



## FIVE NEWLY DOCUMENTED VILLAGE NAMES OF MOSO PEOPLE: A FRONTIER TOPONYMIC SYSTEM

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**Abstract:** *This paper comprehensively reconstructs five Moso village names analyzing first-hand field work data, so far unpublished, collected by the author. Moso is an ancient ethnic group from South-West China. Their oral traditions have scarcely and rarely been transcribed and recorded. This study in the Moso historical toponymic can contribute, therefore, to a more comprehensive knowledge of the historical development and of the culture of Moso People. A specific sound change in the “Wujiao” toponym, as well as its Tibetan origin, has been proven, in this paper, through an etymological analysis associated with historical-phonetic reconstruction. The five Moso village names here studied are a toponymic system showing the significance of landscape features in the remote naming process of places. The toponymic analysis also highlights the role of these villages as part of the frontier / border between China and Tibet during the Ming Dynasty.*

**Key words:** *Moso People, Wujiao Village, Lijiazui Village, Qiansuo Village, Wenquan Village, Youmi Village*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Moso 摩些 ethnic group lives on the border between Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces in South-West China. People began to know Moso culture since the discovery of the unique Dongba glyphs and the matrilineal society of Moso People living around Lugu Lake (eastern branch). Systematic investigations of Dongbaism started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the arrival of Christian missionaries in South-West China.

“Moso” is an historical name. Its records in Chinese literature can be traced back to Jin Dynasty (265-420 AD), e.g.: Chang Qu (1987: 210). The different branches of Moso People share similar endonyms, both in morphological and semantic aspects. Those names are composed of the syllable “na” followed by the word for “people”. The

syllable “na” is homophonic to the word meaning “black, big”. Therefore, in some recent academic publications, the term “Na People”<sup>1</sup> is used to refer to Moso People.

## 2. TOPONYMIC STUDIES ON MOSO PLACE NAMES

Lists of Moso place names can be found in He Zhiwu (1989: 117-121). Li Lincan (1984: 90-91) has provided a catalogue of places following Moso People’s migration path. Since Moso People have not records on their history, studies on their place names could contribute to figure out their social background. In the early Naxi studies, the endonym of Moso People is transcribed as “Nakhi” (according to the pronunciation widespread in Lijiang area).<sup>2</sup> However, Rock (1947: 4) has argued whether the two appellations, *Moso* and *Nakhi*, are identical. This question can also be formulated this way: “How to establish that Moso in history was the name of current Na People?” Besides the fact that the designation “Moso” has been used until the time of People’s Republic of China, the places mentioned in the historical texts have been analyzed as supportive evidences. Several ancient toponyms revealed to be the same as the current Na People’s ones.

One of the targeted villages is located in Yanyuan 盐源 County. Yanyuan County was the region of Dingzuo 定笮 in Han Dynasty, Kunming 昆明 in Tang Dynasty, Yanjingwei 盐井卫 in Ming Dynasty, and Yanyuan County 盐源县 since Qing Dynasty (*Sichuan Tongzhi [Annals of Sichuan], vol. 2: 44-45*). Dingzuo 定笮 and Kunming 昆明 were mentioned as territories of Moso People in the sources listed above. Moreover, Fang Guoyu & He Zhiwu (1979: 39) discovered that “样渠头” (/yang tou qu/ in Chinese *pinyin*) and “楼头” (/lou tou/ in Chinese *pinyin*), two places where Moso People lived recorded in the *Yuan Shi 元史 (Chorography of History of the Yuan Dynasty)*, are the names of Lijiang and Yongning in native languages, i.e.: [iɿgɿɿdyɿ] and [lyɿdyɿ], by reconstructing the pronunciation of the characters in Old Mandarin. This discovery reveals that Lijiang and Yongning, two important inhabited places of Naxi and Na People nowadays, were also territories belonging to Moso People in history. The present study aims at providing an agile report on undocumented Moso village names and related legends, in order to widen our knowledge of this ethnic group.

## 3. FIELDWORK BACKGROUND

Between January 2011 and July 2014, I have conducted several field work trips in Na villages on the border between Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces.<sup>3</sup> My field works focused on Daba writing, Daba oral tradition, and language documentation of local languages, while my interviews also collected social background information of these

<sup>1</sup> Having noticed similar endonyms and languages, Mu Shihua (2010: 100) proposed a single identity for these ethnic groups - Na Xi Zuqun, a term that means “series of all ethnic groups with the endonym Na”. It can, thus, be translated as “Na-ish people ethnic group”.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Rock is considered “the father of Naxi studies in the West”. He has lived long time in Lijiang area between 1922 and 1949. He has compiled more than ten books, including the *Nakhi-English Encyclopedia Dictionary* and *The Ancient Nakhi Kingdom in South-West China*, covering topics from history of Naxi ethnic groups and religious activities, to language reconstruction and writing system description.

<sup>3</sup> I participated in the National Social Science Fund Project entitled *Zhongguo Xi'nan Diqu Binwei Wenzhi Qiangjiu, Zhengli, yu Yanjiu*, “Interpretation and Rescue of Endangered Scripts and Bibliographies in Southwest China” (10&ZD123), advised by Professor Zhao Liming.

communities. The villages I have visited and studied are Wujiao 屋脚 Village and Lijiazui 利家嘴 Village in Wujiao 屋脚 Township, Muli 木里 County, Sichuan Province; Qiansuo 前所 Village in Qiansuo 前所 Township, Yanyuan 盐源 County, Sichuan Province; Youmi 油米 Village in Labo 拉伯 Township, Ninglang 宁蒗 County, Yunnan Province; Wenquan 温泉 Village in Yongning 永宁 Township, Ninglang County, Yunnan Province. Figure 1 is a sketch map of the field work areas. The white part represents Yunnan Province and the grey part shows the Sichuan Province. The bolded line between the two provinces marks the main branch of the upper stream of Yangtze River, which is also called Jinsha 金沙 River (“Gold Dust River”).



Figure 1. Map of Field Work Bases <sup>4</sup>

## 4. VILLAGE NAMES

### 4.1. Wujiao Village

Wujiao Village rises 3000 meters above sea level. It has a population of around 300 units, composed of Moso People (around 200, 70% in the village; endonym: [na.lhĩ]) and Yi People. They believe in Dabaism and Tibetan Buddhism. During my field work time in 2011, there were six Daba priests and seven Lamas<sup>5</sup> in the village. “Wujiao” in Na language is read as [ʋɑ.lɔɔ]. Daba Awo from Wujiao Village explained that it is a transcription of a Tibetan phrase [riɫɔɔ], which means “this is the place”. According to

<sup>4</sup> The map is from the website of “China Maps”.

URL: [www.chinamaps.info/images/Province/chinamap%20Yunnan.jpg](http://www.chinamaps.info/images/Province/chinamap%20Yunnan.jpg).

<sup>5</sup> “Lama” is the designation of a Tibetan Buddhism monk.

the local legend, a goddess called *Pati Lamu* ([pɛ̃tɪ̃lɛ̃lɛ̃lɛ̃mɯ̃ɿ]) has pronounced that sentence when she arrived there. Since when Moso People settled down there, the original Tibetan pronunciation has changed according to the Moso phonemic system.

#### 4.2. *Lijiazui Village*

Lijiazui Village is the other village in Wujiao Township, located on the other side of the mountain in the west of Wujiao Village. It has a population of around 400 inhabitants, who are all Moso People. Besides the endonym [na.lziɿ], they have another designation: [na.lmɯ̃ɿʔæ̃ɿdzɿ]. There were ten Daba priests and ten Lamas in the village in 2011. Daba Awo told me the etymological origin of the name of Lijiazui. According to him, once, the village was called [lĩdzɿ.lhɿɿ], which means “the place where bad people hide themselves”. Later on, with the immigration of Moso People into this village and due to sound change, the current pronunciation became widespread: [lĩlɛ̃ãɿtsiɿ].

#### 4.3. *Qiansuo Village*

Qiansuo Village is located in Qiansuo Township, Yanyuan County, Sichuan Province. It has a population of around 300 units, including Moso People, Yi People, and Han People. Among them, the number of Moso People is about 200. The different ethnic groups are distributed in different parts of the village: Moso People in the center, Han People in the peripheral area, and Yi People at the foot of mountains. The endonym of Moso People in Qiansuo Village is [na.l]. They had three Daba priests and seven Lamas according to the statistics in 2011. Qiansuo was one of the military bases of Chinese Emperors in Yanyuan County since Ming Dynasty (*Sichuan Tongzhi*四川通志[*Annals of Sichuan*], Book 2, vol. 19: 58-59). The name “Qiansuo” comes from ancient Chinese military toponomastics. *Suo* 所 is the sub-level of each military station called *Wei* 卫 around the country. Its function is to enroll villagers in the army, gathering them. Each *Suo* includes 100 or 1000 families (Chen Wenshi 1977: 180-181). The local tribe chieftain is called *Tusi*, in Chinese. The surname of Qiansuo *Tusi* is “A 阿”. They are an offshoot of the *Mu* 木 family, the local chieftains in Lijiang area authorized by the Chinese Government (*Lijiangfu Zhilue*丽江府志略 [*Brief History of Lijiang Prefecture*]: 137).<sup>6</sup> “Qiansuo”, therefore, indicates literally “the *Suo* located in the front”. There are other four *Suo* in that area: *Zuosuo* 左所, *Yousuo* 右所, *Housuo* 后所, and *Zhongsuo* 中所, meaning *Suo* on the left, on the right, at the back, and in the center, respectively.<sup>7</sup> The village has also an original name, “Waru” [ɣwɿɿzɿɿ], in Moso language. It can be also found in some of the local folklore stories. The first syllable [ɣwɿɿ] means “village”,

<sup>6</sup> The original records write: “In the beginning of Ming Dynasty, the Chinese emperor Hongwu has given the surname *Mu* to the local chieftain tribe *Tusi*. Its direct descendants keep this surname, while the ones split out from the main family changes to *A* after three generations and to *He* 和 after five generations. (明洪武初 赐土官姓木后, 惟承袭及司堂舍人, 木姓三世以降姓阿, 五世以降姓和)”

<sup>7</sup> According to the *Annals of Sichuan*: “The surname of *Tusi* at *Zuosuo* is *La* 喇 the surname of *Tusi* at *Yousuo* is *Ba* 八 the surname of *Tusi* at *Zhongsuo* is *La* 喇 each of these three *Suo* administers 1000 families; the surname of *Tusi* at *Qiansuo* is *A* 阿 the surname of *Tusi* at *Housuo* is *Bai* 白 each of these two *Suo* administers 100 families.

(左所为喇姓, 右所为八姓, 中所为喇姓, 各为千户; 前为阿姓, 后为白姓, 各为百户.)”

while the second is a synonym of “warm”. Considering its location near to the Wenquan 温泉 River (“the warm spring river”) that is the natural border between Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces, its local name could mean “the village at the river side”/ “the village on the river bank”.

#### 4.4. *Wenquan Village*

Wenquan Village is located in Yongning Township, Ninglang County, Yunnan Province. The center rises on the border between Yunnan and Sichuan Province. Wenquan Village has got its name from a hot spring in that area. People living in neighborhood of Wenquan Village converge there to take baths. In Moso language, “hot spring” is [əʎqʰəʎ]. Local Moso People call themselves [naʎ].

#### 4.5. *Youmi Village*

Youmi is one of the main villages of Ruke Moso People. Youmi Village is also mentioned in Li Lincan et al. (1972: 125), its name being transcribed as “Yaomi 药眯” in Chinese. It currently has a population of around 400 units. There are seventy-two families in the village, seventy Moso families and only two Han People families. “Youmi” is the designation of the village name in official Chinese documents. However, the etymological explanation of “Youmi” ([zɔʎmiʎ]) remains, at the moment, unclear.

Ruke People are a small branch of Moso People (around 7,000 units) living on the bank of Jinsha River.<sup>8</sup> The endonym in Youmi Village is [zɛʎqʰəʎ] according to my field work notes, which can be Romanized as “Ruke”. Other commonly used Chinese transcriptions of Ruke include “zher-khin” (Rock 1938), “Ruoka 若喀” (Li Lincan et al. 1972: 125; Li Lincan 1984: 32), “Ruanke 阮可” (He Zhiwu & Guo Dalie 1985: 40; Guo Dalie & He Zhiwu 1999: 7), and “Ruka 汝卡” (Zhong Yaoping 2010). Ruke People in Youmi Village also call themselves “Naru” ([naʎzɣʎ]). The first syllable “na” is shared among Moso endonyms. The second syllable “ru” means “warm” and is identical to the first syllable in “Ruke” (the regional designation analyzed above). Therefore, the endonym, as I have been able to reconstruct it during my field work, means “Moso People living in lower and warmer places”. The local Chinese term referring to them is “jiangbian ren 江边人” (“people living on the river bank”). Correspondingly, the Moso name of Youmi Village is “Rudi” ([zɣʎdiʎ]), which means “lower and warmer place”.

### 5. HISTORICAL CLUES FROM THE VILLAGE NAMES

Among the five Moso village names listed and described above, “Wujiao” seems to derive from a Tibetan legend. “Pati Lamu”, the goddess who – in the local story – named Wujiao Village, is a Tibetan protector of Muli area. Her name is དཔའ་ལམ་ལྷ་མོ་ ([dpal

<sup>8</sup> Ruke Dongba culture is considered a sub-branch of Dongbaism (He Zhiwu 1989: 55; He Limin 2002: 255). Their glyphs have been classified as an independent category among the common Dongba glyphs in Li Lincan et al. (1972).

Idan lha mo]], in Tibetan, which means “glorious goddess” (Buswell et al. 2013: 267; Volkmann 1995: 171). One of the sacred snow mountains of Wujiao Village has been named after her.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Gelug Lama Monastery of Wujiao Village is called “Renjiang 仁江” in honor of the goddess. The worship for the same goddess and the fact that the two places are not distant indicate the connection of Wujiao Village with the Renjiang Monastery. In fact, the Tibetan pronunciation of “Wujiao”, [riɰdzoɰ] mentioned by Daba Awo in the legend I have collected during my field work, has the same initials of the Chinese transcription of the Wujiao Lama Monastery name. Therefore, “Renjiang” and “Wujiao”, the two Chinese *pinyin* transcriptions, should be identical in Tibetan. Proofs of this can be found in some old documents. In the annals of Muli County, “Renjiang” referred to the region including the current Wujiao, along with Lijiazui and Dazui. This was the southern frontier of Muli *tusi* before 1949 (*The Annals of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County*, 1995: 115-121). In other words, the monastery, the local venue of the religious leader, was named after its region.<sup>10</sup> Later on, the Lama monastery has kept the Tibetan pronunciation in its name, while Moso People have gradually adapted the toponym to the phonetics of their language.<sup>11</sup> Lijiazui Village had its name before Moso People settled down. Also that toponym had, possibly, Tibetan origins. In Gexi Quzha (1957: 858), a Tibetan word ལི་ཙ་བེྱ [li tsa bhi] is explained as the name of a noble Indian family emigrated from a Tibetan Kingdom. This word sounds similar to the old form provided by Daba Awo, [liɰdzɰlɦɰɰ].

Both Qiansuo Village and Youmi Village have local denominations in Moso language. Their old names, together with “Wenquan”, were coined according to their geographic features: [ɣwɰɰɰɰɰɰɰɰ] “warm village” (Qiansuo Village), [zɰɰɰɰɰɰɰɰ] “lower and warmer place” (Youmi Village), and [əɰɰɰɰɰɰɰɰ] “hot spring” (Wenquan Village). Moreover, the pronunciation of Wenquan Village is similar to the endonym of the “Ruke” ([zɰɰɰɰɰɰɰɰ]) ethnic group. The fricative [z] and central vowel [ə] are both retroflexives. In Li Lincan et al. (1972: 125), this endonym is transcribed as “Ruoka” ([zɰɰɰɰɰɰɰɰ] in IPA), possibly due to the dialect in 1940s. The authors annotate that this designation refers to both the endonym and the place where Ruke People live. It means “warm place”, a place located along the Jinsha River. “Youmi”, therefore, is a village name, while “Ruke” is a regional designation. Conversely, the Chinese name of Qiansuo Village, which means “The military base in the front / in front of”, highlights the fact that Yanyuan was the frontier / border between the Chinese Empire and Tibet in Ming Dynasty.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper comprehensively analyzes five Moso village names starting from first-hand field work data so far unpublished. The toponyms are documented for the first time with their IPA transcriptions, the description of related local traditional stories, and their

<sup>9</sup> “Lamu” means “goddess” in Moso language. The term is borrowed from Tibetan ལྷ་མོ [lha mo] (Gexi Quzha 1957: 955). Therefore, a more remote onomastic source of the name of the goddess could have been the name of the goddess Pārvatī (पार्वती) in Sanskrit, which means “the daughter of the mountain” (Kinsley 1987: 35-37).

<sup>10</sup> The political and religious system in Muli lasted from around 1648 to 1952 (Wellens 2010: 24-28).

<sup>11</sup> The syllabic structure of Moso language is (C)(G)VT. One of its differences from Tibetan syllabic structure is that Moso language has not consonantal coda. The Tibetan form of “Renjiang” has not yet been recorded. According to the explanation of local people, it means “green mountain”. Therefore, it could be written as རི་ལྷང [ri ljang]. The first syllable, “རི”, means “mountain”. The second syllable, “ལྷང” means “green”.

etymological reconstructions. The newly-collected data provide detailed information on the history and historical toponomastics of these places. The names of the five villages are configured as a toponymic system. The description of their historical semantics and the reconstruction of their etymology help in shedding some light on the history and culture of the places and their inhabitants and on the historical topography of the targeted areas. This preliminary analysis of the village names also helps in delineating the continuous dialectics of mutual influences between the two bigger regions (China and Tibet) involved in the history of that territory. The link between place names and local traditional stories is also important in the reconstruction of the remote naming process of toponyms in this border area.

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