

**Blurring Boundaries of Writing: The Dongba Script
and the Naxi Creation Myth**

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Abstract

This thesis performs an ethno poetic analysis of the *Coqbbertv* (‘The Origin and Migration of Mankind’), a Naxi creation myth recorded in the Dongba pictographic script. Rather than treating this text solely as a written artifact, the paper approaches the *Coqbbertv* as a semi-oral performance narrative situated between speech and script. Building on linguistic and anthropological research on the Lijiang Naxi language and Dongba manuscripts, the project takes Duncan Poupard’s annotated English translation of the *Coqbbertv* as its primary corpus, which builds on an overlooked early transcription recorded by the Dutch missionary Elise Scharten. Examining this corpus, the project identifies the text’s prosodic and structural patterning, including concordant phrases, rhythmic phrasing, formulaic repetition, and recurring narrative frames. By applying ethno poetic methods, the study seeks to reconstruct the underlying performance logic of the text: how poetic organization indexes the narrator’s intended effect and reflects the oral conventions of Dongba recitation. This approach challenges rigid distinctions between writing and orality by showing that the *Coqbbertv*’s meaning emerges through its patterned, performative structure rather than solely through its written form. By repositioning the text as a living poetic form, the analysis demonstrates how its poetic organization reflects and reproduces Naxi ritual knowledge. To ground thematic interpretation, the study employs Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* to identify culturally salient narrative motifs and to contextualize them within the broader corpus of Naxi ritual narratives. In doing so, the study clarifies the role of the Dongba script and the *Coqbbertv* in Naxi society and demonstrates how semi-oral traditions sustain systems of meaning at the intersection of oral language, performance, and writing.

1. Introduction

1.1 Sociological and Historical Background

The Chinese state officially designates the Naxi as one of its 少数民族 *shǎoshùmínzú* (‘ethnic minority’), applied to groups recognized for their distinct languages and cultural traditions that together make up less than nine percent of China’s total population (National Bureau of Statistics 2020).

The term Naxi (纳西 *Nàxī*) itself originates from the endonym /naJhi/, derived from /naJ/ (‘black’) and /hi-/ (‘man, person’). In international linguistics, these speech varieties are classified within the “Naish” (or “Naic”) branch of Sino-Tibetan, which includes three closely related languages: Lijiang Naxi (“Naxi proper”), Na (also called “Narua” or “Mosuo”), and Laze (Michaud et al. 2017; Ethnologue 2025). According to the 2000 Chinese census, there are roughly 300,000 speakers of Naxi proper, with dialects including Lijiang (the standard), Lapao, and Lutien.

The origins of both the Naxi proper and the Mosuo (or Na) are uncertain, though many scholars such as Wang (1999) link them to the 羌 *Qiāng*, an ancient group mentioned in early Chinese histories (Friedrich 2023:271). The region along the Lijiang River where the Naxi and

Mosuo live today was first subdued by the Mongols under Kublai Khan in 1253 during the conquest of the Dali kingdom. Under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Lijiang became a powerful 土司 *tǔsī* (‘native chieftaincy’) ruled by the 木 *Mù* family, and was later integrated into the Qing empire after 1723. Chinese sources from this period onward began to record the region’s multiethnic composition in detail. Today, the Naxi proper roughly occupy the territory that was once controlled by the Mu family, speaking a relatively homogeneous dialect, while eastern groups are linguistically more diverse (Friedrich 2023:271; Michaud et al. 2017).

In Yunnan, the Naxi ethnic minority designation aligns with the population of Naxi language speakers, though some groups in Sichuan have been misclassified as 蒙古族 *Měnggǔzú* (‘Mongolian’) (Michaud et al. 2017). As an ethnic minority, the Naxi benefit from 优惠政策 *yōuhuì zhèngcè* (‘preferential policies’), including lower university entry requirements and incentives for officials who know local languages (Li & Luo 2022). However, the broader state project to “firmly establish the dominant position of the national standard spoken and written Chinese” (2020 National Conference) continues to erode the intergenerational transmission of Naxi languages. In most schools, Mandarin is the only medium of instruction, and though Naxi is still spoken at home, younger generations are increasingly losing fluency due to the dominance of Mandarin in Chinese society (Huang 2025).

Lijiang’s landscape is centered on the sacred Mount Yulong, which—known for both its biodiversity and its mythological importance—has become a focal site for eco- and cultural tourism that frequently highlights Naxi cosmological ideas (Hart et al. 2022). In Naxi belief, Mount Yulong is both a gateway to paradise and the dwelling place of Sanduo, the ancestral protector god. The mountain and its surroundings contain temples and numerous sacred sites, along with important natural features such as Lugu Lake, Chenghai Lake, and the Jinsha River, which flows directly through the city. According to the 2020 Chinese Census, Lijiang has a population of 1.25 million people, more than half of whom belong to ethnic minority groups. The Naxi people border and overlap with many other communities: Chinese populations to the east, diverse Tibetan groups to the north, Bai to the south, and Yi and Lisu groups within and beyond Naxi areas. As a result of long-standing histories of contact dating back to at least the Tang dynasty (618–906), Naxi religion and culture share features with Tibetan and Chinese traditions, but remain distinct in practice and worldview. For instance, although Dongbas traditionally served as the main religious practitioners and healers in Naxi villages, urban elites (such as the ruling Mu family) brought in alternative religious traditions through their connections with neighboring regions, including forms of Tibetan Buddhism (McKhann 2017).

In addition to its ecological and cultural significance, Lijiang has become a major domestic tourist destination. The city’s well-preserved Naxi-style Old Town was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 (Huang 2025; UNESCO). Historically situated along the Tea-Horse Road (Southwest Silk Road), local labor was divided between Naxi men, who traveled as long-distance horse-caravan traders, and women, who worked in agriculture and operated market stalls. Today, many Naxi work in the tourism sector, where proficiency in Mandarin is essential for economic participation. For example, Naxi women dressed in

“traditional” clothing frequently work as tour guides, while homes in the Old Town are often leased to Han entrepreneurs (White 2010).

Despite the decline of Dongba writing’s use following the domination of written Chinese in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), by the 1980s and 1990s, the script re-emerged as a symbol of ethnic heritage in the wake of cultural tourism and minority revitalization policies. Local officials in Lijiang promoted the Dongba script as a symbol of Naxi cultural identity, integrating it into signage, souvenirs, and museum exhibitions (The Economist 2020:38). By 2003, a course formally teaching the Dongba script and spoken Naxi was officially added to Lijiang primary schools, reflecting the state-supported revival of “minority culture” as part of the region’s tourism economy, but the course is only taught to young children 1–2 times per week (Huang 2025). Despite its limited functional uses in daily life, the Dongba script’s reappearance in public spaces has transformed it into a heritage marker that bridges the gap between ritual literacy and cultural identity in the modern era.



Figure 1. Sacred Mt. Yulong is home to the powerful and frightful Naxi god Sanduo (Hart et al. 2022).

1.2 Classification & Geographic Distribution

The term 纳西 *Nàxī* is commonly used in Chinese scholarship to refer broadly to all language varieties spoken by the 纳西族 *Nàxīzú* (‘Naxi people’). Since 2011, this definition has been revised internationally to place these within the “Naish” (or “Naic”) branch of Sino-Tibetan, reflecting their internal diversity (Michaud et al. 2017; Ethnologue 2025). Within Naish, scholars distinguish three primary languages: Lijiang Naxi (“Naxi proper”), spoken in the relatively homogeneous western region, and Na (also called “Narua” or “Mosuo”) and Laze, spoken in the more diverse eastern region (Michaud et al. 2017:1–4).

1.3 Linguistic Features

Phonology

The syllable structure of the Naish languages is C(G)V+T, where G is an on-glide and T is a tone. Consonant clusters are rare, and therefore are often realized through coarticulation. For instance, the sequence /by/ is realized as the bilabial trill [ɸ].

The Naish languages are tonal, with three basic tonal categories (low, mid, and high). These interact in contour patterns of varying complexity depending on the language (Michaud et al. 2017:7). For example, in Yongning Na, a mid–high contour such as /laʔ/ (‘to strike’) can lose its high tone when followed by certain grammatical particles, producing /laʔ-biʔ/ (‘will strike’), where the high tone reassociates to the following syllable. Some linguists such as Lidz (2010) also propose that Naxi exhibits regressive vowel harmony in disyllabic words, such as in /ŋuʔŋoʔ/ (‘child’), where vowels share backness features (Michaud et al. 2017:8).

Morphology

Like most Sino-Tibetan languages, Naxi lacks inflectional morphology but relies on compounding, reduplication, and affixation to derive new words and grammatical meanings. Reduplication of verbs and adjectives in Naxi is commonly used to convey intensification or a shift in semantic scope. For instance, /laʔ/ (‘to strike’) becomes /laʔ~laʔ/, meaning ‘to quarrel, to fight’, and the adjective /ⁿdæʔlæʔ/ (‘short, low’) reduplicates as /ⁿdæʔlæʔ~ⁿdæʔlæʔ/ to express ‘very short’ (Michaud et al. 2017:9).

Syntax

The basic word order is Subject–Object–Verb (SOV), though topic markers allow for flexible variation when emphasizing particular constituents. For example:

- (1) aʔkʰaʔ nuʔ aʔhwaʔ toʔ meʔ
Aka- nee Ahua- dol meil
Aka NOM Ahua ACC teach
‘Aka taught Ahua.’
(Law 2011; China National Body 2017)

A less common (but also acceptable) word order:

- (2) aʔhwaʔ toʔ aʔkʰaʔ nuʔ meʔ
Ahua- dol Aka- nee meil
Ahua ACC Aka NOM teach
‘Aka taught Ahua.’
(Law 2011; China National Body 2017)

Tense, aspect, and mood are expressed through pre- or post-verbal particles, while questions are formed through pre-verbal or sentence-final particles. The yes/no interrogative adverb, realized as /əɭ/ in Lijiang Naxi (cf. Na /əɭ/, Laze /ɑ/), appears in constructions such as:

- (3) tʰuɿ əɭ- buɿ
 3.SG NEG.INT go
 ‘Is he going?’
 (Michaud et al. 2017:11; China National Body 2017)

The sentence-final particle /laɭ/ is used in confirmation-seeking questions, for example:

- (4) tʰuɿ buɿ- laɭ
 3.SG go CONF.INT
 ‘He’s going, right?’
 (Michaud et al. 2017:11; China National Body 2017)

An example of natural Naxi syntax, drawn from Michaud et al. (2017), shows these patterns in a folktale excerpt:

- (5) tʰuɿ-seɿ, sjaɿhoɿtsuɿ zoɿ tʂʰuɿ-kyɿ ɳuɿ
 thus-TOP young.man man DEM.PROX TOP

 buɿ-meɿ ʂuɿ-tʰuɿ -ɳuɿ tʂʰaɿ-ɳdzuɿ mɿɿ-mæɿ!
 sow-were vampire AGENT bite-eat NEG-achieve

‘And so the weresow did not manage to devour that young fellow!’
 (Consultant M4, last sentence of Weresow story, Michaud et. al 2017:10)

This example sentence demonstrates typical Naxi syntax, tone patterns, and the use of particles for evidential and aspectual marking.

1.4 Origins of the Dongba Script

The Dongba script is a pictographic system traditionally used by Naxi ritual specialists, or Dongba priests, as an aid to the recitation of ritual texts during religious or shamanistic ceremonies. Historians have discovered over 30,000 manuscripts containing Dongba characters in caves and personal collections, some accompanied by Geba, Tibetan or Chinese glosses (Friedrich 2023:272; Poupard 2023). The earliest dated Dongba manuscript dates to the 13th century (Poupard 2023), indicating a long-standing written ritual tradition which is closely tied to Dongba recitations.

Archaeological findings suggest similarities between Naxi pictographs and Magdalenian-like rock paintings along the Yangtze River (see Fig. 3), near what is believed to be the homeland of Dongba writing (He Limin 2003; Taçon et al. 2010). Assuming that Tibeto-Burman migrations into the region occurred no earlier than the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), some scholars hypothesize that early Naxi groups borrowed pictorial symbols from preexisting rock paintings, likely created by Austroasiatic speakers (Mathieu 2003). The Dongba script may have developed as these pictographs were adapted into a ritual writing system during processes of cultural integration with earlier local traditions (Mathieu 2003).

The Naxi term for the script, [sæɫɕɿɻɻ-ɿɻɫɕɿɻɻ] (‘wood marks–stone marks’), reflects its origin in natural materials, while Dongba—possibly derived from the Tibetan *ston pa* (‘teacher’) or from Bonpo, the Bon priests—refers both to the ritual specialists and to the script itself (Michaud et al. 2017; Poupard 2023). Poupard (2023) records the Naxi pronunciation *dobbaq* to denote the Dongba religion and its practitioners, whereas Michaud et al. (2017) identify [sæɫɕɿɻɻ-ɿɻɫɕɿɻɻ] as the term specifically referring to the writing system. This distinction shows a lexical differentiation in Naxi between the priestly class and the script, both of which are represented by the same Chinese term 东巴 (‘Dongba’). This paper uses the term “Dongba script,” adopting the most well-recognized name for the orthography.



Figure 3. Undeciphered symbol from a rock painting (left) and Dongba pictograph for ‘vagina’ (right), demonstrating similarities in the use of abstract symbols. (in Michaud et al. 2017)

1.5 Research & Debates on the Dongba Script

The foundation for modern scholarship on Dongba manuscripts has largely been shaped by translators and ethnographers from Europe in the early 20th century. Joseph F. Rock, an Austrian American botanist and linguist, was the first to extensively publish studies and translations of Naxi texts, which combined phonetic transcription and detailed ethnographic observations. Dutch missionary Elise Scharten, working in Lijiang between 1924 and 1934, produced what may be the first complete English translation of a single *Coqbbertv* manuscript without the mediation of Chinese (Poupard 2023). Scharten’s work had never been officially published and was largely overlooked until Poupard’s 2023 annotated translation. However, her translation is particularly significant because it closely follows the written graphs, suggesting

minimal elaboration by her Naxi consultant. This faithfulness to the Dongba graphs provides a rare opportunity to examine the relationship between the written and spoken forms of Dongba performance (Poupard 2023).

While often described as “the world’s only living pictographic script,” the Dongba script does not fit neatly into conventional writing-system typologies. Luzzatti & Whitaker (2006), in the *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*, draw a broad distinction between ideographic systems—where symbols represent meanings rather than sounds—and alphabetic systems, which encode phonemes. Chinese is sometimes labeled “ideographic,” although more precisely it is logographic, combining pictorial origins with highly abstract, conventionalized signs (Nuessel 2006).

The Dongba system, however, occupies a more fluid semiotic space. While each graph contains semantic meaning, graphs do not correspond directly to Naxi words or morphemes in the way that logographs or alphabetic letters correspond to linguistic units. Some are “phraseographic” indicators which convey an entire phrase, such as a graph that is not read aloud but alludes to a Naxi myth of a man surviving a flood (see Fig. 4). In addition, a significant number of graphs are phonetic loans from Naxi, or “rebuses,” used to represent abstract concepts such as the name of a mythological figure (see Fig. 5).

In this way, Dongba characters function primarily as visual mnemonic cues for the ritual specialist, prompting the recitation of an oral text. As Michaud et al. (2017) note, Dongba manuscripts often lack a fixed linear order: their graphs are arranged in flexible sequences that support performance rather than encode a verbatim linguistic message. From this point of view, Dongba is not a “script” in the usual linguistic sense, but rather a multimodal medium in which image, memory, and oral tradition create meaning.



Figure 4. Two Dongba graphs. A simplified reading: man shoots tiger. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.no. RV-4175-26, detail. (Poupard 2023)

The two graphs in Figure 2 could read:

(6)	la˧l	kʰa˧l	tɕua˧l	nu˧l	kʰa˧l
	la	kail	zhuaq	nee	kail
	tiger	shoot	man	TOP	shoot

‘[When it comes to] the shooting of the tiger, the man does the shooting.’
(Poupard 2023, recited by He Yuncai 1986; China National Body 2017)

In this example, the two graphs are read as five distinct morphemes in Lijiang Naxi, illustrating the lack of one-to-one correspondence between Naxi spoken and written language. Furthermore, the graph of the man holding the bow represents the verb *kail* (‘to shoot’) and the noun *zhuaq* (‘man’) simultaneously. The horns on the head of the figure indicate that this man is the legendary hero Coqssei-leel’ee, the only man to survive a great flood in Naxi myth. However, his name is not read aloud in this section of the story, merely serving as a reference for the narrator (Poupard 2023).



Figure 5. Dongba graph representing Zzee’laq-epv. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.no. RV-4175-26, detail.

The above graph depicts a robed figure with a tiger’s head (note the resemblance to the tiger from Fig. 4). Rather than directly representing a robed anthropomorphic tiger, however, this graph is used to represent the god known as Zzee’laq-epv. The symbol for the tiger’s head is merely used for its pronunciation in Lijiang Naxi, *la*, which closely resembles the second syllable of the deity’s name: Zzee’**laq**-epv.

Poupard (2023) advances this discussion by situating Dongba manuscripts “between the oral and the literary.” He argues that these texts are “semi-oral,” a transitional category that cannot exist in complete form without the knowledge of an experienced ritual performer—“in the same way that a lead sheet can only be interpreted by a competent musician” (36). The written text serves as a framework or memory map for performance, which is realized by way of the oral tradition. “Oral and written intertwine,” Poupard writes, “they are performed orally and partially written down” (36). Though the wording may vary between recitations, the broader narrative structure guiding performers remains stable (45).

In this sense, rather than viewing Dongba writing as a vestigial form of pre-writing or as merely a pictographic artifact, one can better define it as a living textual tradition whose meaning is produced through ritual performance. Analyzing Dongba through this semi-oral lens shifts the question from “Is this a writing system?” to “How does this system encode and enact

performance?” It also reinforces the importance of ethnopoetic methods (described below), which approach texts as dynamic organizations of formulaic patterns, emphasizing the living anthropological aspect of oral storytelling.

1.6 Naxi Creation Myth: The Coqbbertv

The *Coqbbertv* (/tʰoɿ bərɿ tʰɿ/ ‘The Origin and Migration of Mankind’), also known by its variant title *Coqbbersa*, is a creation myth narrative central to Naxi mythological and ritual tradition. The *Coqbbertv* manuscript comprises 36 folio pages, each containing 10–15 panels of Dongba graphs, which function as meaningful units for narration and analysis (approx. 7500 words in translation). Surviving manuscripts are held in the U.S. Library of Congress under the title *Yao Annals of Creation*, as well as in the Naxi Dongba Cultural Research Institute, with translations available in Chinese and English (Poupard 2023). The story recounts the formation of heaven and earth, the emergence of gods and humans, and the establishment of cosmic order. It also details the union of a heroic Naxi ancestor with his celestial bride, situating human origins within a divine family background.

The *Coqbbertv* is not only the most frequently translated Naxi text (Poupard 2023), but also one that has come to represent the entire Dongba tradition. Anthropologist Emily Chao observes that this myth “has become one of the most important, if not the most important, Dongba texts” which is used to symbolize the totality of Naxi culture and history (Chao 2012). However, Chao also notes that during her fieldwork in the 1990s, knowledge of the myth among Naxi was not widespread, indicating that its cultural prominence today is a product of selective preservation. Nevertheless, Poupard points out, this is the only manuscript selected for a full translation, indicating that her Naxi consultants held the text in particularly high esteem.

As a ritual text, the *Coqbbertv* exemplifies the hybrid nature of Dongba writing: it combines pictorial symbolism, mnemonic cues, and oral recitation. The text’s composition is densely patterned with prosodic rhythm and formulaic repetition, providing a particularly rich corpus for ethnopoetic analysis. As Duncan Poupard (2023) argues, Dongba manuscripts are “semi-oral,” occupying a transitional zone between writing and performance: they cannot be fully understood apart from their oral realization. The *Coqbbertv*’s layered repetition, rhythmic pacing, and interplay between visual and script embody this quality, revealing that narrative meaning is performed through sound and rhythm as much as through image and text. By examining its prosodic and structural organization, one can trace the principles by which Naxi ritual specialists constructed meaning.

Moreover, the *Coqbbertv* offers invaluable insight into Naxi cosmology and social order. Its account of divine genealogies situates the origins of humanity within a continuum of natural and spiritual creation, articulating a worldview in which landscape, ancestry, and divinity are mutually constitutive. As such, it is not only a myth of beginnings but also a ritual performance of cosmic balance—a living text through which the Naxi continually narrate their place within the universe.

1.7 What is Ethnopoetics?

Ethnopoetics is a method of narrative and discourse analysis that bridges the fields of ethnography, folklore, and linguistics. Pioneered in the early 1980s by Dell Hymes (1982) and Dennis Tedlock (1983), it was originally designed for the study of folk narratives and oral traditions (Blommaert 2015). Ethnopoetics is grounded in the ethnographic principle that meaning emerges as an effect of performance—that is, stories are organized not only by what they say but by how they are told. Hymes proposed that narratives exhibit formal and aesthetic patterning through aspects such as rhythm and repetition, which generate additional meaning. Viewed through this lens, narrative is a kind of action rather than static text: “what there is to be told emerges out of how it is being told” (Blommaert 2015).

Rather than focusing on thematic content, ethnopoetic analysis seeks to uncover the implicit structures through which narrators organize their speech. These include prosodic features (stress, pauses, intonation), syntactic and semantic patterns (parallelism), and lexical devices (particles, discourse markers). Even dictated or transcribed texts retain traces of these poetic structures, argued Hymes, which reveal how speakers mark emphasis, stance, and cultural logic (Quick 1999).

Blommaert (2015) proposed that these patterned elements constitute distinct layers of meaning, by indexing the narrator’s epistemic stance and intended effect. Ethnopoetics therefore provides tools for analyzing how storytellers perform meaning and structure through rhythm, repetition, and balance. In cross-cultural research, this approach allows analysts to trace how local expressive forms, such as the patterned recitations of the Dongba scriptures, generate significance through poetic form as much as through content.

2. Methods

This study performs an ethnopoetic analysis of the *Coqbbertv*, focusing on oral formulas, quotatives, and prosodic patterning to reveal layers of meaning embedded in its performance that extend beyond thematic content. The [corpus](#) for all text-level analysis is based on Poupard’s (2023) annotated English translation, the most recent version of the story which is aligned with contemporary Naxi and Dongba scholarship. His translation draws on a direct transcription of a Dongba elicitation recorded by the Dutch missionary Elise Scharten and contains only minimal elaboration on the base narrative, making it an ideal preservation of the text’s oral components (see §1.5). While this project does not attempt to decipher the original Dongba glyphs in full, it examines line-by-line Lijiang Naxi–English glosses of the text, Dongba radical dictionaries, and Poupard’s translation notes as the foundation for ethnopoetic analysis. Examining these ethnopoetic devices—such as formulaic expressions, prosodic units, and graphically marked emphasis—reveals additional layers of meaning that index Naxi customs, generationally transmitted traditions, and the broader Naxi cosmological worldview.

First, I identified overt patterns in the text in the form of quantitative datasets. By isolating the most frequently occurring sequences, I established an empirical baseline that directly substantiates the theoretical arguments that follow. To do so, I ran a Python script to

detect and count repeated word sequences in the English-translated *Coqbbertv* corpus, including oral formulas (epithets, collocations, recurring phrases, and numerology) and environmental motifs (plants, animals, natural elements). This process yielded a set of consistent formulaic patterns in the story, such as the phrase, “in the time when...”, which structures the narrative’s rhythmic flow and mythic sequencing. After manually filtering out grammatical words and false positives, I separated the results into collocations (frequent co-occurrences) and epithets (descriptive or formulaic titles). For each prominent ethnopoetic device identified, I connected quantitative findings to anthropological linguistic theory by drawing from relevant research (e.g. Dell Hymes).

Besides semantic content, I organized the text into glossed Lijiang Naxi–English passages drawing from Poupard’s (2018) glossed materials, which illustrate the use of consistent prosodic meter throughout oral recitations of the *Coqbbertv*. I used these along with glossed sections of Dongba graphs annotated by Poupard to demonstrate the way in which prosodic patterning interacts with the semi-oral Dongba text. Prosodic units were segmented according to a five-syllable metrical pattern, following Poupard (2018) and Xu (2025), which allowed me to extend this analysis to my own observations.

Finally, I consulted Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1955–1958) in order to identify recurring narrative themes and culturally salient patterns in the translated corpus. Because Dongba myths combine locally rooted Naxi traditions with mythic structures that are attested cross-culturally, motif analysis provides a productive way to situate the *Coqbbertv* within both Naxi narrative practice and broader comparative frameworks. After identifying recurring motifs which emerge from the narrative, I organized them into the following data-driven categories: sacred animals, numerology, landscape, disasters/apocalypse, and marriage customs. I then compared these motifs with those appearing in Lidz’s (2010) corpus of Naxi oral elicitations to distinguish elements shared across Naxi narratives from those which are specific to this creation myth.

Together, these methods allow a multi-layered reading of the *Coqbbertv*. The quantitative identification of recurrent ethnopoetic devices, combined with motif analysis and prosodic structure, reveals the ways in which the narrative encodes ritual memory and cultural worldview. This integrated approach situates the *Coqbbertv* both as a semi-oral text and as a living cultural practice, highlighting its significance within Naxi cosmology and storytelling traditions.

3. Data

Table 1. Clause-by-clause translation of the *Coqbbertv* opening cosmology (Poupard 2018)

oḷ --- əḷ niḷ laḷ şərḷ niḷ o --- e ni la sherḷ ni,	Oh... Long, long ago,
muḷ məḷ t’γḷ tuḷ dzuḷ mee me tv tee rheeḡ,	When the sky had not appeared,
dyḷ məḷ t’γḷ tuḷ dzuḷ	when the earth had not appeared,

ddiuq me tv tee rhee, q,

bił mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
bbi me tv tee rhee, q,

leł mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
leiq me tv tee rhee, q,

kuł mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
gee, q me tv tee rhee, q,

zał mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
ssa, q me tv tee rhee, q,

dzuł mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
jju, q me tv tee rhee, q,

loł mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
lo, q me tv tee rhee, q,

dzuł mǝł t'ył ił loł mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
jju, q me tv yi lo, q me tv tee rhee, q,

sǝł mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
ser me tv tee rhee, q,

lył mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
lv me tv tee rhee, q,

dził mǝł t'ył ił k'ǝł mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
jji, q me tv yi kai me tv tee rhee, q,

dzuł nał zoł loł lał mǝł t'ył tuł dzuł
jju, q nał ssol lo la me tv tee rhee, q,

hǝł ił bał dał dǝł lał mǝł t'ył gǝł tuł dzuł
hai, q yi bba dda, q zzer, q la me tv gge tee rhee, q,

muł luł dał dził huł lał mǝł t'ył suł tuł dzuł
mee leel dda jji, q heel la me tv see tee rhee, q,

tseł tseł hǝł lył meł lał mǝł t'ył suł tuł dzuł
zeil zei hai, q lv mei la me tv see tee rhee, q.

when the sun had not appeared,

when the moon had not appeared,

when the stars had not appeared,

when the comets had not appeared,

when the mountains had not appeared,

when the valleys had not appeared,

when the mountains and valleys had not
appeared,

when the trees had not appeared,

when the stones had not appeared,

when the waters and ditches had not
appeared,

when the sacred mountain had not appeared,

when the sacred tree had not appeared,

when the sacred lake had not appeared,

and when the sacred stone had not appeared.

4. Analysis

4.1 Oral Formulas

The *Coqbbertv* corpus contains a rich set of oral formulas and patterned expressions that guide the narrative structure and illuminate key features of Naxi cosmology and ritual thought. These formulas serve functions beyond stylistic devices; they serve as culturally meaningful cues that frame narrative temporality, signal shifts in ritual register, and organize the story into recognizable formats within the broader Dongba tradition.

The opening line of the *Coqbbertv*, “Oh, in a time not spoken,” is represented by a single Dongba graph depicting a tiger’s head (see Figs. 6 & 7). Rock (1937) notes that this formula marks the beginning of nearly all Naxi texts—“perhaps the tradition’s most famous and easily identifiable oral formula” (Poupard 2018:31). The graph for ‘tiger’ /laɿ/ acts as a metonym, phonetically standing in for the full five-syllable formula /aɿ laɿ məɿ ʂəɿŋ ɲiɿ/. Alongside its similar five- and seven-syllable variants (/aɿ laɿ məɿ ʂəɿŋ ɲiɿ/ and /aɿ laɿ məɿ ʂəɿŋ beɿ tʰuɿ dʒuɿ/ respectively), the phrase translates literally to ‘yesterday and the day before yesterday,’ functioning similarly to ‘in the very beginning’ or ‘once upon a time’ (Poupard 2018:31).



Figure 6. Section of Dongba graphs in the *Coqbbertv* manuscript. A tiger’s head (graph two from the left) signifies the beginning of the *Coqbbertv* creation myth. Note that the graph to the left is a section marker imported from Tibetan manuscript traditions—not read aloud. (Library of Congress).



DONGBA CHARACTER “LA”: TIGER

Figure 7. Dongba graph for ‘tiger’, representing the opening lines of the *Coqbbertv*. The pronunciation /laʔ/ corresponds to the Naxi phrase /aʔ laʔ məʔ ʂəʔ ɲiʔ/. (China National Body 2017).

Such formulaic openings perform a culturally specific narrative function. As noted by Hymes (1981) and Baumann (1975), characteristic openings and closings in traditional narratives serve as cues that guide listeners into the ritual frame of storytelling. The *Coqbbertv*’s tiger-graph formula works in much the same way. Its recurrence across Naxi mythic narratives (examples shown below) signals a shift from ordinary speech into an elevated storytelling register recognized within the Dongba tradition. In performance, this formula functions as a ritual boundary marker. It anchors the performance within a recognized genre of origin myth, signaling to listeners that what follows belongs to a culturally defined narrative frame associated with cosmology and mythic origins.

- (7) aʔ yiʔ ʂəʔ aʔ yiʔ ʂəʔ dzəʔ luʔ-ʂuʔ ɛiʔ-naʔ-miʔ məʔ-tʂəʔ
 long, long ago long, long ago TOP Luoshui lake NEG-become
 ‘Long, long ago, when Lu Gu Lake had not yet formed,’
 (Recited by Geze Dorje, beginning of Narrative 4 – *Gemu*, Lidz 2010:603)

- (8) tʰuʔ aʔ yiʔ ʂəʔ dzəʔ zʰuʔ muʔ kuʔ laʔ duʔ zʰuʔ niʔ tʂiʔ.
 3SG.PRO long, long ago TOP Zhimuku and one family COP REP
 ‘It is said (that) a long time ago, he and Zhimuku were of the same family.’
 (Recited by Geze Dorje, beginning of Narrative 5 – *Tsodeluyizo*, Lidz 2010:643)

The above examples reproduce the same canonical opening formula found in the *Coqbbertv*; however, Geze Dorje employs an alternate phrasing in his narration. This divergence may reflect idiolectal or lineage-based variation among Dongba ritualists, or it may indicate that he is reciting the stories from memory rather than drawing on a written text—a possibility suggested by the absence of the tiger graph metonym /laʔ/, which typically signals the formula’s presence.

The opening lines of the *Coqbbertv* narrative (shown in Table 1) consist of tightly organized “intonation units”—brief verbal segments scaled to be accessible in immediate memory—listing elements of the world that had “not yet” appeared: sky, earth, mountains, valleys, trees, stones, and sacred sites. The rhetorical cataloguing of negated elements to define a pre-temporal state indexes a Naxi worldview of the essential elements for creating cosmic order.

Not only that, the non-sequential flow from one intonation unit to the next reflects a culturally embedded understanding of cosmological origin defined through contrast (i.e., what is “not”).

Other recurring formulas similarly compress culturally significant images into fixed units. For example, /zɪɿ dʒəɿ laɿ ləɿ dyɿ/ (‘the vast green earth’) stands in for ‘the earth’ or ‘the ground,’ while /muɿ tɛəɿ tʰeɿ hoɿ tyɿ/ (‘the eighteenth level of heaven’) stands in for ‘the sky’ (Poupard 2018:31). These five-syllable units evoke cosmological locations familiar to Naxi listeners: the layered heavens in which gods reside, the living earth from which humans and spirits emerge, and the vertical structure linking these domains. Their recurrence reveals the cultural importance of vertical spatial orientation in Naxi mythic thought.

Taken together, the oral formulas in the *Coqbbertv* reveal that the Dongba tradition encodes ritual memory through patterned, repeatable sequences that guide both recitation and cultural understanding. These formulas situate the myth within recognizable Naxi narrative genres, grounding the listener in a shared cosmology and guiding the way the story unfolds. Thus, the ethnopoetic features of the *Coqbbertv* offer insight not only into the semi-oral nature of the text but also into the expressive, ritualized ways Naxi communities conceive of time, space, ancestry, and the sacred.

4.2 Quotatives

The *Coqbbertv* corpus contains a total of seven different quotative verbs—said, replied, asked, cried, told, spoke, and called out—appearing in a highly patterned distribution (see Table 3). Apart from functioning as transparent reporting devices, these verbs also organize the rhythm and progression of the narrative.

First, the high frequency and recurrence of a small quotative inventory punctuate speech events within the narrative. Hymes (1981) argues that oral narratives often “foreground performance” by making the act of speaking structurally prominent. In the *Coqbbertv*, dialogue is not embedded silently within narration; instead, each shift in speaker is explicitly marked (e.g. between the hero Coqssei-leel’ee and the god Dduq).

Second, the alternation among quotative verbs (e.g. said → replied → asked) creates responsive parallelism, which is a distinctive feature of ethnopoetic patterning. The verb choice marks various participation roles, such as initiating, answering, challenging—producing a balanced back-and-forth rhythm between speakers. This alternation serves a primarily poetic function, rather than strictly semantic. Repetitions build momentum, while the shift from one quotative to another signals a structural or emotional turn in the scene.

Third, quotatives in many oral traditions introduce a technique that Lucy (1993:118) labels “speech within speech”, which builds distance between the narrator and the reported events in the story. A similar effect appears in the *Coqbbertv*: by framing major actions through reported speech, the narrator positions the story as inherited knowledge rather than personal assertions, emphasizing the long-standing Dongba oral tradition. This aligns with Naxi ritual norms, in which the Dongba priest is imbued with generational knowledge to perform special

roles such as vocalizing the words of gods, ancestors, and mythic beings in ritual recitation—necessitating reported speech as a key medium to enforce cosmological authority.

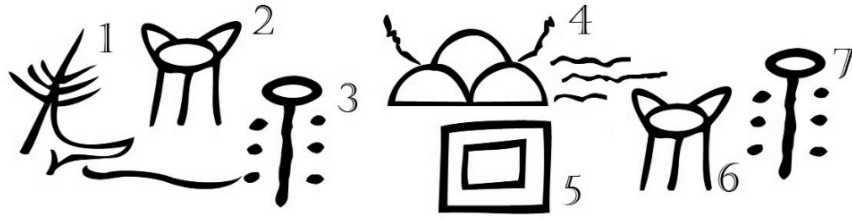
Thus, even with only seven verbs, the quotative system contributes significantly to the Naxi myth’s ethnopoetic structure. It highlights the performative dimension of storytelling by splitting the narrative into discrete units of dialogue, and situates the narrator as a conduit for ancestral speech. In this way, quotative patterning offers insight into the broader features of Naxi society, such as the importance of dialogue in local myths, deference to inherited authority, and the rhythmic aesthetics of Dongba recitation.

4.3 Prosodic Meter

The *Coqbbertv* manuscripts exhibit regular prosodic patterning, which offers critical insight into how Naxi ritual narratives are performed aloud. Narratives are organized into rhythmic “intonation units” such as the formulas described in §4.2: most commonly five syllables long, with units of seven or nine syllables used when required by narrative complexity (Xu 2025; Poupard 2018). Functioning similarly to poetic “feet” in metric verse, where each foot contains a certain number of stressed syllables, rhythmic intonation units serve as the basic building blocks of Dongba recitation (Xu 2025).

To ensure that content fits these metrical templates, Dongba narrators frequently drop or add emphatic syllables to preserve the required rhythmic length (Xu 2025). For instance, the four-syllable name of the creation hero—/tsʰoʌ zeʌ [uʌ ɣuʌ/ (Coqsseileel’ee)—is often pronounced as a five-syllable unit by doubling the final syllable /ɣuʌ/ (‘good’). Poupard (2018:31) notes that this reduplication both completes the metrical frame and functions as a mini-epithet emphasizing the hero’s moral worth (‘Coqseeileel’ee the Good’). This extended form appears 52 times in the *Coqbbertv*, highlighting its role as a rhythmic anchor throughout the narrative. Not only that, it also reveals that Coqsseilee’lee is a central figure in the Naxi myth, with his title an intrinsic part of his identity and role as the protagonist.

These prosodic patterns persist across different narrations and sources—including Scharten’s nearly direct 1930s translation and Poupard’s modern annotated edition—revealing the stability of this tradition. This stability is especially notable given that, without prior knowledge of Dongba oral traditions, there is no way of knowing how many syllables correspond to a single Dongba graph. Despite this opacity, the graphs are organized in such a way that allows for fluid and rhythmic Naxi pronunciation, showing that the text mirrors Dongba oral performance traditions. For example, a sequence of seven Dongba graphs may be read aloud in Naxi as two lines of five syllables each (see Fig. 8).



Graph-by-graph

1. **ser zzeeq jji**, this is a compound graph read with three syllables. *Ser*, meaning “wood” or “tree”, *zzeeq* meaning “grow”, and *jji* meaning “walk”; that is, the trees grew feet and walked.
2. **gv**, literally garlic, here used phonetically to indicate *gv*l, the verb “to be able”.
3. **rheeq**, time. Drops of water, possibly representing the passage of time.
4. **lv ggee**, *lv* meaning “stone”, *ggee* meaning “split”, hence the stones split open.
5. **tal**, literally tower, used phonetically for the verb “to speak”.
6. **gv**l, to be able.
7. **rheeq**, time.

Transcription

ser zzeeq jji / gvl / **rheeq**
 tree grow walk / able / time
lv / ggee / tal / gvl / **rheeq**
 stone / split / speak / able / time

Scharten translation

The trees could walk.
 The stones could open their mouth.

New translation

In the time when the trees grew feet and walked, when the stones split open and spoke.

Figure 8. Graph-by-graph gloss of page 1, sentence 4 (Poupard 2023).

In the above section, seven Dongba graphs are read aloud in Naxi as two lines of five syllables each. The first graph is a compound of three other graphs (see Fig. 9 below), indicating that it should be read as three syllables. Despite this lack of a one-to-one syllabic correspondence, the graphs neatly align with Naxi oral performance, indicating a common history of side-by-side performance between oral and written media.



Figure 9. Dongba graphs corresponding to *ser* ('tree') (left), and *jji* ('walk') (right). The individual graph for *zzeeq* was not found. Combined, they form the compound graph #1 seen in Fig. 7 (China National Body 2017).

The opening lines of the *Coqbbertv* exemplify this regular five-syllable grouping of Naxi narratives, revealing how prosodic structure shapes the interactional dynamics of Dongba performance. Table 1 (shown above in Data) shows that lines 1–9 and 11–12 are grouped into five-syllable units, with additional syllables appearing only where complex nouns require fuller description:

e ni la sherl ni,	(5)
mee me tv tee rhee q,	(5)
ddiuq me tv tee rhee q,	(5)
bbi me tv tee rhee q,	(5)

This consistent use of rhythmic meter is dual-purpose: it creates a rhythmically memorable opening—much like a song or poem whose steady beat aids recollection—and it equally distributes prosodic weight across intonation units, reinforcing the non-linear, non-sequential quality of this portion of the narrative (see §4.1). This prosodic shaping also gives performers room to vary pacing and emphasis, allowing each Dongba to imprint their own interpretive stance onto an otherwise formulaic opening. In this sense, the passage exemplifies the ethnopoetic principle that metrical form functions as a tool of narrative organization, thereby providing Dongba storytellers agency in how cosmological knowledge is presented and passed on.

4.4 Thematic Narrative Elements

Numerology:

The numerals three, five, seven and nine recur throughout the *Coqbbertv* corpus in oral formulas and prosodic patterning, indicating that numeric structures play a meaningful role in the organization of Naxi cosmological discourse. Although Dongba numerology itself has received

little dedicated scholarly attention despite substantial work on other aspects of Naxi cosmology (Hart et al. 2022), the patterns identified here suggest productive directions for future research.

A search for epithets in the text yielded 11 instances of ‘five/nine brothers’ or ‘five/six/seven sisters,’ along with two additional instances of ‘the nine goodly brothers/the seven goodly sisters’ (see Table 6 in Appendix). The epithet ‘six sisters’ did not recur elsewhere in the dataset, indicating a possible anomaly in the original Dongba manuscript that persisted in subsequent recitations. The consistent pairing of these numerals with kinship terms suggests that five, seven and nine may be linked to familial unity or genealogical groupings.

These same numerals—five, seven, and nine—also constitute the syllable counts of prosodic intonation units (see §4.3), revealing their function as rhythmic anchors in Naxi ritual performance. This pattern may reflect broader temporal or cosmological customs, such as agricultural cycles, ritual calendar systems, or musical aesthetics (e.g. five-tone scales, or uneven-beat structures in Naxi dance traditions).

Meanwhile, the numeral three occurs 71 times throughout the text, far more frequently than ‘two’ or ‘pair’ (14 and 16 times, respectively). Its square, nine, appears 46 times. This distribution points to the ritual prominence of the numeral three in Naxi cosmology, perhaps functioning as a canonical measure of balance or ritual completeness.

Sacred Animals:

Sacred or cosmic animal motifs appear frequently throughout the *Coqbbertv* corpus, pointing to which species may have historically functioned as Cultural Keystone Species (CKS) for the Naxi community. In Social–Ecological Systems (SES) research, Garibaldi and Turner (2004) define CKS as “culturally salient species that shape the cultural identity of a people in a major way,” stabilizing local cultural systems including ritual practice, oral tradition, folk festivals, songs, languages, and diet (Qingwen et al. 2022).

The Dongba tradition encodes both mythic and practical knowledge within oral narratives. Therefore, patterns in sacred animal imagery can index how the Naxi conceptualize their environment and social life, revealing which species historically shaped local survival strategies (e.g., agriculture, herding, hunting). This context illustrates that ritual texts are closely tied to lived experience—serving as repositories of cosmological and ecological knowledge systems. The analysis of sacred animal motifs therefore becomes a methodological link between Dongba cosmology and Naxi local practices and knowledge systems, allowing access to historically rooted understandings of the world that structured everyday Naxi society.

This perspective is reinforced by linguistic and ecological considerations. Harrison (2007) notes that an estimated 87% of the world’s plant and animal species remain unidentified by modern scientists, yet many of these species are already deeply integrated into the knowledge systems of local experts (Ahearn 2016). Language functions as a survival tool in these communities, transmitting shared cultural knowledge on species recognition, behavioral ecology, and seasonal indicators. From this point of view, the sacred animal imagery preserved in Naxi texts may record ecological knowledge that exists nowhere else. The Dongba oral tradition is

therefore a critical site for understanding how Naxi cosmology and environmental perception converge in Naxi cultural practices.

Based on Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, the *Coqbbertv* narrative contains the following animal-related motifs:

Cosmic Animals and Birds

- **B10–B199 Animals in cosmogony:** e.g., the cosmic bird/chicken lays world eggs (B11, B14).
- **B300–B399 Animal transformations/creations:** beings produced from eggs; animals foundational to creation.

Animals as Cosmic Markers/Timekeepers

- **B22.1 Cock as cosmological timekeeper:** rooster associated with sunrise/day-night distinction.
- **B210 Animals/insects tied to seasons and fertility:** wagtail, crow, butterfly, ant.

The above motifs reveal a pattern of sacred or cosmological associations with animals in the Naxi creation myth—particularly featuring the chicken as a recurring motif. Examples include the cosmic chicken laying eggs (B11, B14) to produce the first generations of divine beings, and the use of a rooster to track the time (B22.1). An epithet search identified seven instances of ‘a chicken/the chicken,’ six instances of ‘black/white/golden chicken,’ and ten instances of ‘the egg/that egg/last egg/black egg/white egg,’ indicating a high frequency of occurrence relative to other animals in the narrative (see Table 6). Comparing these results to a corpus of Naxi narratives in Lidz (2010), it is evident that the chicken motif recurs in many Naxi oral stories:

Selected Passage from Narrative 4 – *Gemu*

Narrative and translation by Geze Dorje

“When the rooster was just about to crow *Gemu* woke up and saw that this man and all of his things were gone.” (Lidz 2010:616)

Selected Passages from Narrative 5 – *Tsodeluyizo*

Narrative by Awu Daba; translation by Geze Dorje

“*Zhimuku* said, ‘I want for myself wherever has the best landscape, mountains and such, wherever has the best landscape.’ She said she wanted for herself everything with wings. It is said that it was like this. Things with wings, our birds and crows in the mountains, and beautiful things and such... Given to us mortals, of things with wings, only chickens were given; of things that can fly, only chickens were given to us.” (Lidz 2010:634)

“There was a black bear and such; it entered into the forest, the very dense forest. [Sentences in the Daba register.] It became a reptile, and went to live in a pond. So there was nothing to be done. There weren’t any chickens and such. There weren’t any roosters’ crows. There was a type of bird that says, ‘cheeper cheeper cheeper cheeper.’ There weren’t any dogs. High in the forest, there was a type of bird, a type that says, ‘gwuh gwuh gwuh.’” (Lidz 2010:636)

The use of a rooster to track the time (B22.1) appears again in Narrative 4, a myth about a beautiful girl who transforms into a cliff. The chicken motif appears in Narrative 5, a variant of the Coqssei-leel’ee heroic myth, as a hallmark feature of the mountain and forest landscapes. Along with Stith Thompson’s motifs identified above, these findings reveal that the chicken may function as a Cultural Keystone Species (CKS) for the Naxi community, such as being used in rituals, sacrifices, or for certain Dongba customs.

Landscape & Natural Disasters:

Table 7 identified many features of environmental features and natural elements, such as various species of tree, topological landscape features (e.g. mountains, ridges, valleys), and bodies of water (rivers and seas). An epithet search identified 25 instances of ‘the earth,’ 13 instances of ‘the mountain’ and nine instances of ‘sacred mountain.’ Comparing the occurrence of these features to other Naxi narratives, the terms ‘mountain’ or ‘cliff’ appear six times in Narrative 4, serving as the primary setting for the story. Narrative 3 and Narrative 4 both allude to Lugu Lake of present-day Lijiang, revealing the Naxi oral tradition’s direct tie to the surrounding landscape:

Selected Passage from Narrative 3 – *The Lake*

Narrative and translation by Geze Dorje

“Long, long ago, when Lu Gu Hu had not yet formed, underneath where the lake now is it is said that everything was a field of grass, earth. Long ago on this land many Na lived.” (Lidz 2010:601)

Selected Passage from Narrative 4 – *Gemu*

Narrative and translation by Geze Dorje

“He took a string of pearls from around his neck and threw it in front of Gemu. When it fell, it fell into the hoofprint. That string of pearls thrown into the hoofprint became the island in present-day Lugu Hu.”

These allusions to landscape features also manifest in the form of natural disaster and flood motifs, such as in the following passages:

Selected Passage from Narrative 3 – *The Lake*

Narrative and translation by Geze Dorje

“However, from behind the fish, flood water came bursting out. So, very quickly, the oxen, people, everything was submerged by the flood water ... There was no place to escape to, so she quickly grabbed the two children and put them in the pig trough. So these two children in the pig trough escaped to the shores of Luoshui. So these two children in the pig trough escaped to the shores of Luoshui. So, afterwards, all the people drowned. Only these two children survived.” (Lidz 2010:602)

Selected Passage from Narrative 5 – *Tsodeluyizo*

Narrative by Awu Daba; translation by Geze Dorje

“So, the floodwaters came, tə tə tə. The floodwaters fell everywhere, tə tə tə. On the mountains, wood from the trees flew by. The floodwaters didn’t retreat, so there was nowhere to go. When the time came, the water retreated. One didn’t see a trace of humankind anywhere.” (Lidz 2010:635)

Consulting Stith Thompson’s Motif-Index, the flood motif (A1010–A1099) and survival in a container during deluge (A1028) appear both here and in the *Coqbbertv* flood myth:

“After returning home, they killed a yellow pig, and made a leather pouch out of its skin [inflating it with air]. They tied the sack with a thick awl and thin thread. Inside, they placed golden animals: a small goat, a small dog and a chicken, as well as nine kinds of grain. Then they used five straw ropes, tying two to a cypress, two to a pine tree, and one in between heaven and earth. After three days and nights, the great mountains on high cracked with a thunderous snap and the great valleys below split with a cacophonous roar. Lightning from heaven struck the white pine, and Leel’ee-kojiq, in the ninth layer of clouds, was struck to who knows where. Water rushed from the ground and swept away the red chestnut, and Leel’ee-kogv, in the seventh layer of the earth, was swept to who knows where.” (Poupard 2023)

These recurring themes of catastrophes in relation to the environment reveal the intimate knowledge of the Lijiang regions passed down through Naxi oral narratives, providing evidence for Naxi society’s historical adaptation to flooding and climate instability.

Genealogy & Marriage Customs:

The *Coqbbertv* contains an extended marriage quest episode centered on the ancestral hero Coqssei-leel’ee, containing key themes of Naxi ritual customs and genealogy. Using Thompson’s Motif-Index, the episode reflects motifs related to marriage prohibition, paternal authority in matchmaking, and the establishment of heroic eligibility (T71.1, T11.1, & H310–

H399). Through the use of these motifs, Naxi ritual specialists articulate social norms and ancestral identity. A key passage reads as follows:

Zzee'laq-epv did not recognise Coqssei-leel'ee, as he was not of the clan. Zzee'laq-epv said, "I will not give you my daughter, whom you desire. Coqssei-leel'ee, what kind of man are you?" Coqssei-leel'ee said, "I am the descendant of the nine goodly brothers who opened up the heavens and the seven goodly sisters who opened out the earth." "I am of the people who were praised for crossing the ninety-nine mountains, and the seventy-seven lands." "I am of the people that can drink the Yangtze and still not feel full; who can keep the whole sacred mountain in their bosom and not feel tired, who can swallow three bones and not get them stuck in our throats, who can swallow three tonnes of tsamba and not choke." "I am of the people that cannot be killed, and cannot be struck down." "I am the descendant of the white lion and the golden elephant, and of Jjeqga-naqbbv." (Poupard 2023)

The passage begins with Zzee'laq-epv's refusal to grant his daughter's hand in marriage, on the grounds that Coqssei-leel'ee is "not of the clan." Although the phrasing is embedded in mythic discourse, it reflects a recognizable principle of Naxi social organization: marriages require patrilineal alignment, and cross-clan proposals may be deemed improper or illegitimate. This refusal initiates a ritualized exchange that illustrates the dynamic customary for Naxi marriage negotiations, in which the bride's father holds decisive authority and the prospective groom must prove his worth. The father's challenge, "What kind of man are you?" reflects a local cultural frame in which male suitors must confess their own genealogical position and social responsibility before marriage can proceed.

Coqssei-leel'ee responds by enumerating his lineage and heroic capacity, aligning with Thompson's motif of boast-based qualification (N825). His recitation begins with a divine ancestry: he claims descent from "the nine goodly brothers who opened up the heavens and the seven goodly sisters who opened out the earth." This line establishes his divine background as emerging from the labor of cosmogenic actors. He then situates the Naxi people in a history of epic migration—those "praised for crossing the ninety-nine mountains and the seventy-seven lands"—an origin structure corresponding to A1200–A1399 ("origin of peoples; migrations"). In doing so, the ancestral hero invokes a spatial connection to the surrounding geography, qualifying himself through endurance, movement, and ancestral accomplishment.

The hero's speech further grounds Naxi identity in recognizable landscapes, including the Jinsha River (a tributary of the upper Yangtze river) and the sacred mountain, referring to Mount Yulong. These geographic markers place the mythic lineage within an explicitly local frame, reinforcing the inseparability of land from ancestry. Coqssei-leel'ee also traces descent from three divine beings—the white lion, the golden elephant, and Jjeqga-naqbbv—who serve as guardians of the sacred mountain. Together, these layers of ancestry link the hero, and by extension, the Naxi people, to protective cosmological forces inseparable from the local biosphere and topography.

The boast closes with a list of hyperbolic abilities: the ancestors could “drink the Yangtze and still not feel full,” “hold the whole sacred mountain in their bosom,” and “swallow three tonnes of tsamba and not choke.” These claims articulate a shared spirit of self-reliance, bodily endurance, and strength—qualities central to Naxi constructions of heroic and ancestral identity. Within the broader context of Naxi ritual recitation, they present Coqssei-leel’ee as the embodiment of a collective Naxi ancestral identity, whose legitimacy is grounded in cosmological origin, local geography, and moral character.

Poupard (2023) also notes a structural alternation between male and female imagery within this sequence—stomach (male) → bosom (female) → throat (male)—though the exact wording of this passage varies across recitations. This alternating pattern may reflect a gendered distribution of capabilities, which maps desirable traits onto both masculine and feminine domains. It also illustrates the way the speech interweaves bodily imagery with cosmological symbolism, using the gendered body as a vehicle for expressing the range of abilities attributed to Naxi ancestral figures.

As a whole, the marriage-quest episode provides one of the *Coqbbertv*’s clearest articulations of Naxi self-definition. In the contemporary context of the PRC—where state narratives often emphasize a unified national identity at the expense of minority cultural histories—stable oral traditions such as these function as potent, alternative genealogical archives. Through passing down these stories, Naxi ritual specialists continually assert an enduring and locally centered mode of identity formation that resists absorption into broader homogenizing structures. Oral narrative as a medium of articulating one’s identity demonstrates the value in preserving and studying stories such as this one, and even more so, to treat texts such as the *Coqbbertv* manuscript as a vital living tradition that continues to inform us about Naxi values and customs.

5. Conclusion

This study argues that the semi-oral nature of the Dongba script necessitates a critical sociological and ethnopoetic approach, as meaning emerges through patterned performance rather than inscription alone. By combining pictographic graphs with interpretive recitation, the Dongba script challenges conventional distinctions between writing and speech and requires analysis across multiple layers: textual form, oral structure, and ritual authority. Within this framework, *Coqbbertv* emerges as an especially productive object of study. The mythic narrative preserves traces of long-standing ritual conventions while simultaneously allowing room for interpretive variation in each individual performance. As a result, the manuscript offers a rare window into how Naxi ritual knowledge is stabilized through formal patterning yet continually adapted through performance, revealing the mechanisms by which cosmological knowledge, social values, and local history are transmitted across generations.

Approaching the *Coqbbertv* as a living tradition rather than a fixed artifact, an ethnopoetic analysis uncovers the cultural knowledge embedded within the narrative’s poetic

structure. Patterned oral formulas anchor the text within recognizable Naxi narrative genres and connect performers and listeners to a shared cosmology. These recurrent units reveal local ritualized conceptions of space, time, and ancestry, while quotative frames signal the transition into mythic time and mark the story's entry into a ritual-discursive space. The steady five-syllable rhythm that persists throughout the text aids recollection and reinforces the non-linear structure characteristic of Naxi ritual narratives, while leaving room for each Dongba specialist to imprint their own interpretive stance on these inherited formulas. Together, these formal and prosodic structures provide the framework through which shared cultural themes and social knowledge are articulated.

The manuscript's thematic imagery further grounds the narrative in culturally salient elements of Naxi life. Recurrent numerological patterns express local ideas of completeness and canonical temporal cycles, demonstrating that oral conventions persist as structural markers in the written record. Cross-culturally attested mythic motifs—such as primordial birds and cosmic eggs—suggest cultural keystone species which are essential to Naxi daily life and cosmology, while regionally specific tropes like floods and landscape-transforming disasters root the story in the ecological features of Lijiang. In the marriage-quest episode of the hero Coqssei-leel'ee, the narrative articulates key social norms surrounding clan exogamy and patriarchal approval, while also incorporating an account of Naxi origins, migration, and the valorized traits that constitute Naxi identity within local understandings of kinship and ancestry.

These layered meanings take on heightened significance in the contemporary context of the PRC, where state-centered narratives increasingly seek to standardize or subsume minority traditions. The *Coqbbertv* demonstrates that Naxi ritual knowledge persists within the semi-oral space of interpretations and adaptive practices surrounding the Dongba script. As Naxi communities continue to perform and reinterpret this creation myth, they sustain a rich and locally grounded historical consciousness—one that reaffirms identity, transmits ritual expertise, and keeps the tradition vibrantly alive.

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7. Appendix

Table 2. Order of events by appearance in the *Cogbbertv*

Narrative #1: Cosmic Creation

1. **Pre-creation (pp. 1–2):** a time before heaven and earth were formed.
2. **Genesis of the Gods (pp. 2–3):** the gods emerge from divine eggs, as well as the people and animals.
3. **Separation of the Cosmos (pp. 4–5):** the gods open up the sky and the earth and support the sacred mountain with celestial pillars.
4. **Birth & Sacrifice of a Strange Creature (pp. 6–7):** the hybrid creature Reqzzee-bbubbv is born, Dduq chops off its head and its body is distributed across the cosmos.
5. **Protection of the Sacred Mountain (pp. 7–8):** The people build up and protect the sacred mountain Jjiuqnal-sheello.
6. **Sacred Animals Emerge (pp. 8):** wagtail, crow, butterfly, ant.

Narrative #2: Divine Incest & Flood Myths

7. **Divine Incest (pp. 9–10):** the five Leel’ee brothers commit adultery with the six Julmiq sisters, upsetting the balance of the universe.
8. **Flood Myth & Survival in Oxhide Bags (pp. 11–13):** Dduq orders the two wicked brothers to fill oxhide bags with animals, then a great flood destroys all life except Coqssei-leel’ee.
9. **Plan to Propagate Mankind (pp. 13–14):** Dduq builds wooden puppets to propagate mankind, but fails and the puppets become demons.

Narrative #3: Hero’s Quest for a Divine Bride

10. **Marriage Quests, Farming & Hunting (pp. 15–24):** Coqssei-leel’ee marries a celestial woman who cannot give birth to humans and Dduq punishes him. Between heaven and earth, Coqssei-leel’ee meets his celestial bride Ceilheeq-bbvbbeq, but her father Zzee’laq-epv demands that he prove his abilities in farming, hunting, and fishing.

11. **Dowry & Cosmic Journey (pp. 24–27):** Zzee’laq-epv is finally persuaded to allow Coqssei-leel’ee to marry his daughter, offering an extravagant dowry. The celestial couple undergo a strenuous journey to reach the earth.
12. **Settlement & Purification Ritual (pp. 28–30):** The couple erect a tent and light a fire, then enlist the legendary Dongba Chelshul-jiqbber to perform an elaborate sacrifice and purification ritual.
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Table 3. Quotatives

Type	Pattern	Count
Quotative	said	26
Quotative	asked	7
Quotative	replied	7
Quotative	told	5
Quotative	spoke	4
Quotative	cried	2
Quotative	called out	1

Table 4. Recurring Oral Formulas

Pattern	Count
became unclean/made to be unclean	19
then came	10
it did not/it could not	10
heaven and earth	9
from the first/second pair/next pair	9
in the time when	8
when the stones/mountains/heavens/trees	7
three good shadows of them both	5
to the north/east/south/west	5
during the three months of	4

named itself	3
supported with a column of	3
but it didn't hatch	3
was born	2
nobody gave it a name/nobody to give it a name	2

Table 5. Collocations

Type	Target	Collocate	Count
Collocation	Saiq	Paiq	3
Collocation	Gga	Wuq	3
Collocation	Wuq	Gga	3
Collocation	Paiq	Saiq	3

Table 6. Epithets

Type	Epithet	Count
Epithet	the earth	25
Epithet	the mountain	13
Epithet	golden elephant/dog/goat/animals	11
Epithet	five/nine brothers; five/six/seven sisters	11
Epithet	the egg/that egg/last egg/black egg/white egg	10
Epithet	sacred mountain	9
Epithet	a chicken/the chicken	7
Epithet	the god/the goddess/their god	7
Epithet	black/white/golden chicken	6
Epithet	grandfather Dduq	5

Epithet	the brothers/the Lee'ee brothers	5
Epithet	the stone/this stone/green stone/victory stone/big stone	5
Epithet	the vast earth/vast green earth/vast wide earth	5
Epithet	high mountains/high cliffs	4
Epithet	grandfather deity Dduq	3
Epithet	the gods Paiq and Saiq	3
Epithet	great god/life god	3
Epithet	the light/bright light/white light	3
Epithet	the two wicked brothers/the nine goodly brothers/the seven goodly sisters	3
Epithet	golden walking stick/golden fire	2
Epithet	the goddess Seiq	2
Epithet	the gods Gga and Wuq	2
Epithet	(Dduq, Paiq, Saiq) of heaven and earth	2

Table 7. Environmental Motifs

Plants	Animals	Natural Elements
Trees (general)	White/black/golden chicken	Cracks in rocks
Green grass	Rooster	Mist / black mist / fog
Pine (green, white, cypress, fir)	Hen	White light, black shadow
Chestnut, red chestnut	Goose	Snow
Wormwood	Birds (general)	Rain

Rock formations with vegetation	Crow	Winds (white, black, north, spring)
Cypress trees	Wagtail	Sea / ocean
Poplars	Butterfly (white butterfly)	Waves
Melons	Black ant	Rocks, stones, black stones
White fir	Pigeon, dove, turtledove	Mountains, ridges, valleys
White pines	Wild boar	Rivers
Green cypress	Tiger (yellow-spotted tiger, tigress, cub)	Stars, constellations, sun, moon, planets, sky
Wheat (stalks, racks, fields)	Lion (white, yellow)	White dew
Grain seeds (nine kinds, ten kinds, rice vines, tsampa)	Leopard	Clouds (white clouds)
Dew	Elephant (yellow, golden, white)	Fire (cypress fires, burning forests)
	Ox / yak (plowing oxen, white-hoofed ox, wild oxen, yak)	Soil (black soil, crusty soil)
	Horses	Lightning (thunder, lightning)
	Sheep / goat (white sheep, golden goat)	
	Goat	
	Dog (yellow dog, white dog, guard dog)	
	Frog	
	Snake	
	Bear	
	Monkey	
	Otter	
	Insects	

Note: data in this table was extracted using ChatGPT-5.