

Looking at China's cultural complexity. Food, colours and ritual: sensuous epistemology and the construction of identity in the "other" China

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Abstract: Studies on ethnic and cultural diversity within China have progressively eroded the far too simplistic and widespread idea of the Chinese nation as a monolith. In the resulting multicultural internal context, food is definitely more than a necessity for survival and can signify the desire of a community to stabilize a fluid and multiple identity. At the same time, it can be seen also as an indication of the multitude of relationships that the individual forms not only with others as individuals, but even as spirits, gods, and demons. The aim of this contribution is to explore some of the complexity of foodways involving consumption and religion and to understand the extent to which religious uses of foods contribute to the forging and transmission of cultural identity. I will do this by referring to the Naxi people of the Lijiang area as my case-study. My analysis will also take into account how, through the exploration of the Naxi religious foodways and cosmology, it is possible to gain an insight into their culturally different balances of the senses and their sensuous epistemology. This study will be based mainly on Naxi ritual manuscripts and videos of ceremonies, respectively collected and made during my fieldwork in Yunnan.

Keywords: Hybridization, Tibetan-Yi corridor, Naxi, epistemology, food practices.

摘要：对中国民族和文化多样性的研究已经逐渐取代了将中国只视为一个整体的过于简单而普泛的观念。在由此产生的多元文化的内部环境中，食物已绝不仅是生存必需品，它还可以表现一个群体建立流动及多元身份的愿望。同时，食物不仅可以被看作个体与其他个体之间的，而且是个人与灵魂、神及魔鬼之间的多种关系的标志。本文的主要目的在于探索包括消费与宗教在内的饮食方式的复杂性以及了解食物的宗教用途在多大程度上有助于塑造和传播文化身份。我将以丽江纳西族作为研究案例。我的研究还将通过纳西宗教饮食及宇宙观的探索来深入了解纳西人在不同文化中的感官平衡及他们的感性认识论。本研究主要基于我在云南实地考察期间收集的纳西仪式手稿和仪式视频。

关键词：文化杂交，藏彝走廊，纳西族，认识论，饮食方式。

1. Introduction

The Hengduan system connecting the southeast portions of the Tibetan Plateau with the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau consists of large North-South mountain ranges separated by deep valleys that channel the waters of six great rivers: Min, Dadu, Yalong, Jinsha, Mekong, and Salween. One of the main component subsections of the Hengduan is the range running between the Mekong and the Jinsha rivers which includes at its southern end the Yulong mountains and

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the Jade dragon Snow Mountain. This is the area inhabited by the Naxi people, whose population¹ is today mainly distributed in a well-defined region extending along the border between Tibet, north-eastern Yunnan and south-western Sichuan provinces.²

The “six river basin” (*liu jiang liuyu* 六江流域) (Sun 1983) forms a geographically natural passage that was characterized throughout history by frequent migrations and complex flows of ethnic activities which have earned it the name of “ethnic corridor” (*minzu zoulang* 民族走廊) by Fei Xiaotong (Fei 1982, 4; Fei 1990, 207). Some migratory flows alternatively followed the East-West direction along a section of the corridor that from Yunnan headed towards Tibet through the ancient Tea Horse Road or *chama gudao* 茶马古道 (Sun and Previato 2016, 301). Since this corridor was the bordering area of contact between the Han and the Tibetans to the West and the Tibetans and the Yi to the East, it is also known as the “Tibetan-Yi corridor”, *Zang Yi zoulang* 藏彝走廊 (Fei 1980, 157–8). Further North is the region of the upper reaches of the Yellow River, corresponding to present-day Qinghai and Gansu provinces, from which the Tibeto-Burman languages spread southwards and across the Himalayas (Sun and Previato 2016, 296, 299). The Tibetan-Yi Corridor consequently became the site where, throughout the migration process, the cultural features of the Tibeto-Burman peoples gradually differentiated giving rise to the sixteen ethnic groups that are currently mainly distributed in Tibet, Yunnan and Sichuan, namely the Tibetans, Yi, Qiang, Bai, Lisu, Pumi, Dulong, Nu, Achang, Jingpo, Lahu, Hani, Jinuo, Menba, Luoba, and the Naxi.³

Traces of this common origin and of the history of the southward migration are preserved in the legends and myths as well as in the ritual life of some of these groups. For example, after somebody dies, the Naxi invite a *dongba*⁴ to celebrate the ceremony to escort the soul of the deceased to the realm of the ancestor. A Gods’ Road Map is laid out in the courtyard of the deceased’s house and the *dongba* lists in the reverse order the place names—and the relevant mountain gods—the soul has to pass through to reach the ancestors. Although toponyms and routes may be very different, the Yi, Hani, Jinuo, Lahu, Pumi and Jingpo all have similar paths, directed northward (Shi 2018). The common origin char-

¹ According to the China Population 2010 Census, they count a population of 326,925 (https://guides.lib.unc.edu/china_ethnic/statistics, accessed 26.06.2021). At the time of writing, the 2020 census data about the Naxi total population had not been officially released yet.

² Unless otherwise specified, my analysis will mainly take into account the Naxi people living in the area of Lijiang county.

³ For a discussion of Naxi ethnonyms in ancient Chinese sources see, for example, Turini (2020).

⁴ The *dongba* (东巴) is the Naxi ritual specialist mainly involved in the celebration of ceremonies whose actions include particular slow rhythmic chanting and dancing, the latter signifying mock battles against the demons. He is the only one who is able to chant the sacred books necessary to ritual performances. These manuscripts are compiled in what Rock (1937, 5), as early as 1937, defined as the only pictographic script still existing in the world.

acterizing these Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups also emerges from the reading of the Naxi “Creation Myth”, according to which the ancestors of the Tibetans, the Bai and the Naxi were brothers who spoke different languages. The Tibetan was the elder brother, the Bai was the younger one and the Naxi was the middle brother (He Limin 1985, 225).

The rise on the Tibetan Plateau of the Tubo 吐蕃 dynasty between the 7th and 9th century, and its subsequent expansion towards the Tibetan-Yi corridor up to the upper reaches of the Min and Dadu rivers entailed that many originally scattered local tribes became part of a political and military entity whose rule would last over two hundred years.⁵ This facilitated a strong process of political integration and cultural contamination, causing the gradual trend of “Tibetanisation” to occur in the northern part of the Tibetan-Yi corridor, a trend that was fostered by the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism in the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau after the 10th century (Shi 2018).

The northward expansion of the Naxi Mu chieftains⁶ during the Yuan and Ming dynasties led to an even closer mixing between the Tibetan and Naxi peoples since Lijiang consolidated its role of a major station of the tea trade to Tibet. The roads created by merchants connected communities in neighboring valleys and villages and became the communication links for southwest China while the Naxi gradually turned into an important bridge between the Tibetans and the peoples living in western Yunnan. Given this long history of interactions, the Naxi have a system of religious practices clearly showing the hybridization of traits pertaining to different traditions: elements of Bönist, Buddhist, and later even Daoist, ritual and symbolism were integrated into an indigenous system involving shamanic practices, the worship of ancestral spirits and deities mainly representing natural forces, legacy from their original nomadic culture.

The large-scale contacts and interactions occurring in the area transformed the Hengduan system from a migration flow corridor into a channel for ethnic exchanges and cultural blending, characterized by fluidity and continuity, where borders were blurred, boundaries became places of multi-dimensional transition, and processes of mutually shaping identities took place.

Today, the region inhabited by the Naxi people is still a multicultural context, maintaining a great internal variety. Our travelling across the borders in history has set the stage for understanding some of the steps in the making of Naxi identity and for investigating to what extent traces of cross-cultural ethnic identity dynamics and adaptations can be preserved in food practices. The multidimensionality of food will be questioned to explore the extent to which Naxi consumption and religious uses of foods can contribute to the forging and transmission of their cultural identity. I will also consider wherein foodways can make clues available for detecting group-level traits that are maintained

⁵ Buddhism was officially introduced into Tibet in the VIII century; Bön had been the State religion until Songtsen Gampo's death in 649 (Chögyal Namkhai Norbu 1996, 22).

⁶ For a historical analysis of the Mu *tusi* in Ming China see also Turini (2012).

and transmitted within the group, thus making it possible to preserve individual ethnic cultures, alongside cross-group traits that make it possible for ethnic minorities of the area the preservation of the aggregate of their cultures. Finally, the exploration of the Naxi religious foodways and cosmology will be employed to gain an insight into their culturally different balances of the senses and their sensuous epistemology. This study will be based mainly on Naxi ritual manuscripts and videos of ceremonies, respectively collected and made during my fieldwork in Yunnan.⁷

2. Food and Naxi identity

The human relationship to food is a complex one as food is central to the sense of identity, which is itself marked by fluidness. This notwithstanding, any culinary system can be considered as part of a world-view (Douglas 1966). This means that man eats within a culture and this culture orders the world in a way that is specific to itself. Thanks to the intimate links between food practices and the embodiment of identity we may say that nutrition is transformed from a mere biological activity into a cultural phenomenon and food into “embodied material culture” (Dietler 2007, 222). Therefore, eating and drinking are never simply biological acts. Rather, “they are learned, culturally patterned techniques of bodily comportment [...] that are expressive in a fundamental way of identity and difference” (Dietler 2007, 223). The food choices made by people, also as groups, can thus reveal views, background knowledge, assumptions; they can tell stories of resistance, integration, migrations, changes over times, and personal as well as group identity.

Kittler, Sucher, and Nelms (2012, 39) addressed the influence of food habits by stating that “eating is a daily reaffirmation of [one’s] cultural identity”. As identities are by nature negotiable and situational, the adoption of blurred cultural boundaries between neighbouring peoples can sometimes be disclosed by the sharing of cross-cultural food practices by different ethnic groups. We should likewise also bear in mind that culture and ethnicity are intricately connected and that food culture can otherwise be made up of concrete ways by which ethnic identities are preserved before becoming available for cultural contamination. When encounters between groups from different cultures take place, they do not lead to a simple adaptation of a diet, but usually give rise to intercultural acts of crossing identity boundaries. It is against this background that I would like to consider the Naxi case-study. My point is that data from the analysis of Naxi foodways reflect their position of Himalayan people standing between the rice, soybean and alcohol consuming culture of the Han majority to the North-East and the milk, butter, and barley eating Tibetan culture to the North-West,

⁷ All unreferenced discussions of Naxi practices are derived from ethnographic fieldwork carried out by me in Yunnan province at various time between 2002 and 2013 (e.g. see Turini 2015, 2016).

and show they meanwhile hold original declension patterns for the distinctive expression of their own “peculiar Tibeto-Burman identity”.

In the area where the Naxi are resident, the Ancient Tea Horse Road is likely to have been in use long before it turned into the well-known route for the tea and horse trading during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) for it had served as a very important corridor for migration stretching across present-day Tibet, Yunnan and Sichuan while concurrently fostering cultural communication among local ancient cultures in Southwest China (Yang 2004, 29–30). As we saw, the northwestern borders of present-day Yunnan province have always demarcated a very complex area, not only because this region was and is home to many peripheral peoples, but also because it lies at the juncture of both Chinese and Tibetan political (and cultural) expansion.

In the Tibetan cultural area of the eastern Himalayas, barley (*damai* 大麦) has a wide geographical distribution due to its adaptability to rough climates and local different habitats. Not only is barley the main crop of Tibetan agriculture and is flour prepared from its roasted grains (*tsampa*) a typical local staple food, but it has also an important role in many cultural and religious activities, *tsampa* being regarded as a special food for entertaining different kinds of guest. Whereas I will consider the ritual use of barley later in more detail, I will now focus on food practices unrelated to religious tradition.

The most common way Tibetans eat *tsampa* (*zanba* 糌粑) is to mix it in a bowl with yak butter tea (*suyoucha* 酥油茶) and form into little balls that they consume almost daily. Barley flour, together with water and baking powder, is used also to prepare *balep korkun*, a type of round, flat bread typical of central Tibet, where it is eaten nearly every morning and is the primary breakfast staple in local monasteries. Other kinds of bread can be deep fried, steamed or pan-cooked. Although *tsampa* is at the core of Tibetan identity, it is not unknown to Naxi daily lives either: the cultivation, processing and ritual uses of the barley among the Naxi in northwestern Yunnan reflect of the strong Tibetan influences in the area.⁸ Besides processing barley into alcoholic beverages,⁹ which are used as gifts and for serving guests, the Naxi also produce their own *tsampa*, occasionally from wheat (*xiaomai* 小麦). They consume it with butter tea and, in contrast to other Tibetan areas, they add crumbled walnuts to make it tastier (Yang 2017, 29). They too make daily use of bread, which they call *baba* 粑粑. It is a kind of soft, fluffy flatbread, made of barley or wheat flour that can be either fried or roasted and to which crumbled peanuts, walnuts and black sesame seeds can sometimes be added for the sweet version. The cultural importance attached by the Naxi to *baba* and butter tea for entertaining guests is reflected in references to these foods contained in some of their ritual manuscripts. For

⁸ Similar influences can be found among the Shuhi in southwest Sichuan, see Weckerle *et al.* (2005).

⁹ The most widespread is “barley yellow wine” (*damai huangjiu* 大麦黄酒).

example, in the manuscript *To Search for the Books of Divination*,¹⁰ when the goddess who distributed the books of divination to the Naxi welcomed the White Bat who had reached her heavenly home, we read:

The goddess asked him: “White Bat, what do you drink? And what food do you eat?” He replied: “I can eat a *bābā* the size of a mountain and butter tea the size of a lake”. [Then] the goddess prepared a *bābā* as big as a mountain and melted as much butter as a lake could contain and offered them to the White Bat. He flew to the top of the *bābā* mountain but, while trying to sit on it, he slipped and fell into the lake of butter tea. The goddess laughed and covered her mouth with the right sleeve of her dress, she then held out her left arm towards the bat to help him get out of the lake. She asked him what he was up to and the White Bat answered: “Oh, I just wanted to see how high the mountain was, and how deep the lake”. (Turini 2016, 66)¹¹

The Naxi people are familiar with dairy products other than yak butter, such as cheese. Interestingly, the cheese they make is less close to Tibetan crumbly, hard-textured yak cheese than to the typical artisanal foods from milk processing the Bai ancestors passed down to their descendants. Actually, *rushan* 乳扇 and *rubing* 乳饼 that can be easily found among Naxi snacks and dishes traditionally come from Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, further South than Lijiang, and are produced by the Yi people as well. Moreover, unlike the Tibetans, the Naxi neither like to put cheese in butter tea nor enjoy it with *tsampa*. They often eat *rubing*—a firm white goat or cow cheese with a chewy texture that does not melt—grilled or pan-fried instead and, before serving, they can sweeten or salt it. They usually deep-fry *rushan*, so that the puffed-up cheese becomes light and fluffy, with a crispy texture. This dairy product can only be made out of cow milk and, before being cooked, it is hung to dry for about a day until it dehydrates to a thin sheet.

Although these “food customs” characterize Naxi lifestyle, they simultaneously seem to be clear markers of a broader “Himalayan/Tibetan identity”. This means that they are not the expression of the Naxi people’s own specific identity. This latter could possibly be better conveyed through foodways which, being deeply rooted in their own traditions, history and environment, do not show to have such a generalized external sharing with neighboring ethnic groups, and therefore might represent the original core of ways of being Naxi. The fact that it is only served in Naxi areas around Lijiang and that this area is widely acknowledged as being the heart of Naxi culture, would suggest *jidou liangfen* 鸡豆凉粉 be regarded as a typical Naxi dish. *Jidou* is usually translated as “chickpeas”, the Naxi however prepare this bean jelly dish with a mix of chickpeas and lentils powdery starch, which gives it the characteristic gray color, and consume

¹⁰ This manuscript is chanted by the *dongba* during the Great Ceremony for Purification. For the analysis and translation of this manuscript, see Turini (2016).

¹¹ Translation into English by the author.

it sliced into long noodles or into cubes and topped with peanuts, cilantro, garlic and ground chilly.

Naxi traditional food culture has developed from nomadic lifestyle into an agricultural and pastoral context. Cultivated species play a crucial role in the local diet,¹² but they also have a long history of wild edibles gathering and a rich knowledge on using them owing to the fact that northwestern Yunnan has always had a great biodiversity. Collection and use of wild edibles are not only part of the cultural history of the region but also of the Naxi local identity. Many wild vegetables were traditionally collected either while grazing cattle and horses during the spring and summer seasons or after farm work—if they grew wild in cropland. Among these, there are bracken and the lichens known as *Lobaria retigera* Trevis. and *Lobaria yunnanensis* Yoshim., having an antioxidant activity (Geng Yangfei *et al.* 2016, Diversity of Wild Edibles). Mushrooms, mostly gathered during spring and fall by women and children, are still significant in the local diet. They are consumed as vegetables, after drying or while fresh.¹³

Today we are witnessing a trend of decreasing knowledge of wild food plants among the Naxi if compared to that of the last decades. This is mainly due to the fact that migration of young people to cities in search for employment and education has severely disrupted the transfer of local knowledge between generations (Geng Yangfei *et al.* 2016, Age, Gender, and Traditional Knowledge). For similar reasons, traditional knowledge of wild plants related to Naxi ethnomedicine and religion is disappearing,¹⁴ though herbal medicinal plants and their uses are partly recorded and described in a few *dongba* manuscripts (Li Guowen 2000).

The connotation of food as culture implies issues related to identity and ethnicity that cannot fail to consider the notion of “border” and its processual nature. As discussed earlier, the Naxi are an example of the way in which cultural borders in the Tibetan-Yi corridor can be revisited, redefined, negotiated or blurred. We showed that the analysis of some aspects of Naxi foodways can help understanding meaningful patterns of boundary drawing/blurring within and across ethnic groups, even in a diachronic perspective. The Naxi have their own ways of being Tibeto-Burman, some of them are embedded in the knowledge of wild edibles growing in the local environment, while others are expressed through exclusive food practices. Alongside with their own peculiar identity, it has been suggested that they partake of a broader Himalayan/Tibetan identity, the sense of belonging to which is expressed through foodways showing a more generalized external sharing with neighboring peoples, especially the Tibetans.

¹² Besides rice, crops of strong adaptability are planted, such as turnip, potatoes, maize (*yumi* 玉米), buckwheat (*qiaomai* 荞麦) and Tartary buckwheat (*ku qiaomai* 苦荞麦).

¹³ Geng Yanfei *et al.* (2016) have elaborated a deep understanding of the Naxi people's traditional knowledge regarding wild edibles, including wild fruit, beverage and honey source plants, with a special focus on Baidi village. For an ethnobotanical investigation of the Naxi shifting food habits during droughts caused by global climate change, see Zhang Lingling *et al.* (2016),

¹⁴ On Naxi ethnomedicine see Yang Lixin *et al.* (2014).

One identity feeds on the other and on overlaps, intersections, contiguity, and both can be explored through Naxi food culture.

Shared food classifications and the associated practices “incorporate the individual into the group, situate the whole group in relation to the universe and in turn incorporate it into the universe. They thus have a fundamentally religious dimension” (Fischler 1988, 279). Consequently, culinary systems play a role “in giving a meaning to man and the universe, by situating them in relation to each other in an overall continuity [...]” (Fischler 1988, 279).

3. Some ritual uses of food and dongba religion

For the sake of space, I will not conduct a ritual-by-ritual analysis here and my discussion will mainly focus on the general use of meatless food in Naxi religious life, in full awareness that this only gives a partial picture of the complexities of foodways in the *dongba* tradition.

Food is an inherently performative reality “that moves the scholar from the mundane to the cosmological and back again” (Arnold 2000, 5), and that involve the eater in an intertwining of relationships with a wider universe of beings, including supernatural beings. The Naxi live in a reality that is inhabited by infinite supernatural beings, which it would be impossible to describe in detail as the Naxi themselves are unable to identify them all. Their already highly structured cosmology is made still more complicated by the local nature of many forces. Every mountain, hill, forest has its guardian spirit or local deity, of the knowledge of which individual officiants are the custodians. The ritual manuscripts certainly contain the most significant descriptions, though the lack of standardization and the complexity of the situation cause the *dongbas* themselves usually to find it hard to explain them clearly, even with explicit use of the texts. The main classes of deities include high gods, local deities, and apotheosized *dongba*, like Dongbashiluo, the legendary founder of *dongba* religion. To these must be added the Shu serpent kings, who are spirits mainly associated with water sources, and myriads of demons.¹⁵ All this variety, often accompanied by indeterminacy and a lack of coherence in the descriptions collected from one valley to the next, does not reflect visions of the world that are substantially different. On the contrary, seemingly divergent representations continually point to conceptions that are essentially very similar of an individual person’s position inside a web of relations where material forces, the supernatural and the cosmological sweep into a person’s life.

Dongbas are generally able to confront any supernatural being and to officiate most of the ritual activities. To confront offending demons, they seek the help of the gods. While exorcising demons, *dongbas* are paired and fight sham battles brandishing their weapons in magical movements, accompanied by the music of

¹⁵ Joseph Rock (1963, 39), who lived 25 years among the Naxi people at the beginning of the XX century reported the presence of more than 500 demons.

drums, cymbals, gongs and conch shell trumpets, at an increasing tempo. Depending on the function of the particular ritual, some combination of gods, ancestors, spirits and demons is invited at the ritual site and these beings are entertained in different ways according to their *status*. In the manuscript *To Search for the Books of Divination*, these entities are likened to guests who must be correctly entertained:

The celestial Gebaruoji became ill and so did his wife, the terrestrial Kamemiji. This was because of the presence of demons. But they did not know what demons they were and what ceremony to perform to expel them. It was just like having some guests and not knowing how to entertain them. (Turini 2016, 49)¹⁶

Many Naxi rituals are then shaped by a language of hospitality and feeding, each class of beings having its own “food code”. When the study embraces religious uses of food, including food practices that pertain to the otherworld(s) in addition to foodways dealing with transitioning between worlds, the description becomes “thicker” since food for the demons, for the deities, and food for the spirits must all be taken into account. In general terms, the choice of the offerings cannot elude considerations regarding their colors. The first great distinction to be made is between food to be offered to deities and the Shu spirits, for whom the white color is prevailing, and that for demons, which is preferably black or dark colored. Consequently, oat, rice, and popped maize grains are frequently employed to feed deities, while buckwheat and Tartary buckwheat grains are meant for malicious beings. It is worth mentioning here that some demons particularly feared by the Naxi are very well entertained by *dongbas* during ceremonies. This is the case of the “wind demons”. They are the spirits of persons who have committed suicide and who have turned to malicious beings. To placate them, they are offered steamed bread made from wheat flour, deep-fried *baba*, walnuts and are invited to drink as much strong liquor distilled from red wheat as they wish.

In order to appease the Shu spirits, who can cause illness when offended, cow milk and popped maize grains are offered near mountains springs where they love to dwell. Each grain of cereal symbolically represents an animal illegitimately killed by humans for food that has to be ritually given back to its owner. According to Naxi mythology, there appear to be strong blood ties between the Shu spirits and humankind, as while they were born of different mothers, they shared the same father as the post-flood ancestor of the Naxi. A formal division of property was therefore needed from the very beginning: man was made responsible for all domestic animals, cultivated fields, rice paddies and houses, while these spirits were entrusted with wild animals, forests, mountains, springs, lakes, and rivers. So the former would be masters of “social space” and the latter of unpolluted “natural space”.

For this reason, they do not like animal sacrifices and the offerings intended for them essentially have to come from the plant world. To this end, bread rolls, small frogs and snakes are usually prepared with a mixture of flour and water

¹⁶ Translation into English by the author.

and then fried. The Shu are especially close to these animals as it is shown by the pictogram portraying them with a frog's head and serpent's tail.

Except for the case of the "wind demons", which is probably explained by the fact that they are human souls having subsequently undergone a transformation, we may say that different aliments operate in different realms of existence, for deities and demons have distinctive ritualized food. In the Naxi sacred space, food becomes a means to mark integration or separation between these realms through guests' entertainment. Communion can be sought with deities through consumption, while separation between demons and humans/deities is much needed for restoring/maintaining the balance in the cosmos. As pointed out by Yang Fuquan (2017, 28), the Naxi regard those foods which they commonly consume as pleasing also to deities, while all those aliments which customarily are not part of their diet are considered foodstuff for the demons.

As discussed earlier, when encounters between groups from different cultures take place, they usually give rise to intercultural acts of crossing identity boundaries. At a closer look, cross-cultural contamination processes occurring between religious contexts can also be fertile grounds for sacred foodways cross-pollination. If we return to consider the Tibetan-Yi corridor in this light, ethnic territorial borders come to be conceived as areas that produce liminality and dissolve to produce hybridity. We can observe the permeability of boundaries between Naxi and Tibetans highlighted by the ritual uses of butter they share, for example. According to Yang Fuquan (2017, 29), the presence of yak butter and dough figures in many Naxi ceremonies actually comes from long-lasting contacts with Tibetans. *Dongbas* consider butter a powerful protective agent having strong purifying properties. It conveys good luck, fertility, and purity. For these reasons, infants' bodies are entirely rubbed with it shortly after birth and the same happens to the deceased's corpse during funerary rituals. Wedding ceremonies are special occasions on which blessings and fertility are ensured for the new couple by the *dongba* rubbing the bride's and the groom's foreheads with butter. This aliment is also applied to secure prosperity to Naxi boys and girls on the day when they receive their first pair of trousers and their first skirt, respectively, as a "rite of passage" from childhood to adulthood.

Not only do barley and *tsampa* play a very important role as food offerings among the Naxi, but the use of dough figures prepared from *tsampa* as *paraphernalia* also is widely distributed in the Tibetan-Yi corridor.¹⁷ The *dongbas* form¹⁸ and use them as effigies of demons, animals, deities, Shu spirits, and particular objects, such as the sacred mountain Junaruolo (the *axis mundi*). The features that these figures should have described in detail in the ritual manuscript containing indications on the *paraphernalia* and the other manuscripts to be chanted while performing a given ceremony. In some cases, distinctive elements suggesting the identity of these

¹⁷ Besides being widespread among the Naxi, it is documented also for the Shuhi (Weckerle *et al.* 2005) and the Mosuo peoples in southwestern Sichuan (Mathieu 1998).

¹⁸ They can also be made from wheat and from buckwheat, depending on the ritual use.

supernatural beings are clearly depicted by the *dongba*, in others he pays particular attention to their facial expressions, instead. At funerary ceremonies, he often makes use of small dough figures representing the deceased's soul, demons and gods and place them on the corresponding section of the Gods' Road Map. He will then progressively move the deceased's figure along the Road Map in order for him/her to finally reach the ancestors' realm. Depending on their ritual function, in the Naxi context dough figures can be thrown away, offered to deities or spirits to repay the debts incurred by humans or to offended demons as a substitute for a sick person.

The general argument I am making here is far from being sensational for my intent is merely to suggest that also Naxi ritual use of food manifests forms of cultural fusion which can be seen as aspects of their historical legacy and cultural positioning in the Tibetan-Yi corridor. Many traits of *dongba* foodways, like the use of the dough figures, can be easily linked both with a broader Tibetan tradition and with some other Tibeto-Burman peoples' ritual food practices in the area. One of the issues that beckon further investigation is the extent to which Naxi religious uses of food are rooted either in the Tibetan "folk religion" (Tucci 1995, 205), often glossed as "nameless religion" (Stein [1996] 1998, 173), and old Bön (Namkhai Norbu 1996, 19), or in Tibetan Buddhism and how such food uses found their way into Naxi religious life.

Forms of Naxi *dongba* rituals and the old Bön may derive from a common origin which can be identified in a shamanic tradition developed among pastoralists living in the area corresponding to present-day Qinghai province (Rock 1935, 66), whence the Naxi ancestors are thought to have emigrated southwards, to their present location. Accordingly, some Buddhist symbolism and elements in *dongba* rituals (e.g. the use of butter lamps, conch shells, *tangka*, cymbals) are supposed to be a later appropriation, introduced into an original core of beliefs. In Lijiang basin the "Bon cult held undisputed sway for no Yellow lama church was permitted in the territory, and it was only during the Ming Dynasty about 1627 that the Karma-pa church, more tolerant than the Yellow Sect, became settled. They were however never strong and influential" (Rock 1952, 4).

Though Rock (1952, 15) himself was convinced that Naxi religious manuscripts were in the greater part Bon, we should not underestimate the great diversity of localized characteristics of religious practices in Tibet and its surrounding areas. To this end, it might be desirable a comparative study between Naxi religion and early Tibetan sources, including the Dunhuang manuscripts. The varieties of *dongba* food practices can in fact be given sense by understanding Naxi religion and ethnicity within the Tibeto-Burman context, and thanks to the porousness of its boundaries.

4. Food, taste and Naxi sensuous epistemology

In this last paragraph I would like to briefly outline a possible research perspective in which food and taste can be revisited in the light of the theoretical framework of an "anthropology of the senses" that implies a "fundamental epistemological shift towards others" (Stoller 1989, 156), and to present some

preliminary data addressing Naxi culture as a way of *sensing the world* (Howes 1991), to which taste can offer its contribution. Many ongoing disembodied and disengaged approaches to the human sciences have depersonalised the body and sanitised the senses. The aim of my investigation is to refine a sensibility for the body as existential ground for culture and to propose a preliminary exploration of what the ethnographic record has to offer when analysed from data on the senses. I will try to give some insight into the Naxi sensory construction of reality and to make sense of their sensibilities. This can be done by taking into account their cosmology, cosmogony, and ritual life. I am persuaded that my exploration is at this stage merely suggestive and preparatory to future in-depth-analysis.

The senses do not simply gather information about the world, but are also imbued with cultural values, they represent a tool for societies to define the world and a model to interact with it. This means that different cultures develop different ways of “making sense of the world” (Classen 1993, 1), each teaching the individual a kind of sensory specialisation which brings him to “organise his sensorium by attending to some types of perception more than others” (Ong 1991, 28).

The method of creation expressed in the cosmogony of a particular culture is often revealing both of the way in which that culture shapes perception and the relative importance it attaches to the various senses. In the Naxi cosmogony, sight ranks supreme, but it is tinged with sound, which renders Naxi visual bias altogether different from that of Western culture:

[...] Before Heaven and Earth appeared, there first appeared the three good kinds of shadow of each. [...] The true and the real united, and a brilliant white orb appeared. The white orb produced a change, and a beautiful voice that could sing appeared. The beautiful sounding breath changed, and a brilliant turquoise coloured orb appeared. The turquoise coloured orb changed, and the great god *Iggvq-ogeq* appeared. [...] The false and the unreal caused a change. First there appeared a black orb. The black orb changed, and a black gemstone as black as a crow appeared. The black gemstone changed, and a bad sounding voice appeared. The bad sounding voice changed and [the evil demon] *Lggvq-dinaq* appeared. (McKhann 1992, 84–8)

It seems quite clear from the above that sound arises from light, and that disorder is introduced in an originally light and coloured world by the creation of darkness, that, in turn, gives rise to unpleasant noises. The emphasis on light and colour manifested in Naxi cosmogony is further elaborated in their cosmology. They believe that the human world is a square. Each side of the square is associated with a cardinal point and a particular colour. The Seven Sisters God supported Mt. Junaruolo’s east side with a white conch prop, the south side with a green turquoise prop, the west side with a black cornelian prop, the north side with a yellow golden prop; in the middle between heaven and earth they erected a white iron prop (McKhann 1992, 89).

A visual bias is also shown in the various ceremonial articles prepared by the *dongba*, in which supernatural beings are made readily recognisable by their vivid physical characteristic, rather than, say, by their smells or food preferences: pictorial representations of the gods in the form of painted scrolls, wooden slats,

and dough figures made with parched barley when representing the gods, and with parched buckwheat when they refer to demons (He and He 1998). The importance of sight is manifested also in the fact that in order to reach the ancestors, the deceased's soul needs to *see* the itinerary to be followed, and to this end an everlasting lamp is put in front of the deathbed during funerals (Xu 1998).

The stress on sight is accompanied by the importance attached to sound, hearing, and speaking as social functions. The Naxi are a highly verbal people. A very high premium is placed on those with the ability to say the correct things at the right time (Jackson 1979), for without proper talking, communication among men, and between men and gods, falters, and the whole social system creaks as it lacks effective intermediaries to mediate between the poles. In ritual life, this is highlighted by the fact that the possibility of getting in touch with the essence of things resides in the recitation of their origin by the *dongba* (Jackson 1979). Touch can be conversely understood as the most anticultural of the senses for the Naxi, because pollution is mainly spread by contact. I could not find any reference to touch in the Naxi cosmology and ritual life, except the application of butter, discussed earlier. Sight and touch would thus seem to be at opposite ends of the Naxi *sensorium*.

In the ethnographic *corpus* of the Naxi, there is frequent mention of various woods and resins that are burnt as incense. But other substances, which do not necessarily have pleasant odours, are also employed. For example, in the "Greet the Gods with Burning Incense" rite, juniper boughs are burnt in a large incense burner to attract the gods, while the ritual setting is being cleared of pollution with smoke from a torch made of nine twigs from nine different kinds of tree. In the same rite, the demons of pollution are invited by burning chicken feathers and a few small pieces of sheep bone over a tile covered with hot coals. Therefore, while the foul odour of the burning feathers and bone is thought to attract the demons, the gods are thought to prefer the fragrant smell of juniper incense. Odoriferous substances are not merely pleasing or displeasing to the nose: they are first of all channels of communication, they carry messages. It is also significant that what is burnt to establish contact with the spirits' world can be categorised visually. The incense sticks prepared for the "Sacrifice to Heaven", for example, are meaningfully decorated with paper flowers (McKhann 1992).

Although we could not find frequent mention to the sense of taste, this is not sufficient grounds for dismissing it from the Naxi hierarchy of the senses. We run across a multitude of ritual visual perceptions that are mingled with food and taste. During the "Ceremony for the Demons of Suicide" (He and He 1998), for example, two bowls of sacrificial food are prepared. The one containing what is called "white food", is filled with meat and white rice; the bowl containing "black food", is filled with meat, buckwheat, and maize mixed with rice.¹⁹ In-

¹⁹ The bowl of "white food" is offered for those who died unnatural death, "but whose location of death is known and who have received release into the afterlife", while the bowl of "black food" is offered for the "deceased persons whose location of death is not known and who have not been released into the afterlife" (He and He 1998, 159).

stances of this kind point at the multisensory dimension of Naxi culture and to the interplay of the senses that can eventually occur. Sensory perceptions are often so closely related that it is scarcely possible to completely separate one from another, and to deny this sensory interdependence would be non-sense, as Classen (1993) has shown.

The principal offering in the “Sacrifice to Heaven” has two stages (McKhann 1992): the first involves objects of sacrifice which are whole and raw, the second those that are cut up and cooked, some of which are divided among the participants at the end of the rite, while feasting together on the sacrificial ground. The raw/cooked²⁰ distinction is emphasised by the Naxi themselves, but it is something which requires further investigation on the basis of fieldwork just so does the rudimentary Naxi hierarchy of the senses we can establish at this stage and consisting of the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile modalities, in order of importance.

5. Conclusions

In this paper attention has been paid to understanding some of the steps in the making of Naxi identity and to investigating the extent to which traces of cross-cultural ethnic identity dynamics and adaptations can be preserved in food practices. The multidimensionality of food has been questioned to explore in what ways Naxi consumption and religious uses of aliments can contribute to the forging and transmission of their cultural identity. My point has been that data from the analysis of Naxi foodways reflect their position of Himalayan people standing between the rice, soybean and alcohol consuming culture of the Han majority to the North-East and the milk, butter, and barley eating Tibetan culture to the North-West. Clues have been detected that show they meanwhile hold distinctive food patterns for the expression of their own “peculiar Tibeto-Burman identity”.

Culture and ethnicity are indeed intricately connected, and it has been pointed out that Naxi food culture is also made up of concrete ways by which ethnic identity is preserved before becoming available for cultural contamination. The Naxi people are an example of the way in which cross-cultural food practices disclose cultural borders in the Tibetan-Yi corridor that have been revisited, re-defined, negotiated and, eventually, blurred. One of the issues that beckon further investigation is the extent to which Naxi religious uses of food are rooted either in Tibetan old Bön or in Tibetan Buddhism.

²⁰ Interestingly enough, the Ming and Qing empires classified tribal groups either as “cooked” (*shu* 熟) or “raw” (*sheng* 生) according to their degree of sinicization. The first, recognized the native chief’s (*tusi* 土司) authority and submitted to the imperial labor tax, while the latter, more barbarous, refused to submit to any kind of political control and authority (Chao 2008, 106), the consumption of raw food being regarded as an unequivocal sign of savagery since it had not gone through “the transforming power of fire [...], symbol of culture” (Dikötter 1992, 9).

Finally, some Naxi food practices and cosmology have been taken into account to gain an insight into their culturally different balances of the senses and their sensuous epistemology, in full awareness that at this stage my exploration has been merely suggestive and preparatory to future in-depth-analysis. I have indeed endeavoured to begin clearing the ground by sketching some possible developments for a multidisciplinary study of ethnicity and identity in Southwest China that is made up of various methodologies and extends across a number of disciplines including the study of religions, the anthropology of the senses, and food studies.

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