



Reflections of Mosuo Lore

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Abstract

The Mosuo people of southwest China have a rich oral literature. The Mosuo Daba religion contains hundreds of ritual texts incorporating incantations, myths and legends. Over a long history, the Mosuo people have told stories about their deities, mythical and local heroes, past feudal rulers and the natural world that surrounds them. They have told stories to educate their children. They have developed proverbs that hold the moral and social teachings of the community. They have also put words to traditional tunes to express their joys and sorrows, their adventures on the caravan trail, the love between men and women and the love of their mothers. The selected texts in this small collection include stories of the Mountain Goddess Gamu, the patron deity of the Mosuo people; courtship songs; songs of motherly love; proverbs extolling the Mosuo matricultural world; and an animal fable suffused with humorous pragmatism that offers a glance into past feudal relations.

Les Mosuo du sud-ouest de la Chine possèdent une riche littérature orale. La religion daba des mosuo contient des centaines de textes rituels incorporant des incantations, des mythes et des légendes. Au cours des siècles, les Mosuo se sont transmis des histoires à propos de leurs divinités, de leurs héros mythiques et locaux, de leurs anciens seigneurs féodaux et du monde naturel qui les entoure. Ils ont raconté des histoires pour éduquer leurs enfants. Ils ont développé des proverbes qui contiennent les enseignements moraux et sociaux de la communauté. Ils ont également composé des paroles sur des airs traditionnels pour exprimer leurs joies et leurs peines, leurs aventures sur le chemin des caravanes, l'amour entre hommes et femmes et l'amour de leurs mères. Les textes sélectionnés dans cette petite collection comprennent des histoires sur la déesse de la montagne, Gamu, qui est aussi la divinité patronne du peuple Mosuo; des chansons qui traduisent l'amour entre les hommes et les femmes, mais aussi l'amour des enfants pour leurs mères; des proverbes qui exaltent le monde matriculturel mosuo; et une fable animale imprégnée d'un pragmatisme rempli d'humour qui offre un regard particulier sur les relations féodales du temps passé.



The Goddess Gamu

On the twenty-fifth day of the seventh lunar month, we Mosuo celebrate the mountain deities. Among these mountain deities there are both goddesses and gods, but the most important of them all, the deity who is worshipped with the most solemnity and the most important rituals, is the mountain goddess Gamu. Gamu has no rivals amongst the mountain gods. She towers over the Yongning plain and she looks like a crouching lion, so that other nationalities call her the Lion Mountain. To the Mosuo, she is only the Goddess Gamu. The Mosuo sing praises to her beauty, and tell her stories in many legends. She is the goddess of beauty, love, protection, and birth, and she is endowed with all powers and qualities. To the Mosuo, the Mountain Goddess Gamu is a monument to women. She is the deity who holds the world in balance.

The Mosuo believe that Gamu presides over the fertility of the people of Yongning, over the success of their harvests, the reproduction of animals. She presides over the health of women, their beauty, unions and birth. She not only blesses and protects all living creatures, she holds first place amongst all the mountain deities around her. All surrounding deities esteem and admire her, and are devoted to her. She bestows favours upon them. She has many lovers amongst the gods.

Every twenty-fifth day of the seventh lunar month, all Mosuo households go out to celebrate, helping the elderly and carrying the small children. They wear their finest clothes. They take food for a picnic and, singing and dancing, they arrive at the foot of the mountain. There they light juniper branches to honour the Goddess. They then form a long line, so that everyone in turn may offer prayers to the Goddess to ask for her blessings, to grant rain and wind in the year to come and peace to humans and animals. The lamas then chant to worship the mountain Goddess, praying that she may protect humanity against disasters and grant people good fortune.

On this festival day, people come to the sacred cave and put up tents, they eat picnic food, compete in horse races, wrestling; they play on swings. Everyone has fun. When dark has fallen, young women and men spend the rest of the night in the mountain, speaking of love, singing love duets, and the Goddess bestows upon their love the promise of happy times.

Stories of the Goddess

In their cult of the Goddess, the Mosuo do not only worship a deity. The Goddess Gamu is the shining reflection of Mosuo love life. When, in the past, outsiders asked the Mosuo about men and women, about love and visiting relationships, the Mosuo would reply without hesitation: 'The Goddess has love relationships.' Because what they know of the relationships between women and men, they have learned from the Goddess. Of course, it is not the legends that have given rise to visiting relationships, but the custom of visiting relationships that has created the legends. Human beings must make sense of their existence and sanction their own customs. With the passage of time, however, stories acquire a moral strength and spiritual will. There are many interesting legends about the Goddess Gamu. I recall three of them below.

Gamu and the whirlwind

A long, very long time ago, Gamu lived in Bozhe village. She was a very intelligent and quick-witted girl as well as very beautiful. On her eighteenth birthday, a God in heaven saw her beauty. And on the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month, he created a whirlwind that carried her into the sky. All the people in Yongning were horrified. They came running out of their houses and fields, shouting and screaming. They shouted so loudly that the god became alarmed and either in fear or in a moment of clumsiness, he let the girl go. Unfortunately, she had no means of returning to the earth, and so she turned into the mountain. And now she stands between Heaven and Earth and her soul has become a goddess.

Gamu gambles in Tibet

Following the conversion of Yongning to Lamaism, the legend integrated new elements, in contents and meanings. Accordingly, stories now tell that on the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month, all Goddesses go to Tibet and all people celebrate all goddesses on this day. When the Goddesses reach Tibet, there are celebrations and amusements. Gambling is a favourite game. When it comes time to take part in the festivities in Tibet, and especially in the gambling games, Gamu is the most powerful of all. When she sits down at the table and plays, Gamu's presence is felt by all of the other gods. When she displays her full divine powers and wins, all the gods honour her. If she happens to lose, however, she will display her anger for all to see. The skies will then darken over Yongning, torrential rain will fall, and the crops will be ruined. People and animals will no longer be at peace. To ensure that the Goddess would engage the other deities in the gambling contest with fun in her heart, the Mosuo people thought of something. On the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month, all the households go out to the foot of the mountain. They wear beautiful red and green clothes, they sing and dance, all to boost the Goddess's morale and encourage her to defeat the other gods and either restore or keep the peace.

Gamu has love affairs with the mountain gods

Legend has it that Gamu has many lovers. Some are short-term, like Cezhe, Hewa, and Ashao, and she also has a long term lover: Azhapula. Gamu and Cezhe met once, by chance, and for a night loved each other. But Azhapula, who had been riding on the wind, happened across them unexpectedly. He saw Cezhe and Gamu making love and in a single breath, drew his sword and cut down Cezhe - which is why Cezhe Mountain is now missing a peak. Another time, Gamu and Ashao were arguing, and Ashao decided he would ride away and leave for Dali.¹ He wanted to look for another girlfriend in the blue mountains. He had decided to break things off with Gamu. But Gamu could not bear to part from him, and so she mounted her white horse and took off after him. Pulling up close, she managed to grab onto his vest, and she held onto it for dear life. And so they galloped away with Ashao trying to escape from Gamu and Gamu holding onto him. They rode like this for so long that they did not notice that dawn had broken, that the rooster had already crowed, and that the light of the rising sun was shining on their love. And so the mountain god Ashao was struck down, and he was stuck on earth for ever. But Gamu was still holding onto his vest and today the two mountains are still linked together.

¹ Which is to say, for somewhere foreign and very far away.

Songs

Three songs about love

Love and courtship songs have a set tune upon which would-be lovers set their own words. In other words, the tune is set but the words are improvised. The Mosuo have a taboo about singing courtship songs near their homes, and since the courtship tune is known by all, the taboo applies not only to singing but also to whistling or playing the tune on an instrument. Courtship songs should be sung in the wild, in the mountains or in the fields. Mosuo courtship songs never celebrate love as such. Women and men express their love for one another, but they do not praise love as a category of thought, as an ideal or psychological state. In Mosuo language, there is no term to identify romantic or sexual love as exists in Chinese (性爱, *xingai*), and the words Axia (denoting a woman) and Azhu (denoting a man) are best understood as 'intimate friends'.

Courtship songs are usually composed of several couplets, by which the would-be lovers open a dialogue, responding to each other with wit and innuendo until the time comes to reveal their true feelings. As singers use metaphors, their words are imbued with rich meaning, not all of which may be translated into Chinese or other language and is inevitably lost in translation. Love songs are not always sung by couples, and individuals may also go into the woods or the mountains to sing about their beloved, to express their joy or the pain of rejection.

Rocking the Boat from Side to Side

- M: Lake Lugu is so wide and grand
It is difficult for the wild goose to cross
- W: Don't be frightened of the width of the lake
Just rock the boat from side to side
- M: At first, I hesitated to go after the fish
But the fish has eyes of gold
- W: At first, I didn't think of letting the dog after the deer
But the deer horns are precious
- M: I thought of riding a horse across the lake
But the waters of the lake bolted and it was hard to get on the saddle
- W: I thought of plucking stars from the sky
But the white clouds would not give me a bridge
- M: The azelea and the camellia
Prefer to bloom on the mountain
- W: I thought of the blooms on the hill
But I fear that frost might follow the spring
- M: I have walked around the dark and dense forests
I have swam across Lugu Lake
- W: I walked across the mountains and found a valley

But I did not see my Axia

- M: I rode a white cloud as a horse
To stroll the sky and roam the earth, who will come with me?
W: I rode the north wind as a horse
To stroll the sky and roam the earth, I will come with you.

When You Reach the Sea, Don't Forget the Little Stream (title of song)

- M: I am a pine tree and you a cypress tree
Let us be together on this festival day.²
W: I am the clear waters flowing from the snowy mountain peaks
You are the river; let the crest of our waves splash together

W: Azhu, when you reach the unforgettable sea
Don't forget the small mountain stream
M: Waters flow incessantly and froth likewise ebbs and flows
Your Azhu's heart is not carved from wood or stone

M: The caravan road is long, oh so long
My intentions are long as the caravan road
W: I have finished weaving a beautiful hemp belt
My caravan brother, come back quickly

M: The spring wind is already blowing across the fields
Why are the flower buds still closed?
W: Azhu, my heart, please do not lay blame
It is not that the flowers cannot love, but that the earth is much too cold

M: From within the earth, grass and cereals grow
Do the cereal crops we grow also have grass seeds?
W: My Azhu only needs to find the words
For me to withstand the fog and frosts of this hard winter

W: When the leaves are no longer green, they fall upon the earth
My clever Azhu, I don't know how you feel deep in your heart.
M: After the leaves have fallen, the time comes for trees to turn green again
You know what your Azhu has in his heart, even if I do not speak

W: When Azhu sings, his words are so beautiful
But is it so in the depth of his heart? Is his heart as beautiful as his song?
M: Azhu's heart is bright and light
It is as clear as day is from night.³

² Pine and cypress branches are burned together as offerings to the gods on festival days.

³ Meaning that he has no mixed feelings.

W: To hear that Azhu's song is as intoxicating as my own
My heart twists as a hemp rope
M: Let me undo the turmoil that twists the hemp
Let me follow my friend's tender affection.

Heartbreak

The two of us are like eyes and eyebrows
One life together yet they never meet

Please do not drive stakes in all the trees
And if you happen to trip, it will be only your own fault

My mother is thinking of me and calling me home
But in my heart, I cannot lose you, Azhu!

Everyday, I watch the birds fly overhead
But I cannot ask them to be my messengers

I fear that if I were to trust the birds with my news
They may carry my words to the wrong person

We no longer walk together
Yet, in the beginnings in our heart, we had not thought...

My Azhu, in ten years we may never meet
Again in the high mountains again

My Azhu who lives near Lugu Lake
In ten years, we may never see one another

Please so not suppress your heart, please sing again
My face is feverish, my heart is crying

You left me to go live so far away
Please do not forget the words we told each other

When you reach the high mountains, and dizzy
You happen to see the snow lotus

Don't think less of the small flower
That grows hidden by the side of the stream

Don't think that I do not think of you in my heart

Every drop of my blood hangs on your body

In all places, rice plants grow short
Don't think of your crop growing higher than others

Now I cannot see even your shadow
Actually, I don't even know where you are.

Two songs in praise of mother

Gratitude

I can forget all troublesome and unpleasant things
But I could never forget my mother's love

The sound of mother's loving voice
Is like a cup of sweet wine

When I was small my mother took care of me just as birds care for their young
And yet, when we grew up, her sons and daughters flew away like the eagle

My mother suffered every hardship to raise me
Now that I have grown up I must be her loving friend

The world over, mothers are the same
The care for their children with all their love

No one understands my feelings
As my mother knows the depth of my heart

So long as I had my mother by my side
I could eat no more than three bowls of rice a day
and yet my heart would be filled with sweetness

The Azhu to whom I will give my heart
Will satisfy my mother's wishes

My mother put her whole heart into raising me
In return, I will always hold her in my heart

If it were not for my mother's guiding hand
I would not know right from wrong

When my mother passes away, I will never see her again
While she is alive and healthy, I must take good care of her.

The house where my mother gave birth to me
Is poor but filled with joy

When my mother will no longer be of this world
Her love will live in my heart

The mother who raised me was very poor
But I could not move away and lose her

I do not care that she be rich or poor, noble or humble
I only care to make her happy

When I walk in the mountains with the wind on my face
I think of how my mother touched me so softly when I was a child

The person who raised me in this world is my mother
As long as I live in this world, I want to show her how good I may be

A Son Left His Mother (to marry uxorilocally)

I left to marry in other people's house
But how could I lose my mother and leave my home?

When I was young I did not understand my mother's heart
Now I have left my mother to live at home on her own

When I will go home, I will sing all the way
Because I will be returning to my mother's side

I heard my mother calling me home
But I had nothing to bring her

It was the voice of a sparrow calling in the high mountains
It sounded just like the voice of my mother calling me

The road was long, so long. The farther I walked
Along the road, and the more I thought of my mother

When I arrived at the crossing in the mountains, I forgot my way
But I did not forget my mother's advice

So I kept going and happily found my way
While my poor mother was so lonesome

I lost my mother to come to your door
Don't think it your good fortune

It is only because I would not lose your daughter
That I lost the threshold of my house to enter yours.

Mosuo Proverbs

One may have 990 Axia but only one mother.

To be handsome and capable, Mosuo boys follow the teaching of their maternal uncles; to be handsome and capable, Mosuo girls follow the teachings of their mothers.

When a man marries into the house, it is to become a servant. When a woman marries out, it is to become the head of the household.

If the oxen and the horses are in one pen, they will not be at peace. Likewise, people who are not of the same lineage cannot live in harmony.

A horse cannot carry two saddles, a woman cannot foster two households.

Chickens hatched out of the same nest don't fight; children born of one mother are united.

One forgets the taste of sweet things, but not the taste of bitterness.

One sees the slightest flaw in others but our eyes cannot see our own faces.

If people live a reasonable life, they will not trip on the road when they walk.

The power of the horse is in his four legs, a person's power is in the heart.

One cannot drink ferrous water and one cannot eat mud; generations to come cannot be ashamed of their ancestors.

We don't put salt in milk; good friends likewise do not lie.

Those who dig holes everywhere are bound to fall in one of them one day.

Draught animals that grow long tails do not need to take into account what lies at their rear end; since people do not have tails, they must at time worry about what happens next.⁴

⁴ This is so because the future lies behind and the past ahead – since we can see the past but not the future.

Those who have never cut bamboo do not know how smooth the bamboo is; those who have not entered the path of truth and reason do not know how hard the road can be.

One should not ride a tired mule or listen to people's gossip.

When the toad drinks water, it is never content; when people find money, they are never satisfied with their lot.

A life without laughter is as awful as soup without salt.

The Mosuo rely on the caravan trade for wealth, the Han rely on the earth.

The Mosuo rely on hemp and earth for their clothes; they rely on the mountain for their food.

Fables about Rabbit

In which Rabbit represents the common people, because rabbits, just like the common people, are many and all look the same; Tiger represents the Mosuo feudal lord.

How Rabbit grew long ears - and the trickster was tricked

Once upon a time, Rabbit knocked on the Grandmother's door. He told her a heart-wrenching story and begged for milk. Moved by his sorry tale, Grandmother gave him some milk. The next day, Rabbit pretended to be another rabbit, and again came knocking on Grandmother's door. He told another heart-wrenching story, and Grandmother, moved by the dismal tale, gave him some milk. The next day, Rabbit, pretended to be yet another rabbit, and again came knocking on Grandmother's door with a tragic story. Grandmother, moved by the tragic tale, gave Rabbit some milk. On the fourth day, Rabbit pretended to be yet another rabbit and again he came knocking on Grandmother's door with a sorrowful tale, and Grandmother, moved by the sorrowful story, gave him some milk. Rabbit, pleased with himself, returned the next day, and the day after that and again - at which point, Grandmother began to think that something was odd, and she thought of a trick. When she brought the milk to Rabbit, she spilt a few drops on his fur. Rabbit - too pleased with himself and emboldened by his own success - did not notice a thing. The next day, when he came knocking at the door, Grandmother saw that his fur was still sticky, and understood that she had not been helping a series of unfortunate rabbits but only one greedy tricky rabbit. When Rabbit was uncovered, he cried in shame and pulled on his ears out of desperation and remorse. And that is how Rabbit got his long ears.

Clever Rabbit

Once upon a time, Rabbit saw Tiger coming his way. There was nowhere to run and so Rabbit thought of a clever way out. He climbed up a tree and hung onto the tree trunk as tightly as he could. Tiger approached him and asked: 'Are you not the rabbit that just played a trick on me?' And Tiger's eyes began to dart up and down as he gauged the best means of climbing up the tree.

Rabbit pretended not to notice him and ignored him.

So Tiger asked again: 'Are you not the rabbit that just played a trick on me?' And this time, Rabbit answered: 'Oh, it's you, Tiger. I am so sorry, I must apologise, but I was busy with my own affairs. You were asking if I were the rabbit that just tricked you? Well, how could a little rabbit like me trick a great tiger like you? Besides, there are so many rabbits in the world, how can you tell them apart? Now, the rabbit who tricked you, tricked you today but I have been up here trying to steady this tree since yesterday. When would I have found the time to trick you?'

Rabbit then explained how Heaven would punish him if he failed to steady the tree.⁵ To which he added, that having been hard at work to steady this tree for a whole day and a half, Heaven was sure to come by soon and reward him with something very nice to eat. At these words, Tiger's ears pricked up, and for an instant, he looked thoughtful. 'Little brother' said Tiger after a little pause, 'would you like a helping hand at steadying this tree?' Rabbit hesitated, then said: 'A helping hand would be good but... I am a little worried that you may not have enough strength for the job...'

That did not please Tiger who thought to himself: 'How dare this little rabbit underestimate me, king of the animals?' And so he said: 'You little rabbit can surely tell a good joke! If you can steady this tree, how could I not do it? I am so much stronger than you! Come on, get down now, I'll take over!' Without much ado, Tiger reached out for Rabbit, flung him off the tree, and embraced the trunk in his big paws.

Rabbit, seeing the enthusiasm Tiger was putting in embracing the tree, felt like having a bit of a laugh but he thought better of it. In a grave tone, he said: 'Older brother, you must take care of not relaxing your position. Meanwhile, I shall go and take a look around to see if I can catch a glance of Heaven coming with some goodies. Just keep hanging on!' Rabbit then went off.

Tiger spent the whole night hanging onto the tree. At dawn, he realised that he had been tricked. He slowly released his grip, every part of his body screaming in pain. And he was very hungry.

Author biography

Lamu Gatusa (Shih Gaofeng) is associate professor at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, in Kunming, China. He is a scholar and a poet and the three-time winner of China's Minority People Literature Award. A member of the Mosuo people, of the Naxi Nationality, Lamu has studied, recorded and translated Mosuo folklore, customs and religion since the 1980s. Lamu Gatusa has published numerous books of his collections and translations of Mosuo oral literature into Chinese poetic form, in order to reproduce Mosuo poetic aesthetic. In addition, Lamu has published scholarly articles in journals and anthologies and his most recent studies have focused on the impact of tourism and modernisation of Mosuo culture. Lamu has collaborated on the production of television programs and documentaries pertaining to Mosuo culture, and has mentored and advised many Chinese and Western scholars in the field of Mosuo studies.

⁵ The tree is the *axis mundi* that separates heaven and earth. As such it is also a symbol of kingship for the king too mediates between heaven and earth.