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The *Oikos* of the Mother Tongue

Ecology and Maternity of Language in Two Yi Poets

Cosima Bruno

By recognizing interconnectedness in the coexistence of multiple forms of life and by supporting the distinction and singularity of identities, models of ecological consciousness have been defining fruitful frameworks to analyze not only the relationship between human and nature, but also the uneven relationship between marginalized communities and settler colonialists, animalism and anthropocentrism, local economy and global capitalism. This is an exploratory paper about the ecology of language in relation to racialized subjects of ethnic communities in mainland China. I refer to works by two poets from the Yi ethnic group Aku Wuwu (1964–) and Jidi Majia (1961–) to show the inextricable concerns for the loss and preservation of the linguistic, cultural, and natural environment. My aim is not to simplistically romanticize China's ethnic minorities and their environment, nor is it to highlight their ethnic identity or nationalism. Rather, on the axiom of a relational politics of language, within which their poetry fulfills the purpose of keeping alive the cultural ecosystem, I aim to better understand how linguistic, cultural, and environmental protection combines with human ontology.

Using models of ecological consciousness, I aim to explore how the environment is conceptualized in the work of the Yi 彝¹ poets Aku Wuwu 阿库乌雾 (1964–) and Jidi Majia 吉狄马加 (1961–).

Since the 1980s, many Yi poets from the Liangshan mountains have developed influential voices in various regional, national, and international poetry circles. Within Chinese national literature, the long tradition of ethnic poetry in general, and of Yi poetry in particular, has often been recuperated as “nature writing,” bearing a valuable contribution to the environmental awareness on the Chinese territory.² Frequent are also studies discussing issues of nationalism and ethnic identity in Yi poetry.³

My aim here is not to simplistically romanticize China’s ethnic minorities and their environment, nor is it to explain their ethnic identity or advocate for cultural or linguistic conservationism. Rather, on the axiom that Yi poetry contributes to the cultural ecosystem, I aim to better understand the linguistic parameters of these poets’ environments and how they manifest in their works.

I am guided by a 1981 statement by the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, who wrote that “the choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe.”⁴ Crucial to this conceptualization of the environment, and with reference to the Chinese context, is the notion of *mutu* 母语,⁵ or “mother tongue,” as “the language of first territorialization,” the language of the writer’s first environment, “that fabric of natural and social elements from which they emerge, in which they may continue to live, and which they may want to pass on to future generations.”⁶ As Jidi Majia muses, “It was Mama who dipped into the sea of language / And ladled out those sea-bottom treasures for me.”⁷ Those “treasures,” and his forefathers’ fragmented memories as transmitted by his mother, he hopes “will not be forgotten by the living.”⁸

The ecological perspective adopted in this paper is therefore to be understood in the double sphere of the ecology of language⁹ and ecopoetics, implying that mother tongue, language ecology, and ecopoetics all share the same linguistic, psychological, and socio-political territory. Furthermore, the ecology of language makes the same claims of ecological urgency at both protecting the historical and cultural specificity from invasive species and at adapting and including marginalized communities.¹⁰ It is under this urgency that Aku Wuwu talks of the “survival” of the mother tongue in a context in which improved proficiency in Chinese weakens the poet’s mother tongue and native way of thinking.¹¹ Such a struggle involves the politics of translation and nontranslation, center and periphery, national language and the mother tongue.

Ecology of Language and Maternity of Language

In its interdisciplinary practice of co-creation of the universe, minority poetry poses an ecological question that can be examined from different perspectives: that one of forms and genres, symbols and allegories, language policy, comparative literature and philosophy, identity construction, and so forth. I here focus attention on the *oikos*¹² of the mother tongue.

For poets from an ethnic minority, the ecology of language implies at least a diglossia. If the way they write represents their identity, history, and home, their environment is complicated by the inclusion of experiences and memories of languages being changed or lost due to politics of national unity or sameness. While it is rather common in scholarship to distinguish between ethnic poetry written in the mother tongue and ethnic poetry written in the dominant language, these two linguistic environments have in practice overlaps and cross-pollinations. The wider environment of Yi poetry of course includes other linguistic varieties: Chinese as the standard national language; classical Chinese as one of the literary languages; the Nuosu 诺苏 as a classical language, used mostly by the ritual priests (*bimo* 毕摩); the Nuosu as oral mother tongue, the reformed Nuosu syllabary, and other Yi dialects.¹³

In contrast with the national language, which is a desired language that refers to an imagined community, the mother tongue, when is not used to indicate the primary language of an individual (for example, Chinese for the majority of the population in China, or Italian for Italians), refers to a reduced, identifiable community, its heritage, and its collective memory. The way it is employed here is more literally the language from which the speaker has genetically descended. The fundamental bond between an individual writer and their language is initially territorialized in an intimate, proximate, familiar environment, then also social, including the members of the same linguistic community. Differently from those of its synonyms “first language,” “native language,” or “ancestral tongue,” the concept of “mother tongue” expresses the meaning of the language of first environment, that language that one learns from their parents by imitation, through the interpretation of sounds and gestures. The word “mother” in the term attaches an emotional quality, investing language with the meanings of memory, physical proximity, interaction, and imitation, in a direct link to orality and oral culture. In other words, what makes the mother tongue happen is the body. Thus intended, the mother tongue does not always correspond to the language the subject can speak or write best. In fact, there is a clear distinction between learning a language by proximity and learning a language by education. In fact, although Aku Wuwu writes both in Nuosu and in



Chinese Mandarin and states that he has “two mother tongues,”¹⁴ his mother tongue should be considered Nuosu since he acquired this language by proximity in his community in Mianning County. Mandarin is instead the language he started learning at the age of seven, thanks to the teaching of his sister, who was the only speaker of Mandarin in their community.¹⁵

Writing, however, always implies learning. The young Aku Wuwu needed to study on borrowed books in Chinese in order to be able to be the first person in his community to ever pass the college entrance examinations, and enroll, in the early 1980s, to study Yi traditional literature at the Southwest University for Nationalities. In this sense, we could argue that there is no such thing as “writing in the mother tongue” because writing leads significantly from the level of acquisition to the level of learning, of mediation, introducing the discrete codification of knowledge and an impairment of memory. This may explain the importance of orality in the poetry of ethnic minorities and the paucity of written literature in their mother tongue, which points to a difference in aesthetic approaches between the ethnic minority and the dominant culture: poetry in the mother tongue is predominantly oral-oriented, poetry in the dominant Han culture is predominantly print-oriented. Whether in content, sound, or structure, or in all of these aspects, Yi poetry has indeed integrated strong elements of orality and of its oral tradition.¹⁶

Solastalgia in the Poetry of Aku Wuwu and Jidi Majia

The individual choice of writing in the mother tongue or in Chinese can be autonomous from or dependent on the domestic space of the mother and the social determinism of the Chinese nation.¹⁷ In either case, the national language is also the language of a wider territorialization, and it cannot be completely excluded from the knowledge of culture, art, and literature in the Yi-Nuosu lan-

guage. What seems important to understand, however, is the kind of spaces, registers, and spheres defined by the usage of Nuosu and/or Chinese. What different statuses and degrees of intimacy are attached to the two languages? For example, following Haugen’s argument, we could notice that while communicating in Chinese may considerably affect the power and influence of the writer/speaker in the wider social context, the use of Nuosu in poetry may hold a higher degree of intimacy, “being associated with solidarity, shared values, friendship, love.”¹⁸

Although the mother tongue is considered the language that can better connect to feelings and emotions,¹⁹ the adoption of Chinese overcomes (in terms of prestige or daily practice) the acquisition of the mother tongue. Economic considerations (for example, the widening of the human capital with international communication) often contribute to the choice of language, too, since a book in a minority language has a necessarily limited readership. The psychological consequences of living in an environment with a minority language and a majoritarian language often include feelings of danger, fear of extinction, or being neglected.

For the poets writing in Nuosu, as well as those Yi poets who use Chinese as their creative language, the mother tongue becomes a popular theme that links to territory, affects, refuge, and force to survive in a hostile context. The mother tongue, even when absent, is seen as a receptacle of history and memory and as a channel for engaging with the community and with the environment at large.²⁰ The loss of the mother tongue results in an environmental dysfunction, which provokes an emotional and existential crisis in the poet.

Aku Wuwu signs his books as Aku Wuwu or Wuwu—a simplified transcription in pinyin given to him by one of his teachers—instead of his Nuosu Romanized name Aku Vuvu (or Apkup Vytvy). In addition, he uses the Chinese name Luo Qingchun 罗庆春 in legal documents.²¹ Presently the dean of ethnic studies at the Southwest Nationalities University in Chengdu, Sichuan



Province, Aku Wuwu has published poetry collections in Chinese and in the reformed Yi-Nuosu script.²² Although the revised script may be used and even promoted in various media, few Yi people possess the reading or writing proficiency to appreciate or write literary works in the revised script. According to Mark Bender, it is in order to counteract this low proficiency that Aku regularly performs and records his poetry in Nuosu.²³ Aku's poetry performance as an alternative to reading gives full expression to the oral aspect of his poetry in the mother tongue, which integrates natural scenery and stylistic elements drawn from Yi folk songs, myths, and major cultural symbols.

In the poem "At Twilight, Longing for My *Amo*," we can see how the figure of the mother is associated with hardship, nurture and nutriment, heritage, and writing, in association with the son's worry that the mother may be hurt, or attacked, or somehow lost:

At twilight I long for my *Amo*
 ...
 How many buckwheat leaves
 Were nurtured from sprouts by *Amo*?
 How many buckwheat kernels
 Were so carefully raised by *Amo*?
 Oh, my *Amo*, her back stacked with firewood,
 ...
 I can't say if her steps are steady or not,
 As her feet may slip down the slope,
 ...
 Will she step upon a toad or poison snake?
 ...
 Or busy leaving
 A heritage for her descendants.
 ...
 Oh, *Amo*!
 Carrying a bucket of water thick as ink²⁴

The fear of losing his mother is encountered here and again, as in the poem "Revisit" ("Chongyou" 重游), which begins with a quotation from the renowned exile poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (c. 339 BC–278 BC) about birds and foxes returning to their home and ends with the subject's

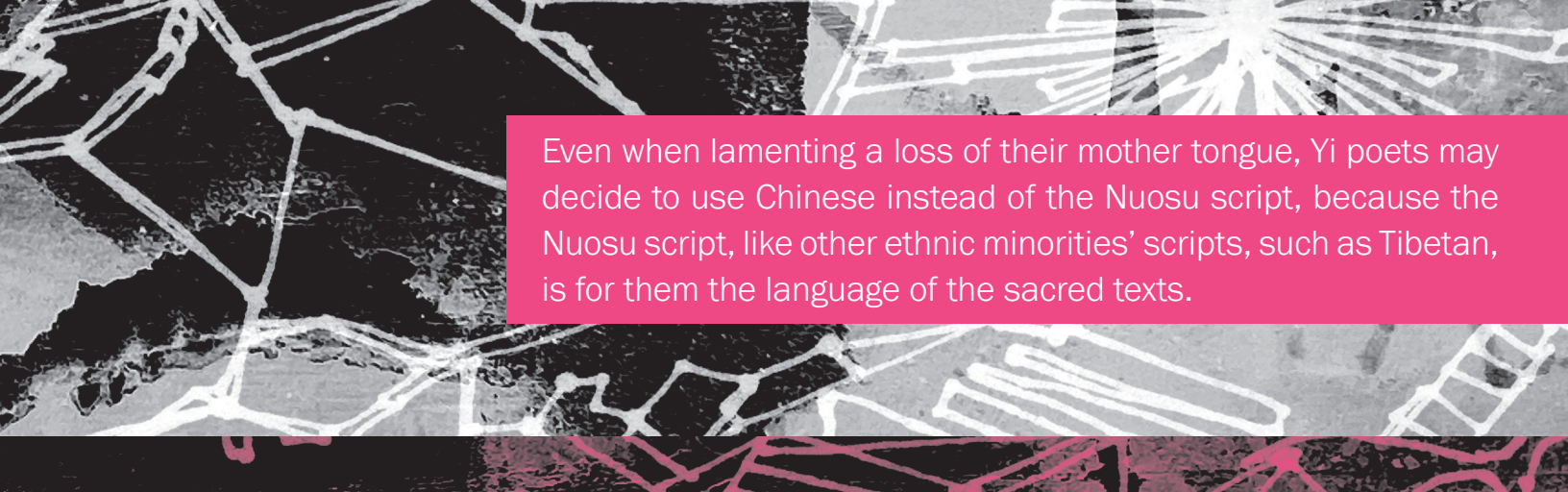
separation from his "maternal source" (*muti* 母体), which makes "the world no longer complete," and home hard to return to.²⁵

In the essay "Forever Home" ("Yongyuan de jia yuan" 永远的家园), Aku perceptively notes that the anxiety for the clash between mother tongue and Chinese language is psychologized in minority writings through disastrous imagery: the snowy land resounds of the avalanche; the desert sinks in quicksand; the forest is enveloped by the smoke of fire, and the mountain peak collapses in desolation.²⁶ The *oikos* of the mother tongue is thus so tightly interlaced with the natural environment that it is often impossible to distinguish it.

The eighty poems collected in *Coyote Traces—Aku Wuwu's Poetic Sojourn in America* (Kaioudi shenji—*Aku Wuwu liu Mei shige xuan* 凯欧蒂神迹——阿库乌雾旅美诗歌选, 2015)—Aku's second bilingual (Chinese and English) poem anthology—provide observations and insights which draw parallels between the natural world, the Native Americans, and the Yi people.²⁷ Aku's ecological concern is strong and clear, expressing his anxiety for the disappearance of the species, be it animal, human, or linguistic.

Jidi Majia, whose Chinese-language poetry has been translated into English, Italian, and Scots, among other languages, is currently the head of the Poetry Committee of the Chinese Writers Association and has been instrumental in organizing international poetry festivals at the scenic Lake Qinghai. His writing in Chinese²⁸ is imbued with a diglossia that shows him as a foreign in his own language. His question of identity resolves as a Yi poet:

Ashylazzi and Jidi Majia
 Are sometimes the same person.
 Their voice comes from the chorus of ranged
 mountains.²⁹
 My ageless mother
 Is a singer upon this land
 She is its deep-running river
 ...
 I am Mother's quavering syllables
 ...
 I-am-Nuosu!³⁰



Even when lamenting a loss of their mother tongue, Yi poets may decide to use Chinese instead of the Nuosu script, because the Nuosu script, like other ethnic minorities' scripts, such as Tibetan, is for them the language of the sacred texts.

In the year 2023, a new collection by Jidi Majia was published in translation, with the title *Mither Tongue* ("mother tongue"). The book contains both Jidi Majia's poems in their original Chinese and their translations into Scotland's linguistic varieties. Such a publication can be seen as fulfilling an important function of solidarity in bonding ethnic minorities' predicament and in recognizing it as a global question.

Many of Jidi Majia's poems present natural elements, such as the mountains, the animals, the crops, integrating the poet's ecological consciousness:

We know that there is not much time left

...

Because the course of all life on earth attests
To let any kind of plant or animal fade away
Would threaten disaster for all in common³¹

More conspicuously, the poem "I, Snow Leopard..." ("Wo xuebao" 我, 雪豹...) adopts the subjective voice of the animal itself, a poetic eco-diction, in which the snow leopard, as nature, is made to speak as the environment. The poet simultaneously muses about the predicament of indigenous peoples living in highland areas of Asia, identifying the snow leopard with the Yi people themselves.³² In this poem the persona is described in a conflictual position, living in a language that "betrays" his identity, having to use "traitorous words" that "will ever inscribe" him.³³ His own name "now becomes a weapon against naked power!" The diglossia of the national language and mother tongue is doubled by the diglossia of the vernacular and the classical language, defined by the poet as "Spirit-given language" that adapts his "lips into ritual vessels."³⁴

As for Aku, also for Jidi, the mother tongue is receptacle of memory, heritage, native land, intimacy, and poetry, and as such is undistinguishable from the physical, psychological, and cultural environment:

Oh the nameless river in the chasm of
Guniyilada
Give me the rhythm of your lifeblood
Let the roof of my mouth resound with your
voice

...

Let my body be your embryo once again
Let me gestate in your womb³⁵

Yearning for his integration with the natural environment, the subject endorses it with the power of giving him "rhythm" and "voice." The natural environment is not external but constitutes the subject's own body, as an "embryo" in the mother's "womb." The same identification is found in "Self-Portrait" ("Zi huaxiang" 自画像): "My ageless mother / Is a singer upon this land."³⁶

Even when lamenting a loss of their mother tongue, Yi poets may decide to use Chinese instead of the Nuosu script, because the Nuosu script, like other ethnic minorities' scripts, such as Tibetan, is for them the language of the sacred texts. As such, it is not precisely a literary language. Using Classical Nuosu to write poetry may not just be difficult but it may also sound somewhat inappropriate to express certain more secular ideas. Modern Nuosu has rarely been employed in literature, possibly sounding awkward to the literary person who is not used to reading that oral language. In contrast, Chinese may be perceived as the literary or political language among the Chinese people inside and beyond China.³⁷

In any case, the Nuosu language is linked to the figure of the mother, even when—in calling her Nuosu name—Jidi uses Chinese characters to transcribe it:

死神用母语喊了她的名字:

尼子果各桌史, [...]

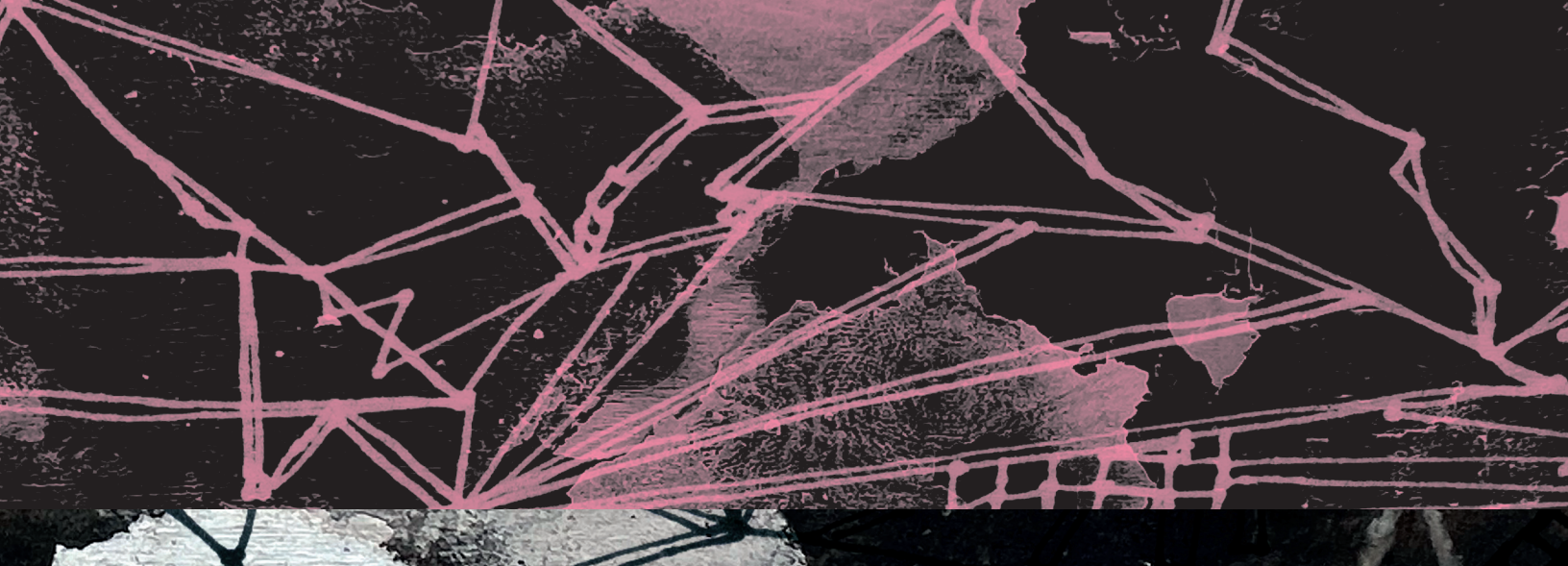
The Grim Reaper called to her in our mother
tongue;

"Ninzy Guowzoshy ..."³⁸

The figure of his dead mother recurs in more than one poem, both as carrier of the oral mother tongue and as receptacle of the collective memory of his community:

Mother Tongue

Although Mama left no verse in written form
Her spoken words crystallized the salt of
language.



...
So many truths, however deeply conceived,
Commanding a perspective on the land around
us,
Were summed up in her proverbial language
...
I admit, one who goes in search of phrases,
It was Mama who dipped into the sea of
language
And ladled out those sea-bottom treasures for
me.³⁹

In the poem "Reminiscence" ("Zhuinian" 追念), the poet's concern and worry are again directed toward his lost mother tongue, through the trope of the typical Yi mouth harp, the *kouxian*: "Mother, tell me / Is there a way to find my lost *kouxian*?"⁴⁰ The same lost mother tongue is thematised in "The Enduring One" ("Buxiuzhe" 不朽着), where the poet writes: "My mother tongue sobs in the darkness."⁴¹

Concluding Remarks

The ecology of language, as defined by Haugen and developed by some linguists and philosophers since, has been used in the study of mother tongues in contexts of ethnic colonization.⁴² I have adopted it here not to advocate linguistic conservatism or purism but to enthuse over greater awareness of how language is part of the environment. By eroding the boundaries among nature, environment, language, and culture, the ecology of language can create an ontological and epistemic basis for a conception of language as a knowledge system and of its elimination as an "epistemicide."⁴³

To the deterioration, endangerment, and even loss of the mother tongue corresponds the deterioration, endangerment, and even loss of the place, signaling the urgency of an ecological mutation. Intended as *factum loquendi*, the mother tongue is able to converge and iden-

tify immediately (not literarily) with the mother place, the environment. Furthermore, both Aku Wuwu and Jidi Majia very consciously engage with other minorities' indigenous poets from around the world, manifesting their aspiration to link cross-culturally with other ethnic contexts in the ecological world system, thus confirming their poetry's position within a universal episteme of mother tongue and ecology.

In foregrounding the *oikos* of these Yi-Nuosu aesthetic texts, I hope I have demonstrated that they are environmental writing not only in a thematic sense, but also in a linguistic and existential sense, as sites of alterity of poetic procedures and of socio-ontological experience. The mindscape, the landscape, and the cultural imagination are all made up by language as much as by the natural and material surroundings. The mother tongue, the language of the first territorialization, entertains an important dialogue in Yi poetry and to ignore it would modify Yi poetry's function and diminish its significance.

Through the trope of the mother tongue, these poets express their attachment to the environment, often in terms of nostalgic memories of their childhood or fear and worry for their mother and territory. For these poets, linguistic intimacy with the mother tongue is something to desire and aspire to, even if it may never be achieved, because, as Julia Borossa argues in a clearly psychoanalytical vein, the mother tongue is a language of loss, as "the language of childhood, what remains of a long-gone interaction, of a relationship remembered and mourned. ... [t]he child must realize, crucially, that its union with the carer, culturally the mother, can never be complete."⁴⁴

While Jidi Majia's and Aku Wuwu's poems enact a reflection on the survival of poetry in the linguistic and natural landscape through a continuous re-evocation of the dead and the lost people, things, animals, plants, and voices, they also reflect the porosity, the constant cross-pollination between Chinese and Nuosu languages, styles, themes, literary traditions, and repertoires. Aku Wuwu and Jidi Majia exhibit their ability to translate their

own poetry, in addition to ordinarily performing acts of non-professional, fragmentary, and incidental translation. Their diglossia persists between mother tongue and national language, between orality and abstracted, national, written language.⁴⁵ In such constant contiguity, in the flex of the national language and of the mother tongue, silence, and articulation, there is poetry's possibility of carrying the episteme of an ethnic group in the ecosystem. In such an intimate diglossia, there we find poetry thriving in "the entire universe."

Notes

- 1 The Yi is the most prominent ethnic minority of Southwest China, largely populating the mountainous regions of Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou Provinces.
- 2 Notably: Bender, "Ethnic Minority Literature." Barnstone and Ming Di, eds. and trans., *Republic of Apples*. Aku Wuwu himself, when visiting the Asia Centre at Harvard University, in May 2019, delivered a talk titled "The Theories and Practices of Yi Ecological Poetry."
- 3 Bender, "Dying Hunters"; Zhang and He, "Minzhu wenhua ziyuan." Both articles investigate the use of certain imagery and symbolism in connection with Yi ethnic identity. Aku Wuwu, "Yong muyu"; Kuo, *Panda Diaries*; Wen and Liu, "Double Writing"; Allen, "Performing Serpent Mound." All offer a comparative critique of ethnicity, with reference to the Yi and Native Americans. Herbert, "Nationalities Conflict and Ethnicity"; Liu, "Bianyuan"; Yao, *Wenhua minzu zhuyi*; Qiu, "Poetic Approach." They entertain a more political reading of Yi poetry in relation to nationalism and the preservation of Yi ethnic identity.
- 4 Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*, 4. As noted in Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology*, the connection between language and environment has a long history and can be traced back to philosophers of existential phenomenology, for example Martin Heidegger or Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger's concept of "dwelling," in particular, that is, of *being* in the world, and find how language fits together with all its things, people, and environment, seems to point toward the same direction. Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking." Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception does not separate the human body, language, and thought from the natural world; instead, language and thought are conceived as immanent in the natural world. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*.
- 5 From preliminary investigation, it would seem that *mushe* 母语, "mother tongue" was probably a direct translation from European languages, therefore first reported to be used in the twentieth century by Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 (1898–1948) in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi—shiji daoyan*, with reference to a poet who, using the mother tongue, required the reader to translate. Luo, *Hanyu da zidian*, 7:818.
- 6 Agresti, "La nozione," 34. My translation. Resembling this notion of the mother tongue, in *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante Alighieri defines the "vulgar" language as "the language that children acquire from those who are around them." Quoted in Agamben, "Seminario su bilinguismo e poesia."
- 7 Jidi, "Mother Tongue," 104.
- 8 Jidi, "I, Snow Leopard...", 76.
- 9 In his 1972 seminal work *The Ecology of Language*, Einar Haugen defines language ecology as "the study of interaction between any given language and its environment." The environment of a language is for Haugen "the society that uses it": "Language exists only in the mind of its users, and it only functions in relating these users to one another and to nature, i.e., the social and natural environment." Haugen, *Ecology of Language*, 325.
- 10 Mackey, "Ecology of Language Shift," 67.
- 11 Aku Wuwu, "Yongyuan de jiayuan," 12.
- 12 In Ancient Greek, *oikos* indicates the family house. The suffix "eco" in English derives from *oikos*, employed, for example, in the word "ecology" as "the study of where one lives."
- 13 The Chinese government recognizes six mutually unintelligible Yi languages, all variations of the Burmese-Moso branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The Yi-Nuosu variant has a written script, probably originated in the thirteenth century and was primarily transmitted in ritual texts by the bimo ritual priests. Since the mid-twentieth century, the script has also been used for non-religious purposes and was eventually standardized and popularized in the late 1970s. Literary works, together with historical documents, famous families' genealogies, and medical treatises, were written in classical Yi script, while modern syllabic Yi, with increasing influence from Chinese, is widely used in books, newspapers, street signs, education, and now also in computers and mobile phones. Following an anti-illiteracy campaign that promoted the translation into Nuosu of Chinese official administrative documents and books of history and myth, words and concepts, as well as historical and mythological figures found in the Chinese dominant culture and language were introduced into Nuosu. On the history of the Nuosu script, see Harrell, *Ways of Being Ethnic*. Since the ecology of language conceptualizes languages from a systemic and interactional perspective, in a global and synergetic dimension, it also sees the study of a literature as requiring to be conducted in its relations with the literatures of the wider cultural area, so as to reveal mutual complementarity and integration. According to the same logic, both minority language and national language are to be intended in a dynamic way, not as exclusive from one another, but mutually influencing each other, and both being influenced by other circumstantial languages too. A similar argument is made in Aku Wuwu, "Muyu de guanghui."
- 14 In an article where Aku explores the impact of Chinese as a narrative means in Yi fiction writing, Chinese is called "the common mother tongue" since it is "commonly used by all ethnic groups across the country." Aku, however, also distinguishes between Chinese as the "second mother tongue" and Yi-Nuosu as the "first mother tongue." Aku Wuwu and Wang, "Poetry Creation," 57.
- 15 Bender, "Aku Wuwu," 5. In a previous article, Bender reports that Aku "learned Standard Chinese from teachers sent from urban areas during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to teach in underdeveloped rural areas." Bender, "Ogimawkwe Mitiwaki," 87. Most of the biographical information on Aku Wuwu is taken from Bender.
- 16 It is consonant to note that Aku Wuwu regularly performs his poetry in Nuosu. Some of his performances are also available online, as for example, "World Poetry Day 2023" and "Rediscover China." For a discussion of orality in contemporary Yi poetry, see Luo, "Koutou chuangtong."
- 17 For example, especially in a post-colonial environment or in a migrant situation, the language of the mother (say, Shanghaiese) may be in fact not spoken in the first environment of the descendants, who may have Cantonese, Chinese Mandarin, or English as their language of first territorialization. Fathers

and mothers may come from different linguistic backgrounds and speak yet a third language to communicate with each other in their settlers' condition. Such distinctions are particularly relevant when we want to explore further both the idea of the ecology of language and the ideological and political value of the national language. Either way, it stands to reason that the equation between one geopolitical territory and one mother tongue is to be rejected.

- 18 Haugen, *Ecology of Language*, 60. A similar diglossia can be found between vernacular Nuosu and the classic variant of the language used by the *bimo*.
- 19 Jing, "Poetic Approach and Yi-ness," 98.
- 20 Both Aku Wuwu and Jidi Majia perceptively point out that there is an important difference and tension between being celebrated as "other" culture and being co-opted into the dominant culture as a consumable show. Aku Wuwu, "Tiger Skins (Lat Njy)"; Jidi, "I, Snow Leopard...," 66.
- 21 Bender "Ogimawkwe Mitiwaki," 87. *The Constitution of the People's Republic of China* (article 4) stipulates that members of the ethnic communities are in China and have freedom of religion, customs, and language. However, in order to promote a national Chinese identity, the government makes members of the ethnic groups use either a Han Chinese name or a Chinese transliteration of their native name. They can also include the Romanization of their name, that is, the phonetic transliteration in pinyin. "Naming Laws in China." The various versions of the poet's name all explicate the extension of the ingrained act of transliteration and translation to which the minority poet may be subject.
- 22 Aku's first poem written in Nuosu was published in the bilingual journal *Liangshan wenyi*, while his books *Winter River* (1994) and *Tiger Traces* (1998) are the first collections of poetry written and published in modern Yi-Nuosu script.
- 23 Bender, "Ogimawkwe Mitiwaki," 89. This is confirmed by an interview by Qiu Jing, in which Aku Wuwu explains that "because there are so few publications and readers of Yi language, even many Yi people who can understand spoken Yi language cannot read it." Qiu, "Poetic Approach and Yi-ness," 106n.35.
- 24 Aku Wuwu, "At Twilight."
- 25 Aku Wuwu, "Revisit," 680.
- 26 Aku, "Forever Home," 12.
- 27 On the topic, see Wen, "Chinese and Native American Connections."
- 28 I am considering Poupard's inclusive definition of Sinoxenic writing, as writing borrowing Chinese characters. Poupard, "Sinoxenic Writing." More commonly, though, his writing can be defined as "Sinophone." Bender, "Ogimawkwe Mitiwaki"; Poupard, "Translated Identities."
- 29 Jidi Majia, "The Enduring One," 20. Ashy Lazzi is the name of a famous *bimo* ritual priest.
- 30 Jidi Majia, "Self-Portrait," 3. Translation by Mair with some small changes.
- 31 Jidi, "I, Snow Leopard...," 60.
- 32 For instance, as Denis Mair suggests, the poet describes the rosettes on the snow leopard's coat as "telepathic cowries," which associate them with the ceremonial sash worn by Nuosu elders, often studded with cowries said to confer telepathic powers upon the wearer. Mair, "On Blackness and Whiteness," 181.
- 33 Jidi, *Mither Tongue*, 42. This poem thus gives full expression to a notion of ecopoetics that assigns poetry writing the very role

of preserving identity and serving cultural ecology. On the topic, see Zapf, "Ecocultural Potential."

- 34 Jidi, "I, Snow Leopard...," 66.
- 35 Jidi Majia, "Heise," 27.
- 36 Jidi, "Self Portrait," 3.
- 37 Beyond the two poets Aku Wuwu and Jidi Majia, both operating within the context of initial attempts to Yi-Nuosu cultural and linguistic revitalization, the use of Nuosu as a possible language for artistic expression is naturally linked to several internal and external factors, such as the amount of pressure from the state onto local minorities, the breath and consistence of involvement, and practical measures such as the popularization of the reformed Yi-Nuosu script as the standard dialect for all speakers of the Yi northern dialect. Seeking application in different sectors of cultural life, from school textbooks to online and other media, collection, documentation, and the study of language data have been facilitated, making possible preservation and even enhancement of the Yi-Nuosu in artistic expressions. In language revitalization, translation plays of course a prominent role. First and foremost, translation from Yi into other languages promotes and transmits Yi culture and literature among different generations and other linguistic communities. Translation into Yi also plays a fundamental role in preserving and developing the language by stimulating the creation of new expressions in dealing with forms and concepts found in other languages. However, standardization, homogenization, transliteration, translation, and eventually deterritorialization of Yi written language have made of a contextualized mother tongue a language that nobody can fully relate to. Speculations on the future of literature in Yi-Nuosu therefore remain risky to make. In fact, Yi-Nuosu, in its written and spoken forms, is currently in decline, while many young Yi speak a pidgin language that conflates Sichuanese loan words, Yi-Nuosu dialect, and Chinese grammar. I suppose that new approaches to capture some of the fluidity and variations of the spoken language may be essential to the Yi ecosystem. More on the topic of the reformed Yi-Nuosu script can be found in Kraef, "Building Yi (M)other Tongue"; Bradley, "Language Policy for the Yi"; Hu, *Assessment of the Social Functions*.
- 38 This noticed, to the Chinese reader these characters are promptly recognized as transcribing foreign names. Jidi, "When Death Makes Its Advent," 72 (English) and 157 (Chinese).
- 39 Jidi, *Mither Tongue*, 104.
- 40 Jidi, "Zhuinian." My translation.
- 41 Jidi, *Mither Tongue*, 28.
- 42 Among these: Haarmann, *Language in Ethnicity*; Makkai, *Ecolinguistics*; Mühlhäusler, *Linguistic Ecology*.
- 43 Term coined by de Sousa Santos. In syntony with the episteme of the mother tongue, Gregory Bateson's notorious theory in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* identifies in poetry the ecological task of keeping a person thinking in a new way, toward a mind that extends to the outside, where there is no contraposition between human and the environment. De Boaventura, *Epistemologies of the South*; Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.
- 44 Borossa, "Identity," 398.
- 45 Agamben talks of poetry's constitutive diglossia. Agamben, "Seminario," 1.

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