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CHAPTER 2

A REMODELLED CHILDHOOD  
FOR THE DEAD

*Shamanic Perceptions from Birth to Marriage  
in a Yi Funeral Manuscript (China)*

AURÉLIE NÉVOT



*Jo t'a neu t'a t'i dje nga dzeu.*

THE CHAPTER ABOUT THE PERIOD OF BIRTH  
AND THE PERIOD OF YOUTH

The Masters of psalmody, *bimos*, shamans from a Yi group of the Yunnan Province<sup>1</sup> practice domestic and clan rituals in order to heal people, protect children, guarantee their community's fecundity and prosperity, or to ensure peace for their ancestors and to safeguard their posterity—every year they renew the alliance between villagers and their founding ancestors thanks to invocations and offerings (Nérot 2008, 2011 and 2012). As exorcists and diviners, *bimos* organize rituals during which they travel through the cosmos and communicate with spirits. Their cosmic odysseys are possible only through their chants based on books written in a particular writing, which is different from Chinese writing. This ritual and secret writing<sup>2</sup> that they alone handle allows them to venture into the other world and to enter into contact with beings from 'beyond'. Although *bimos* are farmers like other inhabitants, they stand out clearly since they have a particular status. They are closer to the spirits and at the centre of the socialization process, intervening during the seasonal festivities of the villages where they live, and at each important event in life, especially at birth, marriage and death.

The Masters of psalmody have different kinds of books, reserved for the diverse rituals they may perform. References to birth or childhood are usually an integral part of their ritual texts so that childhood does not constitute a central theme by itself. It forms the main topic of only one text I collected in the field, the one on which this essay focuses, extracted from a book reserved for funerals—for men, in particular.<sup>3</sup> It is called 'The chapter about the period/time (*t'a*) of birth (*jo*) and the period/time (*t'a*) of youth (*neu*)',<sup>4</sup> *jo t'a neu t'a t'i dje nga dzeu*. If the *bimos* explain the importance of chanting it by

having to retrace the life of the dead person, to make their ‘biography’ so to say, birth and childhood appear to be connected to death here through ritual writings because the socialization of the dead man is necessary to transform the latter into an ancestor. In other words, becoming an ancestor supposes being a ‘good dead person’, which means having been a ‘good living person’, well integrated in the community and the cosmos from the time they were in the womb—childhood is the motor of social balance. And by chanting the manuscript I analyse here, at the opening of the funeral rites, the shaman in charge ensures that the deceased goes through all the socialization phases from conception to marriage. The religious practitioner makes the dead live an ‘instituted’ childhood to transfer him to the ritual paradigm of socialization. Birth and youth are thus remodelled by the *bimo* who imposes, through the substantial strength of his ritual manuscript, an ‘ideal type’ of youth which has to be experienced by the deceased for the sake of society. So, here I will explore a ‘rereading’/‘replaying’ of childhood which ensures the perpetuation of the lineage and promotes the transmission process—this text could be seen then as a medium between two worlds, that of the ancestors, *ngami*, and that of living human beings, *dumi*, and as a means of communication between two extremely interdependent periods (life and death) which interpenetrate each other during a funeral.

In fact, the following analysis will reveal that this chapter is a kind of *mise en abyme* of the topic of transmission: first, its content explicitly refers to the growth of a child in connection with his lineage; second, its purpose is to ensure the future of the person after death, one who has to follow the way of his ancestors (and is ‘obliged’ as a dead to have lived a ‘perfect’ ritual life); and third, the object itself: the ‘text’ is inscribed in a relationship established between the shaman who chants it and his master who transmitted it. So, three thematic loci have to be well distinguished, each of them implying ‘shamanic agency’, i.e. the role of the *bimo* to re-establish a ‘good life’ (whatever may have been the ‘real life’ of the dead), to establish a ‘good death’ for the deceased to become an ancestor, and to refer to rituals which may not be practised anymore but whose efficacy remains through the psalmody of the text. So the shaman is deeply involved in the transmission process, on him depends the survival of his society thanks to his ability to act on different social strata.

By studying this ritual manuscript, which may seem at first to be opaque because of its ritual characteristics, its esoteric aspects and its references to many implicit components, it will be possible to not only grasp its efficacy in the shamanic and literate context of the *bimos* and to question the paradigm of socialization through shamanic literacy, but to also understand the perception of birth and youth. This will be developed in the next three sections of the article. In the first section, the child’s body is seen as an ideal pattern of transformation and socialization. Its growth is surrounded by

different cults and actions. In the second part we will explore the perception of intrauterine life accompanied, during the third month, by a sacrifice to the dragon performed by the father. We will also analyse the moment of birth (after a sacrifice done by the mother during the ninth month)—the newborn being seen as a star laid down on earth. ‘Deposited’ on earth, the baby is the fruit of the meeting of the sky and the earth; its arrival subsequently implies ‘cooking’ its body and a ‘rupture’ by cutting its umbilical cord (both with the father’s intervention). This phase from mother to father which introduces perceptions of the body, constituted of essences *pa* and *ma* (which may be compared with the *yang* and *yin*), will permit us to understand that while the mother gives birth, the father gives life. In the third section, we will follow the growth of the newborn, or more precisely its ‘transformation’, *lu*, during its first month, and the important and unique role of the mother in this process, and analyse a specific ritual: ‘the call of the child’ performed by the shaman to give it a name and at the same time, to attach its ‘solar soul’, *yi*, to its body. When it is one month old, it is said to get from its mother its ‘lunar soul’, *cha*,<sup>5</sup> the constitutive part of its living body linked to its ‘solar soul’, previously fixed to its person. If the child is ‘complete’ then, it still has to undergo transformations—the word *lu* keeps on being used in the text—thanks to which it develops its capacity to ‘welcome’, *dze*, that is to say to integrate knowledge. So, its growth is described, month by month, year after year, until it is twenty years old, which marks the end of the chapter.<sup>6</sup>

I. THROUGH PSALMODIES AND WRITINGS:  
EXPERIENCING CHILDHOOD WHEN DEAD

Before exploring in detail those parts of the text which seem the most interesting in order to understand how childhood is perceived in the literate context of the *bimos*, let me begin by describing the environment in which the manuscript is chanted to the dead and, the main meaning of the ‘chapter’, *dje*, which is our focus.

*Books of the Dead, Funeral Rites*

When I had the opportunity to collect from the field manuscripts reserved for funerals in particular, I was fascinated by the wealth of their contents evoking the different phases of the ritual and helping the reader to understand the eschatology of Nipa society. Among the richest collections I made, are the seven books written by *bimo* Zhao (who died in 2003) from the village of Shangpucao—about 16,000 verses in all.

The funeral rites, which last three complete days, are among the longest and the most grueling of the rituals practised by the Masters of Psalmody.

For hours, they have to chant psalmodies. The aim of the ritual, focused on the mutation of the body, is to control and transform the souls as well as human substance: the flesh and the skeleton. Indeed, when somebody dies, the Nipas consider that their souls are dislocated. The *yi*, the 'solar soul', leaves the body while the *tsocha*, the 'lunar soul', goes back to earth with the corpse (we shall return to these later as verses of the text refer to them).<sup>7</sup> For the family of the deceased, it is important to organize the funeral as soon as possible to permit the corpse to integrate into the world of the dead where it is still attached to the *cha*. For this reason, it must be buried quickly. At the same time, the *yi* must come back and reintegrate into the world of the living to enable the deceased to become an 'ancestor-spirit', *puse*. As a matter of fact, it is attached to an effigy of the ancestor. Organizing this journey of the souls is important as this process of transformation after death allows the lineage to be perpetuated.

*Bimo* Zhao underlined that four books have to be chanted specifically during the wake. The first 'chapter' or 'part/section', *dje*, of the first book which is our focus here, evokes the first twenty years of a man's life. It is rather short as it contains only 122 verses. This text is efficacious (the words imply the activeness of what they refer to) in that it is consubstantial with the shaman who gives voice to it. Though the text has to be personally linked to the reader, the same text is read for anybody; no personal elements are inserted in the psalmody. An 'impersonal' man's physiological and intellectual development is depicted as well as the influence of social practices which ensure an individual's well-being and integration into society. To understand why the text is efficacious by being chanted and being bodily connected to the shaman only, we have to explore this shamanic writing a little further.

### *Shamanic Writing as Living Substance*


The books the Masters of psalmody use to perform ritual activities are written in pentasyllabic verse: these include cultic records that provide explanations of the various ritual stages, and which particularly describe the odyssey of the shaman in the cosmos, descriptive texts that fix worship by announcing, for example, the dates of the rituals, and the recitative texts that evoke the Nipas' cosmogony and mythology. The writing covering these manuscripts and which the shamans give voice to (we shall return to this later), is not comprehensible by humans: the psalmodies have a poetic style based on truncated words and contain metaphors in abundance as well as secret words. Instead, this ritual writing is exclusively addressed to the spirits, *se* (in this case, especially to the dead on the point of becoming an 'ancestor-spirit', *puse*). It serves as an intermediary between two usually separate worlds. Syllabic, it includes about 1,200 characters, which are read from top to bottom and

from left to right—unlike the traditional Chinese script which is read from right to left.

This writing is a living substance. Indeed, a relationship is explicitly established between the specialist's writing and blood: the character *se*, used to denote 'written characters', is homophonous with the term 'blood', and for some *bimos*, it is also a homograph. Written characters are, thus, said to be similar to the shaman's blood and to have an analogical link with the ritual specialist. These represent his vital energy. Writing, therefore, means transmitting one's vital elements to signs and books:<sup>8</sup> characters and shamans are consubstantial. And the transmission of the *bimos*' knowledge implies a trans-substantial process.

The ritual texts are indeed transmitted from master to disciple by reading the master's books and by copying the master's manuscripts—that is, all the texts written in his hand. After the master's death, the originals cease to exist as they must be burnt to accompany the dead *bimo* to the other world. Writing means giving body to what is slowly incorporated (from the beginning of the novice shaman's apprenticeship based on readings and up to the death of the master). And if a manuscript has to be read according to the specific ritual purpose, the text itself may refer to rituals which are no longer practised (as is the case for most of the ritual evocated in the chapter on which I focus here) but which are still 'done', so to say, through the psalmody of the *bimo* and the efficacy attributed to his writing.

The term *bimo*, which, let us not forget, literally means 'Master of Psalmody', highlights the importance of singing. Writing effectively comes to life thanks to the *bimo*'s voice and his body that moves to and fro, his weight on his legs in a crouched position. The rhythm he adopts is based on a pentasyllabic metre, with the shaman having to take a breath at the end of each verse and ring his small bell at the first, third and fifth syllables. By giving breath and life to his manuscript, which carries his vital substance, the shaman travels in the cosmos. More precisely, he leaves his corporal envelope: it is said that the *bimo* rides a horse to reach the different stratum of the sky. So, by lending his body to his writing, the Master of psalmody transforms the writing into the ritual space in which he is able to travel.<sup>9</sup>

In order to convey his song as far away as the spirits and, thus, to pass on the message contained in the texts to the world beyond, this chanting of the ritual book is always accompanied by blood sacrifices. Texts specify that by its blood, *se*, and its breath  the sacrificial victim carries the message conveyed in the chanting. It is precisely written that the sacrificial animal speaks—*bé*—the word used to say that humans speak. Thus, its vital essence transports to the spirits, *se*, what is dictated by the written characters, *se*: chanting the written characters, *se*, is conveyed by the prolongation of the circuit of the *se* through the animal's blood spilt on the altar. The *bimo*'s words addressed to the spirits *se*, therefore, passes by the underlying theme

*se*, and the animal's *se* together with the *se* of the writing contributes to the ritual effectiveness. The blood sacrifice is indeed the missing link between what is written and what is said, between the human beings and the spirits. So, a trans-substantial phenomenon occurs in this cultic context.

### *A Written/Lived Childhood*

The reading of 'the chapter about the period of birth and the period of youth', during the wake, accompanied by the sacrifice (of a chicken at this first stage) and only devoted to the dead, is effective in that it conveys in actions what the *bimo* chants. The text is performed for the deceased and the *bimo* addresses the latter directly—'you' appearing many times in the text—by relating what the deceased has/had to go through from birth to marriage, the shaman is nevertheless not evocating what the actual person has lived, but makes the latter live a 'read' childhood, remodelled as written in the text and, therefore, an 'efficacious' childhood which achieves a 'symbolic reality'<sup>10</sup> thanks to the specific quality of the 'oral writing', as I have noted. In other words, whereas the *bimo* did know the dead person—the family of the latter always inviting a shaman from its own lineage or from a related one to perform the ritual, the text does not refer to the child the deceased once was, but to the child the dead person 'is' thanks to the psalmody of the shaman who literately 'gives birth' to the one who has just died. By evoking his first twenty years, the text unwinds before our eyes, as if we were watching a 'live' slideshow of these first years that has been fast-forwarded, to follow each step of its development and socialization. To sum up, the *bimo* has to first make the deceased live a ritualized and socialized childhood before referring to death and to the different rituals the latter must undergo in order to become an ancestor. 'Real time' is of no concern here, the most important being the 'symbolic' aspect of the text and the congruence of the different times it portrays. Its efficacy is encapsulated in them.

Thus, the literate context which implies a 'fixed' content (Goody 1977) here suggests a fixed perception of childhood; a *bimo* does not chant the content of the texts according to the personality of the deceased. The writings are consubstantial with the shaman, but have nothing to do with the person for whom they are chanted. The formal and, at the same time, 'living' characteristics of this text ensure that the dead person experiences the different phases of childhood as perceived in Nipa society, phases which now need to be analysed.

## II. THE COURSE OF A STAR LAID DOWN ON EARTH

Let us now return to the text itself, to its content rather than to its form. We shall not comment on all the verses: to sum up, the first sequence refers

to the funeral phases which occur later—more precisely, the next two days when the dead is buried and becomes an ancestor (the ultimate phase of the funeral which is of great importance as it ensures the perpetuation of the lineage). The *bimo* then says that he comes here now (near the deceased) when it is not yet light, when incense has not yet been burned, when the chapters which must be read to the dead have not yet been chanted. He adds, ‘you were born’, addressing the deceased. Having chanted this verse, the *bimo* evokes the intrauterine life of the latter.

### *Gestation: The Sacrifice to the Female Dragon*

Four verses refer to the sacrifice to the dragon, when the mother is three months pregnant:<sup>11</sup> ‘The sacrifice in the third month of pregnancy, it is the sacrifice given to the female dragon, offerings of tea and of incense are given, it is the sacrifice in the third month of pregnancy.’ I did not have the opportunity to observe this ritual of fecundity and fertility<sup>12</sup> in the field as it is rare now, but this sacrifice appears regularly in ritual texts—and is still ‘acted out’ through the ritual writing—especially in the first lines of an old manuscript entitled ‘Achema’ (Névot 2009). Indeed it is written, ‘The family of Gelujeni [the father of Achema] makes three sacrifices to the dragon in order to have a daughter.<sup>13</sup> Achema was born.’ The number three<sup>14</sup> is associated with the dragon in both texts since, for the Nipas, the third lunar month, linked to spring and to the new agricultural season, refers to the dragon—and not to the tiger, as for the Hans—who form the majority Chinese nationality.

As a mythological being, the dragon is considered both female (*ma*) and male (*pa*), the Hans would say that it is associated with *yin* and *yang*, linked both to water and to fire. A local myth relates that a long dragon came from the sky (*yang*) to the earth (*yin*) where it was eating fire (fire being *yang*) and caused torrential rain (water being *yin*). Then its belly full of water (*yin*) was gutted by two brothers whose heroic act gave birth to the Long Lake, one of the biggest lakes in Nipa territory and whose shape resembles a dragon.<sup>15</sup> Associated here with two usually disconnected elements (water/fire, earth/sky), the dragon’s body is regarded as a geographical element (a lake) which is seen, in the same way as for the Hans, as a well connecting the underworld and the world of the living. As *yin*, a chthonic being, the dragon hides in the lake, and is, therefore, in contact with the world of the dead, aqueous and underground. As *yang*, a celestial being, it flies through the sky. The dragon then has the ability to move from one world to the other, to allow the living to interact with the other world. Thus, a traditional Nipa house has five pillars. The central pillar is called *baga*, literally ‘the root pillar’ as it is the base of the architectural structure. It is also the ‘dragon pillar’ which goes deep into the ground. A verse from a manuscript chanted during the harvest festival says: ‘here is the dragon, spirit of the house, on the root pillar’. As the



dragon coils itself around the central pillar, the house is linked both to the bowels and to the sky.<sup>16</sup> The dragon pillar is, so to speak, an axis between sky and earth (*pa* and *ma*). And from the favourable position of the pillar and relationship between the latter two depends the well-being of those who dwell in the house and who must make domestic offerings to the dragon every year to ensure the perfect balance of the universe.

Let us return to our ritual text. By making offerings of tea and incense to the *female* dragon when a woman is three months' pregnant, the *ma* (or else *yin*) part of the dragon is brought to prevail—which seems quite logical since the baby is closely connected to its mother's body (*malyin*) during its uterine life—the explicit image given by the mythology of the dragon on earth with a gaping belly full of water further underlines its connection with the aqueous and feminine side of the world. Thus, though the sacrifice to the female dragon implies auspicious elements (fertility, prosperity), it inscribes the baby, above all, on the *ma* side of the world. In other words, the position of the future baby in the cosmos is not yet balanced; for the moment, it is full of *malyin* and depends on a figure situated 'between the worlds'.

*Born, Burned and Cut:  
A Raw Body in the Hands of the Father*

While the *ma* part of the body prevails during gestation, the *palyang* part grows and becomes particularly important during the birth which is seen as an arrival of the baby on earth. Indeed, the verses say: '[after] the sacrifice of the ninth month of pregnancy done by the mother, you were born,<sup>17</sup> you are a star (*ga*) laid down (*da*)'. If nothing more is mentioned about the sacrifice performed here—perhaps it refers to the act of giving birth—the birth is metaphorically described as an up-down movement through the use of the word *da* (which implies descent). The association made with a star underlines the fact that the birth is seen as a moment connecting the sky to earth.<sup>18</sup> And if the baby, in its mother's belly, is full of *malyin*, it then arrives as a newborn connected to the sky (*palyang*) and laid down on earth (*malyin*). It is metaphorically deposited on the soil.<sup>19</sup> Thus, linked to the territory of its clan, the 'baby star' has to be inscribed in cosmos and society through various rites of passage. The father is heavily involved here.

Associated with a star on earth, the body of the newborn is not yet depicted as involved in the subsequent transformation phases (the word *lu* is not mentioned),<sup>20</sup> but it is integrated into a sequence of actions whose aim is to manipulate it, to attribute to it a specific status in the cosmos. First, the newborn has to be cooked over fire, to be burned. The text explicitly says: 'your father comes to take fire (*tu*), the fire is taken, your body (*geu*) is cooked/

burned (*na*). Cooked/burned, you do not die.’ *Tu* which means ‘fire’ is always accompanied in the vernacular language<sup>21</sup> by the word *mu* or ‘sky’. Seen as coming from the sky, fire is associated with the *pa* (male/*yang*) part of the universe. In the mythology, the Mountain of Fire, *mutubeu*, is the mountain where mud was taken by the celestial spirit to model the first human being. So, here fire and sky refer to the origins of the human being who has not yet been modelled. Moreover, the way of cooking over fire: *na*, also refers to Nipa ancestors who are said to have survived in a hostile environment and had to hunt and to cook game over burning wood (Névot 2008: 243) The body of the newborn is thus seen as ‘original’, as ‘unprocessed material’, about to be transformed. It is linked to non-civilized time. In addition, the start of its transformation is encouraged by its father who also has to cut the umbilical cord to enable the mother to take part in her child’s transformation process.<sup>22</sup> The next verse reads: ‘iron<sup>23</sup> is taken to cut your umbilical cord. But cut, you do not die. You were born, you were born [the verb *m*’ placed at the end of the verse underlines that it is well established now].’ It is, therefore, stated that by being burned and cut, the baby does not die, its death is not desired by the sky or by the earth: the cosmos accepts its arrival. Thus, birth might be seen as a kind of commitment between universal entities.

Consequently, whereas the mother puts the baby in contact with the *ma* side of the world and gives birth, the father gives life (his practices referring to the ‘creation’ of the first human being) and puts it in contact with the *pa* side of the world. The newborn nevertheless remains ‘unprocessed material’. As a star laid down on earth, deposited on its ancestors’ territory, it is part of the universe yet its body has still not reached the maturation stage, which requires other manipulations. Thereupon, the day to day transformations, *lu*, of the newborn are described in the text. The mother is now the only one, with the shaman, who plays an active part in this process in the following verses.

### III. THE CHILD AS TRANSFORMING MATTER

Seen, described and ‘reformulated’ through writings and chants, at the moment of its disappearance, the body of the deceased is depicted as originally being a ‘transforming matter’ totally immersed in the process of socialization.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the inscription of the newborn in the cosmos engenders transformations: the word *lu*, ‘transform’, is used in the text each time the *bimo* refers to the age the human being reaches. The child has to integrate into society gradually by being duly purified, carried (and fed), and identified by being attributed a name. Correlatively, its solar soul is part of its person. The end of its first month is described as a period of interaction with its mother (vision being central during their exchange), and concludes with the celebration of its first

month during which it is seen as fully constituted with its *yicha* (its united solar and lunar souls).

*Purifications (Second and Third Days) and First Carryings  
(Fourth and Fifth days)*

‘You were born and you have been transformed for two days. Mama comes and you undergo purifications (*ro*). Purified, you do not die.’ The word *ro* is a secret word used only by shamans to refer to an act at the beginning of each ritual. For instance, the altar has to be purified as well as all the instruments the *bimo* is likely to use. These purifications consist in throwing water on the given object and uttering ‘*ro*’ at the same time (the word bestowing efficacy on the act). The next verse shows that this purification has no consequence on the baby’s life, ‘Purified, you do not die.’ When he is three-days old, the face of the baby is cleansed, and once more—and for the last time in the text—the text specifies that the newborn does not die.<sup>25</sup>

The first three days of a baby’s life may be considered the most dangerous<sup>26</sup> and the shaman, by chanting his text, ensures its survival through ritual acts (purification and cleansing).<sup>27</sup> However, it may not be the actual risk of the baby dying that prevails as much as the need to ensure, through rites of passage, the gradual integration of the latter into the society into which it was born. First, the purifications (washing and cleansing) evoked in the text recall, as in many societies, that delivering a baby engenders impurity. That is why a child must be purified before it can be carried and fed.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, let us remember that the baby is compared to a star laid down on earth. In contact, symbolically, with the soil of its ancestors, it is also linked to Mother Earth. In ancient China, it is said that during the first three days, the baby, deposited on earth, was ‘abandoned’, especially if it was a boy, so that it could assimilate the particular forces emanating from the familial floor. It is what Granet calls ‘the three days of training/experience on the feeding ground’ ([1953] 1990: 169). Although the social background of ancient and contemporary China cannot be compared, cultural structures may be.<sup>29</sup> This idea that springs from Granet’s analysis is of some interest here, since the baby is said to have descended to earth. During its contact with it, the child could also be seen as drawing vital forces from the earth.

Nothing is said about the four day old, but when the baby is five-days old, it is carried in its mother’s arms, ‘Mama comes, a rocking movement (*cho*) is given (*bi*) and this movement is “expulsed” [established] (*nai*). The rocking movement is given, it has to be given.’ The baby, now purified, can be metaphorically lifted up from the floor. It may be fed at the same time (it is possible that the missing verse describing the four-day old deals with this).

*Identification and Call of the Newborn (Sixth to Tenth Days):  
Fixation of the Solar Soul, yi*

Between the sixth and the tenth day an important ritual takes place which implies that the newborn is, at this moment, called ‘infant’, *aneu*, for the first time. The text reads, ‘The child (*za*)<sup>30</sup> was born, the spouse is not rich. The *bimo* who separates (*fi*) the trunk (*ko*) calls (*eu*), does this *bimo* come here? He comes and calls (*eu*) the infant (*aneu*). I come and I call (*eu*) the infant. It gets a name.’ An important phase begins—the baby is now identified. Let us study these verses in detail.

First, this section of the text refers to kinship: the mother, presented as a spouse here, is described as poor. In fact, the lineage in which a woman was born is always presented as being poorer than her husband’s lineage, in the ‘Achema’ myth, mentioned earlier, the difference in status between wife takers and givers is always underlined, the former being richer than the latter (Nénot 2009: 228). And the shaman is presented here as the one able to separate, *fi*, the trunk: the word ‘trunk’, *ko*, is used in the expression to designate the agnates, *tsoko*—literally ‘the trunk of human beings’—and in the expression which describes the uterines called *koké*: the ‘branch of the trunk’—the side of the mother being like a branch coming out of another trunk which is attached to the ‘agnatic trunk’.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the shaman has an important role to play during marriage and he may be asked for help and advice to establish alliances (as mentioned in Achema).

About *eu*, ‘the call’, this expression is ordinarily used in a ritual named, *cha eu*, ‘call the *cha*’, *cha*, or *tsocha*, being a heavy essence. *Cha* specifically means the moon and it may also designate an egg. The same pictographic character is used for both of these words. In fact, an egg is used ritually by the shamans during the ‘call of the *cha*’ to symbolize the essence of the person, *tso*, to whom this *cha* belongs. It appears on the altar during the exorcizing ritual the aim of which is to recall the soul. So the *cha* is represented by an egg, which has a metaphorical value as the *cha* is both the soul and an egg, which symbolizes the germ of life. Eating this egg is supposed to heal the person by making the *cha* reintegrate its body. As, in the language of the Nipas, the prefix defines the suffix, in the word *tsocha*, the word *cha* depends on the word *tso* which describes the human being in a physical sense (the character is also pictographic). Consequently, the *cha* is fixed to the *tso*—the *cha* and the *tso* are one. That is why the *tsocha* is connected to the skeleton. After death, it dissolves with the dead body into the ancestral ground. As an egg linked to the ground, to the earth, to the moon and to the mother (as we will see later), the *cha* is a special essence linked to life on earth, to the *feminine* part of the world. As the human body is ephemeral, the *tsocha* is not eternal and has a limited lifetime. Its ephemeral characteristic is underlined by its connection to the moon whose different phases reveal motion. That is why the *cha* may be translated as the lunar soul of a person.

Yet though the ritual is called *cha eu*, the shaman calls the *yi*, the solar soul, to come back, this one, ordinarily attached to the *cha*, having the possibility to leave the body and to engender sickness, damaging the vitality of the latter (and, by extension, of the *cha* that always stays in the body, attached to the skeleton). Contrarily to the *cha*, the *yi* is linked to the breath *sè*, it is a light essence, connected to the spirits named *se*. It is an autonomous essence, located beside the body: the *yi* is considered as the shadow. After death, the *yi* goes wandering: to become the spirit of the ancestor, it must be captured and attached to a humanoid representation of the dead person. The shaman has the ability to talk with the latter, to ask it to stay in the world of the dead while calling its solar spirit *yi* to come and receive offerings and to permit its descendants to construct its effigy. Closely linked to the sun, the *yi* is said to be eternal as the sun appears every day. That is why we may translate it as ‘the solar soul’.

Here, the text says that the shaman calls the child *aneu*, a mode of address which triggers the socialisation of the child, since a verse tells us that the infant gets a name afterwards: it is ‘identified’. This phase obviously also refers to the appeal to the solar soul which was fragile until now and was wandering around the baby without yet being fixed to it.<sup>32</sup> Fixing it will finally result in the coming of the *cha*. Before developing this topic, let us keep following the transformation of the baby until the age of one month.

### *Interactions through Vision*

Then, once again, kinship returns in the meaning of the verse referring to the tenth day, ‘you were born over ten days, you were born, and a branch (*ké*) is born (*jo m*)’, which means that through this birth a new branch has been added to the trunk, to the agnatic lineage, fruit of the graft between the branch of the uterines, *koké*, and the trunk of the agnates, *tsoko*. Having now a personal name, the newborn is described as being able to see its mother’s face. ‘You see the beautiful face of your mother. Mama is tremendously happy.’ Then the text refers to the twentieth day of the baby’s life and affirms that the baby has been born, by chanting this verse, the *bimo* lends efficacy to his words, he underlines the effectiveness of what he has stated earlier, as if he had to sum up what happened and to put an end to this phase. And indeed, a phase is complete, the text referring to the first month of the baby’s life which is crucial as it marks a new level of the transformation: the baby being seen as having its ‘complete’ souls.

#### IV. TOWARD COMPLETENESS AND ASSIMILATION

Both essences *tsocha* and *yi* are essential for the constitution of the human body. Each of their roles is highly determining both during life and at the time of the death, and even after. They are connected to the cosmos, especially

to the moon and to the sun. According to the mythology, the *cha*, linked to the differentiation of the sky and the earth, differs from the *yi*, which is linked to the ‘two in one’, to the bowl of clay containing the two halves not yet divided.

*One Month Old: The Star Linked to the Moon and to the Sun*

The word *yi* indeed appears in a ritual book which relates the separation of the earth and the sky. It clearly states that at the very beginning was Tatsi, two in one, both male and female, the original bowl of clay. This Tatsi had a ‘solar shadow’—the solar shadow is the literal translation of the word *yitche* used in the text. After it gave birth to human beings, the bowl of clay was divided into two parts which became two bodies: a man and a woman who were respectively transformed into the sun and the moon. In other words, the *yi* of primordial times was fixed to the two original ‘halves’, it was linked to a formless bowl of clay which had, the text specifies, no hands, no face, no father, no mother and no lineage either. So the *yi* came before the constitution of the cosmos, before the separation between the earth and the sky and before the birth of the moon and the sun. The *yi*, the shadow of the sun, was the germ of humanity. As a consequence, the *yi* is an essence which refers to the lack of differentiation between the two primordial ‘halves’, it precedes the being, the creation of the body.

On the contrary, *cha* refers to differentiation. A myth says that during the original flood, a man and a woman were put in a wooden chest together with an egg. The text says that when the chicken was born (literally, when the child (*za*) of the hen was there), the door of the chest was opened. So, when the egg became chicken, when the *cha* became *za*, the original ancestors settled in the cave which, thus, came to shelter the couple who gave birth to humanity. In other words, the *cha* corresponds to the non-union of the couple in a closed place, the chest. On the contrary, the *za* corresponds to the union of the latter in another closed place, the cave. Consequently, in the mythology, the *yi* precedes the *cha*, the shadow precedes the division of Tatsi, two in one, which becomes the sun and the moon, and the *yi* belongs to a formless entity while the *cha* belongs to the human body.

The ritual text also suggests that the *yi* of the newborn precedes its *cha*.<sup>33</sup> The former is linked to its body which is incomplete, not yet totally formed, and to its individualization, while the latter is linked to its first month; both are united when the baby celebrates its first month.<sup>34</sup> The text specifies, ‘the newborn is one month old, Mama comes to give it the *cha*, the *cha* is given, the *cha* is wanted’.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the baby is now perceived as unifying *tsocha* and *yi*, having its *yicha*, which is the common appellation of the souls of the human being—there is no differentiation between them in the vernacular

language as long as a person is alive and in good health. And the mother is the one who has the ability, with the help of the shaman who brought forth the *yi*, the name, to unify the vital essences of her baby.

Thus, the souls are metaphorically perceived as a form of shadow, the shadow of the human being, and in a metonymic form as part of the human being attached to their skeleton. In a pertinent way, by evoking two souls whose nature is distinct, the Nipas refer to the bisexuality of every human being which is made up of two complementary halves. On the one hand the *yi*, linked to the sun, *masculine*, an eternal component, and on the other hand the *cha*, linked to the moon, *feminine*, an ephemeral essence. So, the solar and the lunar souls refer to the psychological unity of man. And the child finally acquires these essences by the end of these various rites of passage.

#### *Until a New House is Built*

Finally, the child's growth is described—the word *lu*, 'transformation', is still used in the text—month by month, year after year, until it is twenty years old. 'The newborn is three months old,<sup>36</sup> the newborn is four months old, and a branch (*ké*) was born (*jo m*)', which means, once more, that this birth adds a branch to the trunk, to the agnatic lineage. The infant is five months old, it is able to eat and to drink water. When it is six months old, 'it is the period when a chapter (of a book) welcomes it [a chapter has to be read by the *bimo*]'.<sup>37</sup> The child is seven months old, 'it is adorable, nice and cute'. The text continues, 'you are eight months old . . .' the child is nine months old, it is transformed over nine months in the *vi*<sup>38</sup> (lineage), it is able to listen. The child is ten months, it is able to sit, the child is eleven months old.'

From the age of one year, the child, who is still being transformed, *lu*, is able to 'welcome', *dze*, different kinds of knowledge and activities. Its integration and interaction with others in the society come to the fore:

you are one year old, the child is two years old, it can talk and it can walk. The child is three years old . . . . The child is five years old, it is welcome to go to the fields (accompany others). The child is ten years old, it lends a hand in the work in the fields. The child is fifteen years old, it has been transformed in the lineage (*vi*) over fifteen years, it invites a young woman for a drink, the spouse is welcomed, it is welcomed and has arrived.<sup>39</sup>

And after a new branch has been attached to its own branch, after an alliance has been settled between its lineage and that of its spouse, the text says: 'the child was born twenty years ago, a house [construction] is built'. Now that it has reached the end of its transformation, now that it is considered

complete, the child, *za*, must build a house to welcome his own children; it must carry on with the process of transmission in which it was immersed for twenty years. The course of life it shall follow is determined by the different stages it has so far gone through. Actions by society on its own person open the horizon of its destiny, and the man, no longer a child but about to be a father in his turn, is now inscribed in the lineage of his ancestors.

#### CONCLUSION

In Nipa society, a newborn is not a person ‘taken for granted’. The relationship between the baby and its parents, its clan and its ancestors, has to emerge from different rites of passage which form, little by little, its socialized individuality. Kinship affiliation is settled during the first twenty years through constant ritual practices, mental evolution and learning.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the child always has to follow specific procedures. The malleability of a child is the central topic here: the mother gives birth while the father gives life, then the mother transforms the child, transformations which allow the latter to acquire knowledge and to fit into the society.

The chapter about the period of birth and the period of youth remains quite esoteric by constantly introducing implicit references to mythology—the mention of the female dragon, the use of fire to ‘cook’ the newborn—or by using metaphors—kinship and alliance depicted as a tree with different branches attached to the trunk or born from grafts—whose interrelations help, little by little, to access the fundamental meaning of the text. The poetry hides its sense, as if the semantic has to be hidden in the interstices of the verses. Such a complex religious speech takes on efficacy by being chanted to the deceased—who ‘lives’ an orthodox childhood through the shamanic writings. And different phases may be extracted from the text: the period of gestation when the female part prevails, the birth seen as the meeting of sky and earth—the newborn being compared to a star laid down on earth—the cooking of the newborn, ‘unprocessed material’ which then has to undergo certain transformations: after purifications, it is considered as an infant and gets a name. It pursues its development by unifying its lunar and solar souls. It then acquires various abilities thanks to which it becomes involved in society.

The final words of ‘the chapter about the period of birth and the period of youth’ reveal that the deceased to whom the text is chanted has been well inscribed in the transmission process: the first twenty years of a person’s life appear as strictly controlled by various rites of passage imposed by society, and through this inscription into the autochthonous ground and the clan, in the ensuing years, the person appears to follow in his ancestors’ footsteps: he will have children who will assure his own transformation into ancestor.



At the end of this road, the person perpetuates the cycle of life in another corporeal form, that of his wooden ancestral effigy.

It is possible to question the concepts of transmission and of agency in this specific shamanic context: first, a *bimo* has to appropriate and to personalize the manuscripts transmitted by his master, and his shamanic writing is a vital element fundamentally anchored in the ‘matter of transmission’. Second, his ritual language is able to override social transformations by acting out rituals, virtually, which may have disappeared. Third, the psalmody of the manuscript goes past reality in order to reach a ‘symbolic reality’ which involves three actors emerging through the funeral chanting and, as such, put in the hands of the shaman: the dead as a remodelled baby, the dead as an ancestor in progress, and the family of the dead giving the latter a place among generations of ancestors. In a certain way, the *bimos*, whose practices are accepted as true and powerful, ‘impose’ their intellectual, shamanic view on the world.

## NOTES

1. Yi nationality (which concerns about eight million people—they rank first among the Chinese Tibeto-Burman speaking populations)—is made up of diverse ethnic groups each with its own cultural and linguistic specificities, scattered over the Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces. The focus of our study here is a Yi branch from the district of the Stone Forest, Shilin, a territory located south-east of Kunming, the capital of the Yunnan province. It is named the ‘Sani’ branch in Chinese, and in its own language it is known as the Ni people, or the Nipas. The Nipas number around 70,000 people.
2. Contrary to Liangshan Yi societies, Nipas do not—as far as I know—have any books that are used outside the religious context and read by people other than *bimos*—whereas the ancient *nzyimo* chiefs of the Liangshan area would have also been able to read texts evoking genealogies, war chronicles, medicine, etc.
3. Other texts are reserved for women. Space does not permit me to discuss this topic at length, but it is worthwhile noting that a myth about Achema is sometimes evoked during funerals; the birth and the childhood of this female heroine is recorded and each stage in her growth corresponds to particular abilities (development of the baby, then the young girl’s knowledge).
4. ‘*New*’ is quite difficult to translate. According to this ritual text, it refers to the period of life until the age of twenty.
5. Those notions refer to vital essences, the word ‘essence’, in my opinion, emphasizing the link to the body. We could say that the *yi*, beside the body, and the *cha*, in the body, correspond more or less to what Han people respectively name the *hun* (the soul-breath) and the *po* (corporeal soul)—even if a few differences between the Nipas’ and the Hans’ conceptions are noted later.
6. I haven’t studied yet this ritual text with a shaman. That’s why the translation and the analysis I propose here have to be seen as a personal proposal that may be re-examined in the future.

7. Conceptions which, once again, can be compared to that of the Hans for whom the *po* stays with the corpse and goes back to earth, while the *hun* flies away immediately and goes back to the sky.
8. Note that Chinese calligraphy is attributed bones, flesh, nerves, veins, blood and breath. It is said that it is a vein of ink that beats to the rhythm of the painter's own arteries; it is an extension of his body.
9. The chiasmatic relationship established between the painter and the world in Merleau-Ponty's thoughts about paintwork helps me to analyse the relationship between writing and body. In *Eye and Mind*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty notably writes that 'by lending his body to the world, the painter changes the world into painting' (*C'est en prêtant son corps au monde que le peintre change le monde en peinture*) ([1964] 2006: 16).
10. About the symbolic efficacy, cf. Lévi-Strauss ([1958] 1998: 213–34).
11. About prenatal education in China, gestation and birth, cf. (Despeux 2003: 61–98). From the the third month of pregnancy, 'life comes to existence' says the Commentary of Zuo (*ibid.*: 62).
12. Beside this auspicious domestic cult, a village cult is celebrated each year to the dragon, on the third month of the lunar calendar, in order to regulate rains and to ensure prosperity in the village (to prevent drought or, on the contrary, a devastating monsoon). For the Hans, the dragon embodies the awakening of springtime, it is associated with the colour green and with the woods. Whereas it is linked to rain, *yin*, its nature is seen as the *yang* growing, and its body forms the topography of the earthbound layer, cf. Skinner (1982: 30–51). We shall come back to this more specifically in the Nipa context.
13. Recipes were given in ancient China to change the sex of the foetus and to guarantee the future birth of a male (Despeux 2003: 92). For the Nipas, the birth of a boy does not prevail on the birth of girl as they like to mention their clan, organized on kinship groups based on patrilineal descent, portraying matrilineal characteristics. Nevertheless, a male descendent remains important to ensure ancestral worship.
14. The number three in China is associated with the beginning of everything (Despeux 2003: 67).
15. *Lunan minjian gushi*, 'Popular tales from Lunan' (1996: 86–7, 93–4).
16. On this subject, see also Stein ([1987] 2001: 216–19).
17. The text actually reads: 'You were born of it', which means, 'due to this sacrifice' just mentioned in the verse before.
18. In ancient China, conception is seen as a 'brawl' between sky and earth, between father and mother (Despeux 2003: 68).
19. In ancient China, a ritual was accomplished to lay the child on the floor, in order that the baby achieves an autochthonous belonging, to create a close link and alliance with the soil (cf. Granet ([1953] 1990: 159–202).
20. We shall come back to this expression in the third part.
21. But not in this particular religious writing/language which often implies the use of one character only to express a word composed of two syllables in the ordinary speaking, contraction which permit to respect the rhythm of pentasyllabic verses.

22. In period China, each sex is said to have its own function: man gives life, woman transforms (Despeux 2003: 79).
23. Probably because a knife has to be used to cut the umbilical cord.
24. Jacques Gernet underlines that, according to classical Chinese thought, a human being can be manipulated *ad libitum*, hence the first years are decisive for shaping behaviour as well as for acquiring knowledge: education may even begin at the moment of conception (2003: 12–13).
25. In period China, the baby was introduced to the ancestors when it was three-days old (Despeux 2003: 67).
26. In period China, these three days were regarded as dangerous and delicate, that is why the baby was only given a name on the third day (Despeux 2003: 67, referring to Leung 1984: 62).
27. In period China, the newborn, until it got a name, was totally isolated and ‘abandoned’ the first few days. For the Hans, a purification ceremony is traditionally performed three days after birth, by washing the newborn (Granet [1953] 1990: 164). According to Granet, this ritual brings to a close a period so that the baby can subsequently integrate into the family (baby as ceemeting force bring together, *ibid.*: 165)—thereafter, the baby can be carried and fed. For the Nipas, if the purifications take place the second and third days as well, the baby can be carried on the fifth day. We shall come back to this.
28. About the soiling when delivering a baby in China, *cf.* Granet ([1953] 1990).
29. A strong cultural link exists between ancient and contemporary China. Like Detienne, we could say that it gives a kind of unconscious form in the language which transmits ‘fundamental frameworks’ (Detienne 2000: 37–8).
30. The word *za* refers to the inscription of someone in the genealogy: everybody, no matter how old they are, is the *za* of somebody. About ‘*aneu*’, which we will come to later in the text, it specifically designates an infant.
31. About the way trees are conceptualized worldwide, and perceived as suitable objects for symbolization, *cf.* Bloch (2005: 21–38).
32. I have not yet read texts which explicitly refer to the origins of the *cha* and of the *yi* (whereas for the Hans, texts are devoted to the origins of the *po* and the *hun*). Nipas consider that the souls interfere in the baby’s life since the latter is in its mother’s belly, but they are still very light, and fragile, and the first month of the baby is the time needed to fix the *yicha* souls together. This will be developed later.
33. In the Commentary of Zuo, the *po* (*yin*) is said to emerge during conception (particularly the third month of pregnancy) and the *hun* (*yang*) during birth (Despeux 2003: 68). In other writings, it is not the *po* which appears in the third month of pregnancy but the *hun* soul (Despeux 2003: 69–70).
34. Granet ([1929]1968: 352) underlines that when the mother gives birth, her child only has a *po*, ‘the soul of the blood’. The soul, *hun*, appears later during the ritual which consists in giving the newborn a name (during the celebration of the ‘full month’ *manyue*, the baby gets a name, *ming*, identified to its soul *hun*, to its destiny).
35. A perception which is quite different from that of the Han people, the majority of the Chinese, for whom the child receives its *hun* (spiritual souls) through its father when the latter gives it a name.

36. According to Chinese ancient rites, the baby was really integrating society and had a social place when it was three months old (Despeux 2003: 67).
37. A ritual may be practised when the baby is six months old.
38. All the families (*gh'eu*) who say they share a common ancestor form a *vi*, an agnatic group comparable to a patrilineage. The word *vi* has different meanings regarding the context of enunciation: a Nipa says, for instance, that he is a member of the *ni vi*. Referring to his village, he says he is a member of the *tyé* (village) *vi*. Talking about his lineage located in this village, he will give the name of this lineage and add the word *vi* after it. Regarding the geographical and demographical scale, through the word *vi* the Nipas identify with the Ni clan, the village clan or the patrilineage.
39. In classical China, it was only when a boy was sixteen years old that his energies were considered to be complete and fully operational. Consequently, it was at that age that a boy was considered to be complete. Until that time, he was still being transformed and influenced (Despeux 2003: 61).
40. But teaching is not of more importance in the text. In 'What is passed down from parents to children: A cross-cultural investigation', M. Bloch underlines that 'while in European and African systems, birth and parenthood seem to be the determinant factor in creating fundamental kinship identities, in Southeast Asia and Madagascar, birth is more like, as these people say, 'the launching of a ship'. Where that ship will go will be determined later by other factors such as choice, association and environment. Kinship affiliation will be settled only late in life, and settled definitely perhaps only some considerable time after death' (Bloch 2005: 65).

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