

Gendered Cosmology, Landscape and Species-Inclusive Community in Yunnan's Tibeto-Burman Origin Myths

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Abstract

This paper examines gender- and species-inclusive notions of community as reflected in the origin myths, animistic beliefs and practices of a few Tibeto-Burman minorities in the uplands of China's southwestern province of Yunnan. Among these minorities, culture-specific views of descent and cosmocentric attitudes toward sentient nature showcase women's social standing and role in enhancing relational empathy with non-human actors or species, as well as with a pantheon of deities who are believed to (co)inhabit or own the physical landscape. Integrating sources of knowledge from environmental history, comparative mythology and anthropology, the paper presents a selection of case studies on the Mosuo, Naxi, Yi and other minority cultures, demonstrating how relations with multiple non-human selves can be genealogical and how rituals aimed at influencing them can have positive effects on community well-being.

Keywords: Tibeto-Burman minorities, Southwest China, origin myths, eco-cosmologies, human–nature interactions, community well-being

Bearing on the insight that relatedness is a dynamic process not solely given by birth or marriage (Carsten 2000, 2011), contemporary anthropological and archaeological approaches have abandoned narrow conceptions of kinship based on procreation, blood, and genetic inheritance¹ in favour of “transpersonal relations of being, [...] shared life conditions, affects and memories” (Sahlins 2011: 2, 4–5). There has been an increasing integration of perspectives on performative ways of becoming kin (Carsten 2020: 321), even resulting in the neolo-

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gism “kinning” (Howell 2003) to describe these relational processes. Whether fluid definitions of kinship beyond the immediate family and social organisation can also encompass human–nature interactions is a topic of great interest, one that has long fascinated social scientists examining virtually all cultural areas of the globe.² Over the last decade, this topic has undergone a steady revival in research on environmental conservation and sustainability.³

Past approaches have focused on the agency of nature in human history⁴ or on ideas of community as a “web of life” (Salmon 2000: 1328) that also comprises elements of the physical environment, including flora and fauna (Hughes 2001: 5–7). However, the proposition that kinship can be formed with non-human actors and that indigenous visions of community could open up new venues for more sustainable or equitable ways of managing resources has yet to be taken seriously in environmental studies. In some cases, this proposition has been harshly criticised by social scientists themselves, who tend to see it as a deliberate attempt to replace outdated negative stereotypes of indigenous livelihoods – characterised as intrinsically unscientific, backward, and harmful to the environment – with equally stereotypical constructs of pristine, forest-dependent communities made up of “ecologically noble savages” (Redford 1991).⁵

In rethinking the place of nature in human affairs, animistic religiosity(ies) and ontology(ies) offer an alternative approach to modern Western naturalist views of environmental relations. A notion that since its first appearance in the late nineteenth century has been substantially revisited and has gathered new momentum in the anthropology of Southeast Asia and Buddhist Himalayas,⁶ animism (Lat. *anima*, “breath”, or “soul”) posits a relational and personalised cosmos where the mineral, vegetal and animal kingdoms of life are all endowed with a spirit or soul. In such a cosmos, which in Descola’s (2013: 172–173, 232–233) formulation is the ontological inverse of modern naturalism, human and non-human beings or selves (i.e., mountains, plants, etc.) share the same “internal faculties”, and selfhood is not ready-made but emergent and in the process of becoming, with “beings of all kinds, more or less person-like [...]”,

1 Fuentes 2013: 51–52; Johnson 2019: 209–210, 213.

2 Scholarship has compared cultures with manifold kinship arrangements across the Asia-Pacific, Andean and Amazon areas; see, respectively, Kelly 1993: 141–207, Bamford 2009, Arnold 1987, Carreño 2016, Weiss 1975 (especially pp. 309–310, 313–315), Viveiros de Castro 2001. For a recent collection of ethnographic cases from around the world, refer to Kavesh / Fijn 2023.

3 Cf. Magallanes 2015, Martinez 2019, Whyte 2020, Dudgeon / Bray 2019.

4 Environmental historians were the first to raise the question of nature’s agency (Worster 1988, Cronon 1993). The concept has since been expanded by political ecologists and social anthropologists in their analyses. For instance, see Scott’s work (1998: 11–52, 262–306) on state-sponsored campaigns of landscape planning that impose sedentary agriculture and modern forestry upon animist swidden cultivators. Another example is provided by Zerner (2000) and Peluso (2012), who explore the commodification of natural products, places and processes in relation to the globalising environmental agenda of resource extraction and conservation (cf. Tsing 2001: 5–8, 18 n. 2; Foltz 2003).

5 For more on the exaltation of conservation-oriented indigenous peoples, see Agrawal et al. 1997, Li 2002, Hames 2007.

6 See e.g. Bird-David 1999: 67–68, von Stuckrad 2023, Århem 2016, Torri 2015: 260–261.

continually and reciprocally bring[ing] one another into existence" (Ingold 2006: 10).⁷ The natural and supernatural are not antithetical to each other, and ritual is what enables access to the holistic unity that underpins the two domains. The seasonal performance of rituals is a critical concern for indigenous communities with a subsistence economy and at higher risk of exposure to adverse environmental conditions. For the animistic members of these communities, ritual is both a response to extreme weather and a means to secure livelihood. It actualises eco-cosmologies – (1) “a set of concepts, practices, and beliefs [...] embedded in local ecological [and] weather systems” and (2) “shap[ing] praxis and people’s understanding of their place in the world” (Tacey 2021: 77).⁸ Underlying these eco-cosmologies is the assumption that ecology (natural) and theology (supernatural) are “isomorphic” (Sponsel 2001: 179–181), and that “kinship across species”⁹ supplements kinship from consanguineal (blood) or affinal (marriage) ties.

The Tibeto-Burman (TB) cultures of upland Yunnan, in Southwest China, exhibit many such arrangements. Strongly influenced by Tibetan culture,¹⁰ their myths justify social institutions (marriage, family organisation, rites of passage and funerary customs), and cosmogonic cycles are recreated in sophisticated ceremonies to either appease or win the favour of the non-human denizens of the natural landscape. The socio-mythical corpus of TB minorities in Yunnan, like elsewhere among the TB-speaking people of the Himalayas (Steinmann 1996), ties the origins of marriage and human lineages to some alliance with the supernatural. Networks of dynamic alliance with celestial or earthbound god(desse)s are inscribed in a landscape which is both mythical and “real” at once. This reveals that individual personhood and intentionality are not unique to humans, and that ritual functions as a medium for communication between the natural, social, and supra-mundane domains.

As the empirical cases presented here set out to illustrate, actors from the sky and earth – ranging from atmospheric phenomena to stones, ensouled plants, and varied other classes of spiritual beings – are ritually acknowledged or revered as ancestors, and are thereby integrated into a single “ritual cosmos” (Samuel 1993: 157–158). In coming into contact with the spiritual beings who own features of or occupy an ecological niche in the landscape, humans are reminded of their moral obligations toward sentient nature. Ritual, in this sense, helps maintain or restore balance in the flow of benefits upon which

7 Here I draw on Descola’s definition of animism as the ontological type opposed to naturalism, with the latter being a closed universe of “shared physicality and different interiority(ies)” or internal faculties. In acknowledging the possibility of “sentient ecology” (Ingold 2000: 24–26) and ascribing such faculties to all forms of life, I situate my research findings within Ingold’s model of personal agency that seeks to replace the modern human/nature dichotomy (*ibid.*: 13–26) with person-environment relations and conceives of them as mutually constitutive in active engagement.

8 For another interpretation, see Århem 1996: 185.

9 Kirksey / Helmreich 2010, Charles 2014, Haraway 2016.

10 See Kvarne 1991a and 1991b: 1079.

humans and non-humans rely for survival, while mutual observances and ceremonial offerings are fundamental to community well-being.

Among the Qiangic-speaking Mosuo (officially “Eastern Naxi”) and the highly composite group of Ngwi (or Loloish) speakers who make up today’s Yi,¹¹ culturally specific notions of descent inform and reproduce eco-cosmologies in which relations with non-human “persons” – e.g., biotic or abiotic elements of the environment, nature spirits, ancestral souls, otherworldly gods, and cultural heroes – are not utilitarian and exploitative but genealogical and reciprocal. This interconnectedness of life forms requires that well-being be attained through a degree of give-and-take on all sides and that people make regular offerings to other beings, especially to the gods who control the forces of nature. The fact that eco-cosmologies are used in ritual ceremonies to promote the public good makes them an indicator of community well-being and self-sufficiency in natural resources.

In keeping with these theoretical premises, the present paper will investigate the cosmological and environmental visions of Qiangic and Ngwi cultures, as reflected in their origin myths, belief systems and gender-inflected ritual concerns. In the said cultures, human relationships with non-human life forms, including supernatural entities deeply rooted in the landscape, unfold along kinship lines, with ritual observances and ancestral cults all revolving around such relationships. The paper will build on published mythologems and ethnographic literature available in Chinese and Western languages to stimulate discussion of the following questions: How do factors like kinship and gender affect people’s environmental perceptions? What role do ritual specialists play in them? By what means does the animistic repertoire mobilised during the ceremonies construct nature and contribute to community well-being?

In tackling these questions, three possibilities are envisaged: (1) nature can be conceptualised as a text, and the meanings ascribed to it are contingent on the cosmological context; (2) rituals can help decipher nature and provide solutions to weather-related crises; (3) the interplay between nature, cosmology and ritual dictates community well-being. Apart from the introductory section, which outlines the basic characteristics of the TB cultures under consideration, the remaining two sections of the paper present critical reflections on this interplay. The second section is an archetypal analysis of cosmogonic myths, in which apocalyptic floods are correlated with incestuous marriage, while flowers, trees, bottle gourds, animal species and demigods are worshipped as human ancestors in seasonal rituals of communal offering. Drawing on evidence from multiple Yunnanese groups, the section supports broader conclusions about how

¹¹ Loloish is the standard nomenclature for the sub-family of TB languages spoken by the Yi and other ethnic minorities. Since the mid-1950s, however, the Chinese pejorative Lolo has been replaced by the modern Yi as a more neutral exonym for the northern branch of this language sub-family (Benedict 1987: 186). More recently, Bradley (2009: 171) has derived the category Ngwi from the traditional autonym of these minority groups.

female archetypes inform social and cosmic orders, resulting in stronger ancestral ties to the ensouled forces of nature. The third section is a focused investigation into the socio-mythical corpus of the Mosuo and the Nuosu branch of the Yi minority, with special attention to “matricultural”¹² perspectives on nature and to women’s role in community life and shamanic rituals.

Overview of Qiangic and Ngwi cultures of upland Yunnan

Tibeto-Burman, broadly defined, is the family of languages genetically related to Chinese, Tibetan and Burmese, with the eastern Himalayas, north-eastern India, Nepal, Bhutan, the Indo-Myanmar borderlands and the uplands of Southwest China identified as its historical locus and core area of distribution (van Driem 2002: 233, 236–237). It comprises a few dozen Ngwi sub-groups that speak different, often barely mutually intelligible languages, scattered across northern Vietnam (formerly Tonkin), and the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. Among them is the Yi (8,714,393), with the Nuosu as its major clan. A minor Yi clan, the Sani will be surveyed in section two, along with the Lahu (485,966), Hani (1,660,932), and Jinuo (23,143) – all Ngwi speakers who were once misclassified as subsets of the Yi, but now stand as independent “minority nationalities” (in Chinese *minzu*) within the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) policy framework (Mullaney 2011: 86ff).¹³

As for the Mosuo (ca. 40,000), they belong to the northeastern or Qiangic branch of the TB. This tiny group of Qiangic speakers on the Sichuan-Yunnan border is formally part of the Naxi minority (326,295). Unlike other Qiangic sub-groups in the cultural area of Greater Tibet (Kham and Amdo), they do not use local spoken Tibetan as a lingua franca, nor do they use written Tibetan for religious purposes.¹⁴ Based on the current ethnic classification criteria of the PRC, they are an offshoot of the Naxi, but they identify themselves as a culturally distinct group. Centred respectively in Lijiang and Yongning (Ninglang Yi Autonomous County) in northwestern Yunnan, the Naxi and self-ascribed Mosuo are presumed to be descended from the same people – a proposition that not all so-labelled “Naxi” agree with. To make things even more compli-

12 I hereby endorse Guédon’s (2020: 6) wisdom and use the attribute “matricultural [...] to designate that part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women’s participation in the socio-cultural fabric, whether it sustains a matrilineal kinship system or not”. Meanwhile, I align myself with the collective Network on Culture’s mandate and treat indigenous cosmologies and mythologems where a female figure is the creating force or co-creator with a male one (i.e., elder brother) as essential indicators of matriculture. Refer to <https://www.networkonculture.ca> (accessed 1 November 2024).

13 Over time, the Yi category was applied broadly to many groups in Southwest China, leading to gross oversimplification and misrepresentation. This reflects how Chinese state policies have often imposed external classifications that overlook the complexity and diversity of local ethno-linguistic identities.

14 Bradley 2001: 201–205 and 2007: 356–357, 360. The statistics are taken from the official website of the NSBC (Table 25–19) and refer to the fifth official census of the Chinese population by ethnic composition and distribution as estimated on 1 November 2010. See <http://www.stats.gov.cn> (accessed 5 December 2024).

Figure 1: Yunnan Province and Southeast Asia



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Departing from the idea that female agency can be well accepted, if not explicitly sanctioned, even in highly patrilineal societies such as the Nuosu, I will take the above as a working hypothesis to test whether the greater decisional power accorded to indigenous women can translate into a more environmentally conscious ethics. Not only are these women privileged decision-makers within the family, but they also take on responsibilities beyond the domestic sphere

15 They are found in the Muli and Yanyuan counties in southwestern Sichuan. Harrell 2001: 219–220, McKhann 1995: 48–49.

16 See Watkins 1996: 111 on property rights among the Nyeshang, Sherpa and Tamang Nepalis, whose daughters inherit from the mother and sons from the father; Scott 2009: 18–19, 22 commenting on the decentralised structures of Hani, Lahu and Jingpo societies; Gellner 1991: 108–110 on Newar women's freedom to remarry and isogamy.

17 Although critics have argued against applying the label "shaman" to ritualists other than those found in Siberia, where this system of practices originated (Hutton 2001: vii), scholarly efforts to "diagnosing shamanism cross-culturally" (Klein et al. 2005: 128) have not waned. For broader definitions of shamanism, encompassing early Chinese *wu* (lit. "witchcraft") and contemporary ritual traditions of ethnic minorities, see Williams 2020, Michael 2017, Lin 2016.

18 Wellens (2017: 381 n. 8), for example, has argued that the social stratification found among the Qiangic Primi is the result of superimposed hierarchies of Gelugpa-style monasticism. Likewise, findings on Thangmi earth-based shamanism lend weight to the assumption that the TB "religion" borrows but is distinct from the literate traditions of high-caste Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists (Shneiderman / Turin 2006: 97–98, 148, 164–167).

19 Thomas Ptak et al. (2020): Understanding Borders through Dynamic Processes: Capturing Relational Motion from Southwest China's Radiation Centre. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 10(2), pp. 200–218.

cated, a non-negligible number of Mosuo living in southwestern Sichuan are also classified as Mongols.¹⁵ Despite the unclear genetic position of some TB languages and the frequent outcries of revisionist scholarship against the careless use of the TB category as an ethnic label (Turin 2006: 35–36), ethnolinguists have characterised the minority groups that fall under this category as (1) more egalitarian in terms of gender and social organisation,¹⁶ (2) animistic or practicing some form of shamanism,¹⁷ (3) and not thoroughly attached to Hinduism, Buddhism or any other institutionalised religion (van Driem 2007: 239).¹⁸ With the exception of the patrilineal caste-like structure of Nuosu Yi society, which seems to contradict the first postulate, the other two provide a fair summary of the defining characteristics of the minority groups selected for this study.

as is visible in communal ceremonies that mark life's major transitions. The reason for this lies in a combination of factors, namely (i) patterns of marriage, descent or residence, (ii) indigenous beliefs and practices, and (iii) the mythological rationale that motivates such patterns, beliefs and practices. The impact of these few factors on the socio-ecological balance is discussed in the following sections through a selection of mythological narratives and ritualised procedures that demonstrate the social status and role of women – whether as archetypal figures or shamanic healers – in nurturing community well-being.

Female archetypes in cosmogonic myths and multi-species kinship

In the family organisation of Ngwi and Qiangic cultures, kinship through women is taken into account in the allocation of social rank, and maternal relatives may outshine the paternal ones. Cross-cousin marriage arrangements – whether patrilateral, matrilateral or bilateral (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 98–145)²⁰ – were, and in several instances still are, common in these cultures. This can also be inferred from their creation myths, which, as attested to by the cases given below, are replete with excursions into the genealogies of early humans and cosmological explanations of kinship.

Two recurring themes in TB cosmogonies are the cosmic egg and weather-related disasters. Both indicate substantial borrowing from Chinese or Tibetan cultures. In Chinese mythology, the birth of the world from an egg (Ch. *hundun*, “primordial chaos”) is entwined with legendary figures such as the goddess Nüwa and King Yu the Great, who fought a flood and brought order out of chaos, or Pangu, the giant progenitor of mankind, who separated the egg into Heaven and Earth and whose limbs became mountain peaks, celestial bodies, trees and other features of the landscape (Kaltenmark 1991: 1009–10; Ouyang 1995: 34). A key mythologem in pre-Buddhist Tibet, the egg appears not only in cosmogonic and anthropogonic myths, where it is again associated with features of the landscape (especially lakes), but also in clan genealogies to justify social structures.

For example, the *rLangs Po-ti bse-ru* (Singular Volume of the *rLangs*) relates the history of *rLangs*, one of the oldest and most powerful ruling houses in the eastern Tibetan region of Kham, beginning with the primeval being King Ye-smon rgyal-po, who metamorphosed from an egg (Langelaar 2022: 85; Kværne 1987: 166). By the same token, the collection *Klu-'bum dkar-nag khra* (White, Black

²⁰ Cross-cousin marriage is the institutionalised exchange of sexual partners between the offspring of the opposite-sex siblings of both parents. Accordingly, a man may marry the daughter of his mother's brother (i.e., the offspring of his maternal uncle), or the daughter of his father's sister (i.e., the offspring of his paternal aunt). In the first case, the offspring are exchanged matrilaterally; in the second patrilaterally. In a bilateral system, relatives of a married couple are of equal importance.

and Variegated Volumes of the Hundred Thousand Klu) cites the egg as both the origin of five classes of aquatic spirits known as *klu*, equivalent to the Hindu *nāga* (chthonic snake spirits), and the origin of social divisions between overlords, priests, servants, outcasts and animals. Moreover, the egg is found in rituals performed with the *klu*'s assistance to ensure sufficient rainfall, richer harvests and a more stable environment (Zeren 2023; Kværne 1991b: 1079–80). In Tibetan myths, floods, droughts, and crop failures are direct consequences of neglecting one's ritual obligations to the *klu* and other supernatural beings (Salick et al. 2012: 461–462). So it is in many TB cosmogonic myths. Even though it is difficult to determine the extent to which TB myths were influenced by Chinese and Tibetan cultures, one cannot help but be struck by the similarities with the mythologems of those cultures.

Apart from proto and early human genealogies, the TB cosmogonies envision the mediating role of mothers and sisters as crucial to maintaining healthy relations at the community level and, most importantly, to sustaining life in hazardous environments. Two types of marriage occur with high frequency in the cosmogonies: marriage between humans and gods, and marriage to a blood relative before or after a natural catastrophe, most often a flood. TB flood myths mirror the narrative of some Chinese myths where the only survivors are a brother and a sister, and from their incestuous union mankind is able to regenerate (Schipper 2011: 17). In the myths of a number of minority groups in western China, such as the TB groups covered here, the flood represents a divine punishment. It is either the coming of the flood that compels the two siblings to re-create humanity out of incest, or their failure to abide by incest taboos that causes the flood in the first place (He 2014: 115–116).

Sani

This theme of sibling union following a flood appears in the traditions of the Sani, or southeastern Yi, in Lunan (Shilin Yi Autonomous County). Like other Yi sub-groups, the Sani are patrilineal, though they incorporate elements of matrilineality and uxorilocal marriage, with strong kinship bonds between maternal uncles and uterine nephews (Névot 2019: 48–51).

A celebrated Sani myth tells of a primigenial family of three brothers and a sister who were caught by a dreadful flood while ploughing the fields. Only the sister and the youngest brother survived. They fled to the mountains, where they found themselves trapped between rocks, unable either to climb down or ascend. Eventually, they discovered a twig with orchid (*Sa. keleu*) flowers. Grasping the twig, they managed to climb the rocks and save their lives. After they proclaimed the flowers as their ancestors and vowed to worship them, the waters retreated steadily, marking the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind. The flood, embodying the foundation of every family's history, has been woven ever since into Sani marriage ceremonies (Vial 1898: 8–9).

One of the first Westerners to study this myth, the French missionary Paul Vial (1855–1917), provides much insight into Sani ancestral beliefs and practices. In his work, Vial explains that among the Sani and other Yi groups, effigies filled with *keleu* flowers and draped in old clothes were at the heart of ancestor worship. Before China's transition to a republican system of government, these were hung up in a corner of the ceiling to represent human ancestors in what resemble Chinese home altars. Ancestral cults prescribed that maternal ancestors enjoy an equal if not higher reputation than paternal ones, and that the loss of a mother be mourned longer than the loss of a father. In addition, Vial also comments on the custom of worshipping shapeless stones, known as *midje* (from *mi*, meaning “earth”, and *dje*, “to sacrifice”), which were used to delimit sacred enclosures in mountain groves. These stones symbolised a dyad of male (*pou*) and female (*no*) gods, believed to have descended from Heaven to assure plentiful harvests and the well-being of all life on Earth. The worship ceremony took place once a year and was presided over by a local ritualist, the *bimo* (lit. “reciter of scriptures”), who offered sacrifices to the gods at *midjedu*, the sacred grove of each village. Inside the enclosures, unregulated tree-cutting was strictly forbidden (Vial 1898: 9–10, 12).

Sani animistic cosmology links kinship and nature through sacred symbols like orchids and stones in both family and communal ceremonies. Ritual observances follow kinship lines, with reverence for female ancestors and local deities who are tied to the land, and whose presence is vital to the collective welfare.

Naxi

The Naxi myth *Ts'o-mber-ssaw* (lit. “Descent of Man”), which begins with “Heaven laying an egg and Earth hatching it”, contains equally noteworthy allusions to the Naxi forefathers, *Ts'o-zä-llü-ghügh* (*Ts'o* meaning “people,” and *zä* “demon”) and his siblings, as they endure a devastating flood. In the Naxi worldview, marriage and warfare were inseparable, and since they could neither wage war nor capture wives, the forefathers found themselves unable to avoid incest. In some versions of the myth, their incestuous acts with their mother or sister are said to have provoked the flood.

Despite differing interpretations, what remains unchanged in all versions is that the post-diluvian ancestor *Ts'o* seeks a wife in Heaven. There he marries the goddess *Ts'ä-khü-bu-bu-mi* (*khü* meaning “lake”, and *bu-mi* “to think of a wife”), creating a matrilineal kinship system in which men marry their cross-cousins (e.g., a daughter of their own father's sisters) and offspring are exchanged between brothers. The myth tells how *Ts'ä* escorts *Ts'o* to Heaven and then back to Earth, carrying all the necessities of life: “They met [...] where a white blossoming tree grew. They liked one another and became united as man and wife. They leaned against the tree and [...] she changed herself into a crane, took him under her wing and flew to Heaven. [...] They open

three sets of nine gates: the gate of domestic animals, grain and fertility. [...] They come down bearing [...] clothing, riches, horses, cattle, diviners and slaves" (Jackson 1975: 26–29, 33).

A ritual enactment of this myth and one of the earliest Naxi nature worship ceremonies, the *Mùan bpö* ("Sacrifice to Heaven") prompts reflection on the convergence of kinship with some features of the landscape. Before contact with Chinese culture, the Naxi viewed the maternal uncle as a protector. So significant was the uncle's social standing that children knew only him, not their father, and in the *Mùan bpö* he is identified with Heaven. His protective role is played by a small oak tree erected on a stone altar (Jackson 1975: 27). Joseph Rock, who witnessed the ceremony at Shangri-la (formerly Zhongdian, Tib. Gyalthang) in the 1930–40s, explains that there are three trees on the altar: a juniper flanked by two oaks, all considered masculine. The juniper stands for the gods, and the oaks represent Heaven and Earth. The tree of Heaven, symbolising the maternal uncle, is the first to be placed on the altar. It occupies a position of honour and is fed with a blood offering of greater value than the other two (e.g., the head of a hen). The gods attend the ceremony in the form of crows swooping down to receive their portion of the offering. Meanwhile, the other participants prostrate themselves before each tree, making a vow and asking for protection from Heaven. The place of worship is surrounded by a large grove of ancient oak trees that are sacred and must not be cut (Rock 1948: 12–15, 30–31, 91, 95–96 nn. 236 and 238).

Another notable detail is the use of homonyms that shape the symbolism behind Ts'o-zä-llü-ghügh and Ts'ä-khü-bu-bu-mi's wedding ceremony. The plum tree (*Na. ssi-k'aw indzér*), against which the two leaned before she transformed into a crane, functions as a matchmaker in human marriages, as the Chinese word for "plum" (*mei*) is homophonic with "go-between" (Rock 1948: 75 n. 192). This further elucidates how natural elements acquire deeper layers of meaning that reinforce social structures, while facilitating imaginative identification with mythological characters and bridging the divide between human and heavenly realms.

Lahu

Corroborating evidence of the convergence between kinship and nature comes from the exogamous Lahu culture, renowned for tracing descent bilaterally, with no formal distinction between paternal and maternal relatives (Walker 2003: 43). Lahu family surnames in the greater Lancang (upper Mekong) area of southern Yunnan were assigned by a genderless deity called Xeul Sha. In the daily interactions, families are recognised by the combined names of husband and wife (Ma 2013: 44). After marriage, the couple is treated as an individual unit, rendering ancestral heritage a matter of little social relevance. Legend has it that Zayi (sometimes also featuring as Cal-tif, lit. "only-man") and Nayi

(Na-tif, “only-woman”) formed the first human couple, who emerged from a gourd, which, not unlike the cosmic egg described above, signifies the power of generation, the evolution of life and the worship of mother goddesses (Liu 1980: 225–238) and is perhaps the prototype for all other vessels used to escape the flood in southern Chinese mythology (Mair 1996: 192–195).²¹

Zayi and Nayi were brother and sister, but also became husband and wife when Xeul Sha tricked them into drinking a powerful aphrodisiac, and their union produced eight sons and eight daughters.²² Their children and grandchildren continued to intermarry, until, by the third generation, stringent incest taboos were instituted. From then on, only bilateral cross-cousin marriages between sons of sisters and daughters of brothers were allowed (Ma 2013: 57–58, 101–102, 65–66; Du 2002: 41–42).²³ Furthermore, Lahu myths reveal that Xeul Sha taught the demigod progenitors of mankind how to manage natural resources, hunt and cultivate hill-rice in swidden fields. Having learned these skills, humans were able to find ingenious solutions to overcome floods and other types of catastrophic weather, such as the rising temperature caused by nine suns, or the presence of nine moons that froze the Earth’s surface (Du 2002: 38–40, 79–135, *passim*).

Hani

The gourd that is key to the Lahu origin narrative is popular also among the Hani and Jinuo minorities. Among the Hani of Yuanyang (Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture) in south-central Yunnan, the gourd is revered as a proto-human ancestor along with the swallow and other animal species. Many of the Hani ancestral myths are grounded in old matriarchal beliefs linked to the goddess Tapo, also referred to as “the mother of a hundred children”. One such myth narrates that in primordial times, a flood hit the Earth and humans were wiped out except for two siblings (again a brother and sister) who saved themselves in a giant gourd. Their descendants became the Hani, Yi, Han-Chinese and Tai-speaking Dai (Cao / Long 2014: 64–67, 81–84, 167–168). Historically grouped with the non-Sinicised Yi clans and acknowledged in their own right only in 1954 (Huang / Shi 1994: 148–149), the Hani from Sipsongpanna (now Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture) present a slightly altered version

21 Mair clarifies that the gourd, and more precisely the bottle gourd (Ch. *hulu*), is a symbol of mother and ancestor worship, reflecting the lofty position of women in matrilineal societies.

22 Yang (1999: 15–21) hints that the myth is likely to be a local variation of the Chinese myth of the primeval god Fuxi and goddess Nüwa, also siblings. Fuxi taught people to fish and cook, and, by taking Nüwa as his wife, established marriage rules. Nüwa repaired the broken sky, and in Chinese folklore is venerated as the Great Mother of humans.

23 In Ma’s version of the story, it is not Zayi and Nayi but their demigod parents Zadi (La. Cal Hie) and Nadi (Na Hie) who break out of the gourd and drink the “shame-forgetting water”. By contrast, Du reports that the demigods never truly reproduced themselves. Although there are slight differences in the way the story is told, presumably due to regional variations, both Ma and Du regard Zayi and Nayi as the first generation of humans.

of the myth, in which the survivors are a mother and her daughter, rather than siblings (Wang 2012: 270).

Through bards, the Hani and their Akha cousins in adjacent areas of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand preserve mythical genealogies and migratory epics (Scott 2009: 176) that trace the ancestry of all Hani-Akha groups back to Mq-ma (lit. “Sky Mother”), a Goddess and apical ancestor who descended from the sky. While locating their ancestral homeland in Mq-ma’s abode, a sky lake surrounded by mountains, the Hani animistic worldview posits that the Earth is inhabited not only by humans, animals, plants, bodies of water, and other physical entities, but also by supernatural spirits who help maintain the ecological balance (Wang 2013: 34–35, 69, 87).

Any living organism or entity has a spiritual guardian called *yaw-sanr* (lit. “owner”), some of whom are revered as deities. Improper conduct may lead to punishment by the *naevq*, another class of spirits acting as representatives of nature and vigilant enforcers of customary laws. The *naevq* possess the power to trigger cataclysmic events whenever forbidden or restricted activities, such as tree-cutting, farming, hunting, and other human endeavours, transpire in sacred or semi-domesticated landscapes, including old-growth groves, reservoirs, watershed forests, and small fenced gardens. To guarantee thriving rice crops, healthy livestock, and the general well-being, the Hani make seasonal sacrifices to these guardian and “policing” spirits, who are indispensable for shielding the forests, water resources, and agricultural fields. For example, some villages in Sipsongpanna prescribe annual ceremonies in honour of Mirsanr (“Lord or Goddess of Earth”) – an all-governing deity represented by one of the oldest oak or bodhi trees in a communally protected forest, and whose worship takes precedence even over the gods of agriculture (Wang 2013: 84ff, 104, 133–134; Pei 2010: 102; Xu 2008: 1796–97).

The Mirsanr tree is a species native to the local environment and, as such, varies from one village to another. In Honghe, two ceremonies are staged at the turn of the year: one in the first lunar month to commemorate the Lord of Earth, and another in the third month to commemorate his female counterpart. In spite of the regional differences, the tree(s) are never to be cut down. If they fall naturally or are destroyed by a storm, the entire village observes a day of mourning and refrains from work. The trees are left to decompose and cannot be used for firewood or other purposes. Some trees also hold significance in courtship, marriage, and birthing rituals. Villagers believe that healthy trees foster the growth of wise and strong children. When a child is born, parents plant three small trees at the foothills of the village, bury the placenta beneath them, and nourish the roots with the water used to cleanse the newborn baby. As the child grows, so too do the trees, symbolising longevity and prosperity in the family and, by extension, in the community. This custom underscores the deep connection between forestlands, family history and the village genealogies of the Hani people (Cao / Long 2014: 27–31).

Jinuo

Similar worship customs are observed by the once matrilineal Jinuo at Jinghong (Chiang Hung), the historic capital of the Dai kingdom of Sipsongpanna, on the border with Myanmar's Shan state. There, a team of ethnologists led by Song Enchang has reported that the Jinuo worship Amoyaobu (lit. "Mother Ancestor Amo") – a giant creator deity of exceptional strength similar to Pangu – and make sacrifices to other minor gods whenever the community is hit by drought (Song / Dong 2009: 169, 172–173). Communal sacrifices to Amo take place every year during the seventh lunar month and can last up to thirteen days. In a Jinuo creation myth, Amo undertakes a cosmic mission against a mammoth toad, which in comparative mythology is correlated with rain-making rituals and from which, in this specific case, everything in the universe originates. Amo jumps into the toad's mouth, causing it to burst. The amphibian's dismembered body transforms into the sun and the moon, and with what is left Amo creates the Earth, humans and other species (Du 1996: 879). When a flood approaches, she leads a twin brother and sister (Mahei and Maniu) into a wooden drum, and saves them from drowning (Li 1998: 354–355).

Initially categorised as a subclass of the Dai or Yi minorities and granted a separate designation in 1979, making them the last confirmed ethnic group in the PRC (You 2013: 206–208, 211), the Jinuo have earned the epithet of "descendants of the maternal uncle" – a Chinese exonym that discloses further aspects of their matriarchal past and family organisation. Maternal uncles have retained a high degree of authority to this day, and the veneration of a deceased uncle by his sisters' children as well as by his own plays a role in Jinuo ancestral beliefs and worship practices. Uncles have the final say on marriage, which is forbidden between maternal cousins but allowed between paternal cousins after three generations. They can ratify a couple's marriage despite parental disapproval (West 2009, Wang 2014: 311–313).

Another explanation for the Jinuo ethnonym is found in the myth of Grandmother Apierer – an ancestral gourd who, when the flood waters recede, sacrifices herself to give life to the Jinuo and other minority groups living in the subtropical hills of Sipsongpanna. According to this explanation, the root *ji* in the compound word Jinuo means "to squeeze", while *nuo* means "the last." The myth tells that the Yi, Han-Chinese, Dai and Jinuo came out of the same "gourd", and are therefore all descendants of Apierer. It also tells that Mahei and Maniu, who had married out of fear that mankind was on the brink of extinction, discovered the gourd, cut open its "belly" button and freed the people inside. The last to jump out were the Jinuo, who continue to make offerings to Apierer on various ritual occasions and before each meal (Miller 1994: 68–73; Yuan 2015: 602–603).

The Jinuo's creation myths reflect the prominence of female ancestors in shaping kinship, social and ritual practices, while their reverence for maternal kin

and unwavering veneration of ancestral figures, like Amoyaobu and Apierer, attests to the resilience of matriarchal traditions in contexts otherwise dominated by patrilineal norms.

From the foregoing, common themes emerge, such as the link between incest taboos and natural catastrophes (e.g., floods, droughts, rising temperatures and icy blasts), the veneration of maternal ancestors, and the agency of nature in the formation of social structures. Among the Sani, Naxi, Lahu, Hani, and Jinuo, ancestral worship weaves human kinship into the fabric of the physical landscape, reflecting a worldview in which human existence is crafted by both natural and supernatural forces. Myths, along with the rituals associated with them, invoke genealogies of multi-species encounters, with flowers, stones, and trees becoming conduits between human and the supernatural. The frequent occurrence of female archetypes in all these myths points to the pivotal contribution of women to balancing the social and cosmic orders, strengthening ancestral ties with nature and instilling respect for the environment.

Role of women in conflict mediation and shamanism

As shown by the mythological examples above, female deities and ancestors mediate human–nature connectedness. Willing to sacrifice themselves to restore the broken balance and usher in new life, they are portrayed as immortal, bountiful and knowledgeable. By contrast, men are portrayed as able-bodied, uncultivated and dependent earthlings, ready to wage war against one another. While this aspect is further investigated with additional examples from the Mosuo and Nuosu, the ethnographic cases presented in this section shift the focus toward feminine symbolism in nature and women’s engagement in community affairs, which validates their decisional power and complementary role as shamanic ritualists.

Among the Mosuo and Nuosu, the high regard for women translates into specific roles in ritual and social contexts. Women, notably, are skilled at performing rituals that manage spiritual forces associated with childbearing, illness, and fertility. As with indigenous women in South and Southeast Asia (see, e.g., Rozario / Samuel 2002), they are not the sole repositories of these rituals, and may sometimes seem peripheral or even subordinate to male shamans or spiritual healers.²⁴ Nevertheless, their ritual actions do not passively reproduce the sym-

²⁴ TB speakers in Yunnan have different words for shaman(ess). The two Tungusic roots denoting this ritual specialist – i.e., *sam-*, meaning a bodily gesture (Lot-Falck 1977: 18), and *sa-*, “to know” (Diószegi 1974: 638) – suggest that the shaman performs a gestural activity (e.g., drum beating) and is knowledgeable (in curing illness). He or she may also fall into a trance to “understand the [secret] language of nature” (Eliade 1964: 96–97). Based on comparisons between Naxi and Yi (Nuosu) ritual manuscripts, scholars have concluded that due to extensive contact between shamans native to northern Yunnan and fleeing Tibetan monks of the Bön religion, a form of “shamanism without trance” developed out of the use of these manuscripts after Yunnan became a

bols controlled by their male counterparts. They fulfil a complementary function that is no less essential to the social efficacy of rituals. Moreover, they are primary actors in a variety of social contexts, and can help the community reach consensus on blood feuds or other sensitive issues, making them key assets in conflict resolution. Their role as mediators also extends to human-nature interactions, as is found in indigenous beliefs and practices. Like other animist peoples worldwide, the Mosuo and Nuosu attribute illness and weather-related crises to wrathful deities who guard over the well-being of the household and the broader community.

To influence these deities, they prescribe gender-specific ritual sequences, which often involve older women participating in communal ceremonies alongside or in place of male ritualists. In their role as ritual and social mediators, women embody a “maternal ethics of care and reciprocal giving” that deepens people’s empathic connection with deified nature. The notion of “matricultural principles” has recently been advanced to describe such an ethics (Previato 2021: 40–41, 54 n. 7). Here, I will take this postulate a step further to include cases where female ritualists coordinate life cycle ceremonies and alleviate calamities or illness, and where feminine symbolism, embedded in nature, resonates with prevailing myths and landscape beliefs.

Mosuo

There may be no clearer manifestation of women’s respectable status in society than the Mosuo’s uxorilocality and loose marriage customs. Unlike their Naxi “cousins” in nearby Lijiang, exclusive patrilateral cross-cousin marriages have not taken root among the Mosuo. They practice cohabitation (Mo. *ti dzi ji mao the*) and a poorly understood custom referred to as “furtive visits” (*nana sésé*, or *tisese*, lit. “walking back and forth”). The custom, rendered in Chinese as “walking marriage” (Ch. *zouhun*) or “friend marriage” (*azhu hunyin*), allows women to change their conjugal partners at will, while men live in separate households and keep distinct descent identities. Children born from these “visits” are raised within the mother’s family (Jackson 1971: 60, 69–70; McKhann 1995: 52–53 n. 24; Cai 2001: 185ff). As a result, the Mosuo are considered to be one of the few remaining matriarchal societies in the world.

The axis of Mosuo community life is the household head *dabu*, who can be either male or female, but in the majority of cases is a woman. Aged between 40 and 65, the *dabu* oversees nearly all aspects of the village economy, from land administration to family inheritance, from crop farming to other domestic and communal tasks (Göttner-Abendroth 2012: 108; Cai 2001: 122–125, 171–175; Shih 2001: 385). In particular, the *dabu* is empowered to intervene in clan

Chinese province and Buddhism spread in Naxi and Mosuo society(ies) over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Jackson 1979: 63–65, 73–74; Pan 1995: 113–118, 185–186). This implies that Mosuo, Naxi and Yi shamanism share the same origin. On shamanic healing through trance states, see Winkelman 2010.

disputes and, in collaboration with a *nda-ba* ritualist or Tibetan lama,²⁵ supervises life cycle events in her capacity as house priestess. These events comprise ceremonies to please the “spirits of the soil” (Ch. *dibu*) in exchange for an abundant harvest, as well as rites of passage where the (re)birth of a female ancestor is acclaimed or the help of a “tree spirit” (*shubao*) is sought during a traumatic childbirth (Göttner-Abendroth 2012: 113, and 129 n. 8; Bai 2000: 93).

Nda-ba shamanism blends nature, spirit and ancestor worship with elements derived from Tibetan Buddhism. In the *nda-ba* tradition, nature is humans’ half-sibling, with the same father and a different mother. All life forms and the primordial forces of nature (e.g., wind, lightning, thunder, and fire), are conceived of as emanations of the divine quintessence that permeates the cosmic universe. They are feared and appeased through appropriate ceremonies (Yan et al. 2008: 51).

For the Mosuo, such forces can cause illness or death if not dealt with swiftly. For example, a person who extinguishes a fire by urinating on it is likely to become ill and develop disturbing genital pathologies. Similarly, if someone offends the god of water, they will contract rashes or other skin ailments. For this reason, a distinction is made between wells for drinking water and wells or ponds housed by gods that make water unsuitable for human consumption. Cutting down trees around these ponds is forbidden. In addition, the landscape can affect human activities in other ways. While regular contact with gods through votive offerings (e.g., incense, alcohol, and grain) is usually considered sufficient to ensure well-being, there are some mountains and water streams that can make people weak and vulnerable to diseases, and others that can have the opposite effect (Li 2015: 83–99, 154–157; Wang et al. 1981: 115; He 2000: 73).

All of this requires the services of local ritual specialists, who, as in other TB cultures in Southwest China and throughout the Himalayas, often work in pairs. Before Buddhism became a major presence in Mosuo society during the eighteenth century, most public functions were performed by a *pu-pa* (male-female) pair of ritualists, with incantatory skills assigned to the men and divinatory skills to the women. Although some female ritualists (*pa-nda-ba*) held services in Yongning until 1949, Mosuo ritual specialists are predominantly men nowadays, at least in name. These considerations also apply to Naxi shamanism, where the trance techniques, divination and physical feats that up to the 1920–40s were the perquisites of *san-ba* (male or female) practitioners have been fully incorporated into male-only *dto-mba* priesthood offices (Mathieu 2003: 123, and 2015: 373–375; Chao 1996: 218–221).²⁶

25 The *nda-ba* refers either to the person, normally a man, who officiates ceremonies or to the set of animistic beliefs embodied by such person. It has long been assumed that *nda-ba* is an oral version of Naxi shamanism (*dto-mba*) but there is little corroboration for this claim (Mathieu 1998: 232). See also Rock 1959: 805.

26 Relatedly, Rock (1952: 30, 101–102 n. 58) points out that *dto-mba* priests used to call themselves *lli-bu*, and were at the same time *ssan-nyi* (a disrespectful appellation for “sorceress”). In fact, their offices were formerly run by women who cast horoscopes, spoke with the dead and expelled demons during night séances.

Despite this shift toward male-dominated ritual offices, women's authority remains unchallenged in Mosuo creation myths, which are fundamentally gynocentric. The story goes that the last surviving man on Earth, Tsozhiluyiyi, seeks help from Heaven and proposes to princess Tsehongjijimi (also known as Mumienzhami, lit. "celestial girl with horizontal eyes"). She agrees to marry him but one of her sisters, jealous of the happy couple, soon tricks Tsozhiluyiyi. The sister takes the shape of a muntjac and leads him deep into the mountains until he loses his way. Worried, Tsehongjijimi sends a male monkey to search for him. The monkey claims he couldn't find Tsozhiluyiyi and persuades Tsehongjijimi to take him as a companion instead. After twenty years, Tsozhiluyiyi finally returns home, only to find Tsehongjijimi living with the monkey and two half-monkey children. Tsozhiluyiyi kills the monkey but spares the children, whom he raises as his own, since he is now too old to father humanity. In this myth, which, as observed by Shih Chuan-kang, is an account of the absence, accidental nature and replaceability of fatherhood, everything of value to mankind comes from women. It is women, not men, who wield magic, give birth, invent agriculture, and bring plants, domesticated animals and tools into this world (Shih 2010: 228–230). In Christine Mathieu's recorded version of the myth, Tsehongjijimi epitomises women's primal connection to the nourishing element of water. As one of the daughters of the Sky Mother Gugumi, she is a *nāginī* (female *nāga*), associated with fertility, rainfall and autochthony. Mosuo clan genealogies trace descent to her union with an earthly male ancestor, whose individual rights to the land are established by virtue of this union (Mathieu 2003: 296–297, 400–401, 417 n. 140).

Another myth, the *Remugubv*, prominent in the Labei region south of Lake Lugu (Mo. *Xienami*, lit. "Mother Lake") on Yongning Plain, relates to the renewal of nature and hunting taboos. Performed every year on the second moon, the myth recounts the story of the mountain god Remugu and his brother Palassu, who fight over the ownership of wildlife assigned to them by Mulu Abaddu, a genderless sky god and founder of *nda-ba* shamanism. The brothers fight until Zhechegarmi – an eagle goddess comparable to the Indian Garuda – convinces them to make peace. Seeing that the Earth is drying up and there is no water left to drink, the eagle feels compassion for mankind and kills Remugu's snake-child, Zhessewoper, who is blamed for the drought. The water returns and Mosuo ancestors receive the rules of hunting (Mathieu 1998: 226–229).

In Mosuo myths, as best envisaged by the two narratives above, nature is permeated by a complex web of relationships with the spirits, deities and ghosts from the other world, all of whom share time and space with humans in this world. This is notably the case with mountains, which are deified and occupy a prominent place in Mosuo cosmology. While the Naxi tend to perceive their patron deities as more distant and transcendent, the Mosuo ascribe corporeality to the mountains. They consider most of the beings who dwell there, like

Remugu, not as mere lords of nature, but as giant relatives (Mathieu 1998: 224). Some of these beings may have equivalents in, or overlap with, the tutelary gods of Tibetan cosmology. Such a corporeal understanding of the divine is most discernible in the mountain dwelling of Hlidi Gemu (or Ganmu, Tib. *Seng-ge dkar-mo*, lit. “White Lioness”) – the anthropomorphised patroness of Yongning.

Canonised as the “First Mother”, Gemu resides on the “Lioness Peak”, bathing her feet in the western shore of the lake. Like the humans who revere her, she engages in free conjugal relationships with neighbouring mountain gods, demonstrating how kinship rules are projected onto the natural landscape. She protects the community like a family elder, but can also inflict contagious diseases, hailstones and other catastrophes, when, for example, somebody angers her by polluting the lake, felling trees or hunting near the peak during the season of *ri-rgya sdom-pa* (Tibetan for “territorial sealing”),²⁷ which imposes the ritual closing of mountain passes (Rock 1947: 382–383, 418–419; Shih 2010: 228; Previato 2021: 49). This makes her responsible for collective welfare, particularly the rise and fall of the population, the changes in crop yields and animal husbandry, as well as female fertility and childbirth.

On the 25th day of the seventh month of the Chinese agricultural calendar, people ascend the peak to make offerings, and obtain Gemu’s protection. Similar processions are held on the 15th day of the same month at the foot of Mount Wuaha, the abode of the strongest of all Mosuo male deities, who, despite his strength, ranks lower than Gemu in the *nda-ba* pantheon. Women who, after praying to Gemu, are still unable to bear children, visit the protectress Panden Lhamo (Tib. *dPal-l丹-lha-mo*) at the cave sacred to her, in the nearby Muli Tibetan Autonomous County in southwestern Sichuan, immersing themselves in her holy waters (Wang et al. 1981: 32–33). This practice mirrors Tibetan pilgrimages to mountain sites, where people seek to remove the “pollution” (Tib. *drib*, lit. “shadow”) that threatens human existence, above all health, fertility and material prosperity (Huber 1999: 16–17; Samuel 1993: 161).

Nuosu

The practical resourcefulness of women is recognised even in hierarchical Nuosu society. Remnants of matrilineal cultural elements are visible in the patterns of marriage and post-marital residence, as well as in cosmogonic myths and heroic elegies (Liu 2013). As in the above cases, Nuosu marital alliances between parallel cousins – e.g., a child of the father’s brother, or a child of the mother’s sister – are considered incestuous and ergo forbidden. The standard marriage is a cross-cousin type of marriage where, due to economic, status and

²⁷ For a general overview of this century-old custom, which entails a ceremony officiated by the lama authorities to restrict human activities above a certain altitude, see Huber 2004.

clan feuding concerns, preference is given to the daughter of one's own mother's brother. This makes Nuosu kinship a system in which men marry women who are their matrilateral cross-cousins (Lu 2001; Liu 2011: 155–156). Ma Changshou's 1930s ethnography of the "Great Cold Mountains" (modern-day Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture) in southern Sichuan notes that the Nuosu system of alliance is neither perfectly patrilineal nor matrilineal, but rather a "moiety" in that women represent the lineage of their natal family, and affinal ties revolve around the mother and her siblings, especially her brothers (Ma 2006, quoted in Liu 2011: 154–155).²⁸

The stature of married women is all the more evident in ceasefire resolutions between clans linked by marriage. A source of both antagonism and unity, wives are the focal point for tensions between kin. In the old days, a wife might take her own life on the spot to protest against feuding and require blood money as a compensation for her own parental lineage in the event of an armed conflict between her father's and husband's clan. This controversial yet time-honoured form of ritual suicide, known locally as *nga sy ne bby* (lit. "I give my death to you"; cf. Liu 2009: 400), was documented by Lin Yaohua on a field trip to Liangshan in 1943. Lin writes that "if the conflicting groups would not give up their weapons, she would take off her dresses and lie bare in the battlefield. It is then, and only then, [that] the parties concerned immediately cease combat and the woman being ashamed of herself commit[s] suicide" (Lin 1946: 88).

The template for other ritual behaviours and aspects of social intercourse – e.g., customary laws, marriage and funeral protocols, taboos against tree-cutting in sacred groves, and the killing of certain classes of animals – is exemplified in the *Hnewo teyy* ("Book of Origins"), one of the most important ritual texts in Nuosu shamanism. The text places humans on the same family tree together with other sentient beings, some with blood, and some without, such as stones, plants and land spirits. What both groups have in common is that they were transformed from reddish snow that fell from the sky after a dawn epoch of catastrophic warming, and are therefore labelled the "snow tribes", or "twelve sons of snow" (Nu. *vo nre sse ci nyix*) (Bender 2008). They share a genealogy with celestial and earthbound gods, or with the souls of ancestors and cultural heroes, like the legendary archer and saviour Zhyge Alu – born out of a woman's mating with a dragon-eagle – who prevented human extinction by shooting down the extra suns that were drying up the Earth. The *Hnewo teyy* is accompanied by the "Genealogy of [Early Ancestor] Shyly Wote", who is also counted among the descendants of the snow tribes. These "tribes" are part of an integrated cosmos, each operating under a specific set of environmental conditions and filling an ecological niche on land, in the seas, or in the sky (Bender et al. 2019: lxxx–lxxxiii).

28 On the maternal uncle as the most significant representative of the mother's lineage, refer to Lu 2001: 74.

The appended genealogy is full of allusions to women's respectability, mediating power and agricultural knowledge. Shyly Wote, referred to in some passages as a "cousin" or "nephew" from down the road, doesn't know his biological father and wanders in search of him, but finds a bride instead. Despite his poverty, he manages to marry the daughter of an upper-class (Nu. *nzymo*) family, who tests his knowledge, and he only manages to answer all the questions put to him with the help of his sister. His search for a father is another indication that Nuosu society has shifted from matrilineal to patrilineal kinship in the not too distant past (Bender et al. 2019: lxxi, lxxxvi–lxxxvii, 140–141 nn. 1, 6 and 15). There are other details in the story worth noting. After a few generations, the Sky God Ngeti Gunzy sends a fairy named Sisse Abbu to assist humans in harvesting their crops. In the meantime, Jjumu Vuvu, the youngest of three brothers and the sole survivor of a flood, befriends crows, ring-necked pheasants and other animals that facilitate his effort to establish a link with the sky. He then marries Hnituo, daughter of the sky god, who, behind her father's back, brings to earth the seeds of sweet buckwheat, hemp, and turnip – all staples of the Nuosu diet and lifestyle – but is eventually punished (ibid.: lxxi–lxxiii, 55–56).

The *Hnewo teyy* and other orally-transmitted texts of the Nuosu hint that the link with the non-human is maintained through mutual aid, and that the rituals performed by the *bimo* shamans are instrumental in preserving the balance of nature. Emerging in China in the early 1980s as a branch of *Yixue* (lit. "Yi studies"; cf. Harrell 2013), Yi scriptural shamanism or Bimoism is a rapidly expanding but under-documented area of research in Western academia. Although *bimo* texts contain valuable information on the origins of many customs and templates for ecologically oriented ritual behaviours that still carry social weight today, little effort has been made to reconstruct beliefs and practices through a gender lens.²⁹ The complementary role of female ritualists (Nu. *monyi*) in *bimo* ceremonies suggests that ritual actions are gender-specific, and that women can exercise agency even within male-dominated religious settings. In the scholarly literature, the *monyi* is subsumed under the broad category of *sunyi* (Kraef 2014: 148).

Unlike the *bimo*, which is a male-only occupation passed down from father or uncle to son and is rooted in extensive book knowledge, the *sunyi* can come from any clan, even the lowest (*gaxy*), and can be either a man or woman, with no literacy in the Yi scriptures. *Su* means "practitioner", and *nyi* "shaking." Resembling the *ssan-nyi* of Naxi shamanism, the *sunyi* is initiated into the profession after falling ill. He or she performs divination, and enters a trance

²⁹ Besides Bender's edited materials referenced in this paper, there are a few rare exceptions. Nérot (2019) brings in important reflections on gender roles in shamanism (see chapter 6 on female mediums and the Sani myth of Achema sung by the *bimo* in wedding ceremonies), but does not focus on the environment. Swancutt (2023) examines animistic perceptions of the environment in relation to forestry policy, making only passing remarks on gender.

state while dancing, frantically beating a hand drum, gong or ringing a bell. Possessed by the soul of an ancestor who died of the same illness, he or she can work through the spirits to cure others. Among the rituals that require the *bimo*'s presence are those for protection against calamities and diseases that are caused by malevolent spirits, the lower classes of which are dealt with by the *sunyi* (Bamo Qubumo 2001: 454 n. 5; Pan 1995: 113–114, 118–119). As Liu Shao-hua's findings on the spread of the HIV epidemic among Nuosu men and women show, these beliefs dominate Yi everyday life to a large extent (Liu 2009: 400).

The eco-cosmologies of the Mosuo and Nuosu people provide excellent material for studying interspecies dynamics and the agency of indigenous women in the contextually variable matricultural systems of upland Yunnan. In Mosuo society, women elders direct certain *nda-ba* shamanic rituals that involve nature and ancestor worship, while female mountain deities like Hlidi Gemu are believed to protect the community and punish those who violate customary laws or harm the environment. To a greater degree than the cosmogonic myths of any other group discussed in the previous section, Mosuo myths convey that the only man to survive the flood had little to do with the humans on Earth, and that a woman is credited with rebuilding the world from scratch. Such a cosmological framework finds an echo in the *dabu*'s role as household head and priestess in life transition rituals. The Nuosu tradition, as outlined in the *Hnewo teyy*, equally highlights the social stature, wisdom, and authority of women, despite the pervasive patrilineal system of descent. In *bimo* shamanism, female *sunyi* ritualists counterbalance the male-centred priesthood in communal ceremonies, with a gendered division of labour geared toward ensuring the socio-ecological balance. When not directly acting as ritualists, Mosuo and Nuosu women's contribution to community well-being is mostly evident in settling inter-clan conflicts. For Nuosu women, conflict resolution necessitates ritual suicide – a practice through which they can restore their natal family's reputation, redefine marital alliances, and assert their agency postmortem. This set of community-based enforcements, institutions and practices confirms women's roles in communal living, with gendered cosmologies, landscape beliefs, and ritual protocols all coming into play to achieve the desired balance.

It should be clear at this point that the community, in the extended sense that Qiangic and Ngwi minority cultures give to the term, is made to encompass nature spirits, ancestral souls, tutelary gods and mortal-born hero(in)es, each of whom has a share of responsibility for the well-being of others and requests submission and seasonal offerings from humans. Human relations with the non-human agents are kin or next-to-kin relations based on mutual obligation and giving. Women's initiative in these relations is solidified through mythical archetypes that may manifest in the animated landscape and are re-enacted in the public performance of rituals. In some rituals, women's divinatory

and shamanic skills are put to the service of the community to gain spiritual blessings and earthly rewards such as crop or human fertility, and good health. It follows that in the studied cultures, well-being is a gender-inclusive, multi-dimensional and inherently relational process with all the aforementioned agents, species or “persons” actively partaking in it. In a word, community well-being is the result of thoughtful interaction between symbiotic emergent “persons” with the capacity to act and be acted upon, evidencing an ontological continuity of internal faculties and without a clear-cut boundary between humans and non-humans.

Discussion

Qiangic and Ngwi minority cultures are cultures with very diverse and flexible kinship arrangements that speak of the hardship of sustaining life in high-altitude environments. Such environments require substantial adaptation and practical solutions to issues of biological and socio-economic reproduction. Containing clues to old matriarchal and uxorilocal marriage traditions, the eco-cosmologies of the few selected Yunnanese groups reveal that humans cannot prosper without positively engaging with deified nature. People’s spiritual concerns for nature and its inhabitants emphasise mutuality of being, with performative ways of “kinning” underlying trans-species engagements. Failing to make kin with nature would bring floods, droughts, hailstones, and illness, which explains why in the mytho-ritual repertoire of the studied groups natural disasters are always correlated with incest and irregular or neglected offerings. Any lapsed duty toward nature may entail divine punishment for the community. Consequently, nature spirits and the other moralising supernatural agents with whom male or female shamanic healers communicate in their rituals are inextricable from community well-being.

Relational empathy with other-than-human agents is more readily detected in groups such as the Mosuo and Nuosu, where women are a force to be reckoned with and their attendance at communal rituals is taken as a measure of community well-being. In these groups, married women are not estranged from their own natal family, which they represent whenever a conflict occurs. They are equal to their husbands and may serve as household (co)heads or village elders. Moreover, enduring brother-sister ties make women’s natal clans prominent players in society, sometimes even eclipsing marital clans, and mechanisms of inter-household cooperation give women some control over labour and the means of production. Communion with nature holds greater salience in those cultures where both male and female archetypal ancestors are worshipped and the life-giving power of women is celebrated in ceremonies pertaining to childcare,

illness or crop productivity. It is on such ceremonial occasions that elderly women take on liturgical duties and carry out public rituals in partnership with a male ritualist with whom they form a pair.

As a whole, Qiangic and Ngwi eco-visions show that environmental knowledge is stored in cosmogonic myths, and that animistic beliefs are meant to reinforce emotional affinity with nature. Humans' knowledge of the environment is engrained in an arena of customary practices, taboos, and ritualised behaviours at the intersection of gender, religion and ecology. In such an arena, humans enact their myths, beliefs and "memories" of post-diluvian hero(es), thereby coming into contact with stones, trees, animals, and earthbound spiritual entities who remind them of their communal and ritual obligations. Environmental knowledge is contextually constructed in a world beyond the human, where, as best expounded by Eduardo Kohn, "meaning is a constitutive feature of [that] world, and not just something humans impose on it" (Kohn 2013: 16). The non-human selves who (co)inhabit it and with whom humans establish ecological relations are active agents in meaning-making, in spite of the all-too-human attempts to dominate these relations and dismiss meaning(s) that are less profitable or anthropocentrically irrelevant.

Qiangic and Ngwi cosmologies provide a context for humans to learn how to become attuned to non-humans and to (re)signify ecological relations in more sustainable and cooperative ways. As a locus of nested meaning(s) about the environment, the eco-cosmologies treated in this paper inform notions of community that encompass – to keep using Kohn's analytical categories – "living minds and non-living matter, as well as the processes by which the former emerge from the latter" (Kohn 2013: 58). In such a community, subjecthood extends beyond the tangible limits of individual bodies and species, and mutually beneficial interactions across bodies and species boundaries are what determines community well-being. Well-being is more than just the wealth that nature harbours and dispenses to humans and other living selves. It is the product of a contractual relationship between life-forms, ancestral souls and the ever-present mountain, forest and elemental spirits who make up the numinous world. In other words, well-being has also a non-material dimension that depends on the capacity of humans to recognise the subjecthood of the numinous beings that populate the landscape.

The modality(ies) through which all these "selves" relate to one another and the communication that takes place between them at various levels oblige us to revise old assumptions about community. They also impel us to evaluate the potential of mythologems, beliefs and "memories" of extreme weather in nurturing an enlarged sense of community that is gender- and species-inclusive. If all-encompassing genealogies of descent as envisioned in the eco-cosmologies of Qiangic and Ngwi cultures can be a good means to instil feelings of con-

nectedness with nature and to raise awareness of impending environmental challenges, further theorising is needed to ascertain whether indigenous practices of relationality and matricultural modes of being, knowing and remembering can inspire sustainable solutions to such challenges, providing a new source of moral behaviour.

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