



## Following Gemu: Journeys Around a Mosuo Goddess

TAMI BLUMENFIELD, PhD

### Abstract

*This article considers how animist deities can be foregrounded as sentient central characters in ethnographic research, following recent calls to try looking through non-human perspectives as we consider socio-ecological zones from different angles. Drawing on eighteen years of ethnographic engagement in a mountainous region of southwest China where Na / Mosuo people worship the goddess Gemu, I layer together numerous narratives about the goddess and her mountain while also including what may be imagined as her own point of view. I juxtapose voices of Na people from different communities and at different points in time, visitors from distant regions keen on gaining a closer impression of a goddess-worshipping culture, and the anthropologist-author for this polyvocal examination and exploration. The transformation of the goddess from core deity of Na people into a phenomenon transcending their home areas reveals complex interactions between long-term inhabitants, animist practice, tourist discourse, government policy, and heritage recognition and preservation efforts.*

**Keywords:** Na / Mosuo goddess; Gemu Goddess; feminist anthropology; heritagization; experimental anthropology



## 抽象的

人类学家最近寻找着一些新的分析文化变迁的方式，包括从非人类的角度来思考文化生态区域的方式。本文一方面从摩梭女神的角度来考虑近代的文化与生态变迁，另一方面带着一位多年观察女神的人类学家的视角与分析。中国西南山区的摩梭人每年都会过一个崇拜格姆女神的转山节。通过旅游业与市场经济的发展、当地人的流动人口、还有不同关于摩梭非物质文化遗产的政策，此节日也经历过很多转变与波动。从女神的角度如何看待这些转变？通过当地人和外来人的经验，包括来自不同社区的摩梭人以及来自国内外地区的游客和崇拜女神文化的人，本文探讨不同的想法，给予其他想接近本土宗教中神灵的学者一些启发。

**关键词：**摩梭女神、格姆女神、遗产化、女神学、创造性人类学

## Résumé

*Cet article examine comment les divinités animistes peuvent être mises au premier plan en tant que personnages centraux sensibles dans la recherche ethnographique, à la suite d'appels récents à essayer de regarder à travers des perspectives non humaines alors que nous considérons les zones socio-écologiques sous différents angles. S'appuyant sur dix-huit ans d'engagement ethnographique dans une région montagneuse du sud-ouest de la Chine où les Na / Mosuo vénèrent la déesse Gemu, je superpose de nombreux récits sur la déesse et sa montagne tout en incluant ce qui peut être imaginé comme son propre point de vue. Je juxtapose des voix de personnes Na de différentes communautés et à différents moments dans le temps, des visiteurs de régions lointaines désireux de se faire une idée plus précise d'une culture adoratrice de la déesse, et l'anthropologue-auteur pour cet examen et cette exploration polyvocaux. La transformation de la déesse de divinité centrale du peuple Na en un phénomène transcendant leurs régions d'origine révèle des interactions complexes entre les habitants de longue date, la pratique animiste, le discours touristique, la politique gouvernementale et les efforts de reconnaissance et de préservation du patrimoine.*

**Mots-clés :** Déesse Na / Mosuo, Déesse Gemu, anthropologie féministe, patrimonialisation, anthropologie expérimentale

## Introduction: The Context for Goddess Fascination

For many years, goddesses have fascinated women from European-descended backgrounds whose own religions have sidelined feminine powers. Although these religions themselves often developed upon the roots of earth-mother belief systems, by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the overwhelming male-focus of Christianity as practiced in European, US, and Canadian settings as well as the immense trauma of midcentury global warfare left many people looking for alternative models. A collective quest ensued to recuperate 'lost' female divinity by locating goddesses, both in prehistorical records and in other parts of the world. Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas published research about goddesses and gods of 'old Europe' (1982 [1974], 1993), philosopher Heide Göttner-Abendroth wrote *Matriarchal Mythology in Former Times and Today* (1987), and Carol P. Christ wrote *Rebirth of the Goddess* (1997), to name but a few examples. Anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday researched places where women are 'at the center,' arguing for a broadened definition of matriarchy (2002), and Göttner-Abendroth built on her previous matriarchy-focused publications to gather a network of researchers focused on what she called 'societies in balance.'<sup>1</sup> Some of this research was controversial (see Goddess Movement, n.d., for a review), but the ideas discussed nonetheless proved enormously influential both in academic and popular settings. An entire subculture of goddess seekers emerged, with their own websites, conferences, publications and even pilgrimages.<sup>2</sup>

In 2003, after I had already completed my first year of anthropological fieldwork in Mosuo communities of southwest China, I became involved with one of these goddess-searches when I served as the simultaneous interpreter for an international conference held in Lijiang and at Lugu Lake, China. Two women had traveled from the United States expressly to seek out goddess culture and learn more about the Mosuo people, yet were frustrated by the male-centric aspects even of a conference designed to showcase what was billed as a matriarchal culture. Mosuo women were present, to be sure, but most served as beautifully dressed tea-pourers, even those who held government positions. Only on the last day, after I intervened with the conference organizers, did Ninglang County leader Cao Jianping get her chance to address the audience. Everyone was excited to hear her impassioned, impromptu speech, particularly the non-Chinese speakers for

---

<sup>1</sup> Göttner-Abendroth would later publish a comprehensive English-language book about matriarchal cultures (2013), building on a series of World Matriarchal Congresses that gathered representatives from many different countries to share and learn together, and further developing her 1988 German-language monograph, *Das Matriarchat*. See <https://www.hagia.de/en/matriarchy/matriarchal-studies/> for details.

<sup>2</sup> Here I focus on the North American- and European-based scholarship and discussion of goddesses. An extensive Asian-based scholarship on female and ambiguously gendered deities exists as well. For one example, see Gopi (2020). For details on a pilgrimage to Crete, see <https://www.goddessariadne.org/page-3>.

whom I was interpreting. But it was over all too soon. I knew how difficult it was to get all the way to Lugu Lake from the US, and I was thinking about launching some kind of career that would allow me to live in northwest China and still earn a reasonable income, without being tied to a fixed work affiliation that would preclude travel. So I offered to help them learn more about the Mosuo goddess, Gemu. For several days, we visited families and individuals who could share wisdom about Gemu and made an off-season pilgrimage to the shrine honoring Gemu, on the slopes facing her mountain. The trip inspired a short piece by one of the visitors, published in the provocatively titled volume, *If Women Ruled the World* (Wolverton 2004). While I ultimately rejected a career of goddess-seeker-guiding in favor of a more established (and funded) graduate school path back in the United States, my interest in the Gemu goddess was piqued. I began paying more attention to the stylized murals, tapestries, and shrines that bore her image, and taking note of her presence in songs (cf. Yang 2023; also Bliss 2004).

As I returned over the years, my appreciation for the goddess Gemu deepened. I also grew to appreciate how multiple interpretations coexisted alongside one another in this fascinating place. However, finding an appropriate way to convey her stories and share the remarkable role she plays within a remarkable community has collided with a demand in feminist research to avoid speaking for people, especially when we have not conducted explicitly designed research projects aimed at alleviating, or at least ameliorating, ethical dilemmas of representation. I returned to China after two years of graduate school and developed a collaborative project, decentering my own role as I collaborated with the directors of the Mosuo Folk Museum to launch the Moso Media Project in 2005. Instead of only writing my own thoughts and interpretations, we worked together to gather and interpret films, screen them locally, and hold discussions after the screenings. We developed a media production workshop, each contributing resources to bring in an experienced filmmaker and make the workshop possible. And we sought funds together, strengthened by our mix of national, gender and other identities, even procuring funds to support the 2006 Mosuo Film Festival from the all-important Tourism Management Committee (see Blumenfield Kedar 2010 for a full discussion of this project).

This collaboration became extraordinarily meaningful and rewarding, and has become an important cornerstone of my work in this community. However, I came to realize that while we could and did find ways to co-create that fulfilled our distinct agendas, we had very different priorities. I needed to speak in ways intelligible to the English-speaking academy, which prioritized written forms over all else. They did not. They needed to showcase their collections and earn enough operating income to cover expenses, and find time to film, edit and produce projects. This did not preclude our cooperation - indeed, we would later release a film, *Some Na Ceremonies* (Onci, Ruheng and Blumenfield 2015) and co-create a photo exhibit (Blumenfield, Ruheng and Onci 2016) - but the lessons I had learned in graduate school about decolonizing research through co-authorship of written

work (Swarr and Nagar 2010; Sangtin Writers Collective and Richa Nagar 2006; cf. Smith 1999) were not always relevant in this particular context. Each of us was very busy, and producing a text was simply not an important goal or effective use of time for anyone but me. Moreover, co-authorship in an authoritarian political environment carried potential risks, hardly what I wished on any collaborator or trusted friend.

Gradually I became more comfortable with a different style of authorial production, one that I draw from here. In keeping with a long tradition of humanistic, auto-ethnographic work that mixes personal experiences and emotions with more standard forms of ethnography (Behar 2022 [1996], Rosaldo 1989, Wolf 1992), I foreground my own experience learning about, interpreting, and even imagining the Gemu goddess. I also draw directly on the voices of Mosuo people to share who this goddess is, why she is important, and how she is celebrated. While I do not exactly replicate Margery Wolf's strategy of going through the same events three times—offering fieldnotes, a published academic article, and a short story (1992)—I do offer several versions in order to highlight both parallels and divergences among different narrators, speaking at different times. I integrate their accounts with my own experiences both attending and observing from afar, the festival honoring Gemu. This festival becomes an opportunity to trace intersections of emotions, politics and practice, and to experiment with thinking through these events from the perspective of the goddess Gemu.

None of these methods should make this article academically inappropriate. Instead, the article can be considered a realistic integration of priorities within feminist and anthropological scholarship: foregrounding different voices; representing a long-term engagement and commitment to a place where people feel dishonored by short-term researchers; and making plain my own positionality as well as the context through which my interpretations take place (cf. Davis and Craven 2016).

Finally, this article takes seriously the question of how animist deities can themselves be foregrounded as sentient central characters in ethnographic research. In the past decade, anthropologists like Marisol de la Cadena (*Earth Beings*, 2015) and Tsai et al. (*Golden Snail Opera*, 2016) have moved beyond simply describing spiritual realms and belief systems, to thinking through an interspecies and cosmologically multiple way of analyzing and experiencing anthropological zones of inquiry. Here I follow these scholars' calls to try looking through new perspectives, not always human ones, as we consider socio-ecological zones from different angles and layers.

### **Interpretations, versions and translations**

In 2005, as the Mosuo Folk Museum directors and I worked to prepare the first-ever Mosuo Film Festival, we spent many hours screening potential films together in the

museum office. One day while we watched a European-produced documentary, I provided ad-hoc simultaneous interpretation of the English-language voiceovers into Mandarin Chinese. This had proven necessary because even with dialogue in Chinese or the Na language, the voiceovers drowned out the original speakers.

After I finished translating one legend with a particularly surprising story, something giving men a very tiny role with the creation of new humans, I turned to Archei and asked, “Is that how it is [是不是这样]?”

He responded with a twinkle in his eye: “Mm, there are many versions [嗯，版本很多].” Archei neither refuted nor confirmed the story I had just translated, which was unlike anything I had heard before.

This brief conversation encapsulated an important lesson that would help me during future research: rather than thinking in a simplistic right/wrong, yes/no framework of absolutes, multiple interpretations could be perfectly acceptable. Complete understanding might prove elusive, but did this matter? Or rather, for whom did this matter? In many circumstances, circling around a topic might be a better approach than a definitive answer.

Marisol de la Cadena came to a similar conclusion while working with a powerful father-son duo from a Quechua community in the Peruvian Andes. She struggled to make local conceptions of a particularly tricky idea legible, asking her friend Nazario, the younger intermediary between humans and earth-beings, to explain over and over again. Eventually he beseeched several different earth-beings to bestow understanding and compassion through their conversation, and she finally understood the need to let go, to leave the understanding partial in order to retain respect for the whole. She wrote, “Our mutual understanding was also going to be full of gaps that would be different for each of us, and would constantly show up, interrupting but not preventing our communication... While our interactions formed an effective circuit, our communication did not depend on sharing single, cleanly identical notions—theirs, mine, or a third new one.” (de la Cadena 2015: xxv)

This willingness to think expansively and non-dualistically helps set the stage for our explorations of the goddess *Gemu*, the legends which surround and accompany her, and the multiple forms and meanings that she has come to inhabit nowadays. Like de la Cadena (2015), who found a complicated spiritual-ecological topography of interlocking and also aporetic meanings in the Andes, I also found that trying to establish a single, straightforward narrative was not only difficult, it was unnecessary and even inappropriate.

## Thinking through Place and Spirit: Stepping Closer to the Goddess Gemu

In *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Keith Basso (1996) drew connections between spiritual dimensions, landscape and culture among the Western Apache, native to North America. He was among the forerunners of the anthropology of place, now a vibrant area of inquiry and theoretical development for anthropologists and other social scientists. One way in which spiritual aspects are closely integrated with ideas of place is through sacred mountains, rivers and lakes, many associated with deities.

Many spirit mountains exist, both in this region and elsewhere, for it is not uncommon for a mountain rising sharply outside an inhabited plain to be looked upon as a spiritual entity. Ausangate, an earth-being in the Andes, has a mountain form visible from Cuzco; this mountain is also considered a Catholic shrine (de la Cadena 2015). Closer to Lugu Lake, Coggins and Gesang Zeren (2014) have written about the broader concept of animate landscapes in Yunnan Province, while da Col (2014), Litzinger (2004), and Previato (2021) have written about the complicated dynamics of the Tibetan sacred mountain known as Khawa Karpo or Kawagebo. Litzinger explains, “Kawagebo...properly belongs to that classification of mountains known by Tibetans as *neri*, literally translated as ‘mountain abode.’ Mountains such as Kawagebo are considered to be places of residence and activity of certain important deities. This means that not only is the deity thought to dwell in or in the vicinity of the mountain, but also that the deity is seen to be the equivalent to the mountain itself.” (Litzinger 2004: 496).

But if a deity is also a mountain, then what happens when people relocate to other places? As people experience unprecedented mobility, with many moving from village homes to urban ones, how do their mountain deities adapt?

For while people travel, landscapes and the deities inscribed within do so only with difficulty. Mountains, for example, crumble, shake and fall, but generally do not transport themselves along great distances, at least not while remaining intact. Clearly, although some elements can transplant effectively to their new locales, some simply cannot.

Among those who cannot move easily is the Gemu goddess who inhabits a Yongning mountain. While some deities in other cultures have been known to migrate alongside those whose worlds they inhabit, this is not always possible — or at least, a precedent for this may not yet exist (cf. de la Cadena 2015). Three Na people, through a series of intermediaries, bring Gemu’s story into Chinese-speaking and English-reading worlds.

### *First: Gemu*

Geze Dorje, from a village near Lugu Lake, provided this narrative to American linguist Liberty Lidz around 2005, speaking in the Yongning Na language. Geze Dorje then

translated his narrative into Chinese. Lidz, in turn, created an English version and included it in her doctoral dissertation (Lidz 2010).<sup>3</sup>

Long, long ago at the foot of Goddess Mountain, that place, in this Na village, there was a girl named Gemu. She was very beautiful; she excelled in work and such.

When she sewed hemp cloth, she could weave over a dozen measures every day. When weaving hemp cloth, whatever she saw, she could embroider on the hemp cloth. Heaven's rainbows and clouds flying by, she could quickly embroider on the hemp cloth. Flowers, butterflies, and birds on the ground, and more. Whatever she saw she could embroider on the hemp cloth. Flowers and such, she could embroider them all true-to-life.

So, in all the Na areas, all of the young men liked her. All of them thought her the best. A lot of young men went to see her. But she didn't like any of them. Whoever went to visit her, she would give a belt. Her name in the Na areas was, that we known by all of the Na youth. She was considered to be the best. There wasn't anyone who didn't know her.

One day a god when he was visiting from the heavens, saw Gemu. So, he wondered who this beautiful girl was. He went to where Gemu was to look.

So after that every night he went to see Gemu and Gemu also really liked him. So, all the time the two were together on a mountaintop, every night they went to a mountaintop to sing and dance. Often it was like this.

One day, this god's mother found out. She said it was not possible for her son to court a regular girl. She shut their son up in their home. Often in this way he was not allowed to go down to earth. She said that if he went again he would be shut up for his entire life and he wouldn't be able to do so again. So, it was like this for a long time afterwards.

One day, the son escaped from home to the outside world. He went to see Gemu. So, on the mountain the two alternatively cried and sang for a long time. So when it was almost daylight Gemu went to sleep. While she was asleep, the god stealthily rode his horse, leaping up to the sky. When the rooster was just about to crow Gemu woke up and saw that this man and all of his things were gone. So she followed his path and then came back. Up to

---

<sup>3</sup> Because this version, entitled simply *Gemu*, was recorded as part of a linguistic documentation project, it prioritizes faithfulness to the original narrative form.



that point she only saw one hoofprint. So, seeing the hoofprint, she cried.

So, she cried and cried; her tears filled the hoofprint. So, from the heavens the god turned his head to look. When he turned his head to look seeing Gemu crying in this manner he thought it very pitiable. He took a string of pearls from around his neck and threw it in front of Gemu. When it fell, it fell into the hoofprint. That string of pearls thrown into the hoofprint became the island in present-day Lugu Hu.

Consequently, Gemu thought for a long time. So, she went to the top of the mountain and turned herself into a cliff. So, she prayed to all of the gods. So, she has protected Na areas for generations. She herself went to protect everything. So, she also protects young people courting and such things that parents do not permit. Things they do not permit.

(Lidz 2010: 616-617)

#### *Second: Goddess Gemu*

This story, narrated by Wengjima Luruo, was recorded by Kunming-based Na scholar Lamu Gatusa in 1990, then translated by him into written Chinese. The story comes to us in English, translated and introduced by Kunming-based Yi scholar An Xiaoke and published in a Columbia University Press anthology on Chinese folk and popular religion (Wengjima, Lamu and An 2011).

Long, long ago, there was a beautiful girl who lived in Zabo Village by Lake Lugu in Yongning county. Seven days after her birth, she could speak as well as sing pleasant songs. Three months after her birth, she knew everything about the world. By the age of three, she was as beautiful as winter jasmine. Her beauty spread over nine mountains and eighteen villages. Many people came around to see how beautiful she was. When she was eighteen years old, all the young men came to propose to her. The proposal songs were like flowing water, and the proposal gifts piled up like hills. But the girl didn't promise herself to anyone. Her name was Gemu.

One day, when she was helping her mother work the fields, the heavenly spirit took a fancy to her. He turned into a whirlwind and swept Gemu away. Gemu shouted from the sky, but the god held her tightly in his grip.

Everyone in Yongning county saw her and heard her voice. People cried out. The voice sounded like thunder. The spirit heard the voice and became flustered. He suddenly dropped Gemu. Gemu fell on top of Lion Mountain and

could not get down. From then on, she rode a white horse, holding a pearl tree in her left hand and a flute in her right hand. Gemu strolled about the hills of Yongning county, guarding the people's safety. When storms or whirlwinds came, Gemu became a white cloud over the mountains, warning people to be prepared. The local people were very thankful. On the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, people celebrated the Mountain Worshipping Festival. During the festival, people sang and danced around the mountain, recalling her good deeds.

No ordinary goddess, she is one of the most important deities of the Na people. As such, she engaged in visiting relationships - and not with just one lover, but with several. Wengjima Luruo described the goddess Gemu's relationships as follows:

Like mortals, Goddess Gemu had her own *axia* lovers. Her long-term *axia* was the god Warubura. Her temporary *axias* were the gods Zeji and Gosa. Once Warubura went on an outing and Gemu made a date with the god Zeji. At midnight, Warubura came back. He happened to see the two together. Warubura was so angry that he pulled out his sword and cut off the god Zeji's genitals. Down to today, the god Zeji still lacks genitals. Another time, the god Gosa made a secret tryst with Gemu while Warubura was out. But they became at odds with each other. The god Gosa wanted to leave Gemu and stay with another lover - Lady Changshan. Gemu hated to lose Gosa, and she pulled him by a sleeve. In this way, one pulled one way while the other pulled the other way until dawn. When the roosters crowed, they had to stop. Since then, with one sleeve belonging to Gosa in Gemu's hand, they stay close by each other's side.

(Wengjima, Lamu and An 2011: 54-55)

Though these legends about Gemu appear to diverge in some ways - exactly who played what role in Gemu's relationship with that descended-from-heaven visiting god? - the common themes are her role in protecting Yongning and the Na people, as well as her passion, talent and beauty. Given the many layers of translation involved with learning about her and subsequently, sharing her stories - these conversations usually take place in some mixture of 'standard' Mandarin, northwest Yunnanese Mandarin, and Naru, with a smattering of European languages, before being translated or interpreted back into a European language - these multiple meanings are hardly a surprise.

### *Third: The Goddess Gamu*

Lamu Gatusa, director of the Minzu Literature Research Institute at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences in Kunming and the recorder of the previous narrative, was probably

the first Na person to crisscross mountain regions with his tape recorders and other recording gear, interviewing elders, recording chants and legends, and capturing songs. Originally from the Labai region, his introductions to Gemu have appeared in previous volumes of this journal (Lamu 2021) via translator and fellow Na specialist Christine Mathieu. His description below emphasizes the role that Gemu Goddess plays among Mosuo people.

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.

(Lamu 2021: 166)

This poetic rendering of this mountain goddess, as a literal monument to women, encapsulates the esteem and power ascribed to Gemu by those in her orbit. Indeed, from many angles she resembles a lion, reclining regally. Perched right on the Yunnan and Sichuan provincial border next to Yongning and Lugu Lake, her impossible-to-miss form reminds anyone who passes by or glances up that Gemu Goddess is watching. Interestingly, Christine Mathieu notes, “The Mosuo are alone among their neighbors to have a guardian mother goddess rather than a patron warrior god” (2003: 399).

Taken together, these three translations help us better understand the origins of Gemu the person, Gemu the mountain, and Gemu the protector-deity, perhaps even something like a patron saint of the Na people.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the goddess Gemu occupies a unique place among a unique group of people, or perhaps more precisely, among closely related

---

<sup>4</sup> Two additional sources also offer insight into the local cosmology. They include He (2003), who explores matrilineal forest management, and Rosati Freeman (2015), who provides an account of her visit to Mosuo communities, including her investigations of goddess culture.

groups of people.<sup>5</sup> As one of the most important Mosuo deities, she reflects the central roles and status accorded to women in her community.

### Murals, Images and Incarnations: Fieldwork in the Shadow of a Watchful Goddess

I do not recall noticing the presence of the goddess Gemu, other than her sprawling mountain form, the first time I visited the region as a disoriented young anthropologist affiliated with the Yunnan Institute of Nationalities.<sup>6</sup> Gradually, though, the disorientation lessened. I began to see her wherever tourists visited - in vivid color. The goddess was inside the island temple on Hliwobi, appearing on a tapestry, in a stylized Gelugpa Buddhist form (cf. Tsem 2016) (Figure 1). She graced a mural in front of a building, as well as a hotel lobby wall in Luoshui Village (Figure 2). And she appeared in another framed image on her mountain, on a small altar partway up where her followers laid prayer flags and sprinkled grains during the annual festival in her honor (Figure 3).

Figures 1 – 3: Images of Gemu Goddess



Figure 1: Inside the Hliwobi Island temple in Lugu Lake, appearing as a tapestry in a stylized Gelugpa Buddhist form. Photograph by Tami Blumenfield, 2003; reproduction prohibited.

<sup>5</sup> In Sichuan Na people are classified as *Menggu zu* (Mongolian), while in Yunnan they officially are *Naxi zu Mosuo ren* – Mosuo people of the Naxi nationality. Particularly near Lugu Lake, *Menggu zu* has been gradually replaced by *Mosuo*, a teknonym that is in common usage for anyone speaking about Na Chinese. In my writings I use both Na and Mosuo as appropriate, and follow local usage when possible. That is, when translating a Chinese text that uses the term Mosuo, I retain that term in the translation. For further discussion of this nomenclature, see Blumenfield Kedar 2010. See also Latami (2009) about the Na people of Ninglang and Mattison et al. 2021 for analysis of relationships of Yongning and Labai Na. The core areas are Labai, Lugu Lake, Yongning, Wenquan, and Ninglang in Yunnan; and Guabie, Zousuo, Qiansuo, and Wujiao in Sichuan.

<sup>6</sup> Having focused on East Asian Studies in college, I arrived in China to begin my Fulbright fellowship with a weak background in anthropology. A semester studying with ethnology professors in Kunming before embarking upon fieldwork was extremely helpful, but could not substitute for robust methodological preparation.



Figure 2: On a hotel lobby wall, in the Upper Village of Luoshui. Photograph by Tami Blumenfield, 2003; reproduction prohibited.



Figure 3: The Gemu goddess, in a framed figure on a small altar partway up the mountain. Photograph by Tami Blumenfield, 2003; reproduction prohibited.

I spent many days doing fieldwork under the watchful goddess' presence: walking from one home to another in several villages where I worked involved moving through the basin below her sprawling montane form. I often walked alone, and I appreciated her calming energy as I navigated rain, sun, mud and various encounters along the way. She anchored me. When I began focusing on media produced in Na communities, if I saw others' images or found her mountain form appear on a screen, I could instantly tell where the image-maker had filmed from. Both in intangible forms like legends and stories, and in tangible forms like colorful, framed images, the goddess and her mountain form were a constant presence.

Although my initial research topic did not include goddesses or legend-gathering, as discussed above, Gemu began to capture my attention more often. I frequently heard both tour guides and documentary narrators extol her merits and intrigue as they introduced Mosuo culture to outsiders. And after that feminist ethnology conference in Lijiang and at Lugu Lake in 2003, I sought out a grandmother who could chant the Gemu Soyi scripture (in the Na language) while her granddaughter translated, in a hearthside environment that was warm in more ways than one. The undercurrent running through all these environments was one of female strength, power, and agency. Gemu is not a demure goddess who trembles in the presence of her male counterparts. No, the Na goddess is very much in control. She creates storms and demands obeisance, even as she holds power over personal and community-wide fertility. But she does this with a strong set of emotions that she is not afraid to display. She cares about others, and she loves deeply. Whether her approaches are reflected by Na people, or Na people emphasize those aspects which mirror their own values, one can definitely see reflections of each in the other.

Some may question whether Gemu truly holds these powers. After all, how can we be sure she is the one causing storms and impacting fertility? David Hufford (1982) points out that these questions stem from a propensity to adhere to our own belief systems, often elevating these as religion and assuming them credulous while denigrating other people's belief systems as beliefs or superstitions only. For example, anthropologists might think when considering non-Christian individuals, "What I believe, I know, but what you believe, you only believe" (Hufford 1982). In Peru, Nazario described how Ausangate, the earth-being, was angry about the airplanes flying overhead. For not only were the frequent flights causing harm to the streams and waterways, they were also turning Ausangate black, literally (de la Cadena 2015: xxii). Just like Gemu, Ausangate could grow enraged. And he too could vent his fury on those attempting to grow crops down below. They are far from the only mountain-deities with these attributes.



## The Goddess and Her Festival: Cycles of Transformation, Heritagization, and Quiet

I first participated in the annual festival honoring the goddess Gemu in 2002. Returning to Yongning following a several-month absence and finding all the families I had stayed with and grown to care about gathered in clusters on a mountain slope, with exuberant dancers just below stepping circles as music filled the air, was beyond extraordinary. Remembering that joyful atmosphere and energy, people arriving on horseback and tractor, oh! Even from my living room on the other side of the world, I can still feel that so strongly, twenty years later (Figures 4 - 6)

*Images 4 - 6, at the 2002 Gemu Ha-ku festival, known in Chinese as Zhuan Shan Jie 转山节, or Circling-the-Mountain Festival)*



*Figure 4: Families picnic at the Circling-the-Mountain festival. Photograph by Tami Blumenfield; reproduction prohibited.*



*Figure 5: Circle dancing at the 2002 festival. Photograph by Tami Blumenfield; reproduction prohibited.*



*Figure 6: Arriving to the 2002 festival via horseback. Photograph by Tami Blumenfield; reproduction prohibited.*

I returned for the festival the following year, and then the year after that as well. Managing to be in southwest China in late August each year became increasingly difficult

as my family grew and my career progressed, but I continued following the festival's development from afar.

The festival looked a little different every year, some years receiving more robust government support for organized dancing activities and stages, and some years receiving less. No single government unit was tasked with running what had long been an unofficial folk festival. This created some uncertainties about who was in charge and how activities would be funded. When I visited the Yongning Education Office one of those early years, I was surprised to learn that they were the ones in charge of preparing activities for the festival that year. They enthusiastically showed me plans to revive an enormous wooden swing that had been popular years before.

As tourism to the region grew, and cultural activities began to move under the umbrella of 'intangible cultural heritage,' new institutions like the Lijiang-Lugu Lake Tourism Management Committee became involved in the planning. Given their mission of promoting and managing tourism, priority during that period went to attracting outside visitors to the festival. The general trend was that the festival was increasingly flooded with outside visitors, yet steadily less well attended by Na people.

Singapore attorney and writer Choo Wai-Hong included extensive details on the festival and its various incarnations in her book (2017). By her account, she found a festival that had faded from its energetic heyday, and decided to do her part to revive it. Choo poured money into the festival, sponsoring competitions, awarding prizes, and inspiring people to action. Other people who were involved in festival planning during those intervening years, like the leaders of the Mosuo Folk Museum, have a different interpretation and would give a bit less credit to Choo as a festival-savior, but her contributions were appreciated nonetheless.

The situation would change altogether in 2018. As part of a broader emphasis on recognizing and designating intangible cultural heritage (Blumenfield 2018), in 2018 the Ninglang Yi Autonomous County declared the Circling-the-Mountain Festival to be an official three-day holiday at the county-level. Its express purpose? Promoting "the integration of tourism and culture" and building "a cultural brand."<sup>7</sup> This declaration would elevate the Gemu goddess to previously unimaginable physical proportions. From

---

<sup>7</sup> A news article by the Lijiang Television Station provided the official rationale for this change: to create a cultural brand. The article stated, "On June 28, 2018, the Ninth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventeenth National People's Congress of Ninglang Autonomous County decided to list the Mosuo People's Mountain Festival as a local statutory festival to promote the integration of culture and tourism and enhance the tourism culture brand of Wuhu. "The 'Zhuan Shan Jie' will be used as a regional business card and a cultural brand in Lijiang." (<https://www.lijiangtv.com/article/83359-p-1.html>, accessed March 2019; translation by author.)



then on, an enormous tapestry-banner bearing her image would be lifted high above a raised stage with much fanfare, as part of the official festivities' opening (Figure 7). Monks chanted as *Gemu* rose (Figure 8), and *Na daba* moved rhythmically on the stage, cymbals and percussive instruments in hand.<sup>8</sup> How high did she rise? Thirty feet, or perhaps more? She certainly loomed above everyone, her half-smile perhaps mirroring that of the mountain just beyond.



*Figure 7: An enormous tapestry-banner bearing the goddess Gemu's figure is lifted high above a raised stage with much fanfare, as part of the official festivities' opening. Photograph by Tami Blumenfield, 2019. Reproduction prohibited.*

---

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of *daba*, see Li 2015 and Mathieu 1998.



*Figure 8: Monks chanted and sounded their instruments as Gemu rose.  
Photograph by Tami Blumenfield, 2019; reproduction prohibited.*



*Figure 9: Horse racing competition at the 2019 festival. Photograph by Tami  
Blumenfield, 2019; reproduction prohibited.*





Figure 10: An opening ceremony at the 2019 festival, held away from the goddess mountain herself. The words say 转山转湖转 风情 [Circumambulate the mountain, Circumambulate the lake, Circumambulate the fengqing (winds and feelings)]. Image source: Zhongguo ribao wang, [http://yn.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-09/05/content\\_36869377.htm](http://yn.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-09/05/content_36869377.htm).

This carefully choreographed process, which I saw for myself when I finally managed to return in 2019 (Figure 9), was quite different from what I had witnessed during those early years of fieldwork. During that period, the festival was more universally attended by locals but much more sparsely attended by outsiders. Ironically, as it gained official status, the festival lost local support. That first official year, the clutch of media representatives and the incursion of VIP tables and official representatives in front of the stage, combined with the increased number of spectators jostling to get a look at an authentic ethnic festival, simply overwhelmed. The rudimentary roads leading past several villages to the corner of the Yongning plain, though recently improved and resurfaced, could not handle the volume. After all, the key arterial ran in between rice paddies as it transected the plain, and could only accommodate vehicles in a single direction. Usually this involved a dance of drivers, yielding, approaching, and reversing. On the festival day, the crush of drivers all trying to reach the same mountain slopes, without experience in the local

protocols—what could result but complete chaos? The traffic jams became new goddess-festival legends. And what must the goddess have thought, reclining above it all?

After the 2018 festival, one local friend told me grumpily, “I’m never going again! There were toooo many people, way too many. Afterwards we were stuck for hours, the vehicles were all jammed together and no one could get anywhere. It was so not fun.” (太不好玩了)

He was not the only one who was miserable that year. In fact, the 2018 festival (Figure 10) probably represented the festival’s peak, and marked the beginning of a new trend. Though the next year witnessed large crowds and substantial media coverage, many local people decided to celebrate elsewhere. Rather than ascending the Gemu Goddess Mountain and stringing their prayer flags upon her shrine, chanting and tossing sacred grains as they circled the small pavilion, they decided to gather in their own villages, in the sacred areas closer to home.

They still prepared food to roast and tea to drink, and still performed their devotions, but they no longer did so in the company of their compatriots from other villages. Perhaps the mountain could not sustain the new load, and this shift represented a healthy new development. In the 2020s, with COVID-19 pandemic-related precautions discouraging large gatherings, this probably made sense. But thinking back to those early days, and the magic of seeing people from across the Yongning plain all gathered in one place, I cannot help feeling a bit sad. This festival is the only holiday celebrated just by Na people, and represented the only time for everyone in the region to converge together. What must the goddess think, as she watches everyone disperse?

This dispersal is not merely a matter of a single festival day, but encapsulated by it. More Na people have relocated to cities than ever before. Place still matters, but gathering together is harder than ever. On the other hand, Lijiang, about a five-hour drive from Yongning when landslides of unhappy carved-up mountains do not prevent forward progress, has become home for many younger Na and their accompanying elders. The mountain slopes surrounding Lijiang can also host goddess-worshipping rituals and picnics. Groups of Na relatives and friends do gather together for this and other celebrations - my WeChat feed is full of images and videos from their birthday parties, singing nights, and meals together. The difference is that these are closed networks, and these moments are by invitation only. (Although those following along via social media can join in vicariously, many social media platforms themselves are closed networks.) Does the goddess mourn the loss of inclusivity, as she recalls the days when everyone gathered in the same place, to worship her together? Or has she lifted her chin high and risen up higher, the better to see her people in their farther-away regions?

## Discussion

In his article, 'Festivals, Group Making, Unmaking and Remaking,' João Leal (2016) discusses the complicated and not-only celebratory role played by a festival practice of former Azorean residents who had moved to the United States. Their Holy Ghost festas were most active as their celebrants first relocated. But later, as people integrated into their local communities, these festas became less important. In a parallel development, in the islands themselves, efforts to help these festas receive official recognition through UNESCO-level reflected a newly created, newly formalized and perhaps even newly invented festival format aimed at capitalizing on policies of heritagization (cf. di Giovine 2009, Kuah and Liu 2016, Stefano and Davis 2017).<sup>9</sup>

Megan Bryson, who has written about the Baijie goddess worshipped by many Bai, also emphasizes how politics and historical changes affect goddess worship and celebrations. Not far from Yongning, in the Dali region where Bai people live, this goddess has played very different roles over time in order to fit into the needs and political realities of the local people. Bryson writes, "As Dali changed from an independent political center to a peripheral region in a vast empire, Baijie similarly changed from a dragon maiden and consort of Mahākāla called Baijie Shengfei to a chaste widow martyr known as Baijie Furen. The dynamic aspects of Baijie's identity mirrored the dynamism of local identity (Bryson 2016: 2)." Gemu, too, has been variously celebrated, hushed, or invoked as politics of religion and belief, connections with neighboring cultures, and presence of outsiders through tourism, research and media have waxed and waned. The 2018 festival represented a recombination of sorts, with not only Mosuo practices but also those of local Han, Naxi and other *minzu* groups all celebrated through performances and awards. Perhaps this is the beginning of the Gemu goddess' transformation, from a local deity tied to a place, to a transnational one who transcends place. This may be a welcome development for the goddess-seeking foreigners, at least.

## Conclusion

Reaching the end of this story still feels like only a beginning. We have collected some of the stories that took place in years past. We gather the legends, and record the songs, while people can still share them in the Na language. (And we are beginning work to gather these recordings together, in the Pangloss archive and elsewhere, and welcome contributors for this project.<sup>10</sup>) But I cannot help but return to a question posed in an

---

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of festival dynamics and anthropological interpretations of them, see Addo (2009) and Chio (2019). Ohri (2016) delves into the political dimensions of festival heritagization in the India context.

<sup>10</sup> See the Yongning Na Pangloss archive, based in France (Michaud, n.d.).  
<https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/Yongning%20Na?lang=en>

earlier essay, written years ago: 女儿国，你将何从何来? O country of daughters, wherever will you go from here? (Blumenfield 2004).

If we are perched on the edge of some radical changes in Na communities, as so many people move away but others find new opportunities closer to home, will we be able to look back again in twenty more years with joy in our hearts, after seeing efforts to support a thriving, contemporary Mosuo culture bear fruit? For the Museum of the Mosuo People, an official branch of the Yunnan Provincial Museum,<sup>11</sup> the Mosuo Culture Protection and Development Research Center of the Lijiang City Government, and the Lijiang International Matrilineal Culture Research Association,<sup>12</sup> all led by incredible and indefatigable Mosuo people, are each taking action in their own ways, working hard to sustain thriving communities and capture their lessons for future generations.

As for my dilemmas about appropriate representation and finding ways to share voices of Mosuo people with broader audiences, the *Matrix* journal itself has supported this effort. With its focus on matricultures, it has become a venue through which I can translate written work by Mosuo artists, writers, and musicians, then help their words find broader audiences (cf. Banamu 2023, Yang 2023). Hopefully these two contributions will be the first of many.

It is no mean feat to reach the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a Chinese-speaking, Han-dominated nation with a matrilineal, matrifocal community thriving. We can only hope that these next decades will witness gentle continuation of goddess-inspired matricultures like that of the Mosuo people, taking on new forms and locales, perhaps, but honoring the spirits which have sustained them thus far as well. Then it will be a pleasure to walk through the villages of Yongning and feel the goddess looking down. Perhaps that half-smile we see on the goddess images nowadays will have turned into more of a grin. *Ding-bu-er djeh kuh!*<sup>13</sup>

### About the Author

Tami Blumenfield, PhD, MLIS, is an anthropologist and filmmaker focused on the dynamics of community change and the ethics of creating and archiving knowledge. She is Kuige Scholar at Yunnan University, Adjunct Research Assistant Professor in the University of New Mexico Anthropology Department, and principal of Blumenfield Cultural Services, LLC.

---

<sup>11</sup> This is the new name for the Mosuo Folk Museum. Onci Archei and Ruheng Duoqi remain its directors, but they can now receive support from provincial-level museum experts as well.

<sup>12</sup> The Lijiang Matrilineal Culture Research Association (International) was founded by Cao Jianping in 2020. <https://m.yunnan.cn/system/2020/08/18/030894778.shtml>

<sup>13</sup> This is the greeting shared by Mosuo people on happy occasions, especially the celebrations of the lunar New Year and other holidays, as well as the arrival of the coming-of-age ceremony.

## Acknowledgments

I thank the editors of *Matrix*, particularly Angela Sumegi and Linnéa Rowlett, for their patience and encouragement through this unusual pandemic-era writing journey, further facilitated by the Association for Feminist Anthropology and its co-working writing circles. My utmost gratitude goes to the many individuals in northwest Yunnan who have generously offered me insights into their lives and rich heritage, providing spiritual and material support as well as camaraderie. While sharing names may not be prudent, I sincerely appreciate every one.

This project draws on research visits conducted over many years. Funding awards from a Fulbright U.S. Student Fellowship (2001-02), the Association for Asian Studies China and Inner Asia Council (2011), a Gordon C. Culp-Jackson Fellowship from the University of Washington (2003-2006), The Duke Endowment (2014-2015), the Shi Center for Sustainability at Furman University (2013, 2015), and a second Fulbright Scholar award (2015-2016) supported these research visits. I deeply appreciate the guidance provided by professors Stevan Harrell, He Shaoying, He Ming, He Zhonghua, Weng Naiqun, and Zhou Huashan, as well as Na leaders and scholars Lamu Gatusa, Yang Lifen, Latami Dashih, Cao Jianping, Onci Archei, Ruheng Duoqi, and Guzo Duoqi, as I embarked upon research in Na communities and worked to make sense of what I encountered. Yodzhen, Sona, Dudjihma, and their families were particularly helpful along the way. Christina Djossa encouraged my return for the 2019 festival. Francesca Rosati Freeman offered me an important window into goddess-seeking cultures, and it was a privilege to join her in Italy and help her introduce women there to alternative ways of living. Finally, I appreciate the steadfast support of my family, and the enthusiasm and companionship provided by both Ethan and Avital as I worked alongside them to develop this article during a challenging period.

## References

- Addo, Ping-An. 2009. Anthropology, Festival, and Spectacle. *Reviews in Anthropology* 38(3): 217-236.
- Banamu. 2023. "Mosuo Love: An Eight-Poem Collection." Tami Blumenfield, trans. and ed. *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 3(1). 192-217.
- Basso, Keith H. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Behar, Ruth. 2022 [1996]. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- Bliss, Carol. 2004. *The Capacity of Folk Song to Reveal Complexities in Mosuo Culture*. PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University.
- Blumenfield, Tami. 2018. "Recognition and Misrecognition: The Politics of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Southwest China." In *Chinese Heritage in the Making: Experiences, Negotiations and Contestations*. Christina Maags and Marina Svensson, eds. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- . 2004. "女儿国, 你将何去何从? ——从教育、旅游角度看待摩梭文化的发展 (Contemporary Moso Adaptations to Mainstream Culture: Examining the Influence of Education and Tourism)." In Zhang Xisheng, ed. *市场经济与民族法制, Market Economy and Legal System on Minority Nationalities—Research Reports from Yunnan Province, P.R.China*. Pp. 315-326. Kunming: Yunnan University Press.
- Blumenfield, Tami, Ruheng Duoqi, and Onci Archei. 2016. "Diverse Perspectives on Social Change and Resilience: Portraying Na Communities in Flux. 多维视角中的摩梭文化." Bilingual exhibit displayed at the Yunnan University Wumao Anthropology Museum in Kunming, China (July-September); traveling version displayed in Luoshui Village and Lijiang (August).
- Blumenfield Kedar, Tami. 2010. *Scenes from Yongning: Media Creation in China's Na Villages*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington.
- Bryson, Megan. 2016. *Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity and Gender in Southwest China*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- de la Cadena, Marisol. 2015. *Earth Beings. Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Chio, J. 2019. "The Miao Festival Crowd: Mediations of Presence, Body Politics, and an Ethnic Public in 'Minority' China." *Current Anthropology*. 60(4): 536-558.
- Christ, Carol P. 1997. *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. [Boston, MA]: Da Capo Press.
- Choo, Waihong. 2017. *Kingdom of Women: Life, Love and Death in China's Hidden Mountains*. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co.
- Coggins, Chris and Gesang Zeren. 2014. "Animate Landscapes: Nature Conservation and the Production of Agropastoral Sacred Space in Shangrila." In *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*, ed. by Emily Yeh and Chris Coggins, 205-228. Seattle: University of Washington Press.



- Da Col, Giovanni. 2007. "The View from Somewhen: Events, Bodies and the Perspective of Fortune around Khawa Karpo, a Tibetan Sacred Mountain in Yunnan Province." *Inner Asia* 9(2): 215-235
- Davis, Dána-Ain and Christa Craven. 2016. *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Di Giovine, Michael A. 2009. *The Heritage-Scape: Unesco, World Heritage, and Tourism*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Gimbutas, Marija. 1993. *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*. San Francisco: Harper.
- , 1982 [1974]. *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe, 6500-3500 B.C.: Myths and Cult Images*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- "Goddess Movement." N.d. Wikipedia.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goddess\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goddess_movement), accessed March 2023.
- Göttner-Abendroth, Heide. 2023. "Daughter of the Goddess, Sister of Man. Matriarchal Patterns in International Fairy Tales." *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 3 (1): 100 - 117
- 2013. *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe*. New York: Peter Lang Inc.
- , 1988. *Das Matriarchat*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- , 1987. *Matriarchal Mythology in Former Times and Today*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.
- Gopi, Anil. 2020. "Representing Feminine Divinity: A Visual Ethnography of Kaliyattam in North Malabar." *Society and Culture in South Asia* 6 (1): 165-173.
- He, Zhonghua. 2003. "Forest Management in Mosuo Matrilineal Society, Yunnan, China." In *Gender Relations in Forest Societies in Asia: Patriarchy at Odds*. Kelkar Govind et al., eds. Pp. 147-175. New Delhi: Sage.
- Hufford, David. 1982. "Traditions of Disbelief." *New York Folklore Quarterly* 8: 47-55.
- Kuah, Khun Eng and Zhaohui Liu. 2016. *Intangible Cultural Heritage in Contemporary China: The participation of local communities*. New York: Routledge.
- Lamu Gatusa. 2021. "Reflections on Mosuo Oral Lore." Christine Mathieu, trans. *Matrix* 2(1): 165-175.

- Lamu Gatusa (拉木·嘎吐萨). 2016. 拉木·嘎吐萨作品选集 [Selected Works of Lamu Gatusa]. Beijing: Guangming Ribao Chubanshe.
- Wengjima Luruo, storyteller. Lamu Gatusa, recorder and trans. (Na – Chinese). An Xiaoke, introduction and trans. (Chinese – English). 2011. “A Mosuo Story from Lake Lugu” and “Goddess Gemu.” In *The Columbia anthology of Chinese folk and popular literature*. Victor H. Mair and Mark Bender, eds. Pp. 53-55. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Latami Dashi. 2009. 城乡之间的村落—宁蒗县蒗蕨区域摩梭人的文化生活史 [The Village Between City and Township: The Cultural and Living History of the Mosuo People of Ninglang County, Langqu District]. Kunming: Yunnan Minzu chubanshe.
- Leal, João. 2016. “Festivals, Group Making, Remaking and Unmaking.” *Ethnos* 81(4): 584-599.
- Li Dazhu 李达珠. 2015. Daba Wenhua: Mosuoren de Shengming Zhexue 达巴文化——摩梭人的生命哲学(Daba Culture: The Philosophy of Life of Mosuo People). Chengdu: Sichuan Minzu Chubanshe.
- Li Yang, correspondent. 2020 (August 18). Lijiang (guoji) muxiwenhua xuehui chengli 丽江 (国际) 母系文化学会成立 [Lijiang (International) Matrilineal Culture Society was established]. He Qian, reporter. *Yunnan wang*. <https://m.yunnan.cn/system/2020/08/18/030894778.shtml>
- Lidz, Liberty. 2010. *Tone in Yongning Na*. PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin.
- Litzinger, Ralph. 2004. “The Mobilization of ‘Nature’: Perspectives from North-West Yunnan.” *The China Quarterly* 178: 488–504. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20192344>.
- Mattison, Siobhán M., Chun-Yi Sum, Adam Z. Reynolds, Gabrielle D. Baca, Tami Blumenfield, Sara Niedbalski, Ruizhe Liu, Meng Zhang, Lige Liu, Lin Wei, Mingjie Su, Hui Li, Mary K. Shenk, and Katherine Wander. 2021. “Using evolutionary theory to hypothesize a transition from patriliney to matriliney and back again among the ethnic Mosuo of Southwest China.” *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 2(1): 90-117.
- Mathieu, Christine. 2003. *A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland: Naxi and Mosuo*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.
- . 1998. “The Moso Ddaba Religious Specialists.” In *Naxi and Moso Ethnography: Kin,*

Rites, Pictographs, ed. by Michael Oppitz and Elisabeth Hsu, 209-234. Zürich: Volkerkunde Museum.

Michaud, Alexis. N.d. "Yongning Na." <https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/Yongning%20Na?lang=en>

Nagar, Richa. 2002. "Footloose Researchers, 'Traveling' Theories, and the Politics of Transnational Feminist Praxis." *Gender, Place and Culture* 9 (2): 179-186. doi:10.1080/09663960220139699.

Ohri, Lokesh. 2016. "Political Yields from Cultural Fields: Agency and Ownership in a Heritage Festival in India." *Ethnos* 81(4): 667-682.

Onci Archei (dir. and cinematographer), Ruheng Duoji (dir. and cinematographer), and Tami Blumenfield (prod.). 2015. *Some Na Ceremonies*. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Media, LLC.

Previato, Tomasso. 2021. "Indigenous Beliefs for Sustainability: On the Significance of Ritual in the Gender Ecology of Tibetan and Mosuo Matricultures of Northwestern Yunnan." *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 2(1): 34-65.

Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. "Introduction: Grief and the Headhunters' Rage." *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Rosati Freeman, Francesca. 2015. *Sur les rives du lac Mère: Un voyage aux confins du Tibet à la rencontre du peuple Moso*. [Paris]: Éditions Tensing.

Sanday, Peggy Reeves. 2002. *Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Sangtin Writers Collective and Richa Nagar. 2006. *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies*. London: Zed Books.

Swarr, Amanda Lock and Richa Nagar, eds. 2010. *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Stefano, Michelle L. and Peter Davis. 2017. *The Routledge guide to intangible cultural heritage*. New York: Routledge.

- Tsai, Yen-Ling, Isabelle Carbonell, Joelle Chevrier, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. 2016. "Golden Snail Opera: The More-than-Human Performance of Friendly Farming on Taiwan's Lanyang Plain." *Cultural Anthropology* 31(4): 520-544. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca31.4.04>.
- Tsem Rinpoche, H.E. 2016 (April 6). "Gemu Goddess of Mosuo." Tsemrinpoche.com, <http://www.tsemrinpoche.com/tsem-tulku-rinpoche/art-architecture/gemu-goddess-of-mosuo.html>.
- Wolf, Margery. 1992. *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Wolverton, Diane. 2004. "We'd Form a Society Based on Partnership." *If Women Ruled the World*, Sheila Ellison, ed. Pp. 118-120. Makawao, Maui, Hawaii: Inner Ocean Publishing.
- Yang Lifan (Nianzhe Xiaoma). 2023. "Mosuo Songs and Dances: From the Villages to the University Campus." Tami Blumenfeld, trans. *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 3(1). 218 - 234.
- . 2010. 受伤的沉默者: 一个摩梭女人眼中的文化研究现象 [Silenced and Wounded: Cultural Phenomena through a Moso Woman's Eyes]. Kunming: Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe.
- Zhongguo ribao wang. 2018 (September 5). 2018 宁蒗泸沽湖摩梭转山节在云南丽江举行 [2018 Ninglang Lugu Lake Mosuo Mountain Festival held in Lijiang, Yunnan]. Zhongguo ribao wang, [http://yn.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-09/05/content\\_36869377.htm](http://yn.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-09/05/content_36869377.htm)

## Appendix 1: Chinese Language Legend

Story 1: Gemu, as narrated by Geze Dorje of Luoshui Village, around 2006.

很久，很久以前的时候永宁女神山的脚下，那个地方，摩梭的村转里有一个叫格姆的女孩子。她很好看，劳动和一切事情很厉害。她织麻布的时候，每一天能织十几丈。她织麻布的时候，眼睛里看见什么，都可以织在麻布上。天上的彩虹和天上的云彩飞过去就把它织在麻布上。地下的花和蝴蝶和鸟，等等。看见什么就能织在麻布上面。花儿和那什么东西她都能够织的像一某一样的。所以摩梭的地方里头所有的小伙子们都喜欢她。全部算她最好。去她那里的人很多。但是她一个都不喜欢。谁去她那里的时候她送每一个人一条腰带。她的名字在摩梭地区是小伙子们的话全部知道它。她才算最好的。没有一个人不知道她。有一天一个天上的神，他从天上路过的时候看见了这个人格姆。所以他想这样漂亮和好看的姑娘是什么人呢？去格姆那里看。所以后来他每一天晚上去格姆那里，格姆也很喜欢他。所以两个人每一天在一个山头上每一个晚上去山头上唱歌和跳舞。经常是这样。有一天，这个神，他家的母亲知道了。她说他们家的儿子不可能和民间的女孩子恋爱。把他们家的儿子抓起来关在家里。经常这样不准他去下面。说如果再去就一辈子关起来不会放。所以是这样的很长时间以后。有一天这个儿子从家里逃跑到外面来。去看格姆。所以两个人山头上哭一次，唱一次，又哭一次，又唱一次。所以将要天亮的时候格姆睡着了。睡着了的时候，这个神悄悄的骑在马上跳到天上去。刚刚公鸡将要叫的时候格姆醒过来一看这个男和全部东西都不在。所以一路追去一次赶过来。到这边的时候看见只有一个马的脚印。所以看着马的脚印哭了。所以哭了又哭眼泪装满了马的脚印。所以天上的神就回头看。看格姆这样的哭他想很可怜。他把自己脖子上面的一串珍珠扔在格姆的面前。往下丢的时候，全部掉在马的脚印里面。那一串扔在马脚印的珍珠成了现在的泸沽湖的海岛。因此格姆后来就想了很多。所以她就去山的山头把自己的灵魂附在悬崖上。所以她祈求所有的神明。所以她要保护摩梭的地区时时代代的。所以她也保护年轻人恋爱和这些家里的父母不准赶事。

(Lidz 2010: 615-616)