

The Poetics of Sound and Ritual: Music, Performance, and Cultural Memory in Yi Creation Myths

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Abstract: Yi creation myths in China do not exist solely as written texts or oral narratives. Their production, transmission, and reception have long depended on the combined agency of chant, rhythm, musical instruments, bodily movement, and ritual space. Representative Yi creation epics, including *Meige*, *Cham*, *Axi de Xianji*, *Le'e Te'yi*, and *Song of Heaven, Earth, and the Ancestors*, demonstrate that music both organizes narrative structure and brings myth into social practices that can be heard, witnessed, and collectively enacted. Taking the question of how sound makes myth a living tradition as its point of departure, this article examines the narrative functions of mythical music, the cultural representations of traditional instruments, the relation between sound and the body in ritual, and the role of music in sustaining cultural memory. It argues that the poetics of Yi creation myths cannot be understood through textual analysis alone. Repetition, rhythm, melody, singing, and ritual action jointly constitute the production of meaning. Music thereby mediates among mythical narrative, communal experience, and intergenerational transmission, allowing creation narratives to acquire renewed social significance through repeated performance.

Keywords: Yi Creation Myths; Oral Epic; Musical Narrative; Ritual Performance; Cultural Memory

1. Introduction

Oral traditions have played an indispensable role throughout the development of human civilization. During the long preliterate era, they served as the principal medium for transmitting social knowledge. Even after the emergence of writing, oral traditions continued to carry cultural memory, sustain emotional identification, and transmit inherited practices. They are therefore more than instruments of everyday communication. They have shaped cultural history and, in some respects, continue to orient the future of civilization. The concept may be understood in both broad and narrow senses. Broadly conceived, oral tradition encompasses every form of spoken communication. In the narrower sense, it refers to modes of communication and oral art associated with traditional societies. From a folkloristic perspective, it denotes cultural forms preserved through sustained transmission by word of mouth, including epics, narrative poems, songs, sung narratives, myths, and legends. One defining feature of Yi oral poetics in China is its pronounced musicality. Mythic texts are commonly carried by melody and transmitted through singing. Existing scholarship, however, has largely approached Yi creation myths through history, ethnology, philosophy, or mythology. Its preference for textual analysis has often obscured the performative, musical, and living dimensions of these myths as integrated forms of oral art.

The author has conducted fieldwork in Yi communities in Yunnan, Guizhou, and the Liangshan region of Sichuan, with particular attention to oral melodies and ancient songs performed by local bimo ritual specialists and community tradition bearers. Representative Yi creation myths from Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou have been extensively collected, edited, and published, and scholarship on their textual forms is now substantial. By comparison, the melodies, vocal styles, and specific musical structures used in epic performance have not received equally systematic attention. Large field collections, musical transcription, cross notational translation, and comparative analysis of musical form remain especially limited. This imbalance has allowed text centered scholarship to conceal part of the fuller existence of creation myth as a tradition of sound and performance. Bamo Qubumo's theory of the five forms of presence stresses that any study of Yi epic that severs performance from its ritual arena is fundamentally incomplete.^[1] In his 2002 reinterpretation of *Meige*, the American scholar Mark Bender likewise emphasized the dynamic character of the text and its symbiotic relation to ritual context, while criticizing static textual models for obscuring living transmission.^[2]

On this basis, the author extended the field investigation from collected texts to actual occasions of mythic performance. These occasions made it possible to observe how poetic chant, mythical narration, music, dance, and ritual action operate together. Within a ritual setting, sound does not function in isolation. Melody, rhythm, bodily movement, and the emotional responses of participants jointly generate mythical meaning. These observations show that ritual space is not merely the location in which the music of Yi creation myths is presented. It is also a crucial condition through which sound, bodies, and community are brought into relation. Attending to that relation is essential for understanding both the musical form of Yi creation myths and their transmission as living traditions. It also provides the field based foundation for the present examination of myth through sonic and performative practice.

2. From Text to Sound

The Yi are one of the major ethnic groups of southwestern China. Yi histories trace their beginnings to the “Age of Aipu.”^[3] After the historical “branching of the Six Ancestors,” an epic event that marks the transformation and reconstitution of Yi civilization as the ancestors dispersed from the core region of Zhaotong in Yunnan across the Yunnan Guizhou Plateau, the Yi population developed pronounced regional concentrations. Drawing on Fang Guoyu’s *Draft History of the Yi*, the principal areas of Yi settlement include the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, the Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan, and the cities of Bijie and Liupanshui in Guizhou. Liangshan, the largest Yi population center in China, occupies a distinctive position in the transmission and development of Yi culture. Yi creation myths form an important part of the mythological traditions of China’s ethnic minorities. The Yunnan epics *Meige*, *Cham*, and *Axi de Xianji*, the Sichuan epic *Le’e Te’yi*, and Guizhou’s *Song of Heaven, Earth, and the Ancestors* differ in region, subgroup, and performance tradition. Yet all engage motifs of cosmic formation, human origins, flood and regeneration, ancestral genealogy, migration, and social order. To treat them only as edited and stabilized literary texts is to neglect the sonic environments in which they originally existed. Yi poetry has a distinctive oral tradition in which song acts as its medium. Poetic texts and musical forms remain closely interwoven, producing a cultural logic in which no poem is complete without song. Music must therefore stand at the center of any account of the artistic character of Yi creation myths. In a meaningful sense, these myths are sung into being, and each epic is performed through locally specific melodies. *Meige*, for example, names both an epic and the “Meige tune” used locally to sing history. Official records of China’s national intangible cultural heritage likewise emphasize its long preservation through oral transmission.^{[4][5]} Text is thus only one form in which a creation epic may be preserved. Singing and performance remain the primary means by which it repeatedly enters communal life.

The study of Yi creation myths must consequently move beyond the question of what a myth says to ask how it is told, heard, and remembered. In oral tradition, language never appears as an isolated semantic unit. The recurrence of sentence patterns, the arrangement of syllables, fluctuations of tone, and cycles of melody jointly determine the pace of narration. They also shape the audience’s perception of plot, character, and sacred order. Music performs a structural function. Fixed or relatively stable tunes provide a repeatable sonic frame for extended performance. Rhythm enables performers to organize narrative passages, while repetition continually returns crucial motifs to the listener’s auditory experience. Creation narrative thus acquires a temporality distinct from that of silent reading. It must be experienced while sound unfolds. Music does not passively contain an already completed mythical content. It directly participates in the production of meaning. The same words can generate different emotional effects when rendered at different speeds, registers, volumes, or performance occasions. A performer’s pauses, sustained tones, and repetitions can likewise alter the audience’s perception of narrative emphasis. Poetry and music in Yi creation myths therefore exist in a relation of mutual generation. Verse supplies a semantic framework for narration, while sound gives it time, emotion, and situated presence. Myth is thereby transformed from a statement about an ancient world into an experience that the community can inhabit anew.

This perspective also explains the powerful living quality of creation epics. A living tradition is not one whose textual content never changes. It is one that can be realized again in each particular performance. Singers adjust length, tone, and rhythm within a relatively stable narrative framework according to occasion and audience. Listeners enter the narrative by hearing, responding, dancing, or participating in ritual. The continuity of creation myth therefore depends on reproduction through repetition. Core motifs and expressive formulae remain recognizable, while each performance permits measured variation. Music joins stability to change, enabling mythical epic both to preserve tradition and to adapt to new conditions of performance.

3. Musical Narrative and Traditional Instruments

The musicality of Yi creation myths first emerges in their organization of narrative. *Meige* is sung to the “Meige tune,” and publicly available documentation indicates that different tunes correspond to different contents and emotional registers.^[6] Melody is therefore not an ornament attached to a story. It is a resource through which performers identify narrative types and regulate affective tone. Extended oral epics demand sustained memory and composition in performance. Their stable transmission cannot be explained by verbatim memorization alone. Relatively fixed rhythms, sentence patterns, and melodic formulae provide mnemonic supports that allow performers to organize material around familiar structures.^[7] In *The Singer of Tales*, Albert Bates Lord argues, “Without singing and music, a transcribed text alone cannot disclose the full dimensions of epic performance.”^[8] His observation identifies a central problem in the study of Yi creation myths. Written records preserve a great deal of narrative content, but they compress pitch, tempo, pause, repetition, response, and interaction at the performance site. Research confined to plot, character, and motif can therefore reach only one part of the epic’s artistic form. Music transforms myth from a static text into a temporal process. Bodily performance gives sound a spatial form, while ritual gives performance its social force.

Music also shapes the perceptual structure of narrative. Yi creation myths frequently address large themes such as chaos, the making of heaven and earth, flood, and migration. In writing, these subjects unfold chiefly through imagery and represented action. In performance, they also acquire sensory correspondences through tempo, intensity, timbre, and rhythm. Rapid rhythms can produce a sense of action. Low and extended vocal lines can intensify solemnity or mourning. Recurrent beats can draw individual listeners into a shared temporal order. By coordinating sonic parameters with narrative context, music heightens the perceptibility of mythical scenes and marks narrative transitions for the ear. Yi instruments should likewise be understood within this integrated field, not described separately as isolated objects. The mouth harp, hulusheng, and moon lute are used in daily entertainment, festivals, song and dance, and ritual across different Yi regions. Their forms, names, and functions vary by locality and subgroup.^[9] The hulusheng deserves particular attention. Bronze components associated with ancient sheng instruments were excavated at the Wanjiaba cemetery in Chuxiong, Yunnan, providing important archaeological evidence for the early presence of reed pipe instruments in the region.^[10] Later examples of this instrument type often used a gourd as a resonator. In Yi culture, the gourd carries an extensive symbolism of life. Yi flood myths commonly present it as a vessel that preserves life, shelters ancestors, and makes regeneration after catastrophe possible. When the gourd is transformed from a container of life in mythical narrative into the resonating body of an instrument, its material form becomes available for renewed association with established cultural meanings. Later interpretations of the hulusheng can thus connect it with life, reproduction, and the continuity of the community.

The meanings of the Yi moon lute and mouth harp likewise arise from situated use. When the moon lute accompanies song and dance, its steady plucked rhythm can organize collective movement and reinforce a shared pulse during festive or social occasions. The mouth harp has a softer volume and distinctive timbre, qualities better suited to intimate expression and close communication. Different instruments establish different acoustic conditions. They also produce different bodily postures and distances of social interaction. The value of traditional instruments for the study of Yi creation myths can be understood at three interconnected levels. First, they produce particular timbres that give myth a sonic texture distinct from language alone. Second, they organize rhythm so that singing, dance, and ritual action can be coordinated. Third, long histories of use accumulate cultural associations, making instruments perceptible signs of local experience and ethnic identification. Symbolic meaning does not adhere naturally to an object. It forms gradually through repeated relations among myth, ritual, and social practice.

4. Sound and the Body in Ritual

Once creation myth enters ritual, its mode of meaning production changes further. Ritual establishes a special order of time, space, and social roles. Performers, participants, and observers are no longer simply authors and readers in a literary sense. The chanting of the bimo, the ritual specialists of Yi religion who also maintain and transmit Yi culture, combines with instrumental sound, collective dance, and sacrificial procedure to govern how participants perceive and respond to myth.^[7] Music matters here because it turns an abstract sacred order into an order that bodies can perceive. Sound can signal when to begin, shift, or pause, and which actions must be completed in synchrony.

From the perspective of performance, ritual music accomplishes at least two tasks. First, it creates an

auditory boundary that distinguishes ritual from everyday life. Sustained chant, particular timbres, and recurrent rhythms inform participants that they have entered a period governed by special rules. Sound therefore participates in the partitioning of space. Even when ritual takes place in a familiar setting, musical change can invest that setting with temporary sacred qualities. Second, ritual music coordinates collective steps, measured beats, responses, and changes in formation. Individual action submits to a shared pulse, producing an experience of synchrony. Community is not merely narrated by the content of myth. Nor is the body a passive recipient of sound. Singing demands breath, vocal production, and posture. Dance requires steps, turns, and cooperation, while instrumental performance calls for particular hand movements and bodily techniques. Long participation turns these movements into habitual knowledge, much of which cannot be conveyed fully in writing. To know what an epic says is not yet to know how to perform it at the right tempo and on the proper occasion. The transmission of creation myth includes both declarative and embodied knowledge. Embodied knowledge is acquired through imitation and shared practice, which is one reason that oral tradition remains dependent on situated performance.

Many Yi festivals and rituals integrate song, music, and dance. Collective stepping, circular formations, and responsorial singing carry narrative from the linguistic into the bodily register. Participants learn rhythm through repeated movement. Bodily memory also teaches them when to enter, withdraw, and respond. Myth thereby acquires an “operable form,” whose order is repeated through action rather than understood only in concepts.^[11] This quality allows Yi poetry, music, and dance to enter into dialogue with ethnomusicological approaches to music as social practice. Anthony Seeger’s *Why Suyá Sing* offers a useful comparison. Suyá shamans use particular melodies to communicate with spiritual beings and employ song in healing illness or mediating social relations.^[12] Music is not only a mode of sonic expression for them. It is also a way of living through which identity is affirmed, relations with the natural world are sustained, and cultural continuity is maintained amid change. The comparison does not claim that the Yi and the Suyá hold identical musical concepts. It shows that in many societies where oral and ritual practices are culturally central, music can carry aesthetic, social, and religious dimensions at once. The ritual singing of Yi creation myths possesses a comparable complexity. It narrates stories of ancestors and the world while using sound to establish who is authorized to perform, who participates in ritual, and how the community relates to ancestors and tradition. Music thus converts mythical knowledge into social relations. The authority of myth derives not only from ancient content but also from the solemn act of speaking, singing, and witnessing it together in ritual.

Ritual is therefore not an external stage for creation myth. It is one mechanism through which myth continually acquires social efficacy. Accounts of cosmic creation, ancestral origins, and migration are reorganized through sound and the body. In a shared rhythm, participants connect distant mythical time with present life. The “truth” of myth resides here primarily in its practical efficacy as culture. Myth explains where a community comes from, defines relations among human beings, ancestors, nature, and others, and periodically confirms those relations through ritual performance.

5. Sound, Memory, and Intergenerational Transmission

The relation between music and cultural memory is central to understanding the long continuity of Yi creation myths. The Yi possess a long written tradition. Historical records of Yi writing reach back to the Han and Tang periods, and the large corpus of surviving Yi manuscripts demonstrates that writing has long preserved religious, historical, and intellectual knowledge.^[3] In many local epic traditions, especially those not transmitted primarily through written copies, oral singing has long remained an important and sometimes principal means of transmission. Written and oral traditions coexist, assuming different functions in different social settings.

The Yunnan tradition of *Meige* illustrates this distinction particularly clearly. Publicly available intangible cultural heritage materials indicate that *Meige* was transmitted orally over a long period before it was collected, edited, and published.^{[4][5]} The description “without written record” refers to the traditional mode of transmission of this particular oral epic, not to the absence of a broader Yi writing system. From the perspective of cultural memory, oral transmission does more than compensate for limited writing. Sound possesses its own capacity to organize memory. Rhyme, parallelism, repetition, fixed phrases, and melodic patterns reduce the mnemonic burden of lengthy works. More importantly, singing situates memory within human interaction, so that the transfer of knowledge is accompanied by affective, ethical, and identitarian education.

Sound also carries a contextual index that writing cannot fully replace. People often remember not an isolated set of lyrics but the association of a melody with a festival, funeral rite, gathering, or particular

performer. When a similar tune is heard again, earlier experiences of participation may also be recalled. Music therefore preserves more than mythical information. It preserves ways in which a community has experienced that information together. In this sense, sound embeds individual memory within collective memory. A person's recollection of one performance overlaps with the experiences of others through a shared tune, occasion, and narrative. Cultural memory thereby acquires a sensory point of entry that can be repeatedly activated.

This mode of memory can be divided into memory of content and memory of practice. The first preserves narrative knowledge concerning cosmic origins, ancestral genealogies, migration, marriage, and productive life. The second preserves behavioral norms concerning how, when, and by whom an epic is sung, as well as how an audience should respond. The two are interdependent. Stories without modes of performance can readily become ordinary written literature. Melodies without communally recognized narratives cannot easily bear memories of origin. The cultural continuity of creation myth depends precisely on the simultaneous transmission of content and practice. During repeated field investigations in Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou, the author recorded nearly one hundred ancient melodies that survive without fixed musical scores. Transcription, analysis, and comparison reveal repetition as one of their most prominent musical features. Basic tones and melodic shapes return throughout performance. Variations occur, but they are often closely related to the singing habits of individual performers. A melodic form that combines variation with repetition can maintain a relatively stable structure while preserving flexibility for each realization.

The repetition of melody and tone has a special significance within this process. Written passages can be reread at any time, whereas oral performance vanishes as it moves through time. Oral tradition must therefore resist the transience of sound through structural repetition. Important figures, actions, and ideas recur in similar sentence patterns. Melodies and beats return, giving listeners several opportunities to remember within a single performance. Formulaic structures also furnish performers with pathways for generating extended narratives. Repetition should not be dismissed as artistic monotony. It is a central technique of oral poetics and a condition under which communal memory can be reproduced.

Cultural memory also depends on social relations. The transmission of creation myth is not a transfer of information from one mind to another. It is a process of socialization accomplished in particular settings. Elders, singers, bimo, and others familiar with tradition hold different forms of epistemic authority. Younger participants learn gradually through listening, imitation, response, and participation. Modern education, audiovisual recording, and digital media have altered the conditions of transmission, but direct performance remains irreplaceable because it conveys sonic detail, bodily discipline, and the ethics appropriate to an occasion at the same time. A digital recording can preserve the sound and image of one performance. It cannot automatically preserve the social relationships that made the performance possible.

This distinction allows for a more precise understanding of the effects of modern media on Yi creation myths. Audio recordings, video, staged performance, and intangible cultural heritage exhibitions expand the sphere of circulation, carrying once local sounds into transregional public culture. Yet fixation and standardization may also diminish the variation and improvisation intrinsic to oral tradition. If heritage preservation seeks only to secure a single "authoritative version," it risks turning a living tradition back into a text or specimen. A more productive approach would document versions by different performers, from different regions, and on different occasions. It would also preserve performance environments, relations among participants, and sonic detail. The object of preservation should include knowledge of how to perform, not only a text that records what was performed.

6. Conclusion

The distinctive value of Yi creation myths lies in their capacity to return narratives of cosmic origins, ancestral history, and communal order to present life through sound and performance. Music has at least four interconnected functions in this tradition. It organizes narrative, shapes emotion, coordinates ritual, and transmits memory. It gives verse a temporal structure, lends mythical scenes a perceptible emotional dimension, draws ritual participants into a shared pulse, and uses repetition and formula to support memory across generations. The meanings of traditional instruments must likewise be understood through actual relations of performance. Their cultural symbolism arises from the intersection of long use, local experience, and mythical interpretation. The poetics of Yi creation myths is therefore, above all, a poetics of sound and action.

This article has emphasized the artistic characteristics of creation myth as an integrated art form and

examined its dynamic realization within social and cultural contexts. Such a perspective broadens the artistic dimension of research on Yi mythology and on the mythologies of peoples across the world. It also renders their aesthetic and cultural value more visible. The urgent contemporary question is not how to hold tradition in an eternally unchanging form. It is how to sustain the conditions that allow tradition to continue, transmit itself, and renew itself. Textual editing, digital recording, and staged display are valuable, but they cannot replace the linguistic community, performers, ritual knowledge, and social relations on which living transmission depends. Preservation must move beyond saving works to sustaining the generative capacity of cultural practice. Only then can sound in Yi creation myths continue to connect past and present, allowing ancestral memory, local experience, and ethnic identification to endure in new media environments. Yi creation myths consequently offer not only an important object for the study of China's ethnic minority literature and music. They also provide a comparative case through which to understand how oral epics around the world use sound and performance to sustain cultural continuity.

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