the way, the storyworld is garlanded with references to many sorts of local plants, animals, insects (especially bees), and associated lore. They finally find a place where:

> Thereat Uipo Bawndaam,
> Began to settle,
> Began to prosper,
> To begin livelihood thereat,
> To beget prosperity thereat. (Khaling 2018: 123)

However, they soon discover the place is lacking water, so they follow the tracks of sambar and boar, and by the humming of a bee, find a hidden water source, which they name and dig into a pool, which allows the righteous "mannerly" young people to make a "place" in which to dwell and prosper over many generations (ibid.: 127):

> Be [it] known as Yawnpuiyui,
> Its name was given,
> Its name was pronounced,
> When the river pool was dug,
> When the water pond was dug,
> It was dug without prearranged wine,
> It was dug without prearranged food,
> Indeed mannerly lasses,
> Indeed mannerly lads,
> Gathered the food together,
> Gathered the drinks together.

In this passage from the Uipo origin epic, the intersection of origins, genealogy, criteria for a good life, and knowing descriptions of the local environment is set within an "eco-genealogy", a term which I define as origin narratives told in a genealogical format linked directly to webs of lifeforms in a local environment, often including the search for an ideal place to settle and prosper.

As will be more fully illustrated in the discussion of the Nuosu *Book of Origins* below, the web of eco-genealogy entails "specific and intimate ways of linking the origins of particular creatures, including humans" to environmental niches of varying type and scale (Bender et al. 2019: LXXX). Such imagery found in many epics from diverse southwest China and the Southeast Asian Massif, might echo recognisable features of the physical environment and feature multiple species of the local "pluriverse" described in inclusive "cosmographic" detail reflecting local environmental knowledge, folkways, and ideas about society (Adamson 2014: 188; Bender 2016: 93–95; Bender et al. 2019: XXIV). Imagery of local environments embedded in a particular narrative combine to form a mental canvas on which the genealogies of lifeforms that dwell there unfold, the specific niches – within watersheds and landforms – suggested by the metonymic function of key images which for those conversant in the tradition open doors of understanding and knowledge beyond the words of the text (Foley 1995: 1–2). Some imagery of a storyworld, rich in associations, may correlate to "real world" places in the imaginations of tradition-bearers and their audiences (Herman 2009: 71–73; Bender 2011: 274–276; Garrard 2012: 117). Content often insinuates and transmits intimate local knowledge of the natural and human-altered environments which migrating humans traverse and ultimately settle. Such content may include information about kinship relations, social values, and the practical knowledge needed to survive and prosper. This information can also be descriptions and references to material culture (dwellings, tools, costume, etc.) and related technological practices, ritual behavior, and artistic performances (stories, songs, folk sayings, dance, music, etc.) framed within the narratives. The epics are often replete with imagery and descriptive language that continuously evoke a "sense of place" transforming from "space" as yet un-altered by humans (Tuan 1977; Buell 2006: 62–70). Such imagery often includes folk taxonomies of local flora and fauna (often in the form of catalogues), as well as brief sketches of the wildly varying terrain. The accompanying triangle (Figure 1) illustrates the intersections between narrative, genealogy, migration, and the search for an ideal place in epics such as the *Tlou Rachaanad* and the Nuosu *Book of Origins*.

Figure 1. Eco-genealogy triangle: genealogy, migration, ideal place.

In the following sections I will briefly introduce the Nuosu people and some basics about the *Book of Origins*, then shift to a discussion of its eco-genealogical format and examples of "niche selection" in the search for an ideal place that are prominent in the latter sections of the epic, revisiting ideas presented in the Introduction to the recent English translation (Bender et al. 2019). The translation is based on a version of a ritualist's text inscribed by the Nuosu tradition-bearer Jjivot Zopqu of Xide County in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province. In his community, Jjivot is regarded as a wise man or *ndeggu*, who offers advice on local customary protocol and family and clan disputes. Once an active folk singer, he hand-copied an ancient scroll possessed by an elder named Jjimgu Axrryr, using it as a performance promptbook. In concert with his nephew, Jjivot Yyzu, Jjivot eventually transcribed the traditional graphs of the scroll into a manuscript written in the script of the Standard Northern Yi Syllabary. Jjivot has attested that the standard script version follows the received version (now lost), although some graphs were regularised into the standard script (Bender et al. 2019: LXXXVIII).

THE NUOSU, WRITING AND ORALITY, AND GENEALOGY

The approximately 9 million Yi, one of China's 55 official ethnic minority groups, are comprised of over 80 subgroups of upland agriculturalists in Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Guangxi; they speak Tibeto-Burman dialects or languages (Lin 1961; Bender et al. 2019: XXVII–XXVIII). The largest subgroup, the Nuosu, number about 2.3 million and live mainly in southern Sichuan province and the border areas of Yunnan. The Nuosu speak a cluster of dialects called either Nuosu (Noso) or Northern Yi (Bradley 2009: 170–172; Harrell 2001: 84–85).

The origins of the *Book of Origins* are still in question, though hints from ancient Yi writing, oral tradition, and historical and archeological evidence suggest the textual hearth is the area that includes northeast Yunnan, the western quadrant of present-day Guizhou and parts of Liangshan Prefecture in southern Sichuan (Harrell et al. 2000: 128). The epic exists in many written versions handed down by generations of *bimo* priests and other tradition-bearers (Bamo A. 2001: 118–119; Bamo 2003; Feng 1986; Ayu et al. 2013). These ritual specialists perform portions of the epic during rituals, sometimes cued by written scripts and sometimes recited from memory. At certain lifecycle events, particularly weddings and funerals, folk singers extemporise passages of the poem, based on oral or written versions with which they are familiar. Thus, the epic is not solely a text of ritualists[4] but is shared among differing transmitters whose versions comprise the epic in all its written, orally dynamic, and imagined forms. Along with the written texts, oral performances, and the singers' mental templates, themes and motifs in the epic are found in many other aspects of Yi verbal art, including folktales, verbal dueling formats, shorter origin chants, and proverbs. (Bamo Q. 2001: 456–458)

The heritage of Yi written literature, much or most of it inscribed to be performed orally, is written in several local orthographies, as there was never a universal script among the people now known as Yi. Versions of the *Book of Origins* are written in scripts traditionally found among Northern Yi speakers, and like other Yi written texts, are cast as poetry (Bamo 2000). The body of Yi written literature (again, with the relation

to oral performance) includes rituals for dealing with a vast number of harmful ghosts, and reverencing various supernatural beings, including dragons, mountain gods, other local gods, and departed ancestors. There is a complex body of funeral chants, including 'pointing the way' lyrics that direct souls to the land of the ancestors, and chants to retrieve souls that have left a person's body (often a symptom of illness). Other texts are the *Book of Teachings* (or *Book of Conduct*), which is a reservoir of templates on proper conduct, historical accounts (that include an ancient flood story and warfare), the subjects of astronomy, divination, folk medicine, lyric poetry, and stories, songs, and narrative poems. Certain texts indicate a use of writing outside the sphere of ritual, and include rhetorical treatises on poetics, philosophy, and literary criticism (Feng et al. 2006; Ayu et al. 2013). Of great importance down to today are the written clan genealogies, which share content with shorter origin stories that are part of every ritual, as well as folk tales, and parallel oral genealogies recited between unfamiliar Nuosu in everyday contexts (Bender et al. 2019: LV–LVI).

The story of a "lost written text" (explaining the lack of a writing system) is common among many upland ethnic groups in the Southeast Asian Massif (for example, Blackburn 2008: 116–117). James Scott (2009: 24) has observed that, "Given the considerable advantages in plasticity of oral over written histories and genealogies, it is at least conceivable to see the loss of literary and of written texts as a more or less deliberate adaptation to statelessness." In a discussion of the possible advantages of orality and the prevalence of genealogical recitation by regional ritual specialists, he notes (discussing the Tibeto-Burman speaking Akha in particular) the presence of such "teachers and reciters" who have "preserved quite elaborate recitations of long genealogies" that include major historical events and examples of customary law, yet are fluid enough to incorporate newer material than could a set written text (ibid.: 231).

Scholars are still contemplating how the tradition of writing among the contemporary Nuosu, structured as it often is on genealogies, is linked to Yi script records associated with former kingdoms such as Cuan (338–737), Nanzhao (738–902), Dali (902–1253), and smaller kingdoms in the southwest (Wu 2001: 32–33; Herman 2007: 28). The situation of the *Book of Origins*, with its oral and written versions (of which there is no standard), illustrates a tradition in which oral-connected written texts delivered orally by ritualists share performative space with oral recitations by folk singers, both of whom may perform at major life cycle events such as funerals and weddings (Bender et al. 2019: LVI–LIX). A feature of some oral performances by Nuosu folk singers involves an antiphonal dimension, in which opposing singers test each other on knowledge of the epic. Such a delivery format, involving checking of veracity of themes and details, may reinforce epic content and continuity in acts of transmission in ways that shadow the process of *bimo* priests hand-copying written passages of the narrative (which can serve as promptbooks or numinous props in oral recitations). The oral performances are unfixed in terms of selection and ordering of episodes, inclusion or deletion of passages, and phrasing.

Although more research is needed on Nuosu traditions of copying, written texts in the folk context may be seen as co-creations by many hands over time, subject to alteration in the act of scribal copying (Ready 2015: 58; Bender 2019: 72–75). Recognition of traditional Yi literature is growing in China, in part due to ethnic tourism and government funding of "intangible cultural heritage" translation projects, in which a

growing number of Yi epics and related folk literature is being published in translation (Chinese, English, Korean, Japanese, etc.) within and outside China, and appearing online (Bender 2019: 87).

The genealogical picture of the Nuosu is complicated and in the past involved interethnic recruiting of population into the lower ranks of society, a feature with implications on social interactions today (Swancutt and Jiarimuji 2018: 133–134). This complexity is to some degree reflected in the version of *Book of Origins* our team translated. For centuries prior to the 1950s, the Yi in Liangshan had a stratified social system, in which the population was divided into four castes, about which was a small but powerful class of ruling elites called *nyzmo*, who were appointees of the imperial government in the so-called *tusi* system employed to enact control over the southwestern regions of China in the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties (Harrell 2001: 81–87; Wu 2001: 21–25; Whitaker 2008). The *nyzmo* were drawn from the upper-caste *nuoho*, who were ranked above a larger caste of serfs, consisting of a caste called *quho*, a still low caste called *mgaji*, and a caste of enslaved people called *gaxy*.[5] This latter caste was comprised partially of people captured from other local ethnic groups, primarily Han people in outposts in the Liangshan area or nearby settlements (Bender et al. 2019: XXIX–XXX).

The trope of genealogies structures the entire *Book of Origins,* consisting of patterned segments of genealogy repeated throughout the text. The version of the *Book of Origins* our team translated (Bender et al. 2019) begins with two origin narratives that relate the genealogies of the sky and earth, the first of many origin accounts in the text. The latter 15 sections narrate migration accounts consisting largely of lists recounting the patrilineal genealogy of groups large and small and their movements through the landscape, which sometimes include encounters highlighting the exclusive genealogies of the upper-classes that feature in the storyworld of the epic. In the portions of the epic leading to these migrations, the term *nzymo* or *nzy* appears in Part 12, the "Genealogy of Shyly Wote", which relates the marriage of Shyly Wote, the progenitor of the humans who re-populate the earth after the era of extreme heat that destroyed an earlier period of life on earth. As elaborated below, generations later, a descendant of Shyly weds the daughter of the Sky God, resulting in offspring who divide into different ethnic groups and clans and migrate across the varied landscapes of the southwest, each group searching for an ideal place to settle. The most elaborate of these migrations is depicted in Part 23, entitled "Genealogy of the Nyz Clan". Initially the group is referred to as Wuwu Gizy, though late in the section the term *nzy* is introduced, making it unclear if this *nzy* is an elite ruler class affiliation or an alternative clan name (Ma 2001: 88).

The structural principle of genealogy linked to migration is echoed in the genealogies of present-day clans, which remain of great interest to contemporary Nuosu. Claims by some *bimo* and tradition-bearers assert that certain clans have records tracing back 70 generations. These deep genealogies, whether fictional or real, reflect the intricate webs of family relations that still factor greatly in Nuosu life (Karlach 2023). Whether any of the ancient genealogies (as well as accounts of migrations, events, and persons) in the narrative have a basis in reality, they may function as a sort of social capital by creating and maintaining social and familial legitimacy in situations relevant today (Bourdieu 1986: 21; Swancutt 2012: S103–S104). For instance, in major social situations such as weddings and funerals clan affiliations must be clarified, as with more

everyday interactions among unfamiliar Nuosu. Demonstrating an investment in the power of genealogy, representatives of a few clans have funded the publishing of their genealogies, including the bilingual edition listing male family names that reach back many generations illustrated here (see Photo 1). Standard Northern Yi script (created in the 1970s, based on earlier vernacular scripts) is in the left column, while standard Chinese is in the right. The entire 364-page volume is comprised of males within families, sometimes with a place name where they settled.

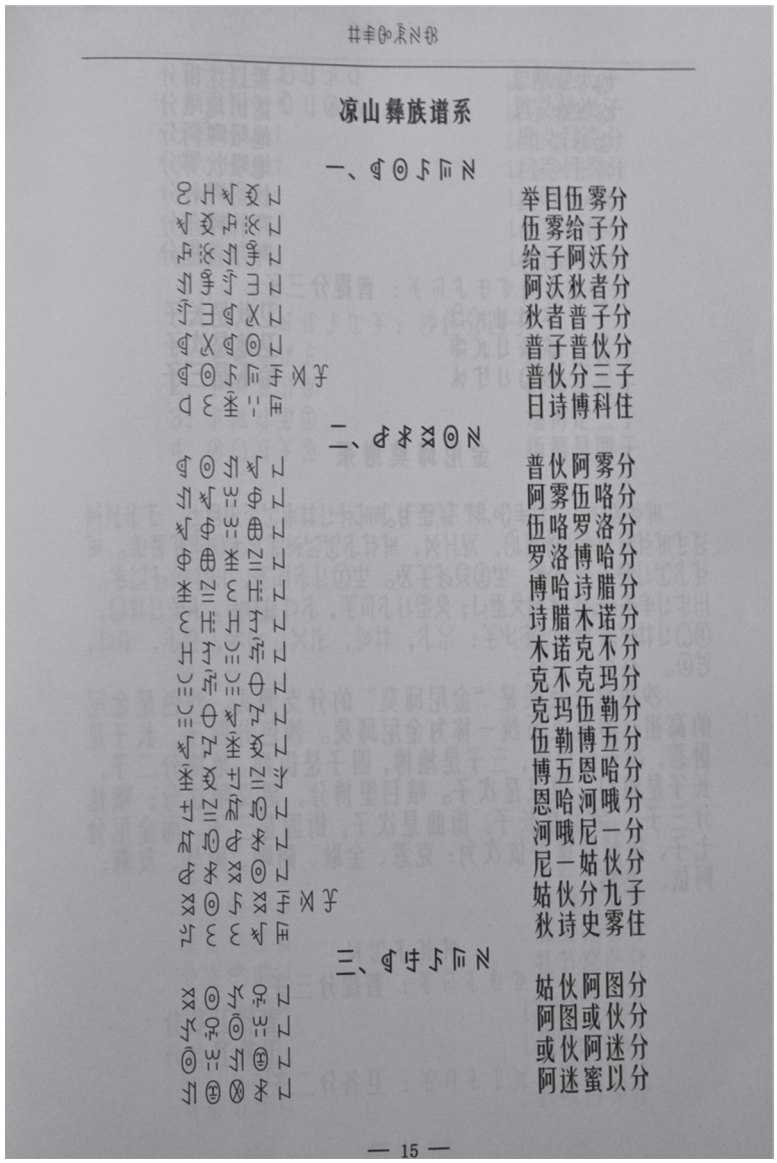

Photo 1. Sample page from the bilingual Genealogy of Jini Qiumo Clan of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan (Qiu and Qomox 2015).

EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE MIGRATIONS

As noted, Part 12 of the epic recounts an era in which life was destroyed by overheating from excess suns and moons and resultant fire. This new era, which later ushers in a torrential flood that again wipes out many living beings, begins with the life force *ge* falling from the sky, followed by red snow. Out of this primordial mix evolves what are variously understood as the 12 sons of snow[6] (sometimes understood as 'offspring' or 'tribes'), six of which are representative plants and six representative animals of the storyworld of the epic, which closely parallels that of the natural environment of the region (Bender et al. 2019: LXXI). Notably, humans are one of the six animals, alongside frogs, snakes, bird, bears, and monkeys. A descendant of these primal humans is the "son of snow" Shyly Wote, who was born before the institution of marriage was established. Upon reaching adulthood, Shyly Wote sets off in search of a father, but ultimately finds a wife, a depiction which some Chinese scholars have identified as an example of the shift from matriarchal to patriarchal society in the Marxist model of cultural evolution. In his quest, Shyly Wote meets the daughter of an upper-cast person, who tests him with riddles that are only answered with the help of his wise younger sister. Rejecting the marriage prospect, Shyly Wote continues his quest until he finds a suitable match, and the newlyweds soon become progenitors of many generations of descendants. Certain customs described in the text still serve as social templates today, especially the protocol of weddings.

Several generations pass and three brothers with the clan affiliation of Jjumu are born. They set about reclaiming farmland from the wilds until one day an old man approaches them clad in black who is a god in disguise sent by Ngeti Gunzy, the Sky God, to test the moral fiber of the earthlings. Defusing a potentially violent situation, the youngest, called Vuvu, prevails over his hot-headed, violent elder brothers and queries the stranger. The stranger relates that the Sky God is enraged over the deadly outcome of a confrontation between a sky being and an earthling and is sending a great flood in revenge.

The three brothers are then instructed to prepare wooden "beds" in which to weather the torrential onslaught. Mythologist Li Zixian (1984: 55–57) has described a range of such "flood-avoiding" vehicles in the mythology of the southwest, of which calabashes are the most common escape vehicle. But in this epic the vehicle of escape seems to be the old-fashioned casement style wooden beds once common in parts of China, including some upper-class Yi homes, though the exact structure is unclear. While Vuvu's elder brothers are told to prepare vehicles laden with heavy iron tools (which will sink to the bottom of the floodwaters), Vuvu's vehicle is filled with various types of grain. In the end, the virtuous Jjumu Vuvu survives the flood, along with a rat, snake, frog, crow, ring-necked pheasant, and other small animals which he saves. Since he is the only remaining human on earth, Vuvu, with the aid of the wise Frog King, finds a bride in the sky. However, when the Sky God discovers that his youngest daughter has taken horses and the seeds of Nuosu staple crops, he curses her to live a spartan life in the uplands with her earthling husband and breaks off the connected iron and bronze strands that link sky and earth.

On earth, the celestial and earthling couple produce three mute children, and send several missions of small animals and birds to the sky to find out the secret of making

the children speak. After several failures, a small bird succeeds in overhearing a conversation between the Sky God and his wife and flies back to the earth with the secret. Climbing the highest peak, the couple then boil pieces of bamboo, the bursting sounds startling the children to speak. Thus are voiced the major languages of the region, as spoken by the Nuosu, *Hxiemga* (presumed to be Han), and *Ozzu* (the Nuosu name for local peoples classified today as Tibetan) (Bender et al. 2019: LXXII–LXXIII).

This ethno-genesis, which distinguishes peoples by language and dwelling place in the local environment, is understood in vertical terms of lowlands to highlands. Specific realms such as fertile river bottoms, highland pastures, and upland fields where rice cannot be raised are differentiated in an eco-genealogical format common to many in epics from the Southeast Asian Massif region (Proschan 2001: 1001–1007; Mandal 2009). Migration stories through landscapes similar to those in the *Book of Origins* are often parts of these folk narratives, including those of the Miao/Hmong, Dong, Yao, Wa, Qiang, Hani, Jingpo, etc., in the border areas of southwest China, the Apatani, and other peoples of the Subansiri river system of Arunachal Pradesh, the Nagas of Nagaland, and some other ethnic groups in North East India (Wu and Tao 1983; Van 1993; Blackburn 2010: 59–60; van Driem 2012: 188). Although set within past storyworlds, some of the migration accounts – which unfold as both genealogies and records of search and settlement in a view more genealogical than historical – could be linked to real-life experiences of the forebears of contemporary peoples, especially in the details of searching for suitable places to settle and criteria that instigate actual settlement. The scale of migrations reported in the epics is, however, difficult to assess, as contemporary data suggests that what is counted as migration in folk accounts of the eastern Himalayan regions varies in scale from very short migration events to much longer ones, involving complex reasons and processes of unfolding (Huber 2012: 88–97). Among the reasons for migrating are depletion of local resources, overpopulation, and warfare. In some areas these factors can imply expansion of greater regional powers, notably Chinese (Scott 2009: 7–9, 23). The movements across the landscape seem to be facilitated by cultural practices, indigenous knowledge, and suitable technology that allows competent adaptation to the environments chosen for dwelling (Garrard 2012: 117; Bender et al. 2019: LXXXIX).

Stimulated to leave their locale, the migrants in the *Book of Origins* set out seeking a more amicable, or even "ideal", place to settle and prosper. The searches proceed across the landscapes of the post-Flood world, and typically lack the narrative embellishment of certain earlier sections of the epic, albeit the epic in general is skeletal.

THE SEARCH FOR AN IDEAL PLACE

In the Introduction to the English version a section is devoted to making sense of the skeletal narrative passages that recount the migrations through the landscape within the frame of genealogy (Bender et al. 2019: LXXXVIII–XCIV). The genealogies appear as long series of "begats" in which names of clans and male forbears and descendants are listed in the contexts of genealogical relationships, and places within the landscape that mark the migration routes associated with clan dispersal and settlement. The following paragraphs revisit the search for an ideal place, providing additional discussion on

the details and dynamics of the search that will allow more insight into the confluence themes relating to the migrations in the epic and contribute to understanding similar content in other regional folk narrative traditions.

A short example of the basic genealogical format of begats in which the migration narratives unfold is illustrated by a passage from Part 19, "Nuosu Lineages" which includes names of people and places. The passage also notes an unusual tree, a material marker of place, though any deeper meaning traditional meaning is still obscure. The Nuosu romanisation is included here as an example of the texture of the original:

> Vuvu Gizy was a Nuosu (whose generation was)
> followed by three Gizy sons,
> followed by the generation of Gizy Shyma,
> followed by the generation of Shyma Shysi,
> who settled at Nzyolurnie.
> On Nzyolurnie Mountain,
> a white colored tree grew,
> putting forth white leaves,
> flowers blooming everywhere,
> as if birthed by a goddess. (Bender et al. 2019: 69)[7]

The search for an ideal place to settle and prosper explicitly or implicitly underlies the narrative of the migration sections (Wu 2001: 38–40). The epic is embedded with "niche criteria" that give insight into what is desirable and what is undesirable in a permanent dwelling place (Bender et al. 2019: XCIII). The most desirable is a place that offers optimal conditions for agriculture and raising livestock, including water, suitable fields, grazing grounds, and salt, as well as providing ample natural resources for crafting clothing, tools, and conducting rituals (which require certain types of flora). The place should have suitable weather, be defensible against enemies, and overall be situated for developing a good standard of living and strong population. Undesirable criteria are related to geographic and climatic conditions, improper relations between the castes, cultural or linguistic mixing and dissonance, unnatural behaviour of animals (both wild and domestic), the presence of harmful supernatural beings, and places contaminated by abnormal deaths.

Although nearly all the migration accounts in the epic make some mention of searching for a suitable place or suitable conditions for settlement, the ideal criteria for settling are most detailed in Part 23, the "Genealogy of Nzy Clan". As the various Nzy families fan out through the landscape in search of ideal places to settle, they sometimes leave behind a few families; in other cases, it seems the entire group moves on. As the trek unfolds, certain criteria for suitability emerge, giving us explicit insight into what sort of "ideal niche" the migrants were searching for and what sorts of place some of them accepted. The migrants first encounter a poor place, evidenced by the broken spoons and an undesirable sort of cattle, which is rejected. Next is a place with burning sun in the day and frigid temperatures at night. They then arrive at a place where peoples called Ni and Shuo mix speech and customs in uncomfortable ways. Next is a place where the environmental conditions bode poorly for agriculture or herding and the locals seem impoverished:

They stood at the place Leggeorro,
and looked at the place Mutedoli.
At Mutedoli,
the trees and shrubs were very few,
but wild grass grew everywhere;
the children and grandchildren looked very poor.
It was not a suitable place to settle down;
And the Nzy were not willing to migrate there to live. (Bender et al. 2019: XCIII, 77)

Lauri Honko (1998: 100) has identified repeated poetic units of diverse lengths termed "multiforms", that help structure the epic content. In Part 23 of the *Book of Origins*, a common multiform consists of four moves that are utilised 25 times within Section 23, as follows: 1) arrival at a vantage point; 2) surveying a place within sight; 3) assessment; 4) decision (Bender et al. 2019: XCI). In the initial move, the group arrives at a vantage point above a new place and then survey it, eliciting an evaluation regarding its suitability or unsuitability. Then there is discussion, sometimes only implied. In the final move, the migrants decide whether to settle all or part of the group.

Some of the migrants inevitably move on and ascend the next promontory overlooking a new place and, following the pattern, view and assess what is below. In this undulating movement across the landscape, negative assessments are based on what is perceived as improper, or at least unfavourable. These include a place of mixed peoples (in particular peoples today called Han and Yi), a place of rank grasses and few trees, frozen landscapes where "the fir trees wore silver garments,/from the cypress trees dangled little bells", water contaminated by the death of a son, a place of ethnic strife where the winds blew fiercely and "ghosts gathered, carrying cut-off heads in hand", an inhospitable place where bowls were enough but spoons too few, and a horrible area of long, poisonous grass (Bender et al. 2019: 77–78). At one place many of the niche criteria are met, but caste status is a factor:

At Rawalomo,
sheep could be herded above,
bulls could fight below,
grains could be planted in the middle.
In later times, the trend was that
poor, cold Black Nuosu lived in this place;
and here Black Nuosu rose in prestige.
The Nzy wanted to live there,
but the prestige of the Nzy would be lowered. (Ibid.: 79)

Moving on, the migrants encounter a place where to get a wife one had to trade grain, in another place natural resource needs were not met (too many pines and not enough rocks for millstones and no proper wood for plough shafts), in another "sacred branches for soul-calling rites" were not to be found (ibid.: 79). Farther along in the trek the Nzy dismiss a place of weird animals where "frogs roared like tigers", and then seem to settle for a while at a place called Yyshybbaka (ibid.: 80). But calamity soon arises when three sons of the Puho family fight about "things they shouldn't" (ibid.: 91), including amounts of clothing and land they owned. The biggest clash concerns in which home their mother will live; the eldest claiming his rank, the middle son just wanting

her in his home, and the youngest claiming the right since her soul-basket (a key part of Nuosu ritual life and an abode of the spirit of the dead during the lengthy funeral process) was presently hung in his home. The ensuing drama illustrates the dangers of sibling jealousy and reifies certain customs surrounding kinship and soul-basket protocols, the text still serving as a template of behaviour today.

In an attempt to resolve their differences the sons smash their mother to death with stones, and separate the corpse into three parts, echoing an earlier scene in Part 11 in which a spider is broken into three parts by the angry Sky God, in passages also related to rituals and curing (ibid.: 33–34). In Part 23, as a way to resolve the conflict, the youngest son suggests they hold a ceremony to worship the ancestors, which results in guidance offered by wise *bimo*, who conduct rituals involving living beings (or their parts) linked to the local ecology, including water deer, eagles, trees (fir, cypress, pine), bamboo, small birds, a "mouse-like" creature, and domestic sheep and chickens (ibid.: 80–81).

Leaving Yyshybbaka behind, we are told the third of the Puho sons and his family continue (it is unclear who else stayed or left), and continuing the pattern of arrival and assessment, encounter more unfavourable spaces, including another frigid zone in the Imuhxomu flatlands, where weather conditions are again a deciding factor, the vivid imagery detailing the effects of heavy frost and snow:

> the bamboos were hung with bells,
> the grass blades were thick as door bolts;
> axes were used to clear snow,
> water was carried in salt mortars.
> It was not a suitable place for the Nzy to settle;
> They were unwilling to migrate there to live. (Ibid.: 81)

After several more unsuitable stops, which are passed up because of improper mixing of castes, they encounter more places with strange animal behaviour as follows:

> When arriving at Ssuwalurqo,
> the winds were very fierce,
> and arriving at Mucheolo,
> heaven and earth were dark,
> and wolves snapped at the horse riders.
> In the future,
> snakes would swallow snakes here,
> pigs and chickens would lead sheep,
> weird snakes would bite tigers,
> and the tigers would hide behind the pigs;
> the tigers wouldn't bite the pigs,
> but the pigs would harm the tigers,
> and the tigers would run into the forests.
> There was but one lucky day a year;
> so they were unwilling to migrate there to live. (Ibid.: 82–83)

The above passage is interesting for its catalogue of creatures and their inverse behaviour, especially of tigers, which seldom appear in the epic, in comparison to Yi creation

epics from Yunnan, such as *Meige*, in which a tiger's body parts become features of the landscape and heavenly bodies (Yunnan 1959: 10–11). The interplay between the domestic and wild is a common thread in the *Book of Origins* and might reflect a kind of "eco-anxiety" over differences between settled and unsettled environments (that is, the wild vs. domestic), as well in this instance a stress on normative behaviour and proper martial valour (Bender 2011: 270–272; Panu 2020: 2).

> Continuing, they arrive at Vowahxuoggur, where:
> a white yak was led as an offering,
> and the gallbladder was divided into four parts:
> One part was offered to the misty clouds,
> so mists would waft through the blue sky;
> one part was offered to the rains,
> so the rains would fall to earth;
> one part was offered to the sun,
> so the sun would rise to whiten everything;
> one part was offered to the moon,
> so the moon would rise and shine brightly;
> so they were unwilling to migrate and live there. (Bender et al. 2019: 82)

Once the ritual offering – in this unusually lyrical passage – was made to cross what must have been considered a locale with unfavourable weather conditions within an unfamiliar ecological niche, as yaks are raised in only in a few parts of the western Liangshan area today. Moving on, the migrants encounter a place evincing martial might with images of "four sorts of magic helmets and armour" and where "steel swords and armour glimmered", causing them to move on again (ibid.: 83). They encounter another weird place where "dogs were born with four eyes,/wild deer captured tigers to eat,/ and muntjacs came to catch pigs", images that like previous ones could be taken at face value, or possibly mask some sort of clash with local human populations or fears of the supernatural (ibid.).

Finally, the surviving Nzy arrive at what they ultimately deem as a "suitable place", though by this time their "horse halter armour broke" and "the metal tips of their canes were smooth" from many years of travel and travail (ibid.). They have arrived at Zzyzzypuvu, a name that circulates throughout Nuosu lore as the homesite of the ancient, ancestral Six Tribes (located on the borders of northeast Yunnan and western Guizhou) that ritually split up and went their ways across the encompassing landscape (Bamo 1994: 63–74). The name is also associated with the place where the souls of proper Nousu return after the death of the body, guided across the landscape by chants of *bimo* priests. Here the name at very least indicates a special, ideal place, as evidenced by a series of passages extolling its suitability. One passage notes the suitable places for raising livestock and crops, as well as a finely built home where young women can weave in the shade:

> At the place Zzyzzypuvu
> above the dwellings were mountains for raising goats,
> below the dwellings were paddies for raising grain,
> and in the middle were dwelling places;
> there were also grasslands for racing horses,

and there were wet spots for raising pigs.
There were places for maidens to find shade under the eaves.
So, the children and grandchildren of the Nyz
were willing to migrate to Zzyzzypuvu to live. (Bender et al. 2019: 83–84)

The "suitable" criteria of the ideal place are very specific, with proper places to raise livestock, and sources of various natural resources: "At the place Zzyzzypuvu,/Above the dwellings they cut pine kindling and gathered resin,/Below the dwellings they took in fish fry" (ibid. 84). So ideal was the place, that livestock grew "magically", demonstrated by the auspicious number nine, meaning "many" in Nuosu folklore:

When the colts were just a year old,
They had already broken nine belly bands;
When the calves were just one year old,
They had already worn out nine plough frames;
when the goats were just a year old,
their rendered oil already gave double-handfuls. (Ibid.)

Not only was the land ideal for farming and stock raising, but the military might and prowess, and industry of the Nyz increased generation by generation, so that they became a dominant group in their cultural realm. Here in their long-sought, ideal place they flourished as their numbers grew, eventually dividing into other clans, which set out on new treks through local environments of the region in search of ideal places to settle. Thus, is the outcome of one of the many clans within this special storyworld descended from the generations following Shyly Wote, a descendant of the offspring of life-bringing red snow.

CONCLUSION

Recalling the passage from the *Tlou Rachaanad*, an origin epic of the Uipo (Khoibu), cited at the beginning of this article, let us recall the chart illustrating the process of eco-genealogy comprised of the factors of recited genealogy, local environment, migration, and the search for an ideal place. Taking the Nuosu *Book of Origins* as a robust example of ritual epic lying at the nexus of Nuosu beliefs, I argue that becoming aware of the dynamics of this process helps us to understand the interactions between culture and environment, transmission of lore by means of epic logic and rhetorical structures, and glimpses into ideas of connectedness with other lifeforms within the trope of genealogy, and more specifically of an "eco-genealogy" that positions a population of humans within a unique landscape consciously shared with other living beings, wild and domestic, who dwell there. The search for an ideal place is narrated as a hopeful social vision, acting on both individual and group levels and which contributes to developing a sense of place within local hierarchies of ethnicity and culture ensconced within an environment illustrated metonymically by rich imagery that recognises a pluriverse of life forms. The content of the *Book of Origins* delineates certain basics of cultural knowledge that allow for survival, if not flourishing within the epic storyworld delivered by a cohort of oral and written means, the content of which finds parallels in some other folk narratives transmitted within the Southeast Asian Massif region.

NOTES

1 In recent years some scholars have suggested the term "Zomia" to describe the uplands of this general area and some contiguous regions (Scott 2009: 14–16; Michaud 2010; Michaud et al. 2016: 2–3).

2 Words in Northern Yi (Nuosu) in this article are written in a romanisation format created in the 1970s. This romanisation system represents the sounds of the original Northern Yi script, which was also standardised after 1949. The Northern Yi romanisation system uses three markers (t=high, x=mid–high, p=low, falling) added to the end of words to indicate three of the four Northern Yi tones (a neutral tone is unmarked). The tone markers are not included in most words in the body of the article (except a few formal names, such as Jjivot Zopqu, which is Jjivo Zoqu without the markers, and words in the sample passage from the epic, which are of interest to specialists). For an explanation of the tones and the complete romanised version of the epic, see Bender et al. 2019: XIX–XX. This source also gives additional information on the translation team, which consisted of Mark Bender, Aku Wuwu (aka Luo Qingchun), who is a Nuosu-language poet and professor at Southwest Minzu University in Chengdu, and Jjivot Zopqu. Jjivot was an accomplished epic singer in his younger days and his input into the translation project is incalculable. His nephew Jjivot Yyzu aided Jjjivot in the rendering of the vernacular Yi script into the modern Northern Yi standard script, upon which Aku Wuwu and I based the translation.

3 *Bimo* is written in Northern Yi romanisation as *bimox*.

4 Literally, a *bimo* book (*bimox tepyy*).

5 These terms in Northern Yi romanisation with the final tone marker: *Nyzmo – nyzmop*; *nuoho – nuohop*; *quho – quhox*, *mgajie – mgapjie*; *gaxy*.

6 In the Northern Yi romanisation *Vonre sse ci nyix*.

7 The passage in Northern Yi script including tone markers:

vux vu git zyp li nuo su
git zyp sse nyip ggo
git zyp shyx ma ggo
shy ma shy six ggo
nzy o lur nyiet dip
nzy op lur nyiet bbo
syr bbo qu bbo zzur
syr qi qu qi ndit
syr vie cyp bu rry
sy ap my si ap my cy ndit yur.

REFERENCES

Adamson, Joni. 2014. Indigenous Cosmopolitics and the Re–emergence of the Pluriverse. – *Howling for Justice: Critical Perspectives on Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead*, edited by Rebecca Tillete. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 181–194.

Ayu Jipo, Zhu Ayi and Guo Xia, transls. 2013. *Mamu teyi: Yi-Han-Ying duizhao*. Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe.

Bamo Ayi. 1994. *Yizu zhuling xinyin yanjiu: Yiwen guji tantao yu Yizu zongjiao yishi kaocha*. Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe.

Bamo Ayi. 2001. On the Nature and Transmission of Bimo Knowledge in Liangshan. – *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, edited by Stevan Harrell. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 118–132. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520219885.003.0009.

Bamo Qubumo. 2000. *Yingling yu shi hun: Yizu gudai jingji shixue yanjiu*. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Chubanshe.

Bamo Qubumo. 2001. Traditional Nuosu Origin Narratives: A Case Study of Ritualized Epos in *Bimo* Incantation Scriptures. – *Oral Tradition* 16 (2): 453–479.

Bamo Qubumo. 2003. Shishi chuantongde tianye yanjiu: Yi Nuosu Yizu shishi 'Le'e weige'an. PhD Dissertation. Beijing Shifan Daxue Yanjiusheng Yuan.

Bender, Mark. 2011. Perspectives on the Environment in Miao and Yi Creation Narratives. – *China's Creation and Origin Myths: Cross Cultural Explorations in Oral and Written Traditions,* edited by Mineke Schipper, Ye Shuxian, and Yin Hubin. Leiden: Brill, 261–276. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004194854.i-354.80.

Bender, Mark. 2012. Butterflies and Dragon-Eagles: Processing Epics in Southwest China. – *Oral Tradition* 27 (1): 231–246. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ort.2012.0004.

Bender, Mark. 2016. Landscapes and Life-Forms in Cosmographic Epics from Southwest China. – *Chinese Literature Today* 5 (2): 88–97. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/21514399.2016.11834105.

Bender, Mark. 2019. Co-creations, Master Texts, and Monuments: Long Narrative Poems of Ethnic Minority Groups in China. – *Chinoperl: Journal of Chinese Oral and Performing Literature* 38 (2): 65–90. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/01937774.2019.1697604.

Bender, Mark; Aku Wuwu and Jjivot Zopqu. 2019. *The Nuosu Book of Origins: A Creation Epic from Southwest China.* Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press. https://uw.manifoldapp.org/projects/the-nuosu-book-of-origins (accessed April 22, 2022).

Blackburn, Stuart. 2008. *Himalayan Tribal Tales: Oral Tradition and Culture in the Apatani Valley*. *Brill's Tibetan Studies Library* 16 (2). Leiden: Brill. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004171336.i-298.

Blackburn, Stuart. 2010. *The Sun Rises: A Shaman's Chant, Ritual Exchange and Fertility in the Apatani Valley*. *Brill's Tibetan Studies Library* 16 (3). Leiden: Brill. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004175785.i-394.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. The Forms of Capital. – *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John Richardson. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 241–258.

Bradley, David. 2009. Language Policy for China's Minorities: Orthography Development for the Yi. – *Writing Systems and Linguistic Structure* 12 (2): 170–187. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1075/wll.12.2.03bra.

Buell, Lawrence. 2006. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

van Driem, George. 2012. Glimpses of the Ethnolinguistic Prehistory of Northeastern India. – *Origins and Migrations in the Extended Eastern Himalayas*. *Brill's Tibetan Studies Library* 16 (4), edited by Toni Huber and Stuart Blackburn. Leiden: Brill, 187–211. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004228368_011.

Feng Yuanwei, transl. 1986. *Le'e teyi*. Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe.

Feng Yuanwei, Qubi Shimei, Lu Xueliang, and Shen Wenguang, transls. 2006. *Mamu teyi*. Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe.
Foley, John Miles. 1995. *The Singer of Tales in Performance*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
Garrard, Greg. 2012. *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge.
Harrell, Stevan. 2001. *Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
Harrell, Stevan; Bamo Qubumo, and Ma Erzi. 2000. *Mountain Patterns: The Survival of Nuosu Culture in China.* Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
Herman, David. 2009. Narrative Ways of Worldmaking. – *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, edited by Sandra Heinen and Roy Sommer. New York: de Gruyter, 71–87.
Herman, John. 2007. *Amid the Clouds and Mist: China's Colonization of Guizhou, 1200–1700*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9781684174638.
Honko, Lauri. 1998. *Textualising the Siri Epic*. *Folklore Fellows' Communications* 264. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.
Huber, Toni. 2012. Micro-migrations of Hill People in Northern Arunachal Pradesh: Rethinking Methodologies and Claims of Origins in Tibet. – *Origins and Migrations in the Extended Eastern Himalayas*. *Brill's Tibetan Studies Library* 16 (4), edited by Toni Huber and Stuart Blackburn. Leiden: Brill, 83–106. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004228368_007.
Karlach, Jan. 2023. Hearths, Mythologies, and Livelihood Choices: Exploring Cultural Change under Poverty Alleviation with the Nuosu-Yi of Liangshan. – *Modern China*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/00977004221141051.
Khaling, Tolheishel. 2018. *Tlou Rachaanad: Epic of the Uipo (Khoibu).* Tartu: University of Tartu Press.
Li Zixian. 1984. On the Dai Calabash Myth. – *Cowrie: A Chinese Journal of Comparative Literature* 1 (2): 54–64.
Lin Yaohua. 1961. *The Lolo of Liangshan (Liang-shan I-chia).* New Haven, CT: HRAF Press.
Ma Erzi. 2001. Names and Genealogies among the Nuosu of Liangshan. – *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, edited by Stevan Harrell. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 81–93. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520219885.003.0006.
Mandal, Pratibha. 2009. *An Approach to The Cultural Mapping of North-East India in Respect to Tribal Tales*. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society.
Michaud, Jean. 2010. Editorial: Zomia and Beyond. – *Journal of Global History* 5: 187–214. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022810000057.
Michaud, Jean; Meenaxi Barkataki Ruscheweyh, and Margaret Swain, eds. 2016. *Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
Panu, Pihkala. 2020. Anxiety and Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-anxiety and Climate Anxiety. – *Sustainability* 12 (19): 7836. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3390/su12197836.
Proschan, Frank. 2001. Peoples of the Gourd: Imagined Ethnicities in Highland Southeast Asia. – *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60 (4): 999–1032. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/2700018.
Qiu Nigu and Qomox Nyiggu, ed. 2015. *Jini qiumo jiapu / Jjihni qomox cyt pot*. *Genealogy of Jini Qiumo Clan.* Hong Kong: Tianma chuban youxian gongsi.
Ready, Jonathan L. 2015. The Textualization of Homeric Epic by Means of Dictation. – *TAPA* 145 (1): 1–75. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/apa.2015.0005.
Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Swancutt, Katherine. 2012. The Captive Guest: Spider Webs of Hospitality among the Nuosu of Southwest China. – *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (Special Issue: *The Return to*

Hospitality: Strangers, Guests, and Ambiguous Encounters) 18 (1): S103–S116. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2012.01766.x.

Swancutt, Katherine and Jiarimuji. 2018. The Return to Slavery? Nostalgia and a New Generation of Escape in Southwest China. – *Recovering the Human Subject: Freedom, Creativity and Decision*, edited by James Laidlaw, Barbara Bodenhorn and Martin Holbraad. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 131–148.

Tuan, Yi–Fu. 1977. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Van, Dang Nghiem. 1993. The Flood Myth and the Origin of Ethnic Groups in Southeast Asia. – *Journal of American Folklore* 106 (421): 304–337. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/541423.

Whitaker, Jacob Tyler. 2008. Yi Identity and Confucian Empire: Indigenous Local Elites, Cultural Brokerage, and the Colonization of the Lu-ho Tribal Polity of Yunnan, 1174–1745. A PhD Dissertation. University of California.

Wu Chongyang and Tao Lifa. 1984. Zhongguo shaoshu minzu minjian wenxue zuopin xuanjiang. Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe.

Wu Gu. 2001. Reconstructing Yi History from Yi Records. – *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, edited by Stevan Harrell. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 21–34. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520219885.003.0002.

Wu Jingzhong. 2001. Nzymo as Seen in Some Yi Classical Books. – *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, edited by Stevan Harrell. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 35–48. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520219885.003.0003.

Yunnan. 1959. = Yunnan sheng minzu minjian wenxue Chuxiong diaochadui soujizhengli. 1959. *Meige*. Kunming: Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe.