

*Naxi and Moso ethnography: Kin, rites, pictographs* edited by Michael Oppitz and Elizabeth Hsu. Zürich: Völkerkundemuseum, 1998. 396 pp.

Reviewed by Nicholas J. Allen

Until the late 1980s students of the Nakhi were few and far between. The founding figure was Joseph Rock (1884-1962), a self-taught scholar of Austrian extraction, who published copiously in a notably rebarbative style. He was a difficult character (for his biography—not mentioned here—see S. B. Sutton, *In China's Border Provinces: the turbulent career of Joseph Rock, botanist-explorer*, New York: Hastings House, 1974), and he did not have an academic post such as would have enabled him to foster students; but he did collect and distribute Naxi pictographic manuscripts, some 7,000 of them, to various libraries. Among those who studied the manuscripts was the anthropologist Anthony Jackson of Edinburgh University, who is one of the nine contributors assembled here by the editors. Meanwhile, a number of home-based Chinese scholars interested themselves in the area, and it is good to see that they too are represented. More recently still, a number of younger students have undertaken doctoral fieldwork on the area, some being of Chinese extraction, others not.

The area in question surrounds the double bend of the Yangtse River in North Yunnan, spreading into South Sichuan. As so often in and around the Himalayas, the indigenous ethnonymy is complicated enough, and is further confused by the labels imposed by outsiders—not to mention the classifications of linguists and the mountainous terrain. To a first approximation (this is very crude), the Naxi and Moso speak the same language, but the former, in the south, are patrilineal and use pictographs, while the Moso in the north are mostly matrilineal and rely wholly on oral tradition. The Naxi number nearly a quarter million, the Moso only about 15,000. No doubt both groups ultimately come from the north, though it is not clear how to evaluate their claims to Mongol ancestry. The language is classified under the Loloish or perhaps the Qiangic branch of Tibeto-Burman.

The first third of the book deals with kinship, focusing on the remarkable contrast between the two closely related groups. This is something of a *cause célèbre* in Chinese anthropology, which has been officially committed to the doctrines of Morgan and Engels, and hence has regarded the matrilineal pattern as a primitive survival which willy-nilly the Moso ought to and will abandon as they follow the Naxi in their progress towards Han and socialist ideals. In fact, as is lucidly shown by Susanne Knödel, the Moso have resisted reform and continue to practise their

system based on *tisese*, ‘walking back and forth’. Brothers and sisters live together in largish households, and men only come to visit their partners at night. This lack of emphasis on the role of the husband accounts for the title of another recent work on the Moso, Cai Hua’s *Une société sans père ni mari: les Na de chine* (PUF, 1997). Although the institution of visiting husbands is known from elsewhere, the most obvious comparison is with the historical Nayar of south-west India, so often cited in anthropology textbooks.

Elizabeth Hsu, who mentions both Cai Hua and the Nayar, examines the Moso and Naxi material in the light of Lévi-Strauss’s ideas on *sociétés à maison*, especially as reformulated by Carsten and Hugh-Jones. Hsu’s is a theoretically lively text which merits development for a wider audience. She suggests that over a wide area stretching from China and Tibet to south-east Asia we need to recognize two different kinship ideologies: one, alliance-oriented, deals with the exchange of women and with rank and honour, while the other, hearth-oriented, stresses domestic harmony. The implication is that such concepts will enable us to overcome the over-sharp conceptual opposition between Naxi patriliney and the matriliney attributed to the Moso.

The second third of the book contains a great deal of material on ritual, illustrated with copious photographs, some taken by Rock. The chapter I most enjoyed was Christine Mathieu’s account of the *ddaba*, a little-known type of ritual specialist from a remote Moso village (which is in fact patrilineal), and the mythology relating to his activities.

In the final third of the book, Jackson and his former pupil Pan Anshi argue strongly, against Rock, that few if any of the Naxi manuscripts were produced before the second half of the nineteenth century. The officiants in fact produced three types of manuscript for different purposes: divination manuals, listings of what was required for particular rituals and, above all, mnemonic texts for the mythic chants that make up so much of a ritual. The main writing system is pictographic. Most signs, though standardized, are recognizable as depictions, but the texts cannot be thought of as comic strips without the balloons. One normally needs some background knowledge to interpret the signs, and familiarity with the spoken language alone would not permit a correct reading. There is, however, also a phonetic syllabic script, based on strokes in the Chinese manner. Many pages of pictographs are reproduced, but perhaps the best way to understand how the system works is to begin by consulting the last article. Here Oppitz presents, syllable by syllable with interlinear translation, a version of the deluge story taken from the main creation myth. Oppitz, now director of the Ethnographic Museum at Zürich,

makes good use of material culture and visual anthropology to explore the nature of the object in which the First Man survives the flood, but a firm solution proves elusive.

Oppitz, who will be known to readers for his earlier work on the Sherpas and the Magar, says that the main object of the book is “to offer some incentives for a comparative anthropology of the wider Himalayan region”, and with this in mind I shall raise a few themes that might repay comparative study. Being nowadays particularly occupied with Indo-European comparativism, I favour the hypothesis that for the Himalayas too a language-family framework will be useful, and that some of the similarities one finds in the region will go back to a Tibeto-Burman proto-culture. Of course, however, generous allowance must be made for diffusion as well as common origin, and for diffusion both within the area (notably the spread of Tibetan Buddhism and organised Bon) and from outside it (Sinification, Hinduization, import of Buddhism, etc.). The task is vast, and no doubt it will be some decades before we have a satisfactory comparative anthropology of the whole region.

The Naxi-Moso kinship material points to several sorts of comparative issue. Can anything be learned from a comparison of the Moso with the matrilineal Garo? Why do both the Naxi and the Moso resemble so many other communities in the area in recognizing four proto-clans (following Knödel: Hsu adds two further Moso protoclans)? And do these protoclans represent some ancient ranked stereotypical division of labour? (cf. my two papers from 1978: ‘Fourfold classifications of society in the Himalayas’, in J. Fisher (ed.) *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan interface*, Mouton, pp. 7-25, and ‘Quadripartition of Society in early Tibetan Sources’, *Journal Asiatique* 266: 341-60). We know that the Naxi prefer to marry the father’s sister’s daughter: ‘the mother’s brother grasps the sister’s daughter’ according to native idiom (the somewhat alarming transcription discrepancies between p. 31 and p. 86 are not typical of this well-produced book). But how does this relate to the bilateral and matrilateral cross-cousin marriage patterns that are found elsewhere in the region, and in particular, are these relations compatible with the hypothesis that Tibeto-Burman kinship terminologies were originally symmetrical prescriptive?

The possibilities for comparison in the field of ritual are endless. Thus the Central Valley specialist might compare the Newar *guthi* with the Moso *sizi*, the group which collectively organizes funerals, or they might note Rock’s observation of a Moso goat sacrifice during which the chest was cut open and the heart torn out (p. 211). McKhann’s report of the division of the pig’s head and its distribution (p. 184)

recalls the classic carving charts in the ethnography of the Chin, and many subsequent reports. The annual journey of the Moso gods to Lhasa in order to gamble (p. 224) reminded me of the annual assembly of the Kinnaur deities on the local Mount Kailash. The *ddaba*'s method of divining, using cut twigs with (as it were) a heads side and a tails side (p. 218), has analogues among the Rai and the Nagas, and no doubt elsewhere. The ritual division of labour, often binary, is another interesting theme, and Oppitz assembles fifteen versions of the myth of a competition between two types of officiant or shaman (in Tibet typically a lama and a bonpo). But perhaps the richest theme of all would be the rituals themselves, especially the death rituals which, as is typical of the region, are far more elaborate than weddings. The chanted cross-country journey to the home of the ancestors, the white 'way cloth', the collaboration of lamas with local priests, the dough figurines and effigies of animals (perhaps substituting for animal victims), the use of horses for prestige, the elaborate laying out on the ground of offerings and ritual paraphernalia, the house gods and central pillars, the sacred groves, the careful written recording of gifts: all of these will be familiar to most Himalayanists. The editors have indeed provided plenty of food for the comparativist.

*Multiculturalism: Modes of coexistence in South and Southeast Asia*  
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Reviewed by Ursula Sharma

The bad news is that, as Ernest Gellner has taught us, ethnic nationalisms are in great measure a product of modern state formation. The good news (often obscured by the many instances of conflict in the contemporary world) is that none the less there are still many instances of peaceful ethnic coexistence, although these are seldom subjected to analysis by social scientists.

This book consists of ten clearly written and informative working papers, the product of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation's research programme on 'Culture and Identity: Ethnic Coexistence in Asia'. Three are on India, three on Nepal, one on Sri Lanka and three on Thailand. (No particular rationale is given for this choice of 'South and South-East Asian' countries, nor is there any editorial attempt to relate the papers to one another.)

Classifying the papers in a different way, some provide historical or general