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Daniel Berounsky



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/249>
DOI: 10.4000/ebhr.249
ISSN: 2823-6114

Publisher

CNRS - UPR 299 - Centre d'Etudes Himalayennes

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2020
Number of pages: 102-106
ISSN: 0943-8254

Electronic reference

Daniel Berounsky, "*Masters of Psalmody (bimo): Scriptural shamanism in Southwestern China*", by Aurélie Névot, *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* [Online], 55 | 2020, Online since 16 March 2022, connection on 22 July 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/249> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebhr.249>



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Masters of Psalmody (bimo): Scriptural Shamanism in Southwestern China

by Aurélie Névod. Leiden: Brill (Religion in Chinese Societies Series, vol. 15), 2019, 264 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-41483-9 (hardback), 978-90-04-41484-6 (e-book)

Reviewed by Daniel Berounsky

The title of the new book by Aurélie Névod might give the impression of an anthropological or ethnological study dealing with ritual specialists among the Yi peoples of China. It should be made clear from the outset that this is not the case, although the book does indeed explore a class of ritual specialists called *bimo* and ethnological materials do play an important role in it.

Névod attempts to discuss the nature of the rituals performed by the *bimo* by focusing on the role of the scriptures they use. It is a highly interesting topic, worthy of detailed exploration with implications that reach far beyond studies of the Yi per se. The reader is presented with invaluable information on the symbiosis of literacy and orality among the *bimo*, which is hard to discern at a first glance. The author mentions that it was only after she had spent a long period of time among the Yi-Sani people that she realised that there are highly interesting though barely perceptible features of this symbiosis that are linked to the confusing usage of books among Yi ritual specialists.

On a closer look at the contents of the book, the latter deals primarily with the Yi-Sani branch of the Yi people. The analysis is based on a comprehensive body of knowledge that has been gleaned from the author's long-term research among them in Shílín Yízú Zìshì Xiàn (The Autonomous County of the Stone Forest Yi Nationality, 石林彝族自治县). This information mainly concerns the role of the so-called *bimo*, male ritual specialists of the Yi people. Female specialists are called *chema* and are also discussed in the book as part of a larger picture of the ritual space. But *bimos* – the only specialists to use written texts – receive much more attention. The role of the *bimo* is apparently to facilitate communication between the community and the realm of the spirits.

The author consequently considers them to be part of a 'shamanistic' type of religion, despite the absence of trance-like states in *bimo* practices. The term 'scriptural shamanism', which appears in the book's subtitle, indicates that scriptures play an important role in this form of 'shamanism without trance'.

The author's rendering of *bimo* is 'master of psalmody'. It shows that, unlike the usual translation of the term by 'master of scriptures', these ritual specialists make a deliberate distinction between oral performance on the one hand and the use of scriptures on the other. This seemingly slight difference is crucial and could be regarded as the book's primary concern.

The discovery of the fascinating features of the use of scriptures starts with the observation that *bimos* understand writing as 'blood'. This blood secures transmission within the family lineage, the books being copied by the sons of *bimos*. The blood in this case is not red animating liquid, but black ink. The writing itself is associated with the feminine gender, thus contrasting with the purely male lineages of ritual specialists. This 'blood' plays a crucial role in securing the *bimo* lineage and in the disciple's mastering of ritual chanting. While writing is understood as being 'blood', the text itself is called 'mountain' with reference to ascending to the sky.

Scriptures copied and read in the presence of the master *bimo* are an essential part of the apprenticeship. Yet, at the same time, individual lineages do not necessarily share the same script and the same writings. The writings are therefore important for marking individual lineages and are, indeed, in this sense at least, their 'blood'. They are also indispensable for mastering the art of *bimo* ritual specialists. However, they do not exactly portray what actually occurs during the ritual performance. The voicing of the scriptures' written contents is conceived of as an animation of blood; in other words, scripture is not a record of the chant, but rather the other way around. The chant stems from the writing, but the scripture is not a precise record of the chant. An uninitiated person would not be able to use the scripture properly, nor understand it. Knowledge of the script (which varies from one lineage to another) is not the sole requisite for chanting. Additional knowledge about words missing in the scripture, of unwritten contexts and meanings have to be acquired orally and through experience (Chapters 1-4).

The book continues to focus on rituals (Chapter 5). It briefly describes the ritual of animal sacrifice, which constitutes the core of *bimos*' ritual practice. The blood sacrifice accompanies most of the rituals performed by *bimos*, including healing and funeral rituals. The author clearly shows that during animal sacrifice the suitably chosen animal is purified and animated by *yi* – 'cosmic essence, vital energy, etc'. Therefore, what matters is that the process of animation brings about the ability of the animal to speak to spirits, rendering the sacrificial offering a means of communication with them. The 'vital energy', *yi*, is carried by the animal's blood (*se*), which is placed on the altar following immolation. The meeting of the 'blood' of the *bimo*'s script (*se*) with that of the animal (*se*) enables the ritualist to communicate with the spirits. The message in the 'blood' of scriptures is vitalised through chanting. Carried by the animal's animated 'blood', it then speaks and reaches the spirits.

After addressing writing, books and rituals among the Yi-Sani, Névot's book discusses the extraordinary myth called *Achema* (Chapter 6). This myth, recorded in script, is exceptional. It is not customary to chant it during the ritual and it does not accompany an animal sacrifice. The author recognises that, behind the poetic and tragic story of the young lady *Achema*, lies an important pattern that displays a broader context of the ritual world of the Yi people. The story narrates the events that followed negotiations to marry *Achema* and continues until her tragic death in a cave, where she turns into a rock. It is undoubtedly a foundation myth about the role of female ritualists called *chemas*. Through self-sacrifice, the petrified young lady becomes an echo of the voice of her brother *bimo*. The author carefully analyses the context of the story and notes that the role of female ritualists is (as during animal sacrifice) to echo the voice of the *bimo*. *Chemas* do not require script ('blood of ink') since human blood is associated with females and renders the use of external blood (ink) redundant in their case.

A rather substantial part of the book (mainly Chapter 7) is devoted to the recent, current situation in which *bimos* operate. This might appear off-topic but it is quite the contrary. There is a fine demonstration of how contemporary Chinese authorities' encroachment in administrative matters blurs traces of what was once essential for understanding the role of scriptures. Research among Yi people is undoubtedly an extremely difficult enterprise. The distant past has not been clearly

recorded and only a few contours are occasionally fleshed out from the otherwise opaque mist. The present state of matters offers a distorted picture due to state policies towards 'minorities' in China. The sections showing how contemporary politics – mainly the effort to unify both the script and the performance of *bimos* – deform the outer appearance of what *bimos* are engaged in are an indispensable and meaningful part of the argument, focusing on the role of writing in this case.

To conclude, it could be said that this book by Névot makes a highly interesting contribution both to Yi Studies and to the broader field of studies on oral traditions.

As a humble Tibetologist, I am naturally inclined to see some implications of the research presented by Névot within my own field of studies, which also deals with speakers of Tibeto-Burmese languages. In the case of Tibetan-speaking peoples, an interesting perceptible combination of the massive use of the written word with a very strong sense of orality can be observed. Névot's book is very inspiring in the sense that it shows a very particular case of an amalgam of written language and oral tradition. Similar research is certainly a desideratum in Tibetan Studies and this book provides great inspiration for the future.

As for the broader significance within studies on oral traditions, I am convinced that it is also of great importance. Note that the author does not, unfortunately, provide the reader with much context of the studies on oral traditions and, for the author of this review, her theoretical framework is rather confusing. Nevertheless, this in no way lessens the value of the book and its vital contribution to this field.

It is extremely rare to encounter purely oral traditions in the world today. Written traditions and orality are not juxtaposed in living practice despite the tendency to oppose the two in theory. Today, most instances of orality are in fact influenced by written texts in a number of ways and *vice versa*. The book reveals an interesting and rather unusual case in which the strengths of writing and the strengths of orality are knowingly employed. Each of these media retains great significance and the two are carefully combined in a ritual context where the power of orality is supported by a written text. Needless to say, the strengths of written texts and oral performances are seen differently by the Yi compared to how they are viewed in the context of the modern world. For the ritual specialists and their clients, they are a very important and powerful

part of the ritual space. However, the writing in these texts is replete with esoteric characteristics that render them far from accessible to everybody. It is precisely these ostensible obscurities that makes them the 'blood' that animates the various ritual lineages of *bimos*.

On a general level, the book provides information on a very careful evaluation and treatment of the written text by certain human societies. Supported by the experience within their environment, those people certainly knew about their strengths and weaknesses. The final words of this review might therefore be addressed to those who question the commonplace of written texts in the modern world: the book will certainly nurture your interest. It is certainly worth reading!

Daniel Berounsky is Associate Professor and Director of the Institute of South and Central Asia, Charles University, Czech Republic.

Daniel.Berounsky@ff.cuni.cz