
Ethnographic Poetry in North-East India and Southwest China

MARK BENDER

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

In a quotation in the 2006 edition of *Indian Folklife*, Ao Naga poet Temsula Ao reflects on the state of tradition among the ethnic groups of North-East India:

The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity. ("Identity" 7)

The work of ethnic poets in southwest China reflects similar concerns over situations of rapid cultural shifting as local folk cultures are impacted by influences from urban, consumer-based cultures, various political and religious agendas, and the forces of that nebulous term "globalization." Employing folkloristic and eco-critical theory, we can understand the "ethnographic" poetry written by poets of the two regions who express a range of feelings over what are perceived to be negative or ambivalent aspects of cultural change and loss. The poems are composed within the waves of dynamic change variously influencing a vast array of cultures in North-East India and southwest China, two areas in close geographical proximity and with ancient cultural linkages but de-linked not only by difficult terrain, but by borders imposed by modern nation-states. Individual poets draw on strategies of expression that often seem extensions of feelings and concerns of their respective groups. Themes and imagery utilizing "local knowledge," folk traditions, nature, and contemporary social issues are characteristic of many poems produced in the respective regions. Attention to such lore and experience is an important element in developing approaches to these literatures born of both change and tradition that in spirit straddle the borders of China and India.

Hundreds of distinct ethnic groups populate the diverse upland environments of the Southeast Asian massif and contiguous upland areas in the eastern

Himalayas. These groups count today as ethnic or “tribal” populations in the nation-states of China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Relevant parts of these states, and most of Southeast Asia, constitute the recently construed geo-cultural region called “Zomia.”¹ Due to similar natural environments, comparable histories, and in some cases linguistic and cultural affinities the region seems an ideal area to explore instances of cultural expression from a transnational perspective. In the area of India known as North-East India and nearby regions in southwest China, contemporary ethnic poets are active in producing works of poetry that are at once modern yet often purpose and repurpose local folklore by way of image, theme, and occasionally form. In India these poets are drawn from members of “indigenous communities” while in China they are “ethnic minority” poets (Misra xxxi; Li 3).

In both areas poets utilize folklore in their poems written in similar yet different contexts of globalization and development. Yet, while these poets have been influenced by international trends in modern poetry, for reasons of history, geography, and language there is little mutual awareness between the poets and readerships of these respective areas due to factors related to the emergence of modern India and the People’s Republic of China in the late 1940s, in particular the 1962 war over the still-disputed border between China and India in the area of Xizang (Tibet) and Arunachal Pradesh and relations of both nations with the pivotal state of Myanmar (Burma). Moreover, these poetries are just beginning to draw attention on the global stage as being a part of the global phenomena of local poetic traditions among ethnic and native populations.

The poems here tend to converge on themes and imagery common to both regions: origins, migration, material culture, rituals, and features of the natural and human-manipulated environment. Though the cultural and linguistic links between these poets may be ancient and modern divisions complex, many of their poems resonate in ways that seem to dissolve borders and create poetic homes for their respective voices within the terrain of this upland region.

In recent decades, a large number of ethnic poets have been writing and publishing in North-East India, a region lying to the east of mainland India. The area is known as the “Seven Sisters,” which consists of seven states known as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, and Nagaland. In recent years Sikkim has also become part of the region. Dozens of officially recognized ethnic groups reside in these multi-ethnic areas. Many speak Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer, or Tai languages and a large percentage of the native population has been classified as “Mongoloid” by Indian anthropologists.² Effects of historic (and prehistoric) interactions between lowland and upland ethnic groups, effects of a-historic and historic migrations from China and South-

East Asia (such as that of the Tai-speaking Ahoms from Southeast Asia in the 13th century), the British colonial tradition dating from 1826, sects of Christianity brought by Catholic and Protestant missionaries since the latter 19th century, incorporation of the area into India beginning in 1947, isolation from neighboring countries and other parts of India, a vast array of independence and separatist movements, some of which transcend national boundaries into Myanmar and other states, growing immigrant communities from Bangladesh and other areas, and Hindu-ization, modernization, environmental transition, and globalization (including the “Korean Wave”) are all components of the complex mix of cultural forces that have impacted local cultural practices of the ethnic groups in North-East India.³

A number of these groups share borders with or are situated on borders within a few hundreds of miles of ethnic minority groups in the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, Xizang (Tibetan Autonomous Region), Guizhou province, and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China. In some ways comparable to the situation in North-East India, cultures in these areas of China have historically felt the effects of many cultural influences, including prehistoric and historic interactions between local lowland and upland ethnic groups, intrusions of early Chinese forces (such as Zhu Geliang in the third century AD), regional kingdoms (such as the Nanzhao kingdom in the 8th-9th centuries), the Mongol invasion, the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynastic expansions into southwest China, Western Imperialism, Christian missionaries, various phases of socialist construction since 1949 and, over the last decades, the effects of modernization projects like the rapid and far-reaching “opening the west” development project (that include dams and logging), massive emigrations of youth seeking work in coastal cities, and globalization.⁴

Many of these peoples in this historically transnational region of eastern Asia speak languages in the same families, share elements of material culture, and follow similar lifestyles and traditional practices. Though physically close in terms of actual distance, daunting cultural, political, and geographical barriers have made interaction difficult for these cultures for centuries. Many theories suggest ancient migration and trade routes between parts of southwest China, Southeast Asia and North-East India. Among the possible avenues of prehistoric and historic contact are the Southwest Silk Road and related passages running from Yunnan to Assam and Manipur via Eastern Tibet and Burma and regional river systems that cut through the mountainous terrain of the Eastern Himalayas (Giersch; Yang 289-290; Higham 85-86). Origin myths of many local groups concern migrations and the motif of local peoples emerging from holes in the earth, often in concert

with other similar motifs, is found in both North-East India and southwest China (Imchen 5-6; Pao).

With the recent rise of globalization and increased opportunities for transnational contact and interaction, it is timely to explore how ethnic minority poets in both these “near yet far” regions have addressed similar and dissimilar cultural, environmental, and social influences to produce their artistic works, stressing the common strategies of utilizing traditional “local knowledge” or folklore in emerging contexts of modern-style poetry for purposes of personal and ethnic expression.

Select works from several poets from North-East India hailing from diverse ethnic backgrounds who have employed folklore and vernacular culture in various ways in their works (Misra xxx-xxxii) serve as examples. The poems are part of what Chandra and Das (1) and others describe as the “multi-ethnic poetry” being written in (or translated into) English by poets from multiple ethnic groups in the region. Among these many poets are Temsula Ao, whose heavily ethnographic work, grounded in folklore studies, includes many poems invoking Naga traditional lore (*The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*). Works of a similar vein have been produced by Desmond L. Kharmawphlang and Esther Syiem, who are Khasi poets and folklorists from Meghalaya. Another influential poet is Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, a proponent of writing in both mother tongue languages and “the language of interaction” (i.e., English) who edits *Rilum*, the first poetry journal in the Khasi language. Mamang Dai is an Adi novelist and poet from Arunachal Pradesh whose poetry draws on imagery of the environment and folk tradition. Yumlam Tana, also from Arunachal Pradesh, is a teacher and of the Nyishi ethnic community.⁵ Robin S. Ngangom is a Manipuri poet and editor from Imphal, Manipur and Mona Zote is a Mizo poet from Aizawl in Mizoram. *Dazzling Dewdrops*, edited by literary scholar Chungkham Sheelaramani, is a collection of poems by women poets writing in English, or translated from the Manipuri language. The use of English by these poets of North-India suggests issues comparable to those of second language usage among ethnic minority poets in China who write in Chinese rather than the mother tongues of their ethnic groups.

Ethnic poets from Southwest China who regularly deploy folk traditions in their work, include many poets of the Yi 彝 ethnic group, especially from southern Sichuan province. Among these poets are Jidi Majia 吉狄马加, a major force in the creation of modern ethnic minority poetry in China, Luowu Laqie 倮伍拉且, Asu Yue'er 阿苏越尔, and Lu Juan 鲁娟, all of whom, like the majority of ethnic minority poets in China, write exclusively (or nearly so) in Standard Chinese. Poets of the Mon-Khmer speaking Wa 瓦 (Va) ethnic group of Yunnan province

include Burao Yilu 布饶依露 and Nie Le 聂勒 who also write in Chinese (Bender, "Echoes"). Among the ethnic poets who write in their mother tongues is the performance poet Aku Wuwu 阿库乌雾, a professor of ethnic literature, who regards his folklore-dense poems written in Northern Yi (or Nuosu 诺苏) script as "textbooks" of tradition (Bender, "Dying Hunters" 134-135). Mo Du 莫独 is among a handful of Hani 哈尼 poets from Yunnan writing in a romanization created by linguists after 1949. Since the late 1980s, steady streams of poems from these and many other ethnic poets and writers have appeared in local, regional, and national journals and many individual collections have been published, sometimes in bilingual editions.

I have tentatively identified a number of common instances of folklore-related imagery in works of contemporary poetry from North-East India and Southwest China. In some contexts, items are consciously deployed in a "thick" ethnographic manner, making the poems repositories of tradition (Geertz 6). In other cases the images are more incidental, as the situation demands. The list includes: 1) images of tangible culture (tools, clothing, food ways, architecture, body art, livestock, agricultural products, etc.); 2) images of intangible culture (songs, oratory, rituals, epic, myth, native language, etc.); 3) images of the folk "doing" folk practices (weavers, potters, herdsmen, farmers, ritualists, etc.); 4) folk ideas and attitudes; 5) local flora, fauna, and traditional adaptations and accommodations to natural and human-manipulated environments (hunting, upland agriculture, herbal lore, etc.); 6) the numinous/spectral world of spirits, gods, and ghosts; 7) figures from folk song and narrative such as heroic or exemplary males or females, were-beings, etc.; 8) narratives of origins and migrations.

Themes that involve folk traditions and traditional folk life in these poeries include: 1) stigma over what "others" may consider to be "backward" or "uncivilized" practices (such as head-hunting, blood sacrifices, homemade rice-beer drinking, etc.); 2) speaking in the voices of tradition-bearers located at the nexus between the fading past and the emergent new; 3) issues of acculturation, cultural change, and minority status; 4) a nostalgic, romantic, or ambivalent stance towards tradition; 5) the idea of poetry as a vehicle for cultural transmission and revival; 6) counter-discourses taking issue with organized religion or "enlightened/civilizing" social projects; 7) meta-references to folklore or ethnological scholarship (use of terms such as "folk song"); 8) interest in mother-tongue languages, or loss thereof.

Examples from several of the above categories ensue, illustrated by passages from the works of several poets in the transnational region. Stress will be given to the roles of folklore in situations where poets assume dual roles as tradition-bearer and innovators, in the dynamics of social and ecological change, in the creation

of ethnic images and identity for multiple audiences, and in projects—formal and informal—of cultural sustainability.

The largest subgroup of the Yi ethnic group of southwest China is the Nuosu 诺苏, numbering about 2 million. Most Nuosu live in the area of southern Sichuan and northwest Yunnan known as the Greater and Lesser Liangshan Mountains (“Cool Mountains”). By the late 1950s land-reform had reached their well-guarded mountain strongholds and integration into mainstream Chinese society began in earnest. In the early 1980s Nuosu poets began to emerge on the national literary stage, led by poet Jidi Majia, now a high leader in Qinghai province.⁶ Many of his poems draw heavily on Nuosu traditions, including folk costume, foodways, funeral rituals, and folksongs. Likewise, Temsula Ao, of the Ao subgroup of Nagas in North-East India has since the 1980s utilized many images and themes from Naga folk culture in her work. She has drawn extensively on Naga myth, rituals, and customary behavior, which persist in certain areas despite the heavy inroads of Christianity and decades of restive discord after 1947 due to claims of Naga sovereignty. Like the Yi, the over two million Nagas speak Tibeto-Burman languages. Recently retired, Ao was Dean of Humanities at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya. Each of these poets has written a poem on hunting local species of musk deer utilizing local folk knowledge of animals, hunting, and related lore in the context of a radically changing society in which traditions are “dying out.”

Jidi Majia’s Chinese language poem, “Water Deer Call” (“Zhang xiao” 獐哨), is written in the voice of a narrator who blows into a rolled leaf to imitate the cry of a female water deer (*Hydropotes inermis*) (37-39). After luring in and killing a buck with a muzzle-loading musket, he feels shame and remorse—rather than elation at taking sustenance for his family. In the speaker’s words the reader senses the conflicted feelings of an introspective hunter engaging in an activity that will prove obscure to coming generations. Yet the poem remains a testament to traditional skills and an ethos of the hunting and warrior culture.

I know not why, but my heart felt
a sudden blast of deep autumn wind,
like the winters of the north—that cold.
I ground the call to bits,
mixed with the blood of my lips,
then threw it to a place hidden
from other eyes. (“Dying Hunters” 133)

Temsula Ao’s English language poem “The Spear” is from a heavily ethnographic volume titled *Songs from the Other Life*. In the poem she takes on the persona of

a male hunter who, as an afterthought, “had to go back” to the *zhum* (swidden) fields for his spear during an afternoon trip to the river. After a purifying dip in the waters, he takes up the trail home. Hearing a “low bark” in the shrubs, he makes out a speeding form and hurls his spear. Approaching the prey he realizes it is a pregnant doe—a barking deer (*Muntiacus*). The speaker agonizes over the loss of two lives in the breaking of a taboo. He covers the doe’s eyes with grass, “To mark my shame and invoke / Nature’s forgiveness.” The next act is to erect a circle of *genma* (uncleanliness) around the spear, following a folk custom to warn away others from the polluted site. Stumbling home, he falls into the comforting arms of his pregnant wife:

As she cradled my tortured self
In the stillness of the night,
I caressed her rounded fullness
Praying to the gods

To protect my seed
From mindless stalkers
Such as me
For now I know
It was not the spear alone
That caused it all. (“Songs” 47-49)

As in Jidi’s poem, the final lines also suggest a conflicted self, caught within changing times and ethos. Here however the torment over needless life-taking extends beyond that of a deer. The allusion to his “seed” resonates with Naga origin myths showing the primacy of patrimony and the construction of traditional Naga gender roles. In an interpretation of several of these myths, Aier suggests that “The creation stories of the various tribes contain various elements that embrace the idea of women as the caregiver or nurturer equating them with the mother earth while men are equated with the qualities of bravery and strength usually represented by various characters from the animal kingdom, especially the Tiger” (“Folklore” 304; Hoakip 183-184; Mandal 292; Ghosh and Ghosh 32-34; Goswami). The concern over the preservation of “seed” may also relate to feelings on the fading custom of head-hunting which pre-occupied Naga culture well into the twentieth century and still figures symbolically in a variety of ways in official and unofficial discourses today, including the contexts of folk festivals and heritage villages.⁷

One of Temsula Ao’s best-known poems, “Stone-People of Lungterok” utilizes various folk images and themes in a variety of ways. The poem draws on tradition-rich imagery of assemblies of stones that mark sites associated with the origins of the ancients (Aier and Jamir). A note attached to the poem explains that in the Ao Naga language, “*Lungterok*” literally means “Six Stones.” It explains that, “According to

the Ao origin myth, their forefathers, three men along with their companions (three women) emerged out of the earth at the place called Lungterok. Some of these stones can be seen even today.” The poem begins by invoking the name Lungterok, and identifying it as a place of origins, where the original ancestors emerge from the earth:

Lungterok
The six stones
Where the progenitors
And forebears
Of the stone-people
Were born
Out of the womb
Of the earth. (“Stone-People”)

She follows the introductory lines by assuming the name “Stone-people” for the ethnic group, a “barbaric and balladic” people once possessing deep knowledge of the local environment, who understand animal voices and grew their culture from teachers in the wilds. One aspect of that traditional culture was head-taking, a practice once common among certain peoples of North-East India and other parts of the region.

Stone-people,
The poetic and politic
Barbaric and balladic
Finders of water
And fighters for fire.
Stone-people,
The polyglots,
Knowledgeable
In birds’ language
And animal discourse.
The students,
Who learnt from ants
The art of carving
Heads of enemies
As trophies
Of war. (“Stone-People”)

The next passage alludes to myths and folk stories about the celestial bodies, including the idea that the stars represent souls of the dead, a conception of stars and human souls that resonates with Nuosu beliefs in southern Sichuan, where it is considered unlucky and disrespectful to point at the stars.

Stone-people,
The romantics
Who believed
The sun can sulk
The moon can hide
And the stars are not stars
But pure souls
Watching over bereaved hearts.
Here below
With their glow. (“Stone-People”)

Moving from the heavens down to earth, the lines first catalog the traditional roles, skills, industries, and crafts of the people which formed the traditional lifestyle. The dynamics of raiding and re-building between tribes and villages as part of the traditional warfare are evoked:

Stone-people,
The potters and weavers
Planters and growers
Hunters and carvers
Singers of songs and takers of heads,
Gentle lovers and savage heroes,
Builders of homes and destroyers of villages. (“Stone-People”)

The interstices and boundaries between the human world and the numinous world of the spirits dwelling within various environmental niches in nature resonate strongly with orientations towards the world of many groups in the region.

Stone-people,
The worshippers
Of unknown, unseen
Spirits
Of trees and forests,
Of stones and rivers,
Believers of soul
And its varied forms,
Its sojourn here
And passage across the water
Into the hereafter. (“Stone-People”)

Finally, the poet again evokes the duality of “savage and sage” to query into the future of her people.

Stone-people,
Savage and sage
Who sprang out of LUNGTEROK,
Was the birth adult when the stones broke?
Or are the stone-people yet to come of age? (“Stone-People”)

Poet and journalist Burao Yilu is a member of the Wa ethnic minority of Yunnan province China (Bender, “Echoes”). Though Mon-Khmer speakers, the Wa have certain cultural affinities with the Naga groups and also suffer from lingering associations with head-hunting and rice-beer drinking (Fiskesjo 111-112). Like Temsula Ao, Burao is an educated professional woman whose writings have profiled the situation of her ethnic group and especially of women.⁸ Writing in Chinese, Burao has a recent book of essays titled, *Pledge to the Sacred Tree* (*Shen shu de yueding* 神树的约定) (2010). Among the Wa in China are myths of *Si gang lih*, a cave into which a giant calabash floated after a great flood. Once the calabash was opened by animal helpers, the various peoples of the region emerged, the Wa leading the way. Burao’s poem “Moon Mountain,” published in Chinese as “Yueliang shan” 月亮山, parallels many themes in Ao’s poem about Lungterok, including the “savage and sage” dynamic (Burao):

The hunter’s bear their prizes—wild boar and ox
rending them with the fierce Awa blade
dividing meat among all villagers, all relatives

That’s the communal way
of these mountain folk

The Awa, roasting and eating by the bonfires,
eating with such gusto

Each cut slicing the green vines
of their nest
within their mountain lair

Then the dancing begins
the unconstrained wooden drum dance

the eating
until the internal heat rises
... (Bender, “Echoes”).

Traditions of ritual, dance, festivals, and tales are purposed and repurposed in a variety of ways in poems from these broken uplands. Images of ritual specialists and references to the spirit world are very common in poems written by certain ethnic poets in southwest China and (to a lesser extent) in North-East India, despite the influence of Christianity in the latter area. In some instances poets may be drawing on common pools of mythic and ritual tradition. As more ethnographic studies are published linkages between ritual and myths traditions may become more apparent.⁹

Though folk religion was banned in China during much of the 1960s and 1970s, traditional ritual specialists, known as *bimo* (priests) or *sunyi* (shamans) often figure in poems written by the Nuosu and such practitioners are still active in many places today. Aku Wuwu's Nuosu poem "Dead Drum" ("Go zzi si" in Nuosu; "Si gu" 死鼓 in Chinese), revolves around the imagery of a sunyi's drum and refers to various spiritual beings, animals sacrifices (including pigs, chickens, and goats), and a god from Nuosu origin myth (Wuwu 110-111):

The spirits of the black-skinned ones,
the winged ones,
the wearers of palm copra clothing,
those fleeced with scissors, and so on,
served as its emissaries to the ghosts;
just like at the time of creation
the spirit Sysse Dihni sent
many emissaries to the human world.¹⁰
The drum could call forth both the dead and the living
to meet upon a bloody animal skin.
Yet, each could see only half of the other.
The unseen is unseen
because of the red blotches on the hide,
like clouds in the sky. (Aku)

Confronting lingering "superstitions," in his poem "Superstitions," Yumlam Tana draws on imagery of divination rituals conducted by ritualists known as *nyibu* in the Nyishi language (which is in the Tibeto-Burman family). There is mention of the mithun (*Bos frontalis*), a domestic hybrid of wild cattle indigenous to the area and popular fare in feasts in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland (Winter et al.). Skulls or horns of mithun, deer, and other creatures are still displayed in some rural homes. The lines go:

A primordial sentiment lurks
Somewhere in us begotten in the days of chaos.

The *Nyibu* had read the entrails of
The chickens
And presaged that six dead monkeys
Shall lie beside a stranger in the house
And as required six horns of *Mithun* be slaughtered,
Besides the fat pigs from grandpa's sty
To appease the hungry spirits from the
World of the dead
Amidst chantings of prayers in four
Sleepless weeks.
... (5-16)

In his poem "Weiking," Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih invokes a traditional Khasi festival, explaining that, "Weiking, meaning 'whirlpool', is a Khasi dance enacted every spring. Virgin girls in this matrilineal society dance slowly in the middle of a circular field and young men dance energetically around them, to demonstrate that women are the keepers of the home and men the protectors." Weiking is also the name of the dance site near Shillong where the festival events take place.

Weiking! Weiking!
Spring is back, begin your whirling motions
and let our life live on.
...
Whirl on, whirl on,
what if some of us
sneer at us for fools?
We are not here to pay obeisance
to the gods for a plentiful harvest
(do we ever have a harvest now?)
whirl on, whirl on to a time
when women stood by their men
and men were tigers guarding
their homes with jealous swords.

Mamang Dai, an Adi from north of the Brahmaputra River in Arunachal Pradesh, also draws on images of a dance ritual in a poem called "Tapu." The poet calls on her people to attend to neglected traditions and identity which are coming under increased pressure from a variety of stressors. According to her note the *tapu* dance is part of annual fencing contests held by Adi men (and occasionally women) who don traditional warrior's garb to participate. An excerpt reads:

Here we have marked the land
with upright branches and stones

and consecrated territory
with song, and the leap of the warrior
returning triumphant.

In this diagram
looking through the sun's face,
peeping through the moon,
the meaning of life is contained
in fulfilling obligation.

Mark the sword.
Mark the sound.
What are the words
we will tell our sons and daughters?
That dying is not so hard if the image survives.
... (86-87)

Such festival and dance events in North-East India have become important contexts for constructing, negotiating, and displaying ethnic identity and are now destinations of ethnic tourism, often taking place on designated festival grounds. Other festivals include the Hornbill Festival of the Nagas, held in Kohima, multi-ethnic *bihu* festivals in Assam, the Chapchar Kut in Mizoram, etc. Likewise, in southwest China, festivals such as the Torch Festival of the Yi and Bai, Sword Pole Festival of the Lisu, Monihe Festival of the Wa, Water-Splashing Festival of the Dai, Fairy Festival of the Nu, etc. have become sites for the display of ethnicity and emergent traditions of song, dance, and costume. Official celebrations are typically sponsored by local governments. Clips from festivals in both North-East India and China showing traditional dance and costume have been posted on sites such as Youtube by locals and tourists in both regions. A number of Yi poets have written the Torch Festival into their lyrics, including Aku Wuwu who is composing a long Nuosu language poem on the subject invoking the dynamic of change and continuity in tradition.

Finally, poets in both regions sometimes make use of the names, deeds, and characteristics of figures in folklore that embody folk ideas. Lu Juan, among the younger generation of Nuosu poets in Sichuan evokes the names of several figures from Yi lore in her haunting poem "Mute Slave" ("Ya nu" 哑女) which laments the loss of traditional oral culture (and the written texts of the Nuosu *bimo* priests) via imagery of a young women in the context of shifting scenes of native experience. Among the figures are Coqo Ama, a cannibal crone of the wilds who eats unwary children, and the mythic culture-hero Zhyge Alu, who shot down the extra suns and moons in the sky and is the subject of Aku Wuwu's famous Nuosu language poem

“Calling Back the Soul of Zhyge Alu” (“Axluyyr kut” in Nuosu; “Zhao hun” 找魂 in Chinese) (123-127). Lu’s lines unwind as follows in my English translation:

Traveling backwards in time
to witness it all,
to be shocked by it all,
able only to be silent:
“Child wash your hands, and shut the door!”
Going forth amidst such subtle directives.
She was neither a grandchild of the crone, Coqo Ama,
nor a descendant of the hero, Zhyge Alu,
but rather one in the most unique blood line
outside that of the lords;
she grew at an imperceptible speed,
in that accustomed way;
unhurried, un-hurried,
and by necessity, that
slow mode
of delivery.
This was the special way
of grandma’s pregnancy,
and her way of telling it.
...
Relinquishing all grammar and vocabulary,
imitating no sort of language .
The distinct scent of fire and
the brightness within hoof prints
incite unsought poems in my dreams... (“Dying Hunters” 146-147)

Khasi poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih draws on a tale about Ren, a young fisherman from a village called Nongjri located in the East Khasi Hills in Meghalaya. The unresisting young man is lured into the depths by a water nymph. These lines recount the repurposed tale, and lead into imagery suggesting the mindless absorption of outside forces of acculturation by the Khasi. The poem was originally written in the mother-tongue of Khasi and translated by the poet in order to reach a wider audience. A passage relates the folktale:

Faraway
from the year dot
Ren, the Nongjri fisherman
Ren, the beloved of a river nymph
Ren, who loved so madly

who left his mother and his home
to live in the magic depths
also left a message:
“Mother,” he had said,
“listen to the river,
as long as it roars
you will know that I live.”
It was too faraway
from the year dot
what he had said.
Times have changed
the sound of our lives
dwindle into different tongues
and everyday, tongues
lap up our sound. (“Ren” 158-159)

Imphal is the capital of Manipur, the North-East state competing with Nagaland for the longest-running and most prolific regional insurgent movements. It is located in a fertile basin fed by rivers and surrounded by nine layers of mountains. According to the creation myths of the Meiteis, the ethnic group dominating the lowlands, a small hump of land in the center of the palace grounds known as Kangla, was the only dry land during an ancient flood. Between 1947 and 2005, the palace grounds, which takes the form of a great rectangle surrounded by a moat, was the headquarters of the Indian military forces who hold down the simmering insurrections in the tiny state. Manipur was only recently opened to foreign travel, as the level violence has subsided over the last few years. Nevertheless, the city was under blockade for four months in late 2011, due to conflicts over land claims between ethnic Kuki and Naga insurgents on highway 39 leading to Nagaland and Assam. The recent 2012 local elections were also marked with grenade and bomb attacks. As in Nagaland, extortion in the name of insurgency is widespread.¹¹

Nevertheless, the local culture of the Meiteis or “Manipuris” is strong and religious festivals and epic singing occur throughout the year. Christianity is almost pervasive among the Kuki, Mizo, and Naga groups in the hills. Among the best-known Manipuri poets is S. Robin Ngangom, co-editor of a volume titled *Dancing Earth*, an important anthology of North-East poetry. His translation from Manipuri of R.K. Bhubonsana’s poem “Bullet,” alludes to the mindless violence of the insurgencies and counter-insurgencies by invoking techniques of traditional slash and burn agriculture in which the wastelands are burned off in winter, then planted with crops in the spring to create *jhum* fields. It is also an example of the often blood-drenched poetry of the region (Ngangom, “Contemporary” 299):

You should keep going,
Bursting through

Like cool water
On a parched throat
Fatigued after a long journey,
Like canals of parched fields
On the forehead
Of a drought-stricken farmer,
Like *jhum* fields, lush,
On slopes charred by wildfire,
Like a breeze at the foot of hills,
In evening's lanes,
On dark roads of nights,
Crooning songs,
Piercing someone's breast,
Lips.

Bullet! (58-59)

Mona Zote of the state of Mizoram on Manipur's southwestern border, is noted for her bifurcated life as a tax officer and poet. One of Zote's best known poems is "Rez," inspired by a brief news article reporting the 2005 shooting spree on an American Indian reservation in Red Lake, Minnesota. The poem, which mixes imagery of imagined reservation life and the life in the insurgent hills of Mizoram, begins with the line:

A boy & his gun : that's an image will do
to sum up our times
to define red lakes
and razor blade hills of our mind. Out here *this place never
changes, never will* ("Rez")

Another poem, "Girl, with Black Guitar and Blue Hibiscus," contains a reference—in the word "subterranean"—to Pi Nghaki, said to be the first oral poet of the Mizo people. Due to her over-production of songs and poems she was buried alive with her gong, so that "future generations would have something to write about" ("Song"). Like other of Zote's poems, this one is manic and wildly lyrical, catching the feel of turbulent times:

The reality of music is a problem
Waiting to be solved by the black guitar
Not the girl, nor the jug of blue hibiscus

The pigeons are insane with grief because you left them
The clouds will be noble and distant as always
The scent of citrus flowers will fade in soft explosions

And the girl will put a blue hibiscus in her hair
And the computer will speak in flawless Japanese
Talking of the elegant instant and how the quasars are
forever expanding

How the jealousy of common stuff finds itself fully
in an uncommon criminal act. In the red earth lay her like a seed.

The sad subterranean gong will go on accusing
Until it becomes the black guitar and music becomes
A cleft of a certain colour waiting for the first quiver of strings,
Until the gong is quiet and the woman in the earth goes to sleep. (“Girl”)

The social dynamics of southwest China since the early 1980s have been geared to rapid social change spurred by China’s booming economy and government programs to modernize China’s southwest. Following decades of upheaval and erratic state and ethnic violence in the 1949-1976 era, in more recent years contemporary social problems such as drug addiction, HIV-AIDS, population shifts due to job-seeking, urbanization, marriage with other ethnic groups, rapid development, environmental degradation, and other issues have all become forces in contexts of poetic production (Liu). While direct address of certain sensitive issues (especially ethnic disharmony and unrest) are normally taboo in officially sanctioned publications, more ambiguous complaints about loss of tradition, alterations in the environment, the impact of urbanization and globalization, and culture shock are common. Such themes are apparent in several poems already examined and occur in poems by many poets of the Liangshan school and other poets writing today throughout the southwest.

In a Nuosu language poem published in 1998 and appearing recently in English translation, poet Aku Wuwu evokes lingering trauma caused by destruction of traditional culture that occurred throughout the Yi areas during local and national convulsions of political chaos in the 1950s and 1960s. Specifically mentioned is the damage done to ancestral soul tablets and written ritual texts at the heart of Yi ritual culture, and the persecution of the traditional ritualists known as *bimo* (who were later rehabilitated as “intellectuals” in the subsequent era of openness and development).

The ritual altar board was ripped from the wall
and became the roof of a dog house.

Leaks within the caves
where they were kept,
caused the ancestor's soul tablets to rot.
Ritualists, the *bimo*,
were driven into rat holes
to doctor sick rats,
The Book of Divination
was carried by ants to their colonies
to tell the fortunes
of ants.
...
All these things ,
were incised
by wild wind and heavy rains
upon the brow of the cypress tree. (Aku, "Four Trees")

The lines are from a poem called "Cypress Tree" ("Shut bbo" in Nuosu language) in a series of powerful and often gut-wrenching poems grouped in the translation as "Four Trees and Three Seas." The images of the cypress draw on a local tree species that has mythic and ritual significance to the Nuosu Yi. The imagery is "metonymic," evoking the accomplishments and spirit of traditional Yi culture (Foley). On one level the poem is a cry for ethnic self-awareness and endurance in a vein similar to many of Aku's other Nuosu language poems, including "Poison Weed," which declares, "Although we appear to be humans, our bones are the bones of tigers. / Or if appearing to be plants—we are plants of great poison." (Bender, "Dying Hunters" 141).

Revisiting Lu Juan's cryptic poem, "Voice of a Mute Slave," the poet also invokes the excesses associated with zealous political movements of the past combined with imagery of legendary battles and ancient migrations through the mountains. There is also a striking concern with voice and voicing to communicate complex emotions of personal and cultural turmoil and survival. A few lines of my translation read:

Relinquishing all grammar and vocabulary;
All the sacred scrolls nibbled up,
When faced with invasion,
The mother tongue was
Hidden within water buckets
Hidden behind millstones
Hidden within fireplaces
But there was no escaping, and now not a word can be read;

Crushed like the foes of legend
Facing a great wild fire,
With ancient tree trunks crackling,
The recollections of ancestors dance around the flames.
Their faces are still clear in the mind:
A thousand hunters walk by
A thousand singers walk by
A thousand craftsmen walk by.
Shouting the names of those ancestors --
Who replies? Does anyone reply? ("Dying Hunters" 146-147)

While poets from indigenous communities in North-East India often compose in English and ethnic poets from China typically write in Chinese, both bodies of poets have been influenced by trends in Western Modernist poetry and poetries of nativist writers from around the world, either in the original texts, or in the case of China, in translation. Because of this access to world poetry in English/translation, the style and texture of poetry produced in both areas is comparable. But beyond aspects of style, and to some extent theme, the content of many of the poems have surprising parallels, especially in the use of folklore and images of the human inhabited natural environment. Although the possibility of ancient links via migration is a likely factor in some of the parallel folk ideas and ways, similarities in these poems may also be due to processes of convergence. Similar environmental and social contexts may influence human activity—including the writing of poetry that draws on and repurposes notions of tradition composed in times of rapid change. That said, drawing on traditional referential knowledge of language, myths and legends, material culture, values, spirituality, life-cycle rituals, and the environment which form the traditional “ethnic life-worlds” of the various regional cultures, will allow more meaningful, culture-based interpretations of the “ethnographic” poetry being written by passionate poets in the dynamic border areas that, in their various ways, these poets call home (Biswas and Suklabaidya 18-20).

Notes

¹The term “Zomia” was proposed early in the 21st century by Dutch Asianist Willem van Schendel (2002). The upland region more or less covers an area from Nepal and Tibet eastwards into China and Southeast Asia. Among recent works conceptualizing how this incredibly ethnically diverse area can be considered a geo-cultural unit is James C. Scott’s controversial *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* on continuities in the historic socio-politics of the region. Also, an issue of *Journal of Global History* was devoted to discussing the concept of “Zomia,” introduced by an informative essay by Jean Michard. Although the name “Zomia” (which van Schendel derived from roots in the Chin-Mizo-Kuki languages of Southeast Asia and Northeast India) is unlikely to be accepted by many of the

ethnic groups and nation-states the proposed region encompasses, the conceptualization of an upland Asian/Southeast Asian region of numerous official and unofficial, often trans-border ethnic groups does present researchers with a socio-geographical framework in which to identify points of comparisons between cultural experiences of various peoples in areas contiguous to China's southwest, India's eastern border areas, and other places of relevance.

² For example Sengupta writes, "From the conventional physical anthropological point of view, the people of this region may be conveniently divided into two broad racial groups, the Indic (Caucasoid) and the Indo-Mongoloid. All the tribes are Indo-Mongoloid whereas Caste-Hindus, Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes (OBC), and Muslims form the Indic group" (202-203). Moreover, as of 1991, about 8.1 million people out of 31.5 million on the North-East were "tribal."

³ See the special issue of *Indian Folklife* for essays on globalization in North-East India and an introductory essay by the editor, Kailash C. Baral (3-5). Hussain treats local resistance movements to dams and other development projects, and articles in Deb discuss conflict resolution in the North-East. See note 10 below for more sources.

⁴ See Peng for current official and indigenous folkloric representations of Zhu Geliang and his southwest invasions. For discussions of acculturating forces at work on the local cultures of southwest China, see Harrell and Notar. See Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani, ed. for articles on the situation of modern Tibetan writing within shifting contexts of social change.

⁵ Works by several of these poets are discussed in recent publications such as the ecocritical/folkloristic *Ecology, Myth, and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry in English from North-East India* (Chandra and Das) and have been anthologized in volumes such as Tilottoma Misra's two volume *Oxford Anthology of the Literature of North-East India* (2011).

⁶ I have termed these poets the "Liangshan School" [Liangshan Pai 凉山派] due to shared themes and positioning towards tradition (the name is taken from the Greater and Lesser Liangshan Mountains of southern Sichuan) (Bender, "Echoes"). Poets in this school include the aforementioned, as well as Jimu Langge 吉木狼格, Bamo Qubumo 巴莫曲布嫫, Sha Ma 沙马, Eni Mushasijia 俄尼牧莎斯加, Ma Deqing 马德清, and others. See essays by Luo Qingchun 罗庆春 [aka Aku Wuwu] for discussions of native tongue poetry and the use of Chinese by ethnic minority poets (Luo).

⁷ Ao has engaged the topic of head-hunting directly in her poem "Trophies," which she prefaces by the statement, "Head-takers were considered to be heroes and such warriors earned the right to wear special ornaments, clothes and give Feasts of Merit to the entire village as a mark of elevated status in the society." (Ao 54-56). In the poem she adopts the voice of a wife who has had enough of the "irresponsible" actions of her trophy taking husband, thus marking the ambivalent memories of the tradition in Naga society. See Biswas and Suklabaidya (39-44) for an interpretation of a folk narrative with an "ecological sensibility" and head-hunting that concerns a hunter and a barking deer doe and frog which shift between human and animal forms.

⁸ In a paper titled "Emergence and Migration: The Use of Tradition in Contemporary Wa and Nuosu Yi Poetry," presented at the International Society for Folk Narrative interim meeting in Shillong, Meghalaya, February 22, 2009, I briefly raised issues of similarity between themes in the poems of Temsula Ao, Burao Yilu, and Aku Wuwu.

⁹ For instance, see Blackburn for a recent study on the Apatani of Arunachal Pradesh whose chants for guiding the dead to the afterlife have certain parallels among Nuosu Yi and other Tibeto-Burman speaking groups in southwest China.

¹⁰Among the Nuosu people of southwest China, the names of animals used in sacrifices cannot be spoken, thus they are referred to with euphemisms such as the “black-skinned ones” for pigs, chickens, and goats. Palm copra clothing is a coded reference to Han Chinese (*Hxiegma*), while wool-bearing sheep (fleeced with scissors) refers to the Nuosu people. Sysse Dihni is a heavenly god mentioned in the early parts of the *Book of Origins* (*Hnewo teyy*), an epic narrative that relates the origins of life on earth.

¹¹ See Biswas and Suklabaidya for nuanced perspectives on the character of insurgency in the North-East, and (Brara) for more specific information on ethnicity and insurgency in Manipur. See Guha for a brief discussion of peace and violence in the poetry of North-East India which includes a number of poets mentioned in this article.

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