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Ogimawkwe Mitii waki and “Axlu yyr kut”:
Native Tongues in Literatures of Cultural Transition

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by Mark Bender
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Introduction

Writing about the relationship between oral tradition and written literature in the Khasi culture of multiethnic North-East India, folklorist Soumen Sen observes, “Khasi literature in print continued, for the last hundred and odd years, to depend mostly on the co-existence of orality and literacy. The principal reason for the effort to re-absorb the oral tradition is the Khasi writers’ *consciousness* of cultural roots and their ancestry and their anxiety to see a continuity of cultural history” (Sen 2004:118). The situation of the Khasi, a matrilineal society that has been influenced both by Christian missionary cultures, since the nineteenth century, and the forces of modern Hindu-ization inherent in the rise of the post-colonial Indian state since 1947, has some parallels with other cultures enmeshed within the dynamics of radical cultural change.

At base, the Khasi traditionalists (*Seng Khasi*) early realized that they had to act proactively to preserve the “old ways,” realizing that “their age-old cultural form was being steadily threatened by alien cultural values, new life styles, and Christian proselytisation.” Focusing on how emerging Khasi poets such as Soso Tham (1873–1940) constructed a relationship between traditional oral culture and written poetry in a dynamically shifting cultural context, Sen observes, borrowing a medical term, that “What was once central literature — oral poetry and narratives — becomes para-central after language is scripted and new literature

begins to emerge in print (Sen 2004:119)."¹ He notes certain problems inherent in the process, particularly the limitations of creativity due to an "extremely unyielding loyalty" to oral tradition and a shift in audience. Nevertheless, Khasi creative poets have "preferred the co-existence of oral legacy and contemporary skill," which continues to be a feature of some Khasi writing (both poetry and prose) today.



Figure 1: Soumen Sen, folklorist and literary scholar, North-East Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya (Emeritus). (Photo courtesy of Soumen Sen)

With these thoughts in mind, this paper discusses the self-conscious use of native languages in written texts that reference traditional culture in terms of oral and material culture in the works of two indigenous, ethnic minority authors writing in times of cultural transition. One author is from a multiethnic area of southwest China in near geographic and cultural proximity to North-East India that is undergoing rapid cultural change due to development projects encouraged by the Chinese government. Another is half a globe away in the region of the Great Lakes of North America that for several hundred years has been a site of cultural

¹ For more on the background and writings of Soso Tham and other writers in this incipient period of Khasi written literature see Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's "The Birth Pangs of the Poet: The Early Works of Soso Tham, Chief Bard of the Khasis," an article in the bi-lingual online poetry journal *Kritya*. http://www.kritya.in/0209/En/name_of_poetry.html (accessed June 7, 2011)

interaction and contention between Native American and Euro-American cultures. In both cases the authors are part of a generation of individuals who were raised in traditional cultures caught in the dynamics of rapid social change. Both authors retain cultural and linguistic fluency and have an interest in "the old ways," yet both realize that the influences of the majority cultures are pervasive and in some respects, irreversible.

The authors and texts under discussion are, firstly, the short novel *Queen of the Woods* (*Ogimawkwe Mitigwaki*), written by Native American author Simon Pokagon and published in 1899. This unique bilingual text combines English with many words and phrases of the Potawatomi (Bodewadmi) language, an Algonquian language of a linguistic family once widely represented in various parts of the Great Lakes region of North America. The second example is a body of poems by Aku Akuwu 阿库乌雾, an ethnic minority poet of Sichuan province, China, that are written entirely in Northern Yi (Nuosu) script. Among these is a long poem entitled "Axlu yyr kut" ("Calling Back the Soul of Zhyge Alu") that has been translated into English (and thus made available to Anglophone readers globally) utilizing many Nuosu words and phrases. The discussion will raise questions about the nature and contexts of "polyglot" texts that employ native tongue languages in conjunction with "languages of interaction" by ethnic minority writers who act as creative agents in the interfaces with majority cultures (Beardsmore 1978:91; Kachru 1992; Misra 2011; Watkhaolarm n.d.).²

² Inspired by Pablo Neruda, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (2003:3–4), a Khasi literary critic and poet from North-East India states in a special volume on writing in multi-ethnic North-East India that, "...the author must be able to translate his own work into the language of interaction. But if he is not ambidextrous in this sense, then his work must risk lurking forever in the dark recesses of his own small world. On the other hand, if he writes only in the language of interaction, he must be able to translate his work into his own mother tongue or risk being cut off forever from the heart and mind of his own people." This quote reflects the situation of many writers and poets in the extremely dynamic and creative literary scene that has emerged in North-East India since the 1980s, growing out of a complex mix of ethnic conflict, recurrent, sometimes violent, social strife, and problems inherent in globalizing societies the world over. Among these writers and poets of various ethnic backgrounds are Temsula Ao, Robin S. Ngangom, Mona Zote, Mamang Dai, and Desmond L. Kharmawphlang.



Figure 2: Simon Pokagon and Aku Wuwu (Luo Qingchun). (Photos courtesy of John N. Low and Luo Qingchun)

Authors and Social Contexts

Simon Pokagon (1830–1899) was recognized as being among the best educated and influential American Indian intellectuals of the late nineteenth century (Low 2011:3). A native of the St. John’s River area of southwest Michigan in the area of the Great Lakes, Pokagon was a member of the Potawatomi tribe, a people in the Algonquian language family who are closely related to the Ojibway (Chippewa) and Odewa (Ottawa) peoples of the Great Lakes area (Clifton 1998:3–24; Brehm 2011:17). Beginning in the seventeenth century, the Potawatomi came in contact with French fur traders and priests and by the late eighteenth century were being heavily influenced by trade with the British. Like other native peoples in the area, they soon adopted many aspects of European material culture, including muskets for hunting and warfare, brass kettles, iron needles, cloth clothing, and silver ornaments (Quimby 1970).

After the War of 1812, influxes of American pioneers were flooding the Great Lakes area, and by the late 1830s and early 1840s most Potawatomi groups, along with other eastern tribes, had been “relocated” by an act of Congress enforced by U.S. government soldiers to reservations

in Iowa, Kansas, and other areas west of the Mississippi River. The Pokagon Band, however, was an exception. Simon's father, Leopold Pokagon (c. 1775–1841) and his band of about 280 followers were able to remain behind due to their relationships with the local Euro-American settlers, their conversion to Catholicism, and their astute use of the legal system, by which they were able to make small land purchases in their homeland (Edmunds 1978:266; Clifton 1984:68–76).

According to the original publisher's notes to his novel *Queen of the Woods*, Simon spoke only Potawatomi until about age fourteen. Recognized by Catholic priests as a promising young man, he later attended schools in the vicinity of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, Oberlin College in Ohio (though no record exists), and a private institute in Twinsburg, Ohio, where he spent two years (Low 2011:2). He gained a mastery of English, Latin, and Greek and is said to have translated over a thousand Christian sermons from English into Potawatomi, published in a variety of magazines of the day, and given many public orations advocating mutual respect between races, the negative effects of alcohol abuse on Native people, and the values of education and assimilation in the face of virtual extinction (Pokagon 2011:77–79, 99; Low, 2011:14–15). On the basis of his writings and oratory, Simon met Abraham Lincoln twice, in the White House in the 1860s, and President Ulysses S. Grant once, and he eventually convinced the U.S. government to honor a portion of the annuity payments owed the Potawatomi after their sale of the land on which Chicago was later built. At the Chicago Convention in 1893, he sold copies of his booklet, "The Red Man's Greeting," printed on birch bark. Despite these accomplishments, Pokagon died in poverty. *Queen of the Woods* was published in several editions in the years after his death. In the dedication to the first edition (reproduced in the 2011 edition), he summarized his philosophy of constructive co-existence between the white community and surviving Native peoples (who in 1900 numbered less than 300,000 in the entire United States) with the words, "...the white man and the red man are brothers, and that God is the father of all" (Pokagon 2011:93; Low 2011:2). In an introduction to the use of the Potawatomi language in his book, he also noted that "many of its readers will inquire why so many Indian words are used ... the manuscript was first written in the Algonquin language..." and that "... I have retained such Indian words and expressions as appear ... as monuments along

the way, to remind the reader in after-generations, that such a language as ours was once spoken throughout this loved land of my fathers" (Pokagon 2011:83).

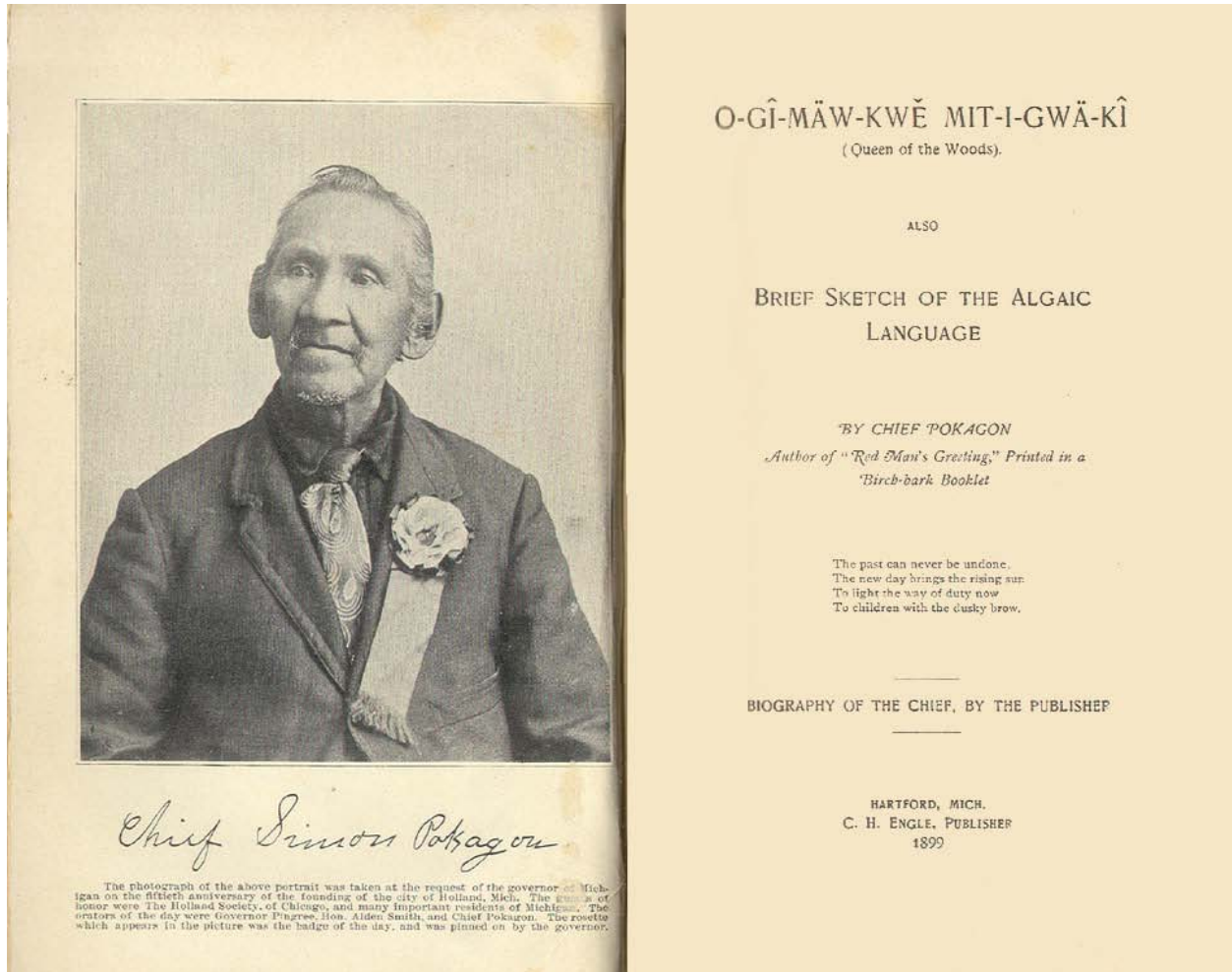


Figure 3: Simon Pokagon's picture in *Queen of the Woods*, 1899.

Aku Wuwu, whose name in Standard Chinese is Luo Qingchun 罗庆春, was born in 1964 in a remote mountain hamlet in Mianning County in the Liangshan Yi Nationality Autonomous Prefecture (Bender 2005:113–114). He spoke the Nuosu language (the northern dialect of Yi 彝) exclusively until age seven, when he began attending a school in a remote canyon on the banks of the Yalong River, a half-day's walk from his home. Here he learned Standard Chinese from teachers sent from urban areas during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to teach in undeveloped rural areas. His first sentence in Chinese was "Long live Chairman Mao" (Mao Zhuxi wanshui 毛主席万岁). Although his name in Yi is "Aku Vvyv" (or "Apkup Vytvy" with

the inclusion of the linguistic tone markers), his teacher decided that Aku Wuwu was more pronounceable, and thus he was given what has become his authorial name. Upon completing high school, he was able to enroll as an undergraduate in the Southwest University for Nationalities (Xinan minzu daxue) where he studied literature. He began publishing poetry in Chinese in the mid-1980s, along with several other poets of the era led by Jidi Majia 吉狄马加 and Jimu Langge 吉木狼格 (Dayton 2006). These poets were the basis of what would eventually form what I have termed the "Liangshan School" (Liangshan pai 凉山派) of Nuosu Yi poets, who with one exception are "Sinophone" poets writing in Standard Chinese, with the occasional transliterated Yi word represented in Chinese graphs (Bender 2009:120–121; Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008:195).

Unique among the Liangshan poets, however, Aku Wuwu set about creating a bifurcated body of work — one corpus of poems in Chinese and another, different set, in the reformed Northern Yi script that was created on the basis of traditional Yi scripts and came into limited use in southern Sichuan and contiguous areas in the mid-1970s. Since 2005, in his capacity as a professor (and later dean) of ethnic literature studies at Southwest University for Nationalities, several of Aku's Nuosu works have been published in English translation, including his most famous poem, "Calling Back the Soul of Zhyge Alu" ("Axlu yyr kut" in Nuosu romanization) (Aku 2005:123–130; Aku and Bender 2006:33–41).

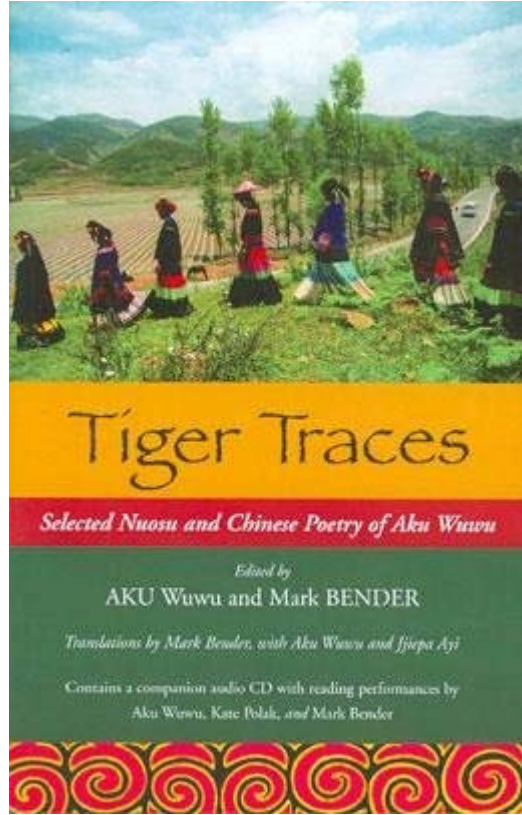


Figure 4: Cover of Aku Wuwu’s *Tiger Traces*, the first collection of Nuosu language poetry in English translation. (Photo courtesy of Foreign Language Publications at the Ohio State University)

Like Pokagon, Aku has advocated policies of mutual respect and constructive assimilation to mainstream Chinese culture. He has also promoted the recognition of the value of traditional folk culture, especially oral tradition and material folk arts, and the use of the “mother tongue” in both daily life and literature. In his words, ethnic minority writers today are “cultural hybrids” (*wenhua hunxue* 文化混血) who must write in Chinese and absorb other cultural and literary influences in order to gain footing in the literary world (Luo 2001:57–58). Yet he also is an advocate of “mother tongue literature” and sees his poems and prose poems as “textbooks” that help transmit elements of and interest in traditional culture to young people, both in rural and ethnic areas.

The social dynamics of change and assimilation of the Potawatomi and the Nuosu Yi that include a rapid shift of cultural and linguistic attributes in the face of a majority with interest in land and resources are in some ways comparable and symptomatic of many “traditional” ethnic

minority (and even majority) cultures today. However, the position of the Nuosu is quite different from that of the late nineteenth-century Potawatomi people of Pokagon's era, who retained but a fraction of their traditional territory, had endured coerced or forced removal to west of the Mississippi, and all told numbered only a few thousand (including many mixed-blood tribal members). Since Simon Pokagon's time, populations of Native peoples in the United States have rebounded over many decades. Assimilation to the evolving mainstream of American culture continues, though in many communities there is a revival of pride and the emergence of new traditions and economies. Many Potawatomi today live in small communities or government reservations in several mid-western states. Few people speak the language, though there are local attempts to pass on some level of fluency among young people (Noori 2011:67; Perot 2008). In recent years, contemporary members of the Pokagon Band have explored new economic paths, including legalized casino gambling that has in some ways revitalized aspects of Potawatomi tradition and given the means for new cultural creations (Web site: <http://www.newbuffalo.com/casino/pokagon.shtml>).

The Nuosu, who once controlled large parts of southern Sichuan and some border areas in Guizhou and Yunnan provinces, had led a relatively isolated existence for centuries until the Land Reform era in the late 1950s, when they came under the direct administration of the then-new government of the People's Republic of China (Harrell 2001:49–50). Thereafter, traditional social organization was realigned, breaking apart the hierarchical society in which a small upper-class of local headmen and wealthy families ruled various middle and lower levels of the populace. Over the ensuing decades these government-stimulated reforms have ushered in new technologies and social practices that have generated many changes in Nuosu life. While most Nuosu today still speak their local dialects, most middle-aged and younger people also speak dialects of Chinese and are often conversant with two cultures.

Some forms of Nuosu oral literature are still common in certain rural areas, though the viability of many song and narrative traditions is already in question in some places, despite attempts at preservation (Bamo 2001:456). On the other hand, a lively literary scene is also ascendant, quite comparable to that of the Khasi and other groups in North-East India. Today, due in part to their two million-plus population, their incorporation into the large Yi ethnic group

(Yizu 彝族) that now numbers over seven million (spread throughout several provinces), and the relatively greater opportunities in the era of economic reform and opening in China, segments of the Nuosu Yi community have taken on new social roles, despite problems of drug use and HIV infection among some sectors of the population (Liu 2011:81–95, 130–133). The rise of Nuosu entrepreneurs and the popularity of tourism-driven events such as the annual mid-summer Torch Festival, herald a new era of change for the Nuosu in an increasingly globalizing context (Heberer 2007).

Texts and Language Use

Pokagon's novel, entitled *Queen of the Woods*, was published in 1899, a low point in American Indian population and in an era in which tribes had been consigned to reservations or were living on parcels much smaller than their previous territories. The content of the story, which is one of the first novels by a Native American author, takes the author as the main character, and mixes the voice of a first-person narrative persona with multi-vocal narrative passages that at times recreate conversations, resemble dreams or folk stories, and act as tracts against the abuse of alcohol (Vigil 2011:38–44). The overall plot concerns Pokagon's return from years of schooling to his homeland. He takes a hunting trip with an elder trapper into the depths of the forest to reconnect with himself and his culture. During the trip he meets his future wife, the unspoiled Lonidaw, who was raised in a traditional way, is accompanied by a white deer, and has almost magical powers over animals.³ After visiting her very traditional home built of birch bark, he eventually marries Lonidaw, whom he calls Ogimawkwe Mitiwaki (Queen of the Woods), and

³ Whether intentional or incidental, the image of the Queen of the Woods and her white deer has parallels with the story of Virginia Dare, the first English child born in North America. According to a legend, Virginia was a member of the Roanoke "Lost Colony" in North Carolina that disappeared with barely a trace around 1587–1590. Legends say the colony was wiped out or absorbed by local Native cultures and that Virginia was "changed by the sorcery of a rejected [Native American] lover" into a white deer (Cotton 1901:12). The story, put into poetic form by Sallie Southall Cotton, was published in 1901 under the title *The White Doe: The Fate of Virginia Dare*, two years after the publication of Simon Pokagon's *Queen of the Woods*. The Cotton text can be found at: <http://digital.lib.ecu.edu/historyfiction/viewer.aspx?id=cow>

they have two children whom they raise in the forest. Later, at the urging of a Catholic priest — but against the urgings of the child's mother — the son leaves to be schooled among the whites. He returns several years later, fluent in English and educated, but also an alcoholic who soon perishes. The couple's daughter later drowns when her canoe is rammed by two drunken white men. The Queen of the Woods dies of a broken heart, and the rest of the narrative rails against the evils of alcohol abuse in Native American society of the day.

An outstanding feature of the text is the mixing of Potawatomi words into the English language that makes up the majority of the text. Commenting on the linguistic register of the text, John N. Low argues that, like Pokagon's use of the traditional material birch bark as a medium of inscription for some of his works, his use of the Potawatomi language — already in decline at the time of his writing —

“...is an assertion of the reclaiming and recovery of powerful native knowledge. It is a potent counter-colonial and counter-hegemonic act with lasting implications, reflecting American Indian peoples taking back their cultural patrimony and stories — rewriting the narratives of dispossession so that the concluding chapter is not the all-too-familiar eulogy of loss frequently associated with Indian peoples. Through such an act, communities are restored and have voice; they are understood by both members and outsiders to be rightful participants in the social, cultural, and political processes of the mainstream” (2011:13).

An example of the texture of the narrative is embodied in this passage in which Pokagon meets his future mother-in-law for the first time (Pokagon 2011:110) [Note: the Potawatomi words are in bold face type.]:

“**Weiki?**” (Who art thou?) “Pokagon,” I replied. She then asked, “**Waw kawin Oгимaw Pokagon Pottawattamie?**” (What! not old Chief Pokagon of the Pottawattamies?) I replied, “**Kaw odewenguis**” (No, I am his son). “**Aunish!** (What!) not young Samaw?” I answered, “**Neween**” (I am he). Then said, “Did you know Neosseemaw (my father)?” Anxiously she inquired, “**Aunish!**

Pokagon aukewashe Leopold smokemon?" (What! not the son of Chief Pokagon — Leopold, as white men called him?) "**Ae**" (Yes). I said. She then replied, "**Keauyaw kitchtiwawis aunishnawbe—ogimaw**" (He was a noble man and chief). "**Winsagiwe—manitan batadodan**" (He loved right and hated wrong). "**Nin widigemagan** (my husband) was chief under him many, many years; they went together to see the great white chief at Washington." She then advanced a step toward me, saying, "**Nind anamietawaw ki sanagise kwiwisens** (Bless you, my dear boy), Simaw! I have swung you in **tikinagan** (hammock), and carried you on **ninpikwan** (my back) time and time again. Bless you! I lived with your **ogawshemaw** when you were born. And you are my boy, Simaw. The Great Spirit bless you. Does **keogawshemaw** (your mother) yet live?"

In the passage the constant shifting between English and Potawatomi creates a texture of polyphony. It can be assumed that readers unfamiliar with Potawatomi orthography will inaccurately pronounce the Potawatomi words. Pokagon attempted to mediate this reality by providing a basic introduction to relevant aspects of the language. Yet, despite butchered pronunciation, readers might still gain a sense of the respective languages and the instantaneous equivalencies of meaning created by shifting between two linguistic systems. Though probably effective only for devoted readers, the duality of the text and its unique polyphony is an interesting experiment in a polyglot literature on the cusp between orality and writing, which as Soumen Sen noted above, requires the creation of new audiences — in this case sympathetic (in the context of the late nineteenth century) non-Native readers open to engaging with a Native-written text. It is striking for its use of polite terms of address, an emphasis on social standing, tribal, and kin (fictive or actual) relations, and the images of items of material culture. There are also set phrases such as "He was a noble man and chief"/ **Keauyaw kitchtiwawis aunishnawbe—ogimaw**" that fulfill Pokagon's promise of showing the artistic and cultural value of the language.

In the case of Aku Wuwu's poem, "Calling Back the Soul of Zhyge Alu," the intended audience is less clear (Aku 2005:123–127). Written in the revised Northern Yi syllabary, the

likely readership in the original is automatically limited only to those capable of reading the script, compiled of 819 distinct graphs. Literacy in Nuosu was promoted strongly in the late 1970s to the 1990s, but market demands for Chinese make it seem less practical for younger people to study the Nuosu script, though it is taught in some rural schools in Liangshan prefecture today. Several of Aku's Nuosu poems, including a heart-rending one about his "Amo" (Mother), have been included in children's language textbooks. Yet, despite attempts to promote the revised script in various media, few Nuosu read with the fluency needed for appreciating literary works or have the ability to utilize the revised script as a medium for literary creation. As an alternative to reading, Aku occasionally performs select poems as performance art at urban academic conferences and poetry readings (where only a few may actually understand the Nuosu), and poetry readings at rural schools or government-sponsored events.

The poem "Calling Back the Soul of Zhyge Alu" is loosely structured on a chant used by Nuosu priests to call back the wandering souls of the ill, especially those of children. The poem is framed with a quote from the third-century poet Qu Yuan 屈原, which is also on the subject of soul-recalling. This referencing of Han Chinese tradition at once legitimizes the subject (soul-calling was considered a "superstitious" activity in earlier decades of the People's Republic) and places Nuosu Yi culture on par with Han culture. Speaking from a more tribal than personal perspective, the poet speaks of a search for the soul of the great mythic culture hero Zhyge Alu, who shot down the extra suns and moons that were causing the earth to overheat and performed many other acts that benefited humankind. Throughout the poem appears the phrase "*O la*" (Come back), which in his orally delivered performances are energized by Aku's voice, becoming a call to consciousness not unlike critic and author Lu Xun's summons to the Chinese people as a whole to revive themselves as a nation during the May Fourth Movement of the 1920s and 1930s.



Figure 5: Contemporary statue of Zhyge Alu in Xichang, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. (Photo by Mark Bender)

The poem's message is entwined within a cascade of images that evoke many aspects of Nuosu traditional myth, ritual, and folklore. For example, the following passages feature the bird that brought the secret of speech from the realm of the sky god to humankind, and a species of sacred grass which the ancestors grasped when migrating along steep river canyons. These images are later followed by references to several types of harmful ghosts and a mention (in a collective sense) of "Father" and "Mother." The final "Ha" is the sound the *bimo* priest makes when the wayward soul is captured in a ritual wooden container (Aku 2005:124–125):

...

According to legend,
You changed, it is said,
Into the *apu yoqo* bird,
The tiny, black *apu yoqo* bird

Flitting here and there
Around the house.
Is the fireplace that you flew through in the sky
Still burning?
Do you remember still the secrets of mankind?
...

You change it is said,
Into the ritual *yyrx yyr* grass.
The rich green grass grows
Forever on the rocky hillsides.
The history of the *yyrx yyr* grass
Is indeed like a head of flowing tresses.
The story of the *yyr yyr* grass must include
The smooth river stones.
...

If you changed into a *ssep ziet* ghost,
The moment you go against your family has come.
Come, like a ferocious storm fast as lightning,
Come, like a landslide in a jumble of trees and rock.

The rice *Abbo* and *Amo* have prepared is steaming —
The rising steam has no soul.
In the four directions all is sunlit —
The sun's rays have become icicles.
...

O la, come back!

O la, comeback!

Pull the string!

Ha!

In English translation a number of words and phrases invite direct transcription in Nuosu that aid in creating rhetorical effect, in ways similar — though not as pervasive — as in Pokagon's text. The obvious "*o la*" is one such word, but in the poem *Aku* also uses kinship terms and referentially loaded images of material culture, flora and fauna, ancient orally performed written texts, folk sayings and proverbs. There is also a stress on kinship and tribal relations, especially in the passages that evoke cooperation in searching for Zhyge Alu's soul in order to revive the spirit of the group in face of sometimes overwhelming social changes, which have, in fact, affected traditional cultures worldwide.

Ethnographic Integrity of the Texts

How historically accurate are the instances of material culture and surrounding environment designated by native language in the respective texts? What are the motivations for including them and how do they function?

Many customs and items of material culture are mentioned, sometimes cataloged, in *Queen of the Woods*. Buckskin clothing, birch bark shelters, canoes, bow and arrows, and an ancient brass kettle are among the items Pokagon utilizes or discovers in use at the camp located in the remotest parts of the forest. The following passage presents a conversation between Pokagon and the old man, concerning the Queen of the Woods and her mother, includes several items associated with traditional items of material culture and their production (Pokagon 2011:123–124):

“He paused a while and then said, “She and her mother can make anything they desire out of **kekiweon**, **anak aqhashk**, **mashkoso**, **wigwassi**, and **kogobiwe** (flags, rushes, sweetgrass, birch bark, and porcupine quills), and stain them in all

colors of **nagweiab** (the rainbow)." He finally asked, "Have you seen her shoot **ki mitigwab achi mitigwanwi** (her bow and arrow)?" I replied that I had not. "Oshkeemaw (Young man)," he said, "I taught **tchi ikwesens** (that girl) how to hold and bend the **mitigwab** (the bow); she can send **awtus** (an arrow) straight as sight."

As Pokagon was born in 1830 and presumably returned to Indian country from Ohio after several years of education, the time of his encounter with his future wife, the Queen of the Woods, would have been in the 1850s, well after the era of Removal in the late 1830s and 1840s. Those few Native groups, like the Pokagon Band, remaining east of the Mississippi River had lost their formerly large tracts of woodland to Euro-American farmers and lived on small, scattered plots and had "experienced the greatest amount of acculturation and assimilation" (Clifton 1984:83–84; Clifton 1998:311). By this time too, contemporary historical accounts and archeological evidence suggest that most Potawatomi, like other peoples of the Great Lakes area, had long incorporated European trade goods into their cultures (Quimby 1970). Linen, wool, and cotton cloth and clothing were in popular use, and firearms, both smoothbore trade muskets and muzzle-loading rifles, had long supplemented or replaced bow and arrows. Wooden cabins, built with steel axes and saws, were also in common use, constructed as alternative dwellings to traditional bark wigwams that were still used, at least seasonally, in some areas. Images of Potawatomi people and homesteads painted by George Winter between the late 1830s and 1850s portray garments of cloth, glass trade beads, ribbons, and silver ornaments such as large crosses and round, pierced brooches (Feest 1993: 98; Figure 6).



Figure 6: Painting of Potawatomi matron D'mouche-kee-kee-awh wearing silver brooches, c. 1830s (Feest 1993: 98; photo courtesy of John N. Low).

Few of these items (such as the beads included in the quotation below) are mentioned in Pokagon's passages about life in the deep woods. Rather, there seems to be stress laid on what may have already been obsolete — yet “native” — items and technologies such as porcupine quill embroidery on moccasins, buckskin clothing, wigwam dwellings of birch bark, bark containers, rush mats, canoes, and traditional foods. At one point, in a discussion with the narrator, the old man recalls seeing Chief Leopold Pokagon setting out on a trip to visit the U.S. president in Washington, D.C. He and the other leaders started out on ponyback, “dressed in ornamental buckskin, wearing fine, beaded moccasins, and **wiwakwanog** (caps) trimmed with **migisi migwanog** (eagle feathers) (Pokagon 2011:125). This treatment of material culture may be seen as an effort to highlight traditions that served the Algonquin peoples in the centuries before contact with Europeans, yet which also fed into essentialist or romanticized nineteenth century images of the Indians as natural people — living, Pokagon suggested, as other races would if given the option (2011:99). Pokagon embodied these ideas in a birch bark wigwam he built as part of an American Indian village exhibit on the grounds of the Columbian Exposition in

1893. The structure was later sold to the Eastern Michigan Normal School (now University) (Low 2011:19–22).

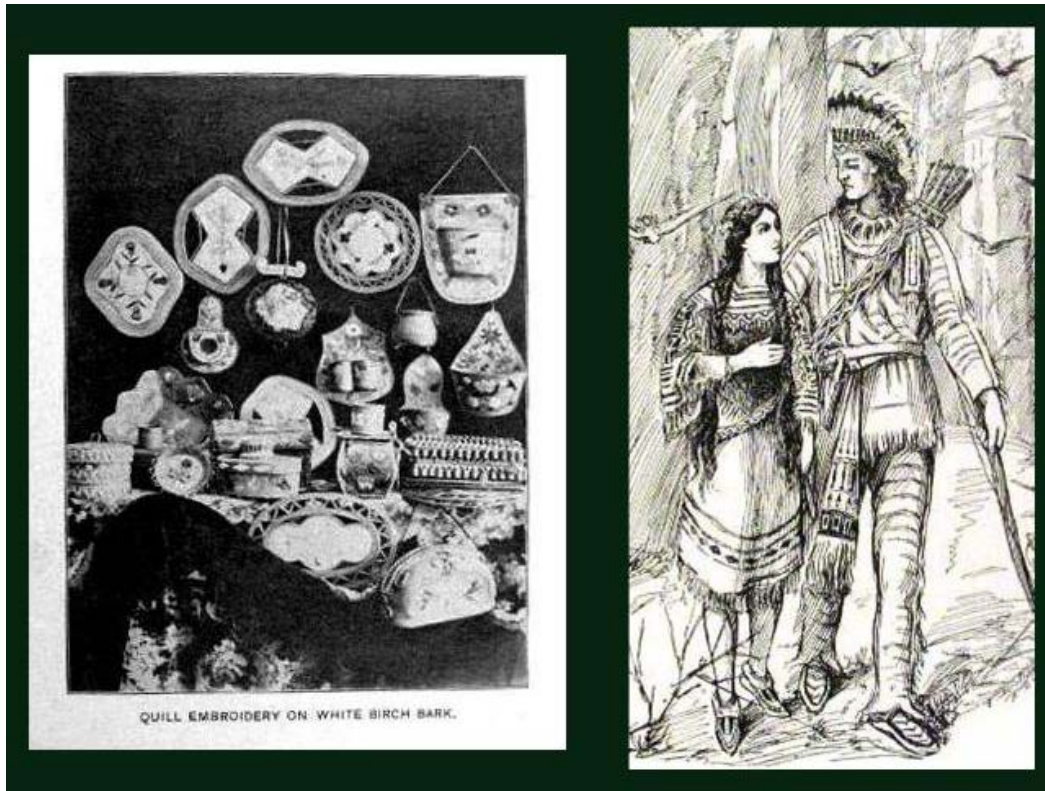


Figure 7: Illustrations of birch bark vessels and “traditional dress” in *Queen of the Woods*, 1899. (Photos courtesy of John N. Low)

The treatment of material culture, rituals, and beliefs in the works of Aku Wuwu and some other Yi poets is very direct (Bender 2009:124–125). Writing in the 1980s and even into the present, the Nuosu poets were drawing on direct experience and mirroring a lifestyle still relatively intact — at least for many rural-dwelling Yi, and despite several decades of social reforms since the late 1950s. Although Nuosu writers vary in their personal engagement in rural Nuosu life ways and folk tradition and thus have differing linguistic and cultural fluency, all have worked in an era when elements of traditional lifestyles still directly inform their writings. Today it is common to see ritualists in county towns carrying bundles of sacred plants and their net bags full of accoutrements on the way to conducting a ritual; many people can still sing folksongs and many participate in folk dances; fringed and felted cloaks are made and used in many rural areas, though urbanites may only wear them at festivals; wooden spoons (*ichyr*) and bowls, fireplaces,

mouth harps, rituals, silver ornaments, turbans, and natural features of the environment are easily accessed (Harrell, Ma, Bamo 2000). Moreover, emergent trends in the production of culture, stimulated by positive shifts in the economy and ethnic tourism see the revival, re-creation, and creation of traditions. Thus, items of tradition in many manifestations are readily available to inform the written works of the Liangshan School poets and make for a correlative presence in the poems.



Figure 8: *Bimo* ritualists conducting a healing ritual in Ebian County, Sichuan, 2007. (Photo by Mark Bender)



Figure 9: Guidelines in Standard Chinese affirming proper behavior in society and a nurturing stance towards the environment. The young women are wearing tradition-styled local garb; Ebian County, Sichuan, 2007. (Photo by Mark Bender)

Conclusion

Although the socio-historic contexts differ, both Simon Pokagon and Aku Wuwu have produced polyglot texts that challenge readers' comprehension and visions of society (Beardsmore 1978:91–93). Cultural amphibians, both authors have developed differential identities that allow them to act ambidextrously as cultural brokers between their groups and majority cultures via formal education and fluency in the discourses of modernity/globalization (Bauman 1971:31–32; Nongkynrih 2007). Both also created unique creative spaces in which they utilize native tongues and imagery in bilingual literary constructs that require willing submission on the part of readers to engaging aspects of their respective cultures and languages, signaling the viability and contributions of their peoples. In particular, this paper has examined the texture and content of

these unique linguistic mediums, stressing both explicit and implicit strategies for cross-cultural engagement and the use of tradition.

As polyglot creative works, Pokagon's novel and Aku's Nuosu poems incorporate elements of oral tradition and culture in the process of what Soumen Sen has called becoming "para-central" to bodies of written works contextualized within what Nongkynrih has termed their respective "languages of interaction." The para-centrality, however, differs somewhat between the Khasi, Potawatomi, and Nuosu. While Christianity and Hindu or Anglo-American cultures were the "other" agents of change and displacement at play *vis a vis* traditional Khasi and Potawatomi cultures, the agent of change in Nuosu culture has been phases of Chinese socialism and, since the 1980s, the wave of globalization and development that has enveloped all of China. That wave of "modernity-with-Chinese-characteristics" has seen the rise of a vibrant cohort of contemporary Nuosu writers and their modern-style literary productions that are yet informed by an oral tradition that for centuries had a mutual relationship with the written texts used by the *bimo* priests. As for the Potawatomi, the influence of their heritage of oral literature continues, though English has become the medium for many forms, including a series of children's books by Jack Wooldridge, and oral storytelling sessions at tribal gatherings.⁴ Yet, in all three cultures writers have emerged from the oral milieu to take up the pen and inscribe a literature that still draws on orality and functions in various ways to recognize, revive, and energize their respective cultures to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

⁴ Potawatomi intellectuals such as Martha Kreipe de Montano, Larry Mitchell, Terry P. Wilson, now write within a greater "Pan-Indian" context of creative writing and scholarship. Links to information on these authors can be found at: <http://www.ipl.org/div/natam/bin/browse.pl/t79>). Among the Pokagon Band, John N. Low is an accomplished literary scholar and museum director. With the aid of the Pokagon Band, in 2006 he produced a presentation that introduces Potawatomi culture, presented in conjunction with a museum exhibit at Southwestern Michigan University: http://www.pokagon.com/presentation/SMCppt_20080112.pdf

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