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Ethnic Voices

Nuosu and Neighbouring Ethnic Groups: Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Relations in the Eyes and Ears of Three Generations of the Mgebbu Clan

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Yangjuan Village lies in the northern part of Yanyuan County, Sichuan, 32 kilometres from the County Seat. Looking Westward from the seat of Baiwu Township,1 you can gaze upward at a mountain wall about two kilometres long. The wall is about 100 metres high, and from near the township the row of cliffs looks very steep, with scenic trees filling the top of the cliff, which is scrambled rocks at a thousand angles and a 100 attitudes forming a stairway that one can climb by grasping the clinging vines. If today nothing is visible but a few scrawny bushes and bald boulders, pieces that have been blasted off are still apparent everywhere. On the rows of cliffs a bit farther from the town, even though there is quite a bit of artificial damage, still on the knife-cut cliffs a variety of jade-like trees continue to grow out as if they were intentionally stacked alternately with the bare, vegetation-free rocks. Interspersed at frequent intervals are individual caves out of which fly now and then flocks of raptors, lazily swirling in the open sky or between the mountains, each looking for its own prey. Between the neat rows of cliffs and the disorderly mountain nooks facing them, there emerges a river valley about a kilometre long. The little river running parallel to the base of the cliffs forms a visually striking sight. If you go slowly upstream along the cliffs to the place where they end and come together with the foothills of Zala Mountain, you can see where a few random trees and houses are clustered like beehives; this is Yangjuan Village.

* Translator's note: This three-generation biography and autobiography by my good friend and colleague Mgebbu Lunzy (Ma Erzi) was originally written for the International Congress of Asian Studies in Nordwijk, Netherlands, in 1998. I have translated it because it is the only account I know of about what ethnic relations were like from the standpoint of the minorities facing the Han and other minorities. I have added a few explanatory footnotes as I deemed necessary, but have not seen fit to perform a conventional scholarly analysis on the material.

Nobody can say for sure where the name Yangjuan came from. Some people say the name is Nuosu;2 some say it is Han; some say it is Tibetan. Six hundred Nuosu people live here, about 400 of them members of the Mgebbu clan, the main body of the village inhabitants. Because of this, Yi people near and far sometimes call it Mgebbu Baga, or Mgebbu Village. The members of the Mgebbu have taken the Han surname Ma for themselves, and for this reason Han people, or people speaking the Han language, call it Ma Jia Cun, or Ma Family Village.

The grand clan to which the Mgebbu belong is the Hziezzy Ssesuo, and within that the Shama Qubi; Mgebbu is a further subdivision within Shama Qubi. The original meaning of Mgebbu is ‘averse to buckwheat’. According to legend, my eighth-generation patrilineal ancestor Shama Qubi Ssybbu crossed the Yalong River from Xide County, and settled in the area of Yousuo in present-day Yanyuan, begetting Hxossy. Hxossy as an adult was relatively law-abiding and good at domestic affairs, and his household prospered. But he was particularly fond of drink. On the day before the summertime Fire Festival, his relatives and slaves were all busy threshing buckwheat on the drying ground, and Hxossy got drunk and fell asleep on the pile of buckwheat stalks at the edge of the ground. Everyone was occupied with the flail, and nobody noticed that Hxossy had fallen asleep on the heap of stalks, where they continued to pile the straw up like a mountain after the grain had been threshed. Not until they were ready to shut down the threshing did they discover that Hxossy was nowhere to be found. Afterwards a boy said that when he and some others had gone to shoot birds, he had seen Grandpa asleep on the straw heap. Everyone frantically started digging through the straw stack, and sure enough Hxossy was lying there dead. The next day, when his relatives celebrated the Fire Festival, in memory of Hxossy they made a regulation that they would never use buckwheat in festival offerings, and they would not drink on festivals. From this time on, affinally related clans jokingly referred to this branch of the Shama Qubi as the Shama Mgebbu, the Shama who were averse or allergic to buckwheat, the Shama who couldn’t eat buckwheat. After that, this nickname was used continuously, and eventually became the small surname of this branch. The custom among the clan of not using buckwheat or liquor as offerings on holidays has persisted to this day. After Hxossy died, his sons and grandsons decided they no longer wanted to live in the place where their ancestor had been crushed to death by his own buckwheat stalks, and they moved to Makezzy in Baizu, and from there as a base they gradually spread out over the eastern part of Yanyuan and the southern part of neighbouring Mulzi counties.

Hxossy had three sons. The oldest, Lurrse, had no descendants. The second was called Lossy, and his descendants are widely spread over the counties of Yanyuan and Mulzi. Before the Democratic Reforms of 1956, this branch was known to be rather poor at agriculture and herding, but brave and good at fighting. There are now about 600 of them. The third brother was called Ddahly, and settled at Gangou in Baizu. Dahlly had three sons, of whom the oldest, Voti, was my great-grandfather. The second was called Musse and the third Luhuo; they both lived in the Baizu area. The time of Voti is remembered as a prosperous one: the household economy did well, with lots of livestock and slaves. He was the undisputed leader of the Mgebbu, and one of the more important men in the whole Hziezzy Ssesuo clan. Voti had five wives. The first, Pacha Synzymo, had no children; the second, Pacha Ddimo, gave birth to Zziaum. The third, Bbopomo, had no surviving children, nor did the fourth, also childless, whose cut-off line nobody can remember anymore. The fifth wife, Jiggu Anyomo was originally the wife of a clan brother of Voti. After he died, according to the leviratique custom Anyomo ‘changed rooms’ and became the

2 Nuosu are officially a branch of the Yi minzu (nationality), living in the Liangshan area of southern Sichuan and neighbouring parts of Yunnan. There are about two million Nuosu out of 7.5 million total Yi.
wife of Voti, and gave birth to my grandfather Ddiendur. Ddiendur was six years younger than his elder half-brother; when he grew up, he had a sharp tongue and was very self-assured; living at Gangou, on the one hand he was perhaps too restricted by his parents, and on the other, when the older brother was unhappy, he would coldly comment that Ddiendu was the child of a concubine, with no status. When Ddiendur was in his 20s, his father’s first wife, Ms Synzy, grew ill and died, and her ancestral shrine was installed in his half-brother’s house but not in his. He was angry at this inequality and smashed several valuable drinking vessels, greatly angering his half-brother and nephews. This did not completely ruin the relations between them, but they were always somewhat distant after that. So Ddiendur moved to a place at the foot of Zala Mountain, about two kilometres from where his father-in-law of the Hxiesse clan lived, and bought a piece of land in an area inhabited by the aborigines of this area, the Prmi. From this time on, he had direct contact with Prmi and Han.

Mgebbu Genealogy

Yiggur
Shobu
X Blurred
X Blurred
Hxiebye
Hxiebye
Jjindi
Ggurur
Chezu
Anzoo
Ahxie
Bizzy
Yola
Yote
Bifu
Nyiibbo
Nyiire
Gusse
Jienuo
Jjissu
Syrbbu
Hxossyr
Shozzi
Dahly
Voti
Ddiendur
Ashy
Lunzy (the author)
A total of 28 generations.

A genealogy, called coozy in Nuosu, is a record of generations, and every Nuosu clan makes recitation of its own patriline and each member’s mother’s patriline an integral part of domestic education. Our Mgebbu clan is no exception, and one of my deepest impressions of childhood is of our grandfather, whenever he had some spare time, gathering the boys of his grandsons’ generation together, some leaning on his back and some sitting on his knees, some tugging at his whiskers, in a very relaxed atmosphere, teaching us to recite the genealogy line by line. His temperament was very friendly and, if someone made a mistake, he would just smile and ask someone else to correct it. Some names are very hard to pronounce, such as his own name Ddiendur: most people pronounce it Ddidur; and only I and one uncle knew the correct pronunciation. One evening, a lot of relatives were
gathered at Grandfather’s house, and some adults proposed that we recite the genealogy for them to hear. I demurred and didn’t recite, and Grandfather jokingly said ‘This grandson of mine is a Han; he doesn’t have to recite’. This motivated me a bit, and I went over and stood in front of Grandfather and recited the genealogy fluently down to his name, and then teasingly took my little finger and tapped him on the nose three times before I added Father’s name. When I got to my own name, I pointed to my own nose with my thumb and stereotyped the sound out very long; everybody cracked up. Only my father said to me sternly, ‘Lunzy, only an evil son doesn’t respect his grandfather’. But Grandfather was not only not insulted, but smilingly and with a certain light in his eye pulled me into his lap and cheered me up. Afterwards, when my companions would curl their little fingers in front of my face and imitate me drawing out the sound of my grandfather’s name, it bothered me.

In the evenings if there weren’t any guests, Mother would also get me to recite her family genealogy, known in Nuosu as onyizzy, or the mother’s brother’s line. I don’t know why, but I was never as good at reciting Mother’s genealogy as my brothers and sisters were. Uncle’s family was of the Pazha Ddi clan, and at the Fire Festival in the summer and the New Year holiday in the late fall all of us brothers and sisters would go with mother to take meat and liquor to Uncle’s house, and sometimes Uncle’s neighbours would come to his house to drink the liquor we had brought. When the adults had drunk quite a bit, they would always ask us if we could recite Uncle’s genealogy. I never responded very well. But uncle would jokingly get me out of it, saying ‘It doesn’t matter if he can recite it or not, but if anybody says my nephew isn’t a daughter’s son of the Pazha clan, we can kill a chicken and curse that person and see what happens’. But then Uncle told me privately that next time I came over I’d better be able to recite it.

When Grandfather and Mother were teaching us to recite our genealogies, if I was in a good mood I would go along; if I was feeling unhappy I would ask, ‘what’s this memorisation for, anyway?’ When this happened they would spew off a torrent of good reasons: Grandfather averred that ‘In the land of the Nuosu, we depend on our kin to eat; in the land of the Han, they depend on merchants to eat’; if one doesn’t know one’s genealogy, then one doesn’t know who one’s kin are. When people gather together, when one is travelling, fighting on the battlefield, or in earning one’s living, if you don’t know your genealogy you’ll never have anyone to protect you; you’ll be like water without a spring, a tree without roots; orphans and widows without relatives always suffer. Mother also always earned much of proverbs, such as ‘If you don’t know your Uncle’s genealogy, your mother is worthless, and if the mother is worthless the son is worthless’. ‘If you don’t know your Uncle’s family, your mother’s milk won’t be sweet’. This points out the idea that you are a Nuosu person because you are a product of your father’s clan and your mother’s clan, half of you belonging to one and half to the other. They could not only point only to many historical examples of heroes who protected their own and their mothers’ clans, but can also point out many cases of people who would have been killed and their families wiped out if they had not been protected by theirs and/or their mothers’ clans. Experiencing this kind of exhortation, most Nuosu people, by the time they are four to six years old, already have the cultural idea that you can’t survive without your own and your mother’s clans. As people get older and gain social experience, the place of their clans and their mothers’ clans only grows stronger in their thinking.

Grandfather: The Man and his Deeds

My grandfather’s full name was Mgebbo Muju Ddiendur, born in 1897 and died in 1962, the son of the most junior wife. Nuosu call the son of the first wife Ryss, the son of the second wife Lysse, the son of the third wife Nresse, and the sons of the fourth and later
wives Ssezzy. Their social positions vary correspondingly, and the difference between the sons of the first and later wives is considerable. Ddiendur was a son of the fifth wife, properly falling into the lowest position of Ssezzy. But because out of the higher-ranking wives, only the second had a son, he was more like the second-ranking Lyse. Because of his father Vot’s high social and economic position, Ddiendur was betrothed at the age of three to the daughter of the locally powerful Hxisse Bata Syly. Syly was also called Hxisse Zziyo, and was not only well-versed in Nuosu customs, but also spoke fluent Han Chinese. When he was involved in a dispute with some Han people, he came to the attention of the local aristocrat Loho Alu, who persuaded Bata Syly to move to his own neighbourhood, but only after Alu agreed to cancel all labour and tax obligations.2 Ddiendur was living in Gangou at that time, but because of the unhappiness between him and his half brother over the distribution of the inheritance, as well as the unreasonable strictures of his father, he independently moved to Mianba village at the foot of Zala Mountain, and bought a piece of land among the Prmi (called Ozzu in the Nuosu language), and began to associate with Ozzu people. Important Ozzu living at Mianba were Dong Number Five, Yang Mani and Guangguang Du. At that time, the Ozzu were relatively strong, and they were spreading out from Muli into the Western part of Yanyuan. At the foot of Zala Mountain there lived a family of socially relatively powerful Ozzu people, known in Nuosu as Ozzu Kali, and to this day the area around Baiwu Town, three kilometres to the East of Mianba, is an area of influence of the Shu and Dong clans of the Ozzu. At that time, in addition to ten or more Ozzu retainers of the Shu and Dong, they also had several tens of households of Han tenants, with the surnames Yu, Chen, Duan, Xu, Zheng, Zhang and Lu. From the start, their local social position has always been lower than that of the Nuosu and Ozzu, but they nevertheless developed the characteristics of a local Han community.

From the time he moved among the Ozzu, Ddiendur ceaselessly reclaimed land and expanded the scale of his farming; some of his lands were as far as four kilometres away, and he had a total of around 300 mu of corn and buckwheat land at such places as Loggu Ano and Yoyy Ndodde, with enough productive capacity to be able to sell over 40 da, or 2,400 kilograms, of buckwheat every year to the Ozzu of Muli. Conditions were also excellent for pasturage, and so he was also able to expand his herds rapidly, and within six years of his move to Mianba he already had over 100 head of sheep and goats, several tens of cattle, over 10 horses, and over 20 slaves to tend his herds. The local Ozzu, seeing that Ddiendur was developing his farms faster than they were, and consequently his strength was growing ever greater, didn’t like what was going on, and when they mentioned with feeling in casual conversations that the buyer of land was more powerful than the seller, Ddiendur pretended not to understand, and answered, ‘I’m simply building on your riches, and compared to my elder brothers I’m still far behind’.

The Ozzu began to consider using military force to limit him, but in the end they didn’t dare take up weapons lightly, for even though their military strength was greater than that of Ddiendur’s own family, his overall sphere of strength was greater, since his father-in-law Hxisse Bata Syly could at any time mobilise over 100 fighters and over 10 guns. His two sons had married the daughters of the most powerful man in the area, Ddissey Niyenye, and of one of the wealthiest men in the area Ali Sasa; according to the saying of the times, if a fight arose, if their clan mates and affines each spit one gob, it could drown any enemy.

3 Translator’s note: In traditional Nuosu society, members of the Quho caste stratum, such as the Mgbbs and Hxisse clans, owed labour and tax obligations to their aristocratic or Nuoho overlords, such as the Loho clan to which Aly belonged. For an overview of the Nuosu stratification system, see Ma Erzi, ‘Dui jiu Liangshan Yizu shehuu jieguode zai renshi ji “Heiyi” “Buiyi” de bianxi’ (‘On a Reexamination of the Social Structure of Old Liangshan, and of the Distinction between “Black Yi” and “White Yi” ’), Liangshan minzu yanjiu (Studies on the Nationalities of Liangshan) (1995), pp. 38-48.
Ddiendur ordinarily did not like to fight, but would often choose to suffer, and for this reason gained a good reputation among his own clanmates, his affines, other Quho, local Nuoho, and even the Ozzu. He had undoubtedly inherited his father’s position of headman among the Mgebbu clan, and in fact became prominent among the whole Hxiezzy Ssesu clan in Baiwu and the surrounding areas. He became one of the most important mediators in any disputes within or among the greater Hxiezzy clan.

Two events in Ddiendur’s life are still told by Nuoso near and far. First, when he saw the havoc wreaked by the opium habit among Han in the nearby plains areas, and when he saw that in Nuoso areas more and more people were growing and selling opium and being corrupted by the drug, he knew the consequences, he called together all members of the Mgebbu clan, sacrificed an ox, a sheep and a chicken, and divided the meat, along with 30 litres of liquor, among the households, hired a bimo to read a curse and administered a blood-liquor oath to the people, pledging that the Mgebbu would never smoke opium, and those who did would die like the three animals slaughtered for the ceremony. Later on, when several clans in the Baiwu area suffered the headache of their members’ inhaling the opium and exhaling the fog, even though there were Mgebbu who grew poppies and sold opium, there was not one who ever smoked it; their spirit and attitude were naturally different.

The second event was when there was fighting within the aristocratic Loho clan in Yanyuan, between the Zuzu branch and the Shazur branch. The Shazur were badly defeated in the fighting, and the blood-thirst of the Zuzu got even stronger; after they had raided two branches of the Shazur, they quickly threatened the Jije Avie branch near Zala Mountain. The Avie felt that either attack or defence would be difficult, and could not come up with an opposing strategy; neither could the leaders of any of their Quho retainers. Ddiendur analysed the situation, and decided that either attack or defence was like an egg smashing into a rock, so he advocated thinking of a way to settle by negotiation. Leaders and followers within the Avie branch all supported Ddiendur’s opinion, but nobody was willing to volunteer to go negotiate face-to-face with the Zuzu. Ddiendur said rather contemptuously: ‘So many Quho and Nuoho, but not one with courage or insight’. He purposely told the leaders of the Avie that he was suggesting Ali Nyuzoza to accompany him to accomplish this great deed. Ali Nyuzoza was a skilled orator and persuader, a wealthy man, advanced in years, who for a long time had gained a reputation as a spokesman for Quho and Nuoho alike; in kinship terms, he was Ddiendur’s classificatory mother’s brother. The leaders of the Loho transmitted Ddiendur’s words and asked Ali to go together with them to talk peace. He knew it would be dangerous, but afraid of losing face he couldn’t see his way to putting them off, but only said one thing jokingly: ‘You should say that it is Ddiendur who is accompanying me to solve this’. Amid this tension, the two of them rode horses to look for the camp of the Zuzu leader Loho Ashysse. The Loho were at first afraid that they were sent to assassinate him, and they threatened and questioned them for a long time before they believed their reason for coming. Ddiendur first flattered Ashysse’s glory for a while, causing him to nod his head and feel very satisfied, and then began to recite proverbs and quote classics about the advantage of peacemaking. His arguments really received Ashysse’s admiration, and he agreed to a peaceful settlement, giving Ddiendur a fine horse to ride back, and a slightly inferior mount for Nyuzoza. Ddiendur also demanded

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4 Translator’s note: There are no formal positions of headmanship in Nuoso clans; the most able people are recognised as local leaders.
5 Translator’s note: A bimo is a Nuoso priest, trained to read religious texts and perform rituals. For an English-language account of bimo and their place in Nuoso society, see Bamo Ayi, ‘On the Education of the Bimo’, in Stevan Harrell (ed.), Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000), pp. 118–34.
the release of two households of Mgebbu captured during the fighting, and Ashysse agreed on the spot. After this, Ddiendur’s fame gradually spread widely.

Ddiendur’s contact with peoples other than the Nuosu, his contact with the Ozzu while living in their territory, along with his relations with Ozzu in Baiwu, Muli, Changma Town, Miangya and Baishan, involved activity on a lot of fronts, and from them he learned a lot of valuable human lessons. Naturally, this influenced a lot of his views. Actually, his ability to move to an Ozzu area in the first place had to do with his wife’s father—Bata Syl was widely travelled and knowledgeable, fluent in the local Han dialect, and fond of interacting with Ozzu and Han alike. When Ddiendur moved to Mianba he was about two kilometres away from his wife’s father’s house. Originally, it would have been much better to move to his wife’s father’s village, but he was afraid of being seen as an unfree local son-in-law (something that is despised by Nuosu), so he chose to buy land and set up a household on his own.

Even though Ddiendur lived in an Ozzu area, he was still a member of the Nuosu ethnic group, and did not forsake his place within the hierarchy of Nuosu society, but rather continued to consolidate it. The Mgebbu were retainers of the Avie branch of the Jiige in the Loho clan of Nuoho aristocrats, whose leader was Loho Nyiddu. Nyiddu would be reckoned as a relatively well-off Nuoho in Liangshan, and was an honourable man who, in addition to mediating disputes, went out to tend his herds almost every day—he had over 1,000 sheep and goats, several tens of horses and over 100 cattle. When he died he left over 1,000 ingots of silver to his children. His relations with the leaders of the Quhu stratum were like those of brothers, and he was friendly to his own and other people’s serfs and slaves. He emphasised doing honest deeds and speaking honest words, and avoiding crass exploitation among the castes. He also emphasised peaceful relations with neighbouring Ozzu and Han. Nyiddu did not allow thievery in his domains: when his father Loho Alur was alive, there were three Mgajie6 who stole Han women’s shoes to sell. They were found out, and Nyiddu and his father warned them not to do it again, to reform their bad behaviour. They were receptive to his face, but in fact did not actually change their ways. Alur became very angry, and one morning he called together a meeting, and forced these three Mgajie to get drunk and climb three trees and hang themselves. As a result when one of them, named Uomu Shoxj, killed himself, the other two, after climbing the trees, did not want to die, and so purposely procrastinated. Luckily, Hxiesse Bata Syl was passing by and learned what was happening, and immediately hurried over to the area and persuaded Alur, saying that the two of them would certainly reform their behaviour, so these two unexpectedly lived on, and from then onward lived very clean lives.

Ddiendur, living in the domain of the Loho Avie, after he became known as a skilled spokesman, often received invitations to participate in Nuoho and Quho events near and far, and one time when he was at the Loho village at Shizhen, about 30 li from Mianba, he saw Loho Tuha (Hu Jin’ao),7 Loho Ashy (Hu Longyun) and others studying at the feet of Han Teacher Yuan Dehou; they could speak to each other in Chinese and could figure bills with an abacus. When he returned to Mianba, he actively talked up the idea of retaining a Han teacher to teach the children Chinese language and use the abacus. The Loho overlords supported him, so Ddiendur deputed his maternal nephew Hxiesse Asa (Li Maoqing) to

6 In Nuosu society, people with no clear clan ancestry belong to the lower, unfree strata of society, mgajie and gavv.

These two strata are usually referred to in much Han-language scholarship as two ranked castes of slaves (muli or wuoy), but in fact their status was flexible: gavv were unmarried household slaves who could sometimes marry and become mgajie, unfree, serf-like farmers with families; there were also cases of owners re-converting mgajie into gavv. Mgajie could also own gavv.

7 Translator’s note: Hu Jin’ao, born 1942, is a well-known local scholar and teacher, and head of the Translation Bureau of the Yanyuan County Government. He would have been a small boy when Ddiendur saw him at school.
hire a teacher. Asa spoke very good Chinese, and a few months later he hired a teacher called Wu Guangrong. Mr Wu was from Hongya County in Sichuan, and had originally come with a band of merchants to do business in the Nuoso area. The business had failed, and of his companions, some died, some returned, some were captured and sold, and Wu Guangrong had ended up as a slave of Adi Chacha of Muli, who was Asa’s cross-cousin, a son of a cousin of Ddiendur. Because Wu did not speak the Nuoso language, he was looked upon by the Nuoso people as a mute person, and every day they made him cut firewood and do manual labour; only when Asa went to Chacha’s house and spoke to him in Han did they realise that Mute Wu was an educated person. When Asa reported the situation to his uncle Ddiendur, he immediately called together leaders of the Nuoho and Quho to decide what to do, and they quickly established a school. The teacher was given food and clothing, and every student paid him an appropriate amount of silver every year. In the course of events, Mute Slave Wu, who was given hard labour on the west slopes of Zala Mountain, became the revered teacher Wu of the east slopes of Zala Mountain. He wore a Nuoso cape and lived in the two houses of Ddiendur and Loho Bbuyosse, edited his own teaching materials, and continuously taught the Nuoso children the Three Character Classic (Sanzi jing) and expanded their learning. Ddiendur did not speak good Chinese, and could only converse awkwardly and with difficulty. In order to test Mr Wu’s level of ability, he arranged for him to meet with Mr Yuan of Shizhen; after they had spoken for a while, and Mr Yuan began to show deference to Mr Wu, Ddiendur realised that Mr Wu’s level was higher than Mr Yuan’s. Within a half-year Mr Wu had 21 students; five of these were Nuoho from the Loho and Bbuyo clans; 15 others were Quho from the Mgebbu, Hxiess, Ashuo and Anyu clans; and one was an Ozzu. Once Mr Wu had a salary, the leaders and the parents of the students all helped him out, and soon he had re-established contact with his relatives in Hongya County, who mailed photographs, and in 1953 a bound-footed wife arrived in Mianba to live with Mr Wu, and Nuoso of all ages called her ‘Mrs Teacher’. Only at the end of 1955 did they return to Hongya County. In 1958–59, he wrote to Li Zhihe (Hxiess Labxo), saying he was living at 31 Zhongzheng Street in Hongya. After 1956, his students just about all belonged to the upper classes and became the target of attacks, and did not dare or did not have the will to make contact with Mr Wu again.

When Ddiendur lived among the Ozzu at Mianba, they had a lot of relations with Ozzu in surrounding areas. The nearby Shu and Dong families of Ozzu had a lot of Han tenants, and in this way Ddiendur was also able to connect with nearby Han people. At that time, the Nuoso were the most powerful in the Baiwu area, followed by the Ozzu, and the Han the least powerful. Ordinarily, relations between Nuoso and Ozzu were better; they recognised each other as ‘skirt-wearing people’, or mbogat ssely, and relations between Nuoso and Han had not been that integrated; any disagreement quickly turned into a conflict.

The Quho and Nuoho living in the area under the control of the Loho Ijige Avie were far removed from the Han people living in the plains, and had few apparent conflicts, and got along better than the Han and Ozzu living together; at least they didn’t invade each other’s territory for trivial reasons. The Quho and Nuoho of Shizhen were somewhat closer to the Han living in the plains, and had many conflicts of interest. This kind of conflict.

8 In Liangshan and many other areas of Southwest China, the Land Reform of 1949–52 was not carried out. Instead, existing social institutions were allowed to remain in place until 1956, when a campaign called ‘Democratic Reforms’ was begun, abolishing the old social relations and quickly instituting Agricultural Producers’ Cooperatives. According to most reports, the campaign was peaceful in the beginning, but in 1957 it turned radical, like everything else, and many people classified in the upper social strata (slave-lords and rich labourers, roughly equivalent to the landlords and rich peasants in the Land Reform) were struggled against and imprisoned.
would get internalised, and people would develop negative feelings about Han in general, which meant that when there were tense relations with the Han of Baiwu. It would often happen that fighting would begin because of the excuse of some minor incident and, in the process of fighting, it was usually the Han who suffered. The Shu and Dong knew that if they were to retain their roots in the area, they would have to manage their relations with the local Nuosu well, so in many kinds of situations, when they observed that their Han tenants suffered unfair attacks from Nuosu, they didn’t dare intervene directly. The Shu and Dong, along with their Han tenants, knew that if they wanted to resolve this kind of conflicts, they would have to rely on the Quho and Nuoho of the Avie district to constrain the behaviour of other clans. So they actively courted Nuosu leaders, invited them to be guests at New Year’s and holidays, and often gave their children to Nuosu leaders as ‘dry children’, who are called ssemo in the Nuosu language. At New Year and holidays, dry children had to present greetings to their dry parents, upon which the dry parents would give the dry children a piece of clothing or a little money. In this way, feelings of ‘my dry father’, ‘my dry children’ developed, and with this kind of frequent contact with ‘my dry father’s family’, or ‘my dry children’s family’, there developed another kind of kinship relations outside blood kinship, in which there was an atmosphere of being among one’s own in which one could achieve the goal of mutual assistance and mutual friendliness. As Ddiendur was a leader at that time, the Shu family gave Shu Tengyi to him as a dry son, and Ddiendur gave him the Nuosu name Vuda. Through Vuda relationships between the Shu and the Mgebbu became very close, and they carried out all the obligations of dry parenthood. In addition, two Han families named Li and Xu also orally gave two of their boys to Ddiendur as dry children, and thus earned Ddiendur’s protection.

In the Democratic Reforms of 1956, Ddiendur became a slave-lord, a target of struggle, and at random times was sent to this or that kind of re-education or reform through labour, and in 1957 when he was dragged back home to be struggled against, people from the Vazha and Sete clans who had personal grievances against him used this as an excuse to start beating him, and beat him almost to death, so he continuously vomited blood. At this time, people from the Shu, Li and Xu families, all of whom had the greatest right to speak because of their official poor peasant status, got together and took Ddiendur to their villages to be deeply and thoroughly criticised. After a public demonstration of taking him resolutely and fiercely to their Han and Prmi villages, they not only didn’t struggle against him, but asked him to go to their houses where they knocked their heads on the ground and said he was a great, good man, and ‘whoever hits you should be struck by lighting’, and other such things, and took care of his basic needs. When Ddiendur returned home he said, very moved, ‘The heart and soul of all human beings is the same; no matter to whom they are directed, good deeds are rewarded with good, and bad deeds with bad.’ After Ddiendur was beaten to the point where he vomited blood, he was never really able to recover his health. He struggled on until 1962, when he died.

An Interview with Father

My father’s full name is Mgebbu Vuho Ashy; he is Ddiendur’s second son. He was born in 1932, and since he was small he has lived in ethnically mixed areas. He went to Mr Wu’s school for a few months, and can speak a certain amount of Han and Prmi. From the time he was in his teens, he engaged in household production along with his father, and when he was in his 20s, at the time of the Democratic Reforms, he had two slaves, two pistols, two rifles, a musket, over 30 pairs of sheep and goats, five horses, and more than 10 head of cattle. In the Democratic Reforms he was classified as a wealthy labourer.
At the beginning of the Democratic Reforms, sons of prominent men of the Quho stratum were urged to go to Jinkuang County to be officials. At this time, he didn't recognise any advantage in doing this, and also felt that it would be shameful to become the hands and feet of the Han, to wipe the mucus from their eyes. And in addition, he said clearly to the work team sent by the People's Government that he had just recently been made a worker in the enterprise department of the Yuanbao District, which included Baiwu. After he had drawn a salary for a few months, he discovered that the kind of work he was asked to do was basically just moving this or that kind of stuff around, and that his co-workers were either recently liberated slaves who were not completely Yi or completely Han or stupid sons and daughters of wealthy families, so the more he thought about it the less he liked it, and he thought up all sorts of excuses to be allowed to go home and farm again. He got the permission of the work team, and from then to this day he has worked the land. After the start of the Democratic Reforms, in 1956, the gunpowder smell of class struggle grew ever stronger. As the son of a slave-lord and a member of a wealthy household, Ashy became a target of struggle. In 1957, a policy was implemented to bring the inhabitants of minority areas together in concentrated settlements, and the elders among the descendants of Mgebbu Daliy, sniffing out the factors of contact with Han that would be disadvantageous to them in the future, and after discussing the matter on their own, over 50 households of Mgebbu moved from Gangou, Yangzhuping, Mianba and Dashibao to Yangjuan, and 20-some households of Mgaji and Gaxi, who had reasonably good relations with them also moved along with the Mgebbu. Of the 50-some households, three were classified as slave-lords, 30 as rich households, and 20 as ordinary labourers. Of the Mgaji and Gaxi, there was one that was classified as wealthy; the others were all classified as semi-slaves or slaves.

This village was relatively peaceful, with good relations between the strata, unlike some villages where there was big struggle and criticism meetings every day. Ashy appeared to be docile and cautious, but actually he was very determined and had inherited Dendiur's self-reliant personality. In 1962, the class struggle movement was intensified, and the government sent a lot of Han cadres to live in villages and learn about the localities. At this time Dendiur took ill and died; during that period people were not allowed to gather for funerals or to perform sacrifices. Ashy felt extremely dissatisfied; in the previous few years he and his father had given so many horses, cattle, sheep and goats to the collective, and now there was not a single meal to send off his father's spirit to the ancestors; what use was it to go on living? Ignoring his fearful elder brother, he secretly conferred with his younger brother Vasty, who had studied five years in a traditional school, and agreed that through whatever means they had to sacrifice a goat and have a funeral for their father. He would be responsible for any consequences; if something happened unexpectedly, he told his younger brother to take care of his family. Vasty suggested that they should think of a way to ask the work team's permission, and Ashy immediately agreed, saying to Vasty that just then the work team had all gone to other villages, leaving behind only a clueless young Han to mind the house; they could take advantage of the opportunity to get his permission. Just as predicted, the clueless young work team member Mr Ye was persuaded by a stream of flattery from Vasty to allow them to slaughter a goat for a funeral. Ashy immediately wished 'Leader Ye' a 100 years' longevity, and both sides were happy. Ashy became afraid that if other people found out this might obstruct them, so he returned to the village immediately, bearing 'Leader Ye's' order to select a 130 jin goat and slaughter it that night for their father's funeral. People who came to the funeral that night, in addition

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9 This administrative unit no longer exists.
10 See above, footnote 5.
to the whole village of Yangjuan, included slaves and semi-slaves from other villages who had good relations with Dediendur. But people with bad class backgrounds from other villages did not dare to attend.

Afterwards the work team and the local government came to investigate this matter as a new direction for class struggle. In reaction, Ashy took responsibility; telling the work team that he wasn't able to give up Nuosu customs, that he should be beaten and he should be killed, but at the same time cleverly seizing on the point that only after the work team had agreed had he slaughtered the goat. The extreme leftists in the work team also knew that the stupid Ye and they themselves also bore a responsibility that they could not shed, and because of this they didn't dare investigate thoroughly, and Nuosu people all secretly admired Ashy's strategy and his filial piety towards his father. In particular, descendants of the upper classes, who dared not stick their necks out at the time, whenever they met Ashy praised his ability, even under the cruel rule of the Han, to repay his debt to his father by carrying out a solemn funeral ritual on his behalf.11

In 1963, under the strong administrative control of the people's communes—that is under the rule of the Han—three households of slave-lords and 30 households of wealthy people among the Mgebbu were expelled from the cooperative, and given a tiny bit of poor unproductive land to make their living as individual households while they reformed their thinking. Ordinarily to produce and consume one's own products as an individual household would not be bad, but this was a kind of political oppression carried out under a particular kind of regime, and the individual households were not allowed to take part in many activities, and to a certain extent they were a closely monitored group of labourers. Because of this, they often developed a kind of attitude of hopeless, pessimistic resignation.

Right up until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the slave-lords were pulled out daily for criticism and struggle, and every day they had to ask permission from the production team leader in the morning and report back to him in the evening. Then the Red Guards, pledging to defend Chairman Mao's line to the death, began raising the slogan 'Smash the four olds; establish the four new'. People began returning from Han areas to their homes and started to trample things, and to begin agitating at home to start the big project of the rebel factions. Yangjuan was seen as a village that had not yet removed the hat of class struggle, and drew the attention of the government and the rebel faction. One night when people were fast asleep, over 100 members of the rebel faction, with previous planning and premeditation, divided up and tied up more than 10 Mgebbu household heads; and strung them up and beat them, and confiscated all jewellery and adornments, gold and silver implements, and Nuosu-language books. The purpose of stringing them up and beating them was to get the wealthy households to reveal the gold and silver—the fruits of exploitation—that they had hid and buried. My father and his two brothers were central targets for tying up and beating—they tied up both hands tightly with rope and tied them to the house beams, while the leaders of the rebel factions beat them with bamboo rods, while chanting in Chinese, 'Leniency for those who confess; harshness for those who resist', 'Long live the Communist Party; Long live Chairman Mao', and other slogans; the repeated shouting of slogans along with Father's cries of pain woke me up. When I got out of bed groggily and was stricken in the eyes with a flashlight, the leader of the group, Syte Gaga, said menacingly to me, 'We'll beat you to death; what are you blinking at?' When I saw clearly Father hanging from the rafters and ran over crying, I was shoved back over toward the bed by one of the rebels. My mother was furious, and took off her hat and

11 Carrying out ritual obligations under the shadow of local government repression during Maoist China is a theme of other narratives of ethnic communities in the Southwest. See in particular Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts* (University of California Press, Berkeley. 2000).
started hitting out at the rebels without thought of the consequences, and cursing by name Syte Gaga son of Syte Yosse, screaming loudly, ‘just how did the Mgebbu offend you worthless people?’ and ‘Heaven will never forgive evil people like you’, whereupon Syte took the flashlight in his hand and knocked Mother to the ground.

Father was hung up and beaten by them until the roosters started crowing, but he didn’t reveal a thing, and finally when one of the rebels repeatedly urged the others to, they finally let him down and left. When Mother and I immediately went over to Father and untied the tight ropes around his wrists, Father’s eyes were full of bloody streaks, but with clenched teeth he went over to the grindstone and picked up an axe and, cursing as he chopped, he hacked his way through the beam from which he had hung. Then, taking up a chicken, he cursed Syte Gaga, cursed the organisers of this night attack, and cursed the policies of the Han. He beat the chicken to death with the back side of a knife and threw it outside. When he came back he fainted on the doorstep, and didn’t wake up until the next afternoon. I don’t know whether it was coincidence or consequence, but the leader of the night attack, Xichang red army student Jjiddu Vunyo, drowned while swimming the following year, and Syte Gaga was struck by lightning and killed in 1996.

Ashy and his companions were originally born and raised in an ethnically mixed area, and because his status in that society was not bad, they respected the Han masses and the Han and Prmi masses respected them even more. But in spite of this, at the time of the Democratic Reforms everybody was forced against their will to move to their own large villages—Nuosu moved to Nuosu villages, Ozzu moved to Ozzu villages, and the power in the local government was actually concentrated in the hands of Han from outside. They pragmatically gave away a little power to local activists from every social stratum, and after they had given them a feeling of having ‘turned over’ 12 and acquired power, they mobilised extreme leftist class struggle; when people didn’t want to struggle within their own villages, they made people struggle against people from other villages. Everywhere they raised the flag of class struggle, and everywhere people plotted to avenge private slights as well as disputes between clans and between castes. Nuosu who understood this at the time constantly repeated one sentence: ‘Yo have to give power to the Hans; an eagle’s wings must follow the wind’. (Ni ke shuo si; ljo ke hly si) Because of this, ‘A Han can’t be a friend; a Stone can’t be a pillow’ (Hxienqng qobo mu k hxi; lyma oku mu a hxi) became a mantra of the Nuosu and Ozzu people.

My Own Story

My Nuosu name is Mgebbu Vurrry Lunzy, and I was born in 1957. Nuosu people ordinarily don’t celebrate birthdays, and often ignore what month and day they were born. My month and day of birth were similarly ignored, but Father and Mother both said that it was the third day after the Nuosu New Year in the fall of 1957. In 1957, the Nuosu New Year was in December, but nobody can say anymore just what day it was. 13 So when I went to study at Baiwu Elementary School in 1963, the uncle who took me to register said I was born on 1 September 1958, and from then on that has been my official birthday, even though I was actually born at the end of 1957.

I was born and raised in Yangjuan, so when I was little I lived far from people of other ethnic groups, and had no opportunity to understand them. But I have a lasting impression

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12 In Chinese, fanxhentle, literally turned the body over, meaning that one had through class struggle righted oneself and the social order around one.

13 To this day, hino priests in each local area divine the particular day each year when the Nuosu New Year (kurshyrr) should be celebrated. This explains why no one could recall the particular date in 1957.
that when we were naughty or wouldn't stop crying, adults used the threat of tigers or Han people to scare us. They had but to say 'a tiger has come' or 'a Han has come' and children would stop crying and cling motionlessly to some adult. In the evening, adults would tell children stories about tigers eating people or Han cutting off people's ears. There were a lot of us the same age in the village, and we would get together and play happily every day. But if anyone said loudly, 'Hxiemga la o'—a Han has come—everybody would startle immediately. My grandmother was the eldest daughter of Hxiesse Bata Syly, and under the benevolent influence of her father and husband, she was less prejudiced toward the Han than many. But like other Nuosu people, if someone behaved in an ill-mannered or clumsy fashion, she called them 'Hxiemga su'—like a Han person. In this kind of an environment, one who had never had any contact with the Han would feel limitlessly that Han were as fierce as tigers and as dumb as oxen.

In 1963 when I was sent to school, I saw Han teachers and Han classmates with my own eyes. I also got to know Ozzu who spoke to us in broken Nuosu. In the first grade, I always had a kind of inarticulable fear of Han teachers and classmates, and because of the language barrier I could not talk with the teachers directly, so I tried to understand Han teachers and classmates from their behaviour and attitudes. Perhaps because of both linguistic and psychological reasons, as soon as we were let out of class, each group immediately went to play separately—Nuosu with Nuosu and Han with Han—and we had little to do with each other. Our Han teacher was very friendly—in class she took our hands in hers to show us how to write; on the playground she took our hands and showed us how to play fun games; on rainy days she carried an umbrella and put on her raincoat to help us cross the river. We thus gradually extinguished many of our prejudices, and developed a kind of feeling that is difficult to express in words. In the first grade, we Nuosu pupils understood virtually nothing of what the teacher was saying, but just mumblingly imitated the sounds of her speech. Our test scores were naturally very poor—mine were almost negative—so along with many other classmates I had to repeat the first grade. By the second grade, most of us could guess at or understand the gist of most of what the teacher said in class, and by the third grade the scores of the Nuosu pupils began to improve gradually, and a few students advanced toward the head of the class. For the Han students, especially those children of the cadres in state units, the natural linguistic advantage began to decline, and there were a few lazy or unintelligent Han students who asked us for help with their homework.

At this time, actual contact began between Nuosu and Han classmates. Two completely different streams flowed into one, and there developed collective feelings of the school as a unit that cut across classes and grade levels. But from another angle, feelings of ethnic identity (which are really feelings of difference) became even stronger, and the struggles between Nuosu and Han became even more acute. Conversations opened up spaces for debates and quarrels, and each side emphasised its own advantages, and found it hard to understand many of each other's customs. For example, Han classmates thought that the Nuosu and Prmi customs of cremation were just too cruel, while Nuosu students thought leaving the body in the ground to slowly rot, stink and become food for worms was just too improper. Han students said that Nuosu and Prmi women wearing skirts was just too inconvenient for walking, and Nuosu would retort that it was better than bound feet. In general, the debates were wide-ranging, unceasing and extreme. When they quarrelled, each had a set of sayings. The Han would say:

Luoluo luo ganzi
Shao huo dian qiaozi
Qiaozi bu jie zi
E si ni jia er ye zi
Lolo naked sticks
Light a fire and plant buckwheat
The buckwheat won't bear seeds
Grandpa and grandson will all starve to death.
Mgebha Luntz

The Nuosu would say:

Lubi Shuo ju hie  The pestle pokes the Han in the waist
Dinie Shuo uo zu  The mortar bops the Han on the head
Liggu Shuo lie hjie  The rattan strip binds the Han in the sinews
Mge li Shuo mge che  Buckwheat is the Han’s funeral food
Chy nji Shuo mge hmu  Goatskin is his funeral clothes
Mge be Shuo sha ka  The Han corpse we throw in a deep cave.

The meaning of this is that the Han is a slave, and when he disobeys his master, he is prodded, beaten and bound, and is too poor to have anything fitting for his food, clothes or grave after he dies. Actually, the students didn’t make these verses up; verses of mutual depreciation are common in the folklore of both sides, and they would curse each other all over heaven and earth.

Starting from the third grade, my grades gradually got better, but my relations with Han classmates were just ordinary. I was very envious of the Han cadres’ children, who often brought coloured pencils and comic books. Driven by an intense curiosity, in order to be able to use the coloured pencils or look at the cartoons, many Nuosu classmates would hang around the cadres’ children, and there we heard the stories of how the guerrillas had fought the Japanese, of how Zhou Bapi, Liu Wencai and others lived lives of exploitation in Han areas before the Liberation, and from sources outside the textbooks, we understood more about the deeds of Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Chiang Kai-shek, and others. Later on, we established quite a few oral contracts with them: There were a few people who would lend us books to read if we would do their homework for them, or would lend us their coloured pencils if we would catch birds for them. This kind of mutual trading of favours strengthened our interaction.

Before we finished third grade, we suffered the attacks of the Cultural Revolution, and the Campaign to Criticise and Struggle Against Landlords, Rich Peasants, Counterrevolutionaries and Bad Elements picked up strength. There were calls for people of all social levels to criticise the factions within the Party taking the capitalist road, and the schools turned completely into clubs for the rebel factions, while the tables, benches and blackboards became their improvised beds. In 1967, in many areas things escalated to violent struggle, and the school became a place the ‘soldiers’ had to fight over, so that they didn’t begin accepting students again until 1969. But the schools had already fallen into disrepair, and had no tables, benches or blackboards, so that people just set down some planks for tables and benches. They had not assigned enough teachers, so two classes were combined into one. They conducted classes in a very informal way, with students and teachers ‘fishing for three days and drying the nets for two’. They read Quotations from Chairman Mao, sang Quotations songs, and we all learned to recite ‘The Foolish Old Man Who Moved Mountains’, ‘In Memory of Norman Bethune’ and ‘Serve the People’ by heart.\(^1\) Not until I was in Grade 5, the graduating class, did the school revive any real curriculum. Naturally, the relative weight of the Quotations was still quite large, but at the same time they revived a simplified examination system, and I worried that I wouldn’t be able to test into middle school. But I quietly put a lot of effort into studying, my grades quickly improved, and I easily made it into middle school.

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\(^1\) Editor’s note: Mao Zhexi yu5l5 (Quotations from Chairman Mao) was originally published in September 1966, at the start of the Cultural Revolution. It contained the ‘gems’ of Mao Zedong’s thought. Everybody was strongly encouraged to obtain and memorise these sayings, and on 25 December 1967, the New China News Agency reported that 350,000,000 copies had been published in China. The three articles named are the most famous of those written by Mao. During the Cultural Revolution, they were quoted constantly, and everybody was expected to learn them by heart.
From the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the local government had made everything to do with Nuosi traditional culture and customs into targets for reform, emphasising wearing Han-style clothes, cooking on a stove, making dry land into paddy fields, propagandising 'There is boundless joy in struggling against heaven, struggling against earth, struggling against people'. Nuosi people, though they dared not oppose openly, still secretly all said the Han policy was really strange: a people has its own lifestyle customs, why do we have to do everything the same way the Han do it? What was really difficult to understand was how they couldn’t get their boundless joy unless they turned us into a gaggle of motherless chicks butting heads and pecking at each other, the daughter pecking at the mother’s mouth and the son biting at the father’s comb. The adults thinking about Han people like this penetrated deeply into our thinking, and so we began to hate Han people and Han people’s society. Because everybody had this kind of feelings, our relations with our Han classmates were very unstable. When things were going well, we called each other brothers, but when there were disagreements Nuosi cursed the Han ‘shuo’ ‘slaves’, while the Han cursed the ‘manzi’ or barbarians. A lot of disputes that began from individual grievances could expand to be grounds for group disputes. People who ordinarily could discuss ethnic questions in a rather casual way and who could handle ethnic relations sensibly, once conflicts between the two sides heated up would take the side of their own ethnic group no matter what. Many of the disputes or even quarrels between ethnic groups on the school grounds happened behind the teachers’ backs, and the teachers often didn’t know about them. There were a lot of things that people did without thinking beforehand that they had anything to do with ethnic factors, but when something unpleasant happened, the side that had suffered couldn’t avoid thinking about whether or not he treated me this way because I was of a particular ethnic group.

When I was in Grade 4, I was a skinny kid, and I developed some sores on my upper and lower lips, which was very unpleasant. But there was a local Han classmate named Duan who often used to make fun of me, and said that the barbarian was eating and drinking all sorts of awful things in order to get sores on his lips. He was three years older than me and quite tall, so there was no way I could fight with him. One weekend, as was the custom, all the students gathered on the school grounds to listen to the principal speak. As everybody was happily running over to the schoolyard, he again started kicking and hitting me, and hit me so my lips bled. I was very hurt, and I felt that it wouldn’t do not to confront him, and stop his behaviour toward me as a person of bad family background. I knew that I was not his equal in a frontal fight, so I waited until Teacher Zhou called everyone to stand at attention, and Duan was standing with his feet together and his eyes to the front, right at the front of our row. I smacked behind him, taking advantage of his not paying attention to me, grabbed him around the two legs, and pulled backward, and heard a ‘huh’ as his face fell to the earth and his whole face was bloodied. After I kicked him hard another time, I bolted for the road home, and figured I was done with school. Other people had no idea what was going on. Because I had become the greatest example of someone trying to poison things among the teachers and students, when I got home I told Father the true story from beginning to end, and asked permission to quit school. Father said if you’re like this the school won’t want you either, and anyway we have hoes and ploughs here for you to shoulder. After I had skipped two days of classes, the head teacher, a Han teacher, came to visit our house. He pulled me to his side, and after he had criticised Duan’s behaviour, he said after this if something happens don’t hide it from the teacher, and don’t use such a crude method to try to solve it, and be sure to come to

15 In Chinese, yu tian dou, yu di dou, yu ren dou, qi le wu qiang.
school tomorrow. The next day I went back to school, but it was psychologically hard to take, I felt very unworthy in front of my classmates, and at the same time was afraid that Duan would come and take his revenge. After the teacher made a speech in the classroom full of political slogans about things such as how every ethnic group should strive to strengthen unity, he called Duan and me to shake hands and make up. After this, Duan was not only friendly to me, but changed his behaviour toward other students, and the teacher praised him in front of the class. Han students said among themselves ‘if they don’t change they will suffer’, and Nuoso and Prmi said about the Han, ‘if you don’t hit them they won’t know you’. It was really unfortunate that Duan had to quit school out of poverty before he graduated from elementary school. We became good friends when we grew up, and now when we bring up the subject of the fight in elementary school, we have a good laugh, and jokingly call each other ‘ethnically prejudiced’ and ‘poisoner of relations’.

When I graduated from normal school in 1977, I was assigned to the Meiuyu Middle School in our own county as a teacher. Meiuyu is a Han district. At that time, there were only a few minorities in that area as salaried employees, and among us only I and another Nuoso were really bilingual. When I was there I discovered how deep the feelings of prejudice between Han and Nuoso were: the mantras that Han people used to scare their children were almost exactly the same as the Nuoso used: ‘The manzi are capturing people; the manzi have descended from the mountains.’ Old people called everyone but the Han ‘manzi’, and middle school students who had never had anything to do with minority people were full of talk that was hurtful to the Nuoso. When they got to high school, every class in every grade had a few minority students, and since the minority students were bigger and stronger than the local Han, the Han were generally able to hold their tongues in public situations, because if they let their anger rise, the minority students would resort to their fists. Actually, not only were village Han and students at school this way, even local Han who had received secondary and higher education would run off at the mouth when they weren’t being careful. Many times I encountered the situation where Han colleagues who wanted to get along well with me talked nonsense to my face about Nuoso and other minorities, and only felt ashamed when they found out that I was Nuoso. Actually, Nuoso students at the high school in Meiuyu would insult the Han as ‘shuo’ (slaves), ‘water buffaloes’ or ‘donkeys’ in the Nuoso language, the only difference being that the local Han people didn’t understand. Myself, I try to overcome this prejudice and not cast ethnic slurs, but there are times when I have unintentionally let them slip.

In sum, there is nobody living in contact with other ethnic groups, whether Nuoso, Ozzu or Han, who had completely conquered this mutual prejudice, at least not in the past and not now. The only difference is the degree.

Coda

Through a rough analysis of the experience of three generations of our Mgebbu clan, we have been able to look at the Nuoso and the ethnic groups in contact with the Nuoso, and the psychology of their ethnic identity. I feel that ethnic identity is an extremely complicated thing, and that nobody has a solution that is generally valid. From a whole nation at the largest to a single member of an ethnic group at the smallest, their standards and choices of identity are not necessarily the same: some emphasise material culture; some emphasise ideational culture, some even emphasise geographic factors. For example, in the ethnically mixed areas of Yanjuan, Muli, Yanbian and Ninglang, Nuoso and Ozzu historically and at present reflect their pastoral economy by calling the Han ‘water buffaloes’, the Nuoso ‘oxen’, and the Ozzu ‘yaks’. Nuoso and Ozzu also call the Han
'goats' and themselves 'sheep'. One could say that this is a kind of geographical style of ethnic identity in this area.

Stevan Harrell has said:

'We can only understand ethnic identity, through understanding the way members of an ethnic group respond to two questions: what binds us together as a group and what separates us from other groups', and 'The key to ethnic identity is a kind of recognition, of what members of an ethnic group consider to be their commonalities with each other and what their differences with other groups.'

In essence, Nuosu society in Liangshan is built along a web of kinship. As soon as Nuosu come into contact with other ethnic groups, they especially emphasise their own internal sameness (jijiusu) and their difference from others (jiyasu), and at this point ethnic identity becomes a complex structure of difference. Actually, if members of an ethnic group do not contrast themselves with another ethnic group, it's difficult to talk about difference or to talk about the question of ethnic identity. The less two ethnic groups have to do with each other, the fewer conflicts they have, the less members of the ethnic group as individuals will emphasise the differentness of ethnic groups; but in such a situation the material and ideational culture of the two ethnic groups is almost always mutually excluding, so that the differences are very obvious, and although ethnic identity is very weak on the surface, in actuality it is very strong. By contrast, the more two ethnic groups have to do with each other, the greater their conflicts, the more the differences between them will be reduced, and members of the two ethnic groups will particularly emphasise their differences. But at the same time, there will be mutual influences of their material and ideational culture, and the differences between them will become less obvious; ethnic identity on the surface will be very strong, but in actuality it will weaken.

I have often asked Nuosu people in both the Nuosu nuclear area and the peripheral, mixed areas the question of what is different about the Nuosu and Han, and the results are very different. In the nuclear area, people generally reply in an unconcerned way that Nuosu and Han are both people, they both eat, drink and labour—they must be the same (jijusu tuxi). Nuosu in the mixed areas earnestly reply, Nuosu and Han are fundamentally different: Han eat dog and horse meat, while Nuosu do not; neither Han men nor women pierce their ears, while Nuosu have to pierce their ears; Han and Nuosu language are different, and so on. Still, Nuosu in the nuclear areas disregard Han culture, disregard school education, have very little Han influence on their lifestyles, and are unfamiliar with Han ways. They mostly talk about clans, marriages and castes. Nuosu in the mixed areas respect school education, and in their lifestyles are continuously in a relation of mutual influence with the Han: in many kinds of habits, there is part of yours in mine and part of mine in yours. In their conversation, in addition to clan, marriage and caste, they are concerned even more with questions of relations with Han and Ozzu; they are just as concerned with ethnic relations as with kin relations. In the face of practical utility, all roads lead in the same direction.

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16 *Translator's note:* most people explain this by the fact that older Han men often grow beards, while Nuosu rarely do.
18 *Translator's note:* The counties of Meigu, Zhaojun, and Batuo in particular, where the population is over 95 per cent Nuosu, and the only Han are bureaucrats in the county seats and perhaps a few teachers in township schools.