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Of Canons and Commodities: The Cultural Predicaments of Nuosu-Yi “Bimo Culture”

Olivia KRAEF

Abstract: The Nuosu are a subgroup of the so-called Yi ethnic group. Today around two million Nuosu live in Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province and translocal urban contexts, such as Chengdu and Beijing. For many centuries, the Nuosu have cultivated a belief system composed of a combination of animism and ancestor worship. Since the resurrection of religious activity across China that began in the early 1980s, this faith – represented by the three types of religious practitioners known as *bimo*, *sunyi*, and *monyi* – has reportedly been experiencing a comprehensive revival at folk level. For the *bimo*, this revival has been paralleled and increasingly overlaid by a scholarly reappraisal of Nuosu religion under premises other than religious. *Bimo* practice and identity have thus become subsumed under the illustrious concept of “*bimo* culture”. In this article, I trace the genealogy of the concept of “*bimo* culture” as part of a cultural canon of and for the Yi which is intended to promote development at the local level but which is also contributing to a weakening of the status of the *bimo* and Nuosu ritual life in Liangshan today.

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Keywords: China, Yi, Nuosu, Liangshan, Bimo, ethnic elites, religious policy, cultural canon

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Introduction

The Nuosu constitute a subgroup of the so-called Yi ethnic group and spread over Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces. Today around two million Nuosu live in Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture – a mountainous area in south-west Sichuan – and trans-local urban contexts, such as Chengdu and Beijing. (Nuosu territory originally encompassed an area larger than today’s Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture, also known as Da Liangshan (大凉山, Greater Liangshan). The term Liangshan (“cold mountains”) was coined by the Han Chinese (see Harrell 2000b: 3)). The Nuosu claim a special place within the larger Yi ethnic group. Geographical seclusion and the long history of opposition towards outside influence helped to maintain a distinct people, identity, and cultural heritage. Until 1956, when the area was claimed by Chinese communist forces, the Nuosu were an unruly people with great clan disputes over land, weapons, women, and power – they were thus often referred to as the “Independent Lolo” and their territory as “Independent Lololand” (Harrell 2001a: 10, 2001b: 64, 66; Bamo Ayi 2001: 118). (The denomination “Lolo” or “Luoluo” (傣傣), which was used to refer to the Nuosu and related tribes by the Han Chinese, is considered pejorative and has been replaced by the broader notion of an “Yi ethnic minority”.) With the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the rigid clan and caste system – which has the *nuobo* (诺伙, also 诺合, Black Yi or “nobles”) at the apex, the *qubo* (曲伙, White Yi or “commoners”) below them, and the two castes of the *mgapjie* and *gaxi* (阿加, 呷西, “serfs”) at its base – gave rise to the Marxist notion that the Nuosu were a “slave society”; this is a stigma which the Nuosu have been unable to rid themselves of to date. The Nuosu have their own language and script; in the local tongue, “Nuosu” (诺苏) simply means “people”.

For many centuries, the Nuosu have cultivated a belief system, which scholars describe as a combination of animism and ancestor worship. Ever since the resurrection of religious activity across China as part of the reform and opening policies after the early 1980s, this faith – represented by three types of religious practitioners known as *bimo* (毕摩, “ritual specialists or priests”), *sunyi* (苏尼, “male shamans”), and *monyi* (莫尼, “female shamans”) – has been reportedly experiencing a comprehensive revival at folk level. For the *bimo*, gen-

erally acknowledged as the central figure amongst these three types of religious agents, this revival has been paralleled and increasingly overlaid by a scholarly reappraisal of Nuosu religion under premises other than religious and by a reshifting of cultural markers that has come to locate the *bimo* at the core of Nuosu culture and even “Yi culture” as a whole. Within this context of reappraisal, *bimo* practice and identity has manifested itself in the illustrious concept of “*bimo* culture” during the last three decades – which has since been adopted by Yi (primarily Nuosu) and Chinese scholarly and political circles as the dominant stance on the *bimo* and issues pertaining to ritual beliefs in Liangshan. Both as a concept and increasingly as a commodity, “*bimo* culture” has been interacting in multiple ways with substantial efforts by Liangshan’s prefectural and county-level government to advance tourism and economic development in the area. Last but not least, this trend has recently resulted in concrete steps to promote the inclusion of “*bimo* culture” in China’s list of national intangible cultural heritage (ICH) assets.

In this article, I relate the terminological genesis, debates, and manifestations of Yi and Nuosu “*bimo* culture” and probe into the possible reasons and mechanisms behind the reconfiguration of Yi and Nuosu religious belief as a “cultural” rather than religious phenomenon. Instead of viewing the revival and political rehabilitation of the *bimo* as exclusively determined by Chinese reform and opening policies, I argue that the question of religion amongst the Nuosu, as well as the dominant vocabularies in the discussion surrounding “*bimo* culture” today, has its roots in scholarly discourses of nearly a century ago. These discourses include the work of renowned Chinese scholars such as Ma Xueliang and Lin Yaohua. I contest that their inherently hermeneutic approach was gradually expanded by Nuosu scholars and local elites in the 1980s to form the current notion of “*bimo* culture”. “*Bimo* culture” has undergone at least two reconfigurations: the creation of and the maintenance of a perspective that sees the *bimo* as the epitome of Nuosu culture and the core of Nuosu society.

Locating Bimo: Nuosu Society and Culture before 1956

Nuosu traditional religious belief has been described as a combination of animism and ancestor worship (Heberer 2006), or “indigen-

ous animism” (Olson 1998: 380). Alternatively, Chinese-language texts by Nuosu scholars on religious belief in Liangshan have employed the term *yuanshi zongjiao* (原始宗教, “original religion” or “primitive religion”) (Baqie 2004: 136f; Xie 2010; Meng 2009) and more recently *bimo zongjiao* (毕摩宗教, “*bimo* religion”) (Baqie 2004: 136f).

Amongst the Nuosu, all religious matters are regulated by the “religious specialists” (Bamo Qubumo 2001) of the *bimo*, the (male) *sunyi*, and the (female) *monyi*. In scholarly literature, the *sunyi* and *monyi* are generally subsumed under the term *sunyi* (Zeng et al. 2004: 116) and described as a type of *wushi* (巫师, “wizard” or “sorcerer”), who employ the beating of a goatskin drum and dancing to mediate with spirits and thereby rid clients of unwanted spiritual influences. Zeng et al. (2004: 116–117) list five different types of situations which usually call for a *sunyi* or *monyi* ritual intervention. Bamo Qubumo (2001: 454) describes the *sunyi* as “shamans” who together with the *bimo* act as “the mediators between humans and supernatural beings”. Furthermore, the *sunyi* as “religious specialists” derive their authority:

from spirit-possessed inspiration rather than from book knowledge; unlike a *bimo*, a *sunyi* may come from any clan, even from the serf or slave stratum, and could be either a man or a woman (Bamo Qubumo 2001: 454).

The *bimo* are generally considered the most important Nuosu religious or ritual practitioners. “*B?*” literally means “to recite or chant a scripture or to perform a ritual”, and “*mo*” is “a person with knowledge or accomplishment” (Bamo Ayi 2001: 119). The *bimo* is often described as a “high-status religious specialist” (Ma 2000: 51) of traditional and contemporary Nuosu society who presides over all major and minor rituals of life, death, major events, and celebrations and is versed in Nuosu history, astronomy, and (herbal) medicine. Specifically, the *bimo* are considered “mediators between human beings and [...] supernaturals [gods, ghosts, ancestors, spirits]” who represent their clients “to the supernaturals and even [control] people’s access to health and wealth through supernatural intervention” (Bamo Ayi 2001: 119).

In traditional Nuosu society and at the rural, semi-rural, and semi-urban levels in Liangshan today, the *bimo* fulfil vital functions for spiritual, physical, and social well-being – primarily in the form of rituals for good fortune, health matters, daily life, and funeral rites.

Bimo lineage and succession consists exclusively of males. Based on the notion of “polluted females”, “[f]emales have neither the right nor the opportunity to receive *bimo* education or engage in *bimo* professional activities” – this includes touching ritual instruments and partaking in certain rituals (Bamo Ayi 2001: 121). The exception to the rule was the daughter of the eminent *bimo* Asu Laze (阿苏拉则, Nuosu transliteration Ashy Lazzi), Lazzi Shysi. Bamo Ayi states that while Lazzi Shysi learned the:

highest-level magic from her father, understood the most powerful and complicated classics, had unusual talent [...] and was able to suppress demons, banish ghosts, and rescue people from dangerous accidents, she still had to dress in male clothing when she performed as a *bimo* (Bamo Ayi 2001: 119).

Eventually – and this part is lost in Bamo Ayi’s account – her real identity was discovered (both her ears were pierced, whereas Nuosu men only pierce their left earlobe), and she had to give up her practice immediately.

Almost all of the *bimo* clans come from a White Yi background (Harrell 2001b: 97; Lu 1999: 30). There are, though, many tales told by scholars and *bimo* alike that claim the *bimo* used to be of Black Yi descent, but fell from grace and became part of the commoner caste. Despite the prevalent depiction of traditional Nuosu society as a hierarchic system of three to four different castes (see above), it also featured five distinct social or professional groups, or *dengji* (等级, Aniu and Jilang 2007: 4; Interview 1 2011; variously translated into English as “strata” or “ranks”, Bamo Ayi 2001: 121), that cut across the caste system. These were the *zi* (兹, leaders), *mo* (莫, “mediators”), *bi* (毕, “religious mediators”), *ge* (格, “artisans”), and *zhuo* (卓, “commoners”). All *bimo* trace their genealogies back to Asu Laze – considered the greatest *bimo* of all time – who lived and practised in what is today known as the centre of Nuosu culture in Liangshan, Meigu County. (These five strata have also been described as preceding the later caste system (Aniu and Jilang 2007: 7). They are not to be confused with the caste system, though which easily happens due to a certain arbitrariness of the Chinese terminology. In Chinese, *dengji* (等级) and *jieceng* (阶层), which also means “stratum”, are used interchangeably, as in Aniu and Jilang, 2007: 6f.)

Due to the significance attributed to the *bimo* for Nuosu religion and culture, research on the *sunyi* and *monyi* has generally been neg-

lected. Reasons for the “religious” and therefore scholarly hierarchy of “high-status religious specialists” (Bamo Qubumo 2001: 455; Ma 2000: 51) versus “shamans” are unclear, but could have originally resulted from the fact that the *bimo* were (and still are) considered to be the most cultured of the three: the *bimo* could (and still can) read and write traditional Nuosu script. There is also a vast amount of *bimo* scriptures supporting *bimo* practice and rituals. After all, in a Chinese context, someone *you wenhua* (有文化, is “cultured”) if he or she is literate (i.e. educated). Furthermore, *bimo* research has its own distinct history dating back to the 1930s. Unlike the *sunyi* and *monyi*, the *bimo* have their own written tradition of scriptures and rituals, which is both complex and extensive and continues to attract the attention of Nuosu, non-Nuosu Chinese, and international researchers. Another reason why the *bimo* are generally deemed more important than the *sunyi* and *monyi* is the difference in their modes of initiation: the *sunyi* and *monyi* are initiated through illness or visions, while the *bimo* pass through a complex educational system.

After the Nuosu territory was claimed by communist forces in 1956, the so-called Democratic Reforms began almost immediately. In their function of maintaining the balance between this world and the netherworld and as part of the old Nuosu world order, the *bimo* were integral to sustaining the socio-political Nuosu caste hierarchy. Their religious duties and their role as supporters of clan politics and as mediators, which were outside of the state’s control, made the *bimo* politically unacceptable. During the general social and cultural upheavals after 1956, the *bimo* and *sunyi* were persecuted by local authorities (Heberer 2006: 53). Some of them recanted and became barefoot doctors, but the majority resisted this kind of accommodation with the new political order (Heberer 2006: 53). Religious suppression peaked during the ten turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and the *bimo* – like many other religious practitioners of different faiths in China – lost all physical and professional rights. *Bimo* practice and rituals were branded as *mixin* (迷信, “feudal superstition”) and forbidden, albeit secretly continued in many places according to some sources (Heberer 2006: 53; Bamo Ayi 2001: 118). Those discovered practising could expect severe punishment. The *bimo* were also forced to join “study groups” to be re-educated and were declared class enemies and targets of class struggle (Heberer 2006: 53; Bamo Ayi 2001: 118).

The Dawn of “Bimo Culture”: Reform and Cultural Revival in Liangshan

After the beginning of the reform policies in the early 1980s, the relaxation of political control and the new autonomy law in particular initiated a grand revival of local faith as part of a supposedly “dramatic revival of traditional [Nuosu] culture” (Bamo Qubumo 2001: 455). The liberalisation of religious practice allowed for overt organisation, implementation, and display of beliefs (mostly in the form of essential religious rituals), which are still regarded today as a major part of everyday Nuosu life in Liangshan. According to Bamo Ayi, “when minority policy turned away from promoting assimilation of Han ways”, both rural and semi-urban Nuosu “spontaneously” began “working toward the revitalization of traditional Nuosu culture”. In the villages, “the movement for cultural revitalization is characterized by the resurgence of the clans”, which in turn determined the revival of religious or ritual activities (Bamo Ayi 2001: 118). Here again, the *bimo* are linked to the political power structure in traditional (pre-1956) Nuosu society. A part of this “spontaneity” may also be attributed to Nuosu society’s acute need to compensate for large rituals (e.g. funerals) that could not be held during the Cultural Revolution. (This is somewhat akin to the revival of rituals as described by Mueggler 2001.)

“Bimo Culture” and the Legacy of Bamao Hermeneutics

There were other more apparent reasons for this type of revival, though, which went beyond the mere reappearance of *bimo* activity at grassroots level and which question the notion of a “spontaneous” or “bottom-up” phenomenon. *Bimo* revival in Liangshan was primarily a top-down occurrence given that it was largely determined by new legislation and incentives favourable to cultural revival. The new Chinese Convention of 1982 and, especially, the Nationalities Autonomy Law of 1984 marked the beginning of nationwide policies of ethnic pluralism and the reassessment of ethnic minority cultures (Harrell 2000b: 6). The nation’s diversity was no longer negated. The increasing presence of ethnic minorities in the national media and within the realm of academia were as much an indicator of the new political

trend as were the new laws that granted ethnic minorities (particularly their political elites) unprecedented command over their own affairs. The new laws and the new sense of local power they seemed to guarantee soon motivated ethnic elites all over China to reappropriate their own ethnic culture. As I have shown elsewhere (Kraef 2012), this motivation was in many instances co-determined by a keen awareness that the time had come to reshuffle notions of political power and (Marxist) stigma in order to consolidate local interests vis-à-vis the state.

The early 1980s in Liangshan also witnessed a major drive towards ethnification – a process that soon linked the political to the scholarly realm. Bamo Erha, former vice mayor of Liangshan prefecture, became a principal driving force in the process of new cultural development. Bamo Erha, who was then “actively pursuing his agenda of reviving and developing Yi culture” (Bamo, Harrell, and Ma 2007: 11), eventually motivated his elder daughters, Ayi and Qubumo, to pursue careers in academia and to undertake tasks which no woman, except perhaps Lazzi Shysi, had ever dared to do – namely, to become followers, and in this case researchers, of the *bimo*. In 1984 Bamo Ayi, the current deputy director general of the international department of China’s State Ethnic Affairs Commission, became the first Nuosu to pass the entrance test for graduate study at the renowned *Zhongyang Minzu Daxue* (中央民族大学, Minzu University of China, formerly the Central Institute for Nationalities, *Zhongyang Minzu Xueyuan*, 中央民族学院) and to focus on Yi historical documents as part of the master’s programme in the major Tibeto-Burman languages. Her advisor during both her master’s and her doctoral degree was Ma Xueliang.

Ma Xueliang (1913–1999) was a renowned Han Chinese ethnologist, philologist, and historian who authored numerous books on Yi and related languages and peoples (Bamo, Harrell, and Ma 2007: 304). Ma proved to be crucial for Bamo Ayi’s research on *bimo* in that he designed a class focused on “documentary and field research in Yi studies” especially for her (Bamo Ayi 2007: 11, 12). In *Fieldwork Connections* (Bamo, Harrell, and Ma 2007), where she relates the beginnings of her research on the *bimo*, Bamo Ayi recalls Ma Xueliang stating that:

if you want to understand Yi-language classics, you have to first understand rituals and customs. You need to understand the

meaning of the texts through rituals and customs; and, conversely, if you understand the basis of rituals through the texts, you can better understand the origins of the rituals (Bamo, Harrell, and Ma 2007: 12).

This logic of an inherent connection between language and religion reflected Ma Xueliang’s own research on *bimo* scriptures. In the early 1940s Ma had conducted extensive anthropological fieldwork amongst Yi groups, including a translation of *bimo* scriptures. His great interest in the scriptures was determined by his university education in the early days of the Chinese Revolution. During the turbulence of the anti-Japanese war, which forced the nation’s scholars and main universities to relocate (first to Chongqing and later to Kunming), Ma Xueliang became the assistant to writer and activist Wen Yiduo. Wen, in turn, was part of the lingering spirit of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which had placed strong emphasis on the reappropriation of textual sources in the quest for a unifying spirit of national development and political reinvigoration. This inspired a strong hermeneutic current in the assessment of local Han and minority cultures, which the fleeing scholars encountered en route to Kunming, and lastingly impacted these scholars’ work. In the ensuing discussion, I have chosen the term “hermeneutic” rather than “textual” to emphasise the cultural particularity (Han Chinese, etc) of this historical-ideological approach to Chinese minority textual sources, as well as to do justice to Ma Xueliang’s postulated reciprocity of textual and practical (rituals and customs) analyses.

As part of this hermeneutic approach, Ma’s research did not only determine Bamo Ayi’s later path-breaking definition of “*bimo* culture”, it also – perhaps more importantly – co-established Yi studies as an academic field. As a linguist who had been trained and raised in the spirit of “culture” as contested by the May Fourth Movement, Ma Xueliang was naturally drawn to the study of *bimo* scriptures. Yet his studies were not so much geared to their religious content. In his earliest definition of “*bimo* culture”, he stated the following:

The *bimo* is the standard of Yi culture (*yizu wenhua zhi benwei*, 彝文化之本位); he epitomises Yi culture (*yizu wenhua de jidachengzhe*, 彝文化的集大成者). The *bimo* scriptures and documents are the core of traditional Yi culture and involve issues such as social structure, historical development, cultural transmission, ethnopsychology, and ethnic identification. The study of *bimo* culture can be called “the key”

(*qian yi fa er dong quanshen*, “牵一发而动全身”) to Yi culture (ZMD-SYW, Chinese terms included for clarity).

This definition emphasises the centrality of the *bimo* – previously referred to as *bamao* (贝耄) in the works of, amongst others, Lin Yaohua and Ma Xueliang – to Nuosu society. For Ma Xueliang and other Han Chinese scholars before him, the scriptures both belonged to and were passed down by the *bimo*, who were practically the only group of people within traditional Nuosu society who could read and write. By pointing to the *bimo*'s key function for the understanding of Nuosu culture, Ma Xueliang took earlier observations by scholar Xu Yitang one step further. Xu had written extensively on religion amongst the Nuosu based on fieldwork in the 1940s and had denoted the *bimo* as the “most educated amongst the Luo people” (Li 2006: 250).

Scholars such as Xu Yitang, Ma Xueliang, and the frequently cited Lin Yaohua did not only acknowledge the existence of religion amongst the Nuosu but provided some of the first comprehensive attempts to describe and appropriate it. In 1943 scholar Lin Yaohua (1910–2000) conducted his first research (lasting 87 days) on the Nuosu and compiled his findings in his famous work *Liangshan Yijia de Jubian* (凉山彝家的巨变 1995). Lin Yaohua dedicated a large section of his report to a detailed description of faith in Liangshan. According to Lin (1995: 95) Nuosu religion (something he terms “a religion of an ‘early’ social character”) is inextricably connected to *wushu* (巫术, sorcery), and all Nuosu rituals adhere to *wushu*. Yet Lin does not use the term *wushu* in a derogatory way; on the contrary, it forms the basis of his explications of Nuosu ritual life. He considers both the *bimo* and the *sunyi* to be *wushu* (Lin 1995: 93f). For Lin, the difference between these two types of *wushu* lies in that they represent “different systems” – though they share the same goals in the practice of sorcery (Lin 1995: 94).

Although Lin Yaohua and Ma Xueliang sought to objectively describe Nuosu religion, they more or less retained the idea that this faith could not be considered a religion. The fundamental insight Ma Xueliang derived from translating and studying the scriptures was “mainly” an understanding of the “recording of primitive religion” (Li 2006: 332, my emphasis). This notion builds on Lin, who argued that Nuosu religion resembled that of primitive society; this later became part of Bamo Ayi's definition of “*bimo* culture”. Ma's shift towards a

cultural rather than a religious understanding of the *bimo* and their scriptures placed the *bimo* at the core of traditional Nuosu society.

Ma Xueliang’s work bears a vital dimension for the study and understanding of Nuosu society then and now. Not only did his emphasis on the *bimo* and their “culture” (as represented by their scriptures in Ma Xueliang’s approach) divert attention away from the lasting importance of the clans for Nuosu individual and group identity, it also questioned Ma Changshou’s findings of the late 1930s that claimed *bimo* practice and *bimo* social status were in fact already in steady decline – even in the Nuosu heartland (Ma, Li, and Zhou 2006: 546). Although Ma Changshou was, to my current knowledge, the earliest of all Han Chinese scholars to conduct comprehensive research on the Nuosu in Liangshan, his work is blatantly absent from Li’s recent study (2006) of early descriptions of Nuosu culture and society. In 1937 and 1939 Ma Changshou conducted extensive research on the Nuosu of Liangshan, which he later published under the title *Liangshan Luo Yi Kaocha Baogao* (Ma, Li, and Zhou 2006). In one memorable passage, Ma Changshou describes questioning a young Nuosu man as to why he did not wish to learn *bimo* practice and being told that the declining social status of the *bimo* provided no incentive to continue this practice. For Ma Changshou, the *bimo*’s loss of social status within the old social order was a result of the separation between worldly and religious power – namely, the differentiation within Nuosu society between the (above-mentioned) specialist groups or ranks of *nzy* and *bi*.

Diverging viewpoints in early research on the Nuosu also existed in the defining of Nuosu religion. On the basis of his fieldwork in Liangshan in 1941, Han Chinese scholar Jiang Yingliang ascertained that the Nuosu had “no notable religion worth studying” (Li 2006: 266). Ma Changshou (Ma, Li, and Zhou 2006: 531f) had already discussed the issue of Nuosu faith in the late 1930s, arguing that it could not be defined as “religion”. He noted that according to a “strict” meaning of religion the “ways the Luo Yi [Nuosu] deal with the supernatural could not be termed ‘religion’”. To prove his point, Ma cited the absence of the notion of prayer from Nuosu ritual life, pointing out that in a case of illness, the Nuosu do not pray to any spirits for a cure, but instead *song bun* (送魂, “send the soul”) or *zhou bun* (咒魂, “curse the soul”). To further support his argument, Ma Changshou highlights the fact that in Nuosu ritual beliefs – unlike in

a religion – the power of (Nuosu) human heroes extends to the heavens. He underlines his thesis with extensive examples from the rich heritage of Nuosu myths (Ma, Li, and Zhou 2006: 1532ff).

From Bamao to Bimo (Bimox) to “Bimo Culture”

Ma Xueliang’s research on the *bimo* not only provided the foundation for Bamo Ayi’s reappropriation of *bimo* practice and its social function under the reconfiguration of “*bimo* culture”, it also shaped the ensuing development of the term and its “developmental economies” as both a theory and a commodity. In a complex twist of rhetoric, it also determined Ma Xueliang’s inclusion into a canon of Yi studies. In his paper on the genesis of the field of Yi studies in China, Li Lie (2006) provides an in-depth discussion of the work of Ma Xueliang and Lin Yaohua, amongst others, with special emphasis on these scholars’ contributions to the body of research on the *bimo* and Nuosu religion. Li draws a clear line between the etic interpretations of Nuosu culture by Han Chinese scholars of the post–May Fourth generation and the emic understandings of early Nuosu intellectuals, such as Leng Guangdian and Qumu Zangyao. However, based on the scholarly impact he grants to Ma Xueliang’s work, Li clearly endows him with the status of co-founder of what has since become Yi studies. Despite or because of Li’s work, it is difficult to determine in retrospect whether Ma’s groundbreaking influence on the appreciation of the *bimo* and the establishment of Yi studies anticipated or ensued the publication of Ma Changshou’s research report in 2006.

Li’s work, which reads much like a “who’s who” in Yi studies and which was originally submitted as a doctoral dissertation to his supervisor Bamo Qubumo, reinforces the notion of an intricate connection between the scholarly appreciation of the *bimo* and the field of Yi studies. Specifically, Li’s chronological and topical discussion of what he has selected as the earliest and most significant works on “the Yi” reveals manifold points of intersection between the genesis of “*bimo* culture” and the genesis of modern-day Yi studies. This is reflected by Harrell’s work (2000a), which depicts (the beginning stages of) Yi studies to be as much an outcome of the re-ethnification of minority cultural discourse as they were part of the fundamental political changes of the 1980s. For Harrell, too, the *bimo* appear to

play a fundamental role. He notes that it was allegedly at one of the early Chinese Yi studies conferences in Kunming that:

it was decided [...] that the Nuosu term *bimox* would be adopted to refer to the priesthoods in all the diverse Yi written traditions, and that their knowledge, now defined as that of ethnic intellectuals rather than superstitious practitioners, was a legitimate topic for study and writing. This, to my knowledge, was the first instance of a major research effort that was directed specifically toward Yi concerns, rather than with using the Yi as a case study for some larger or more general theory (Harrell 2000a).

Harrell supports the notion that “*bimo* culture” was, at least originally, founded as a concept in its own right.

Modern Definitions of “Bimo Culture”

Ma Xueliang’s definition and interpretation of the *bimo* led to a major terminological step that had a lasting impact on later research on the *bimo*. Starting in the early 1980s as part of Bamo Ayi’s research on the *bimo* and Bamo Erha’s institutional support, an extended, “emi-fied” notion of “*bimo* culture” went from being a scholarly phenomenon to a direct outcome of the fundamental political changes and reappropriation of religious matters at the time. In its revamped and extended format, the notion of “*bimo* culture” not only marked the beginning of an entirely new (emic) appropriation of ethnic minority culture but also became the turning point for what is now called “Yi studies”.

Bamo Ayi, her sister Qubumo, and their students were largely influenced by what could be termed the “Ma Xueliang school” or “hermeneutic approach” within Yi studies – that is, the assumption that language in the form of written sources (*bimo* scriptures) forms the foundation for the understanding of “Yi culture”. Insisting that research on “*bimo* culture” required a clear understanding of what exactly demarcates it, Bamo Ayi (2003: 105) formulated the first comprehensive definition of the term in the early 1990s. For her, “*bimo* culture” is *yizhong tesbu de zongjiao wenhua* (一种特殊的宗教文化, “a type of special religious culture”) that is “created and passed on by the *bimo*; which is represented by recorded scriptures and rituals, and at whose core lies a combination of *shengui xinyang* (神鬼信仰, “ani-

mism”) and *wushu jiyi* (巫术祭仪, “sorcery-plus-sacrificial rites”)” (Bamo Ayi 2003: 105; Chinese terms included for clarity).

It is, furthermore, a type of “encyclopaedia-style comprehensive culture”, which “involves and holds many facets of Yi traditional culture”, such as “Yi philosophy, social history, educational ethics, astronomy and the calendar system, literature and the arts, customs and social rites, and medicine and hygiene.”

According to Bamo Ayi’s definition, “*bimo* culture” represents a “cultural system” and a set of specific contents. It is distinct from “‘written culture’ and ‘ritual culture’ as part of ‘orally transmitted culture’, and ‘everyday culture’” – that is, different from *minzhong wenhua* (民众文化, “common (Yi/ Nuosu) people’s culture”) (Bamo Ayi 2003: 105).

Much like Ma Xueliang, Bamo Ayi allocates the *bimo* a central role in Yi culture: “Bimo culture is the culture which is ‘created and transmitted’ by the *bimo* as a special group of *tesbu de shenzhi qunti* (特殊的神职群体, “religious practitioners”) within Yi society” (Bamo Ayi 2003: 105). Elsewhere, Bamo Ayi has described the *bimo* as “the only literate group in Nuosu areas”, and has noted that:

even today, they are the only ones who can read and understand traditional scriptures and old documents, compile historical scriptures, and write new texts relating to philosophy, literature, history, astronomy, medicine, agriculture, arts and crafts, rituals, religion, and ethics (Bamo Ayi 2001: 119).

According to Bamo Ayi, these skills determined the *bimo*’s position as “village intellectuals” (Bamo Ayi 2001: 119) – a view supported by her sister Qubumo, who summarised Ma Xueliang’s original designation of the *bimo* with Bamo Ayi’s elaborated definition (*Zhongguo Minzu Bao* 2006). This definition consensus was also reflected by the 4th International Conference on Yi Studies in August 2005 in Meigu County, Liangshan. The conference was primarily organised and coordinated by Bamo Qubumo, whose formulaic depictions of the *bimo* as *yizu chuantong de zhishifenzhi* (一种传统的知识分子, “the traditional intellectuals of the Yi people”), *yizu wenhua de zhuyao chuanbozhe* (彝族文化的主要传播者, “the main proponents of Yi culture”), and the ones who *yingxiang zhe yizu de zhengti wenhua xitong* (影响着彝族的整体文化系统, “determine the complete cultural system of the Yi”) have since permeated a variety of related articles and Internet platforms (CASS 2005a, 2005b).

Figure 1: A *bimo* in Traditional Attire, Bapu Town, Meigu County, Liangshan



Source: Olivia Kraef, August 2004.

Bamo Ayi’s definition of “*bimo* culture” is not only exclusive in that it draws a clear line between high culture (written transmission) and low culture (oral transmission), but also because it is founded on the principle of exclusion of religious terminologies which have been and continue to be used synonymously with “*bimo*” – most pertinently, the concepts of shamanism and (black) magic. This clear distinction

between (cultural) concepts and vocabularies is reiterated by Bamo Qubumo:

There is another religious specialist, the *sunyi*, or “shaman,” whose authority is derived from spirit-possessed inspiration rather than from book knowledge; [...] So, *bimo* refers to a man who engages in religious activities by reciting scriptures. Meanwhile, the *su* in *sunyi* means a person, and the *nyi* means shaking while dancing and beating a drum. A *sunyi* is akin to a shaman, or a religious practitioner who beats a drum, shakes, and dances exuberantly. The actions of a *bimo* are calm – he simply recites scripture; in contrast, a *sunyi* uses body language. If asked to describe the difference between *bimo* and *sunyi*, a Nuosu would tell you that a *bimo* is mild while a *sunyi* is wild; a *bimo* gracefully chants while a *sunyi* violently shakes (Bamo Qubumo 2001: 454).

Although the clear distinction between *bimo* and *sunyi* can already be found in Lin Yaohua (1995: 93f) and Ma Changshou (Ma, Li, and Zhou 2006), Bamo Qubumo’s comparison reflects the established notion of the *bimo* as intellectuals. The *sunyi*, in contrast, are regarded as shamans. This process of distinction (and essentially exclusion of the *sunyi* from intellectualism and cultural maintenance) serves to establish a more distinct picture of both the function and social standing of the *bimo* within Nuosu society and to legitimate the Nuosu (elites’) claim to a religious culture of their own under the notion of “*bimo* culture”. This elevation of the *bimo* has somewhat happened at the expense of the *sunyi*. Maybe this is the result of juxtaposing the calm recital of scriptures with wild dancing, shaking, and the beating of drums, which has generated a potentially derogatory distinction. This distinction, in turn, runs contrary to prevalent definitions of the concept of shamanism. According to Walter and Neumann (2004: xi), for instance, “[m]ost basically, shamanism can be defined as a religious belief system in which the shaman is the specialist in knowledge”. Although this definition encompasses the use of trance for the purpose of spirit mediation in the professional realm of a shaman – more typically a *sunyi* characteristic than *bimo* – Walter and Neumann’s notion of shamanism certainly implies the concept of “knowledge”. In the context of faith in Liangshan, though, the *bimo* are thus established as the only ones who have exclusive knowledge due to their literacy and compulsory education in scriptures and chanting.

Baqie (2004: 136) reintroduces the question of magic into the modern debate on “*bimo* culture”, but does so only in relation to the *sunyi*. According to him, the Nuosu “primitive/ original religion phenomenon” “formed two types of religion” – namely, *bimo zongjiao wenhua* (毕摩宗教文化, “*bimo* religious culture”) as represented by the *bimo* and *saman wuxi wenhua* (萨满巫覡文化, “shaman wizard culture”) as represented by the *sunyi* (Baqie 2004: 136). Noteworthy here is the fact that “shaman” is not paired with the term *jiao* (教), which would depict a religion or faith of some sort, but with *wenhua* (文化, “culture”). Whereas this tactic may serve to further neutralise the notion of (black) magic in Nuosu ritual life and thus turn it into a civilised culture of knowledge, Bamo Qubumo’s agenda may have been geared more towards establishing “*bimo* culture” as a “culture” in its own right – that is, alongside other officially recognised realms of religious “culture”, such as “Naxi Dongba culture” and “northern shaman culture”.

“Naxi Dongba culture” refers to an ancient “animistic belief system” of the Naxi ethnic minority in China’s Yunnan province (ADCA n.d.). *Dongba* (lit. “knowledgeable one”) both designates this belief system – primarily expressed via handwritten documents in Dongba writing (which consists of pictographs and is promoted as the only hieroglyphic writing system still in use today) – and the Naxi shamans who practice this belief (ADCA n.d.). Similar to the *bimo*, Naxi Dongba shamans “occupy hereditary positions” and “act as intermediaries between heaven, humanity and earth” (ADCA n.d.). They must be “well versed in ancient dances, literature, traditional medicine and folk customs to effectively perform ceremonial, divinatory and healing duties” (ADCA n.d.). Activities and fields of local knowledge mastered by the Dongba shaman include arts and crafts, scholarship, religion, and medicine; these “somehow exceed the tasks of an ordinary shaman” (ADCA n.d.):

[F]or this reason Dongba shamans are primarily considered being the bearers of Dongba culture, which consists mainly of the Dongba religion, the arts, classic scriptures and pictographic Dongba script (ADCA n.d.).

This description of Dongba “shamans” and script bears a striking resemblance to the rhetoric of “*bimo* culture” hermeneutics. It could be argued that the scholarly discourse on “*bimo* culture” (as headed by the Bamo sisters) in many ways used “Naxi Dongba culture” as a

blueprint to establish “*bimo* culture” as an academic field of interest and to create the notion of “*bimo* culture” as a founding element of Yi studies and thus as a central element of “Yi culture”. Indeed, when I first interviewed Bamo Qubumo in Beijing in March 2002, she related the amount of research she had already conducted on “Dongba culture”. Nevertheless, unlike “Dongba culture”, “*bimo* culture” is yet to receive the same level of recognition by the Chinese state and UNESCO (see ADCA n.d.).

Perhaps not quite as spectacular or vocal as “Naxi Dongba culture”, the notion of a “northern shaman culture” in China, as well as its “protection”, has also gained substantial academic and political momentum over the past decade. In an interesting twist of rhetoric, the “shaman culture” of China’s north-eastern provinces has thus come to demarcate a “vital place of origin of global shamanism” and has given rise to regularly staged shaman performances, which are part of those areas’ efforts to have northern Chinese shamanism accepted by UNESCO into the ICH ranks (China Northeast Government Xinhuaawang 2007).

By defining the *bimo* as “intellectuals” and their practice as “culture”, “*bimo* culture” is separated from the potentially condescending notion of “shamanism” and cast instead as intellectual and rational. In regard to Nuosu religion, these omissions correspond to questions involving taboos and the dark side of occult practices (e.g. curses) and to the seemingly uncontrolled (as in unsanctioned) body language during rituals. In religious or ritual contexts, however, it seems questionable to try and differentiate between a transcendental state of mind that is achieved via chanting and one via dancing and drumming. In the *bimo* exhibition hall of *Liangshanzhou Nuli Bowuguan* (凉山州奴隶博物馆, Liangshan Prefecture Slave Museum), there is at least a brief mention of the fact that the *bimo* also conducted complex, and potentially large-scale *zhou hun* (咒魂, “soul cursing”) rituals. Similarly, there were designated “curse *bimo*” in Meigu; they do not appear in the “*bimo* culture” discourse, because dark magic is irreconcilable with notions of modernity and civilisation. But the “curse *bimo*” and curses played a very important role in pre-liberation Liangshan, especially in cases of escaped slaves and clan feuds (as is partially illustrated in the film *The Bimo Records*, discussed below).

It is understandable that some authors should seek to distance Nuosu religion from derogatory and misleading concepts such as

mixin (“feudal superstition”). Such steps, however, require both a discussion and consensus regarding new terminology. This dilemma is also revealed by the contemporary English-language terminology generally employed in discussions on the *bimo* and *sunyi*. By using “practitioner” and “specialist” interchangeably, these come to mean the same thing. In traditional Nuosu society, the idea of five different professional ranks reflects a traditional understanding of specialists. If then – as Bamo Qubumo (2001) highlights – the *sunyi* and *monyi* occupy an inferior sociocultural standing compared to the *bimo*, and if the *sunyi* and *monyi* were obviously not part of the five professional groups in traditional Nuosu society, then referring to the *sunyi* and *monyi* with the same terms used for the *bimo* should be reconsidered. The idea of the *bimo* as the core of traditional Nuosu ritual belief and “Yi culture” in general creates an internal hierarchisation of cultural and social roles and functions. An emphasis on the role of the *bimo* in Nuosu religion has already seen the study of *sunyi* and especially *monyi* traditions marginalised. In the long run, this may lead to further top-down fragmentation within Nuosu religion (as *sunyi* and *monyi* practice receive little official or scholarly attention or support); in turn, this could further weaken the coherence and long-term sustainability of religious practice in Liangshan.

Rhetorically, Bamo Ayi and Bamo Qubumo extended the demarcation of Ma Xueliang’s original textual limitations with notions of a discursive “system”. This system still allowed for the circumnavigation or reshuffling of religious terminology (such as *zongjiao*, 宗教) – a trend Bamo Ayi certainly, if only partially, reversed in English publications (for instance Bamo Ayi 2001) – while redefining the parameters of “culture”. Although Bamo Ayi admits that there is a core consisting of animism and sorcery in “*bimo* culture”, this core is diminished by an emphasis on its comprehensive “extensions”, which encompass via time and space all that is defined as “Yi culture”. Culture here, though, remains “high culture”, and “*bimo* culture” as understood by Bamo Ayi comes to exclude all things “common” or “folk”. Bamo’s terminological manoeuvre proved sustainable in making “*bimo* culture” acceptable in scholarly and ultimately official circles (Liangshan) and thus enabled Bamo Ayi to stay clear of the complex question of religion. In Bamo Qubumo’s definition, too, the aspect of sorcery or wizardry is completely absent. Her emphasis on an understanding of “*bimo* culture” as (yet) another type of (religious) “cul-

ture” – which exists alongside other faiths in their very local expressions (here “Naxi Dongba culture” and “shaman culture” in north-eastern China; Bamo Qubumo in interview 2002) and thus embodies a distinct “culture” – further paves the way for the public and official appreciation of “*bimo* culture” as indeed a “special religious culture”, which is based on a sophisticated writing system and maintained by the *bimo* as intellectuals. Through Bamo Ayi and the political-scholarly (and now essentially emic) vantage point of Nuosu elites in Liangshan, “*bimo* culture” thus advanced from a scholarly reappropriation of religion in Liangshan to an emphasis on the notion of “culture” and determined the progression of the *bimo* to centre stage in modern Nuosu society and development in Liangshan as a whole.

The Institutionalisation of “Bimo Culture”

The scholarly discourse, which in its revitalised format had never quite been separate from local political and economic concerns, officially merged with Liangshan prefecture’s development policies in the mid- to late 1990s and continued to intensify after the year 2000. This unification has resulted in a drive to institutionalise the *bimo* and “*bimo* culture” at the local level. Its most notable measures include the founding of the *Meigu Xian Bimo Wenbua Yanjiu Zhongxin* (美姑县毕摩文化研究中心, Meigu County Bimo Culture Research Centre; hereafter, MCBCRC), *bimo* (museum) exhibitions, and local public and media performances featuring *bimo* and “*bimo* culture”.

The Bamo sisters’ efforts to establish and popularise research on “*bimo* culture” led to the founding of the MCBCRC in Bapu, Meigu, in 1996. The sisters had conducted a substantial part of their fieldwork in Meigu County, which has since been officially designated as *bimo zhi xiang* (毕摩之乡, “home of the *bimo*”). The founding of the centre received substantial support from local authorities, especially those whose families were directly affiliated with one of the many *bimo* families in the county. Initially, the centre focused on accommodating national and international scholars wishing to conduct research on the *bimo*. It organised scholarly field trips, offered a library, provided help with translations and other resources, and held regular scholarly meetings and conferences. Gaha Shizhe, a native of Meigu County, was appointed head of operations until 2014. The centre has a small group of permanent staff, which includes scholars and admin-

istrative personnel. In an interview in August 2011, Gaha mentioned the centre’s shift in emphasis from supporting *bimo* research to promoting literacy and the general use of standard Chinese in the area (Interview 1). Although the centre’s workload has diminished over the past nine years, it continues to publish its own magazine, *Bimo Wenbua* (毕摩文化, lit. “*bimo* culture” though the official English title is *Bimo Practice*), and is still a major resource for scholars, development workers, and the media.

If the founding of the MCBCRC signified the official institution-alisation of the *bimo* and “*bimo* culture” – as well as the “value” of the *bimo* and “*bimo* culture” in regard to religious, cultural, and scholarly concerns – then the year 2004 marked the beginning of the economic and developmental importance of the *bimo* and “*bimo* culture” for Meigu County. Various *bimo* and “*bimo* culture” publications appeared in relation to (a) tourism development in Liangshan; (b) ecological systems, heritage, and preservation; and (c) China’s drive to protect its ICH (e.g. Aniu and Jilang 2007; Xie 2010). This transition from focusing on ritual descriptions, scripture analysis, and the *bimo* as the epitome of Nuosu culture to being concerned with developmental issues and the role of the *bimo* as the primary catalyst of the development of “Yi culture” coincided with Shen Luqing’s term as mayor of Meigu County (2004–2006).

Shen, supposedly a native of Meigu County, is currently head of Liangshan prefecture’s Tourism Bureau. During his time as Meigu County mayor, he played a crucial role in advancing policies geared towards the county’s development and substantially expanded Meigu’s reputation as the heartland of Nuosu culture. He achieved this via a plethora of policies and activities that not only promoted a joint strategy involving “*bimo* culture” and economic development but also facilitated the cooperation between academic and economic (tourism) agents to comprehensively develop the *bimo* as an “economic (tourism) resource” (Gaha 2004: 105ff; see also Mi 2004). For Meigu County, notoriously underdeveloped due to geographical factors and a clear dearth of local industry, the *bimo* and “*bimo* culture” thus became a major commodity for cultural “export”. Under Shen’s tutelage, the Meigu County administration began supporting and investing in *bimo* development work at the rural and especially semi-rural levels. This included building (albeit never completing) the “*bimo* culture village” and the “*bimo* culture show centre” (see also Aniu and

Jilang 2007: 248), holding semi-scholarly *bimo* meetings at the county level, and reorganising and relaunching Meigu's song and dance troupe. Last but not least, Shen organised the 4th International Conference on Yi Studies which took place in Bapu Town, 19–24 August 2005.

As part of Gaha's proposed measures for the development of the *bimo* as an economic agent, Meigu also began staging ritual performances – for instance, as part of the 4th International Conference on Yi Studies. The repertoire of the Meigu song and dance troupe was extended to include local *bimo* performances. Those *bimo* who agreed to become part of these performances received a regular wage for their iron-licking stunts and catwalk displays of ethnic costume. In August 2004 and again in June and August 2005, I witnessed several of these shows at the local theatre. Until Shen was transferred to another post outside of Meigu in 2006, these performances were regularly held for both visitors and locals. Most of the performing *bimo* were part of a group that was also actively promoted by the MCBCRC. They regularly participated in the centre's county-level activities and also featured in local conferences and scholarly meetings as designated Yi “intellectuals”. In August 2004 I attended a *bimo* conference in Bapu, to which the Meigu County administration had invited distinguished local and international scholars, as well as several of these *bimo*. Some of these *bimo* even starred in film and television productions.

With the assistance of the MCBCRC and the Bamo sisters, Shen also oversaw the most prestigious and certainly most expensive *bimo* media project so far: *The Bimo Records* (毕摩纪, *Bimo Ji*, 2006). Directed by Yang Rui, *Bimo Ji* was described as a “beautiful documentary” (Yang 2006) that tells the stories of three very different *bimo* (“the good-magic shaman, the revenge shaman and the communist cadre shaman”) and a Nuosu school teacher in Lama Jolo Township, Meigu County – though Yang has said the film is not a documentary but instead a *yishu pian* (艺术片, “art film”) that seeks to “show” *zongjiaogan* (宗教感, lit. “religious feeling”) (Yang 2006). Rather than providing a clear focus on the cause of the *bimo*, the film's emphasis on imagery and the impressive interplay of light and shadow intends to show an almost otherworldly sociocultural reality (Yang 2006). Despite the fact that the film was widely acclaimed in Greater China and the UK (NYU 2010), it left a number of Nuosu with mixed feel-

ings – especially those Nuosu scholars, artists, and politicians who had been involved in its preparation and production (including Bamo Ayi) and had secretly hoped that the film would further promote “*bimo* culture” as a platform for Nuosu culture in Liangshan.

Through the collective efforts of Shen Luqing and others, “*bimo* culture” has come to entail not only a revised notion of “civilisation” but has also undergone a smooth integration into broader plans for tourism and economic development. Only a few years ago, the *bimo* in Liangshan were represented by few scholarly publications and an underwhelming permanent exhibition at the “*bimo* culture” hall at the *Liangshanzhōu Yizū Nuli Bowuguan* (officially translated as Museum of Slave Society of Yi Nationality in Liangshan prefecture). Since then, Shen has turned the *bimo* into a veritable presence in local Liangshan cultural politics. In 2011 new plans for marketing the *bimo* were underway. Shen is apparently launching a new 10-year tourism development plan for Liangshan, which may also include the infamous “*bimo* culture village”.

“Bimo Culture” as Intangible Cultural Heritage

The developments described above have recently found their theoretical and empirical catharsis in the quest to have “*bimo* culture” included in China’s national intangible cultural heritage (ICH) list (TZB n.d.). As a first step towards this goal, *bimo* scriptures were accepted into China’s heritage archives in March 2010 (see Wang 2010). According to a recent publication on the “ICH character” of “*bimo* culture”, Bamo Ayi’s definition of “*bimo* culture” is the primary of two main “misunderstandings” that are “obstructing” the ICH application of “*bimo* culture”, as well as its protection (Xie 2010: 2). The second “misunderstanding” is that “*bimo* culture” has been falsely taken for “feudal superstition”.

Although the term “*bimo* culture” is maintained, there is a clear deviation from Bamo Ayi’s definition. Xie confirms the denomination of the *bimo* as the main religious practitioners as well as their “ritual and folk knowledge”. He also maintains the notion of the *bimo* as intellectuals and their role as “protectors” and “promoters” of “Yi culture” (Xie 2010: 4). Yet although “*bimo* culture” is understood as having been “created by the *bimo*”, the vital distinction between Xie and Bamo Ayi lies in the latter’s equation of “*bimo* culture” with “reli-

gious culture”. Moreover, Bamo Ayi promoted differentiating between “*bimo* culture” and “folk culture”. Xie, however, reintegrates the latter into the former – thus locating “*bimo* culture” as a “culture” “at the heart of Yi folk-transmitted culture” (Xie 2010: 5).

This redefined notion of “*bimo* culture” allows Xie and the group of co-authors to adapt it to the factors determining and legitimising an application for protection and development through ICH status. At the same time, it represents a more comprehensive solution to the problem of situating religion and its stigmatisation (for instance as *mixin* or “feudal superstition”). Through the erasure of Bamo Ayi’s earlier distinction of “*bimo* culture” as a type of “high” culture and “folk culture”, the new ICH-acceptable definition for the first time incorporates different notions of “culture” as they have increasingly been used in a *bimo* and Yi (Nuosu) cultural discourse since at least the mid-1990s. Specifically, Xie’s publication not only re-evaluates the value and importance of *bimo* scriptures – and Yi script in general – for “Yi culture”, it also includes references to other (inherently Chinese) cultural vocabularies (such as the notion of *yuanshengtai*) that have both marked and demarcated ethnic minority cultural discourse since 2003. In Xie’s treatise Liangshan reverts back to the “rare and only ‘*bimo* culture primitive natural environment’ in China” (Xie 2010: 2).

An extended definition of “*bimo* culture” also allows for the inclusion of other aspects, which were formerly omitted or altered in the Bamo sisters’ definition – thus enhancing its potential for ICH status. For example, *bimo* chants and chanting are included as artistic characteristics under the category of “artistic value” or “music and dance value” and are deemed particularly relevant as a basis for the study of folk-song traditions in an Yi context (Xie 2010: 32). Relating this last point back to the Bamo sisters’ delineation between “*bimo* culture” and “shamanism”, chanting here becomes an art rather than a religious or spiritual device, thus further confining it within politically and culturally acceptable terms.

“Bimo Culture” versus the Bimo?

Political displacement and redirection (Schechner 2003) of *bimo* practice may prove to be a strong factor in the continuing decline of local folk *bimo* practice in Liangshan. Interestingly, the results of this trend have recently been criticised from within the ranks of Nuosu *bimo*

scholars. In 2005 Nuosu linguist Munai Reha pointed out the necessity to identify those parts of local “*bimo* cultural resources” which “should be preserved and saved before development” and claimed that these “resources should be reasonably developed” in order to avoid the risk that “the balance of the local cultural ecology will be broken” (Munai 2005). Munai Reha’s master’s student Sha Zhijun makes a similar argument – although he sees “outside forces” (Sha 2006) rather than emic (scholarly) or local efforts negatively impacting “*bimo* culture” in Meigu.

In an interview in August 2011, Gaha Shizhe lamented the steady and “inexplicable” decline of the number of practising *bimo* in Meigu since the first *bimo* census by the MCBCRC in 1996 (Interview 1). The first census revealed that there were 8,680 *bimo* in Meigu alone, which saw Meigu County account for the highest density of *bimo* amongst all counties in Liangshan. However, subsequent censuses in 2002 and 2010 showed that the number of practising *bimo* had dropped to around 5,000 and then 2,973, respectively (Gaha 2004; Interview 1). For Gaha, though, this demise in practice is not the most worrisome aspect, but rather the drastic decline in the depth of traditional knowledge of the scriptures and rituals. The younger *bimo* increasingly extend and ameliorate rituals to accommodate both clients’ needs and hide the fact that they lack the expertise required for these rituals. Gaha also laments the deterioration in copying and in the number of available *bimo* scriptures.

Rural and semi-urban Nuosu still consult the *bimo* in all matters pertaining to life, death, illness, and everyday good fortune. I have not been able to find out whether the *bimo* are still asked, willing, and/ or able to perform cursing rituals. For the common people as much as for Nuosu officials in Liangshan, the *bimo* are a part of everyday life and the masters of the important annual good-luck rituals every Nuosu family in and outside of Liangshan is expected by tradition to perform. In the county town of Bapu, there are at least two places where *bimo* and *monyi* offer their services on a daily basis. In Xichang, Shengli Daqiao (“Victory Bridge”) has become a meeting point for *bimo*. Here, they provide various consulting services for a range of fees. From conversations with younger Nuosu, I understood that the *bimo* has come to act as a type of *minjian/ minzu xinliyisheng* (民间/民族心理医生, “folk psychologist”) in this public function.

Figure 2: A *bimo* Offering Consultation on the Side of the Road, Xinqu, Bapu Town, Meigu County



Source: Olivia Kraef, April 2006.

The evident rapid decline in the number of *bimo* and *bimo* knowledge and scriptures in Liangshan demands an explanation. Compulsory nine-year state education and migration have certainly all contributed to ruptures in the transmission and lineage of *bimo* practice and knowledge. Even alternative, non-hereditary lineage practices such as apprenticeships (Bamo Ayi 2001: 122f) cannot bridge this generation and knowledge gap. Although *bimo* practice has for many become a

much more lucrative business than it was perhaps ten or more years ago, it still does not offer young Nuosu men the same level of economic promise as does migration to larger cities, such as Chengdu and Guangzhou. Also, the influx of modern media has opened up a new world to youngsters. For young Nuosu men, the desire for modernity and development, which television and the Internet carry into Liangshan’s remote corners, may be stronger than the wish to commit their lives to becoming a *da bimo* (大毕摩, great *bimo*). The question also remains as to whether the introduction of the new simplified writing system as part of the Nuosu language reform has not also severely impacted the continuation of written *bimo* tradition in Liangshan (Kraef 2013).

But *bimo* practice, knowledge, and cohesion are not undermined only by policies and developments that run contrary to their persistence and maintenance, but also – ironically – by those Nuosu academics and public figures most versed in *bimo* knowledge who do not recognise the legitimacy of *bimo* practice and instead continue to consider it *mixin*. Ironic, too, are the diminishing number of *bimo* scriptures in Meigu and the underwhelming exhibit of the “*bimo* culture” showroom in the Liangshan Slave Museum if one considers the rumours that old scriptures which survived the large-scale scripture burnings of the Cultural Revolution were on sale in some backyard in Xichang for a lot of money until only a few years ago.

Conclusion: Yiology, Bimology, and the Canonisation of Yi (Nuosu) Culture

Parallel to groundbreaking new policies, the re-ethnification of ethnic and local cultures, and the revival of religious activity across China in the early 1980s, Nuosu religion in Liangshan has undergone a rapid reappraisal and restimulation at both the local and folk levels. Most pronouncedly, it has also become an integral part of scholarly, official, and developmental discourses. At the official level, Nuosu ritual life is directly subsumed under the idea of the *bimo* as intellectuals, religious specialists, and practitioners who symbolise the core of Nuosu (and Yi) culture as a whole. Accordingly, Bamo Ayi’s (2003) comprehensive formulation of “*bimo* culture” on the basis of a revisited, originally etic hermeneutics has since become a very heterogeneous

concept and tool in a variety of different academic, official, and economic settings.

The process of reconfiguring the notion of Nuosu religion as “*bimo* culture” is grounded on inherently conflicting interpretations and approaches. Ma Xueliang engaged in extended participation in *bimo* life in Liangshan, but his focus was rather on the translation and description of *bimo* scriptures and rituals, and his interpretation of the social status of *bimo* was based on an essentially hermeneutic approach to culture. For him, it was the texts (scriptures), rather than the social practices, which constituted the basis of an understanding of “Yi culture” and which located the *bimo* at the core of Nuosu society. Studies such as that by Ma Changshou (Ma, Li, and Zhou 2006), however, found that *bimo* practice and faith were in decline even before the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The significant decrease in the number of practising *bimo* and the diminishing scope of religious practice in Liangshan can be interpreted with arguments apart from those which solely blame post-1949 Chinese politics.

Consequently, “*bimo* culture” is not just a top-down phenomenon which can be exclusively understood in terms of a state–minority dichotomy. Rather, Nuosu elites are employing state policies and discourses to create an emic displacement of religious activity with the aim of re-establishing their own ideas of culture, and for the purpose of (re-)creating a cultural canon. This canon is as much a vehicle for expanding these elites’ (local) power as it is for promoting development at the local level. Also, the *bimo* as an isolated “cultural” phenomenon and their new position as representatives of their people’s culture and identity has been implemented as a welcome instrument for the decentring of the politically and culturally irreconcilable role still played by the Nuosu clans in the determination of Nuosu individual and group identity. By definition, this process of canonising the *bimo* and “Yi culture” implies an exclusion of sorts – at the very least it entails a circumnavigation of problematic terminology such as “religion”. It also involves the elites’ active attempts to reconfigure a heritage of derogatory aspects stemming from the ethnic classification in the 1950s (e.g. being denoted as “backward” or a “slave society”) – something the Nuosu have been grappling with for more than half a century – in order to accommodate these into improved terms of historical and cultural imagery, or even overcome them.

Apart from the ideological implications of its terminological development, the emic, hermeneutic, and economic-cultural (performative) displacement and reconfiguration of “*bimo* culture” – and the aims associated with it – have not always been smooth or stringent. Scholarly disputes continue to run parallel to each other, rather than in direct confrontation, and are constantly reshuffled together with the influences of economic and tourism development in order to produce yet more possible uses for “*bimo* culture”. The internal reconfiguration of the *bimo*’s universe as “*bimo* culture”, the rehabilitation of the *bimo* as intellectuals, and the recognition of their spiritual world as a scientifically (科学, *kexue*) acceptable entity prevented the *bimo* from being rehabilitated as part of a religious system. Although the concept of “*bimo* culture” as a distinct “culture” vis-à-vis similar constructs (such as “Dongba culture” and “shaman culture”) helped secure the foundations for official acceptance of and funding for local (“cultural”) development, it further weakened the already fragmented collective stance of non-mainstream faiths and philosophies in China. The decision against launching a joint cause with “northern shamanism” is in line with the Liangshan elites’ desire to have their very own cultural definition, which can aid their ambitions to expand their personal power. By creating their own “*bimo* culture” cause, the Nuosu – and perhaps all Yi – are elevated to a more “civilised” notion of spiritual life. Expanding the demarcations of its cultural contents (e.g. scriptures, art, etc.), as in Xie’s treatise on “*bimo* culture” as ICH, also generates greater visibility and greater potential for financial and structural support from the government at the provincial and central levels. Even the category “religious culture”, which “*bimo* culture” is awarded in the ICH treatise, is not so much an effort to reintroduce Nuosu religion into Yi cultural discourse vis-à-vis the state, but rather an attempt to set “*bimo* culture” apart from the (lingering) notion of “feudal superstition” amongst the Yi. This differentiation prolongs rather than resolves the fundamental issue of *bimo* faith as it continues to exist at folk level in Liangshan today.

The heterogeneity of creating and cementing “*bimo* culture” as a (cultural and identity) canon has therefore weakened the already diminished importance of the *bimo* in daily Liangshan life and for Nuosu (Yi) culture as a whole. By becoming yet another “cultural” format, the *bimo* are in fact losing power rather than gaining it. Judging by the relevant statistics, *bimo* practice is on the road to extinction. Efforts

such as those by Bamo Erha and his daughters to describe, develop, and popularise a revitalisation of the *bimo* beyond notions of “feudal superstition”, or at least beyond scholarly and gender restrictions, may have even accelerated the demise of *bimo* practice and knowledge. The *bimo*’s loss of power, or their displacement, and the decentralisation and successive reconfiguration of Nuosu religion and the *bimo* by the state and elites, on the one hand, and the Nuosu folk level, on the other, are placing Nuosu ritual life at great risk of cultural assimilation. The demise of the *bimo* can thus be considered a consequence of a displacing and decentring scholarly and cultural discourse that has rendered “*bimo* culture” a spectacle which is arbitrarily reproduced for economic and political purposes, such as local development drives and achieving ICH status. This discourse, rather than local modernisation or the influx of state schooling and modern medicine, may lie at the core of dwindling religious practice at the local level. Ironically, an eventual inclusion of “*bimo* culture” into the ICH ranks may prove its final downfall.

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