THE CHICKEN AND THE EGG

Cracking the Ontology of Divination in Southwest China

Katherine Swancutt

Abstract: Which comes first, divine agency or the calculations of diviners? Both are integral to divination, other predictive methods, and the ‘hatching out’ of new creation stories among the Nuosu of Southwest China. In this article, I present ethnography on divination in which eggs evoke the person’s position in the world while the bodies or bones of chickens are indices of health or prosperity. When cracking open raw eggs, peeling open slaughtered chickens, or reading chicken bones, diviners creatively draw upon the assistance of spirits and their own calculatory reflections in ways that encourage internal variation within their craft. Through case studies on illnesses and a new family tradition, I show that Nuosu inhabit a hybrid world that features cosmological proliferation, to which the creativity of divination responds.

Keywords: chicken, cosmological proliferation, creativity, divination, egg, hybridity, ontology, Southwest China

Seated on low stools in a household courtyard located in the urban quarters of the Ninglang Yi Autonomous County of Yunnan province in Southwest China, I observed what is often considered to be a mundane form of divination. It was the summer of 2019, and I was in the company of a local Nuosu ethno-historian, whom I call Mitsu, and two Chinese anthropology students. A Nuosu priest (*bimox* 比莫) was conducting the divination, and his clients had extended us the invitation. They were hoping to source the cause of persistent headaches, dizziness, and pain in the arm of a young woman in the household. In line with Nuosu etiquette, they presented the priest with a lacquerware wooden bowl, which, moments later, they filled halfway with water so that he could begin. Rubbing purificatory artemisia (*hxix ke* 黑溪) over a raw chicken’s egg, the priest briefly recounted the origins of his vocation. He then summoned

his own spirit helpers and the guardian spirits of his clients' household to assist him in the egg divination, which in Nuosu literally means 'to crack an egg into water to send away [bad things]' (*vaqip yysha* 𐄧𐄨𐄩𐄪).

Supported by these divine agents, the priest ordered each ghost or spirit responsible for the woman's illnesses to enter the egg. He recited the 'creation story of the chicken' (*vabbo vapat* 𐄧𐄨𐄩𐄪) while holding the egg over the bowl, then struck it several times with a knife to produce hairline cracks in its shell. Handing the slightly compromised egg to the young woman, he waited while she rubbed it swiftly over her arms, legs, shoulders, and torso before blowing into it at one end. She repeated this act several times, supported by her guardian spirits, in order that the egg could fully 'inhale' (*mgo* 𐄧𐄨) the illnesses from her body through the cracks in it. Having retrieved the egg from her, the priest emptied its contents into the bowl, where the divinatory scene would reveal the sources of illness in her body. Still chanting, the priest asked his spirit helpers to guide his own skilled and calculatory reflections on the divination. Then he ran a knife several times through the yolk, scoring it into quarters and opening it in the process. This opening of the yolk is analogous to the opening of the client's body, into which the priest aimed to see. But while the egg and especially its yolk represents the client, the shallow pool of water that supports the egg depicts her or his living surrounds. Mitsu later explained to me that the water evokes 'one's own position in the world' (*cyp njuo dde jjo dde* 𐄧𐄨𐄩𐄪𐄧𐄨𐄩𐄪) and includes the person's household, livestock, roads around the home, nearby mountains, and any spirits or ghosts within this environment. The priest therefore set out to reveal not only which ghosts or spirits brought illnesses to his client, but how they had affected her life at large. Scooping up water from the bowl with an empty eggshell half and pouring it back several times onto the egg, he generated bubbles around it and waited for the froth to settle.

An entire microcosm of bubbles gradually appeared before us. Many on the surface of the egg were the size of a pinhead, although some were larger or arranged in clusters chiefly within the egg white. Bubbles are assessed on features such as their size, whether they appear alone or in a cluster, how close they are to the yolk, and if they lie on the surface of the egg and water or are submerged beneath them. Leaning forward, the priest examined the bowl at close range to identify whether any bubbles lay beneath the surface. Following a creative hunch, he used the eggshell to scoop and pour more water onto the bubbles as a test of their tenacity (see fig. 1). Eventually he confirmed that there were several ghosts causing the woman's illnesses, which he described while pointing at them with either the knife or a twig that was handy. One large bubble had appeared at the upper left side of the yolk, which indicated the particularly powerful ghost (*ggit die wa sa* 𐄧𐄨𐄩𐄪𐄧𐄨𐄩𐄪) of a man who had died without descendants and did not receive his proper mortuary rites and routine offerings after death. Later, when meeting me in his office, Mitsu surmised that

FIGURE 1: Pouring water on the egg divination to test the tenacity of the bubbles within it. Photograph © Katherine Swancutt

this ghost was likely an accomplished man, such as a hero or mediator of legal disputes. There was also a small bubble attached to the right of the yolk, which revealed the ghost of a young male child (*ssep hni* 𑜋𑜨𑜃𑜫) who had died around the age of one. Finally, a large bubble within a cluster of smaller bubbles had appeared near the upper left of the yolk, signifying the mountain spirit (*mu si* 𑜎𑜤𑜂𑜫). Mitsu suspected that the mountain spirit had captured the young woman's soul (*yyr hla* 𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫), and, to indicate this, the priest pointed the knife at a bubble trapped just beneath the surface of the reading (see fig. 2). Quietly, Mitsu echoed the common Nuosu view that when a person's soul is lost, this is often because one or more wily ghosts or spirits have trapped it beneath a stone or some other object.

Once the priest had identified the sources of the young woman's illnesses, he closed the divination with a call for support to combat them. He summoned the assistance of the mountain spirit, followed by the guardian spirits of the young woman's household that protect its fate-fortune (*jjyp lup* 𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫) as well as its livestock and grains (*zza zze ke po* 𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫). Then he invoked the protection of the pregnancy spirit (*gep fi* 𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫) and briefly summoned the soul of the young woman to return home. The priest advised, though, that a ritual was needed to ensure that her soul would be recovered and to manage the other ghosts that had appeared in the divination. Finally, he added the artemisia, twig, and

FIGURE 2: Pointing at a bubble trapped just beneath the surface to indicate the client's lost soul. Photograph © Katherine Swancutt

eggshells to the bowl before handing it to a young man in the household, who waved it above the woman's head in one clockwise sweep. Taking it to the base of a tree growing in the courtyard, the young man disposed of its contents there.

At the Crossroads of Calculation and Divine Agency

This brief vignette reveals the hybrid nature of egg divination, in which spirit helpers, guardian spirits, the diviner's calculatory reflections, and the client are co-implicated and, to varying degrees, dependent on each other. In contrast to the other forms of divination discussed throughout this issue, Nuosu divination is simultaneously 'agentive' and 'calculatory' in the sense that William Matthews (see introduction, this issue) gives to these terms. This merging of divine agency and calculation encourages—and even necessitates—creativity in every kind of Nuosu divination, where priests, male shamans (*sunyit* 日*), female shamans (*mopnyit* 摸*), or ordinary persons allow spirit helpers and/or guardian spirits to guide their calculatory reflections on the divinatory findings. By using the term 'calculating', I do not mean to suggest that Nuosu divination requires a mathematical or counting-based approach. However, loosely defined, it does unfold as a calculatory 'measure', 'technique', 'test', or 'experiment to

get the right result’—all meanings captured by the polyvalent Nuosu term *nra* (𐄎), which can also mean ‘divination’. Thus, Nuosu conceptualize divination as a kind of calculatory *techné*, albeit a hybrid one in which spirit helpers and/or guardian spirits guide the diviner’s own creative reflections.

Given the multitude of bubbles that appear in egg divination, there are potentially endless outcomes that the diviner, in consultation with the client, must narrow down. Prominent bubbles often stand out as the ones that should be divined. Both the obviously visible bubbles on the surface of the reading and the stubbornly unmovable bubbles beneath it reflect characteristics of the ghosts or spirits that the diviner seeks to identify. Diviners tend to share certain conventions for interpreting bubbles, which form the ‘stock of images’—to borrow Stephan Feuchtwang’s phrasing in this issue—that they interpret. For example, in the divination described above, the large bubble situated within a cluster of smaller bubbles near the yolk indicated the mountain spirit, whereas the bubble trapped just beneath the surface of the reading indicated the client’s lost soul. As I show later in this article, a somewhat different, although related, divinatory pronouncement was made in an egg divination held for a former administrator of Mitsu’s ethno-historical team, a man whom I call Pilu. Creativity underpins the differences between these kinds of interpretations, just as it shapes the hybrid nature of divine agency and calculation.

Nuosu often consider egg divination to be common and prosaic, but this does not mean that it is accessible to anyone or easy to execute. Not every bubble is meaningful enough to be incorporated into the divinatory findings. Many bubbles only indicate the presence of one of numerous spirits residing in and around the client’s living environment or carry no significant weight within the divination, either for the client, who may briefly query their presence, or for the diviner, who emphasizes a different feature in the reading. There are also bubbles that no one bothers to identify because the divination already has answered the client’s questions. Moreover, no one tends to elaborate on how egg divination works unless specifically asked, at which point laypersons often say that diviners creatively draw upon their spirit helpers, guardian spirits, and calculatory skill, adding that the divination is facilitated by the client blowing illnesses into the egg. I quickly found that apart from egg diviners, most Nuosu do not know how to identify bubbles as specific ghosts or spirits. Priests and shamans may go some way toward explaining how they interpret bubbles, but they tend to allow that each diviner assesses them somewhat differently. Some even quip in Chinese that diviners follow their own spontaneous or ‘natural’ (*ziran de*) approach to the practice. Ultimately, then, there is a fair amount of creativity and variety among practitioners of egg divination.

Notably, neither the agency of spirits nor the diviner’s calculatory skill is exhausted in any given reading. As Mitsu observed, Nuosu do not seek to map out the entire cosmos with an egg divination but rather pursue the more

modest goal of identifying which ghosts or spirits are causing the problems at hand. Diviners must take care, though, to ensure that their own vision and judgment are not clouded by wily spirits or ghosts. If the divination goes wrong—for example, because the diviner failed to detect a powerful ghost—then a fresh divination is often arranged, preferably with a more skilled diviner who is not so easily fooled.

Through their craft, diviners throw light on more than the Nuosu epistemology of divination, by which I mean their knowledge of how to divine. They illuminate important features of the Nuosu life-world, in which a wide array of spirits, ghosts, and humans from different ethnic groups—as well as animals, plants, insects, forces of nature, and even things or objects—are co-implicated in each other’s existence. To show how this works, I start by giving some background to the Nuosu and to the connections they draw between chickens, eggs, humans, and the cosmos. I build this into a discussion of Nuosu creativity and their penchant for generating new creation stories, introducing new ritual approaches, and absorbing ontological hybrids. This sets the scene for my ethnography of how Nuosu divine with chicken bodies or bones, as well as two more case studies from my 2019 fieldwork on the predictions that they make with eggs. My findings reveal the hybrid nature of divine agency and calculation, rather than any supposed opposition between them, and I conclude with reflections on how the creativity of divination responds to a proliferating cosmos.

Creativity and Cosmological Proliferation

Located across the Liangshan mountains of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, the Nuosu are a Tibeto-Burman group who fall under the broad Chinese ethnonym of Yi. Many elements of Nuosu agricultural and pastoral livelihood are captured in their rich repertoire of ‘creation stories’ (*bbopat* 𐰇𐰺) about various beings, phenomena, and even skills. According to Mitsuo, the term for creation stories pairs an arcane word for ‘head’ (*bbo* 𐰇) with the verb ‘to hatch out’ (*pat* 𐰺), thus indicating something that hatches out of the mind. His etymology for the term is apt as there is no fixed corpus of creation stories, although some are recounted in priestly litanies and may appear in the Book of Origins (*Hnewo Tepyy* 𐰇𐰺𐰠𐰸), an oral history that carries the authoritative weight of a timeless classic (Bender 2008; Bender and Aku Wuwu 2019). Both creation stories and the Book of Origins inform not only Nuosu divination and other religious practices, but their understanding that the world has been shaped by creativity, hybridity, and proliferation.

Children routinely learn the Book of Origins (or certain parts of it) from adults, who recite to them how the world is populated with beings descended

from twelve tribes of snow. Six of these tribes were composed of bloodless plants, while the remaining six (the frog, snake, vulture and other magnificent birds, bear, monkey, and person) were composed of animals with blood. Chickens notably appear in the Book of Origins, not as a member of the six tribes with blood, but as a sacrificial animal (Bender and Aku Wuwu 2019: lxviii, 19). There is also the Nuosu folkloric tale that the cockerel summons the sun to rise in the morning with its call, checks that it is still moving across the heavens in the afternoon, and checks to ensure that it is setting in the evening. In some versions of this tale, a priest gives the cockerel its cockscomb as a reminder of its important role in the cosmos. Each of the three fleshy parts to the cockscomb symbolizes one leg of the sun's movement across the sky. However, Mitsu chose to emphasize a different, albeit cognate, view on the chicken's role in the cosmos, which he sourced to its creation story.

Mitsu observed that the vulture is the first bird to be described in the creation story of the chicken and that it is followed, in a genealogical line of descent, by birds of lesser magnificence—the eagle, peacock, ducks, geese, one local type of pheasant (*shu* 雉), and Hume's bar-tailed pheasant (*hxa* 雉)—until the chicken is mentioned. Checking a work in progress of his to confirm that these details were correct, Mitsu noted that the origins of the chicken are not explicitly given in its creation story, which only describes its cockscomb, feathers, and other physical traits. But he confirmed that before ritually sacrificing a chicken, the priest must recite its creation story as a way of respectfully beseeching it to protect the person in need of a sacrifice. The creation story of the chicken thus unfolds as one important “prelude to ritual life” (Bamo Qubumo 2001: 453). Chicken eggs, Mitsu noted, are also used in many smaller sacrifices that are held informally within the home. All in all, he concluded that the chicken is a popular choice in rituals because, being a common bird, it is inexpensive to slaughter and an easy source of eggs.

A combination of revealing continuities and discontinuities between humans, other beings (such as chickens), and spirit forces in the Nuosu universe is thus traceable to diverse sources, such as the Book of Origins, folkloric tales, and creation stories. Perhaps this should not be too surprising. After all, a similar balancing act between continuities and discontinuities is foundational to Philippe Descola's (2013) study of ‘modes of identification’ as ontological types. In Descola's scheme, the beings in an animistic world are distinguished from each other through discontinuities in their exterior bodily form. Animate beings also share certain ‘interior’ qualities that are generally not visible on the body but evidence important continuities between them, such as the common descent shared by the six tribes with blood, which may be interpreted through the lens of animism. Nuosu consider that members of the six tribes with blood belong to their ‘we-group’ of consanguineal relatives, whom they sometimes refer to by reverential titles such as ‘Paternal Uncle Bear’ (*Womox Avu* 舅熊) or ‘Eldest

Brother Frog' (Ssey *Axmur* སྐྱེད་ཀྱི་ཕྱོག་པོ་). By contrast, animals not included among the six tribes with blood belong to the 'out-group' of affinal relatives, as is the case with 'Maternal Uncle Tiger' (*Latmop Oyyx* མཚན་པོ་ལྷོ་ཁྱེད་).

Descola (2013: 236) suggests that "animist societies all emphasize the relational character of the cosmologies that they describe [such that] relations count for more than terms." Nuosu certainly emphasize the relational character of many beings in their life-world. But they often also evidence key attributes of Descola's other ontological types. Sometimes they prioritize the totemic "origin, of kinship, of similarity, or simply of inherence" (ibid.: 237) among the six tribes with blood over any relationships between them. Certain Nuosu rituals, for example, require "contingent forms of slaughter" (Swancutt 2020: 199) for frogs or monkeys. These rituals downplay relationships to the hapless animals, but do not challenge the terms on which they are related to humans. In other moments, Nuosu seem to inhabit "an analogical regime, [in which] humans and animals do not share the same culture, the same ethics, and the same institutions" (Descola 2013: 213). A good example of this is when Nuosu declare that divination, animal domestication, sacrifice, and revering the ancestors are strictly human pursuits.¹ Finally, some Nuosu treat new cars as hybrid 'objects' that exhibit traits not only of animism but also of "naturalism," in which distinctions are made "between nonhumans and humans, the latter being particularized by their minds, with their ability to create a limitless flux of objects, relations, and signs" (ibid.: 236). Given this, it is nearly impossible to tell which ontological type is "dominant" among Nuosu or "activated in the greatest number of situations in the treatment of both humans and nonhumans" (ibid.: 105).

Among Nuosu, the ontological types identified by Descola are not just entangled. To borrow the phrasing of Rane Willerslev and Olga Ulturgasheva (2012: 49), they are "co-implicated in and dependent on each other" to the extent that they "shadow and shade into each other rather than appear as two opposites of one dichotomy" (ibid.: 50; see also Swancutt 2012: 175–176). This routine shading between ontological types underpins what Wang Mingming (2017: 216) calls the "internally varying traditions" of any given world, which spring from creativity and may give rise to "cosmological proliferation" (ibid.: 201). Notably, Kaj Århem's (2016: 19) "hierarchical animism" also starts from the position that the world is composed of a "proliferation of spirits—nature spirits, ancestors and ghosts of all kinds [... which] tends to be hierarchically ordered with a Supreme Being—a transcendent subject—at the apex." If it would be possible to capture the Nuosu life-world within a single ontological heading, then perhaps it would be hierarchical animism, as the sky god Ngetit Guxnzy is the transcendent subject at the apex of their cosmos and an important source of hybridity within it.

Of particular importance to my discussion here, though, is the Nuosu penchant for creatively generating and absorbing new hybrids. Let me offer two

brief illustrative examples of how this works, which will lead me back to the hybrid nature of the Nuosu world and the creative ways in which divination responds to it. As a witty pastime, Nuosu often enjoy ‘hatching out’ new creation stories that are meant to charm and amuse an audience, even as they beg the question of how they came to enter the universe in the first place. The Nuosu anthropologist Jiarimuji provided me with an example of this during my summer 2019 fieldwork when he hatched out a creation story for cars, which have become the successor to fine horses through something akin to a genealogical line of descent. He observed that when cars were given the transport duties of horses, Nuosu bestowed on them the kind of attention that they formerly gave their equine steeds. Gradually, cars came to acquire some of the sentient (i.e., animistic) qualities of horses alongside the factory-produced mechanical (i.e., naturalistic) qualities of motor vehicles. I asked Jiarimuji whether relationships to cars had informed the recent fashion of ritually incorporating new vehicles into people’s lives to ensure their safe travel (cf. Swancutt 2016: 85–86). Jiarimuji creatively hatched out a further creation story to confirm that this was the case—namely, that sacrifices to cars have, genealogically speaking, succeeded the ritual consecration of horses. Thus, he revealed the Nuosu penchant for generating new ritual approaches and creation stories about them in order to accommodate hybrids.

Similarly, in my conversations with Jiarimuji about egg divination, he reminded me that Nuosu often creatively envision their former slaves as hybrids absorbed from other ethnic groups. In his words, when slaves crossed the “membrane” of the Nuosu “egg-shaped” society, they entered it as quasi-Nuosu persons (Jiarimuji 2010: 197; see also 204–206). The absorption of slaves was a common occurrence until Nuosu slavery was dismantled during China’s Democratic Reforms (*minzhu gaige*) of 1956–1957. But the hybrid nature of slaves can be traced further back into Nuosu myth-history since genealogies for Tibetans and the Han ethnic majority of China appear in the Book of Origins, revealing them to be simultaneously distant relatives and ethnic others (ibid.: 203). As Jiarimuji explained to me in the summer of 2019, Nuosu who hatch out or cleverly refer to creation stories like this are often assumed to have powerful guardian spirits. Not unlike the scholars and diviners that I discuss throughout this article, ordinary Nuosu creatively harness divine agency and calculation as a way of responding to hybridity in the world.

Carving Open Chickens: Mimicking the Body

One day I asked Mitsu and his ethno-historian colleague, whom I call Bahmat, if Nuosu ever wonder, which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Mitsu replied that, to his knowledge, there is no such equivalent Nuosu phrase or concept,

adding that this appeared to be an unanswerable question. Reflecting playfully for a moment, he then announced, as though answering a riddle, that it must be the chicken. Bahmat laughed and countered that it must be the egg. When I asked how they came to these answers, they laughed again and concluded that no one could know. But they stressed that, as ethno-historians, they could advise on how chickens and eggs have featured in Nuosu divination over time—thus presenting themselves in a similar light to those classical philosophers who, as Elsa G. Simonetti (this issue) observes, assumed the privileged position of anthropologists of the ancient world. Bahmat reminded me that egg divination has, as its corollary, the related practice of chicken divination, while Mitsu mused that perhaps all features of the chicken—including its eggs, body, and bones—are used for divination because it is the sacrificial animal most closely related to the person.

Bahmat, whose father had been a priest skilled in both egg and chicken divination, explained how ‘peeling the [juvenile] chicken’ (*va qyt* 剥鸡) is done. The diviner creatively relies upon spirit helpers, guardian spirits, calculatory skill, and the client, who blows air into a live juvenile chicken’s beak before rubbing the bird against his or her body. This causes the bird to inhale the client’s illness, just as the egg is made to do in egg divination. To facilitate the inhalation, Bahmat added that a juvenile chicken should not be given food or drink for a day before the divination, and a light-skinned rather than a dark-skinned chicken should be selected. Once the chicken is slaughtered, the diviner carefully peels back its skin with a knife, cuts open its body, and reads it as though it were an X-ray of the client. When examining the chicken’s organs, blood, and flesh, diviners focus on the ghosts or spirits that have penetrated the client’s body and look to see if the client’s soul has exited it. Thus, the chicken’s body mimics that of the client, but it is not used to map out the ways in which ghosts or spirits have affected the client’s position in the world and life at large, as happens in egg divination. Revealingly, as I learned elsewhere across the Liangshan highlands, ‘peeling the juvenile chicken’ also refers to a now arcane predictive method—rather than a form of divination—that anyone could use to detect rabies. Drawing upon their guardian spirits and calculatory observations, ordinary persons would rub an ill person’s body with a juvenile chicken to ‘pull’ (*mgo* 𪛗) any rabies into it. If the ill person were bitten by a rabid dog, many tiny dogs appeared in the chicken’s flesh and organs when it was slaughtered and peeled open. But they were not visible if the ill person had contracted rabies from eating the flesh of an animal bitten by a dog.

Mitsu, Bahmat, and Jiarimuji confirmed to me that by far the most common form of divination involves reading the bones of a chicken that is eaten during the course of a meal. Anyone may read chicken bones to gauge the wealth and prosperity of their household, lineage, or group of people, who in this case are ‘clients’ of the divination. Many Nuosu, though, prefer leaving the divining to

someone who excels at it, such as a priest, shaman, person of learning, or the oldest person there. Drawing upon their guardian spirits and calculatory skill, Nuosu read the bones and often also pass them around to gather second opinions while discussing their results in the round. Chicken bones are read after the meat has been eaten clean from them, whereupon they are held up to the light. Once backlit, the bones acquire a modicum of translucency and become easy to read. Thigh bones (the femur) are interpreted by the small dark spots that appear within them in a kind of divination called ‘reading the chicken’s thighs’ (*vabbur hxep* 巴卜), whereas tongue bones (the epibranchials and urohyal) are interpreted in terms of the directions in which they bend, which Nuosu call ‘reading the chicken’s tongue [or language]’ (*vahxa hxep* 巴夏). In each case, the bones reveal the prosperity of the ‘insiders’ (typically the household) vis-à-vis the prosperity of the ‘outsiders’ (often guests) whom they may encounter. A hint of rivalry frequently underpins the opposition between insiders and outsiders.

Observe that the chicken’s thighs are read as a set (see fig. 3). Nuosu seek to locate two dark spots in each femur when divining, with the understanding that the femur on the diviner’s left represents the insiders, while the femur on the diviner’s right represents the outsiders.² A good divinatory outcome typically suggests that wealth, prosperity, and all good things will accumulate in the

FIGURE 3: Reading the chicken’s thighs. Photograph © Katherine Swancutt

FIGURE 4: Reading the chicken's tongue. Photograph © Katherine Swancutt

other fare that somehow became 'caught' by the chicken as it was cooked for human consumption.

I had learned a fair amount about chicken and egg divination during my summer 2019 fieldwork trip. However, Bahmat wanted to deepen my understanding through a discussion of his family tradition, which is not a form of divination but a predictive method. Throwing creative light on the connections between chickens, eggs, prosperity, and the hybrid nature of divine agency and calculation, he recounted to me the story of his paternal great-grandmother who had started the family tradition. As Bahmat explained, she had lived a particularly hard life because her husband had died prematurely, leaving her with two young sons and two young daughters. In one especially difficult year, both daughters died of upset stomachs and then her eldest son died. Thus, when the celebrations for the annual Torch Festival arrived, she could not bring herself to feel it was a happy occasion and chose to start her household's sacrifices with the simple offering of an egg, rather than the usual slaughter of a chicken. With the passage of time, her only remaining son, who became Bahmat's grandfather, grew up and married. Life became better for the entire family, and the grief passed. But to honor the strength and tenacity of this great-grandmother, her descendants retained the custom of offering an egg in lieu of a chicken at

every Torch Festival. Two branches of the family line continue this tradition to the present day: Bahmat's family and the family of his uncle.

Reflecting for a moment on this tradition, Bahmat noted that an egg is always a simpler offering than a chicken, but that he considers it to be a better choice than the yellow-colored chicken that is customarily sacrificed at the Torch Festival. He reminded me that many Nuosu consider certain colors of chickens to be best for specific rituals. Alternatively, they divine which color—yellow, black, red, white, or any other chicken-like color—would be most auspicious for them personally to sacrifice at a given moment. Bahmat, though, had reflected many times upon the benefits that an egg sacrifice might bring to a person. Guided by his own creativity and guardian spirits, he concluded that since no one can know until an egg hatches what color the chicken inside it will be, there is only one certainty—namely, that when an egg is used instead of a chicken, one reaps the benefits of every possible chicken color. Thus, he offers an egg instead of a chicken for two reasons, the first being family tradition and the second being his personal, albeit creative, interpretation of the benefits of an egg sacrifice. Our discussion reminded me of the witty person who, as I found with Jiarimuji, routinely hatches out new creation stories about hybrids in the Nuosu life-world.

By his own admission, Bahmat takes a creative view of the relationship between divine agency and human calculation, both of which are implicated in his family tradition. But he is not alone, as a similar notion of somehow finding the good fortune to land on one's feet underpins the everyday practice of divining with chicken bones. In each case, Nuosu open themselves up to what David Zeitlyn (quoting Koselleck, this issue) calls a new "horizon of expectation" that is based upon personal choices and contemplated outcomes. I therefore asked Bahmat if the decision to sacrifice an egg rather than a chicken at the Torch Festival strengthens prosperity and fate-fortune. Nodding, he said that the family tradition had increased the fate-fortune of his household and ensured its continuity through time. He noted that his great-grandmother most likely did not think about the various reasons for using an egg instead of a chicken. She would have chosen to use an egg out of grief. Nonetheless, Bahmat has continued the tradition because he always had success when offering an egg. Both the Torch Festival and the Nuosu New Year, he reminded me, are held to worship the ancestors, guardian spirits, and other spirits that increase fate-fortune, prevent illnesses, propagate livestock and grains, and grow prosperity. Looking me directly in the eyes, he added that although Nuosu tend to focus on the patriline more than the matriline, his household and that of his uncle have retained a tradition started by his great-grandmother. A lasting tradition started by a woman is rare and remarkable, he said, before concluding that the ample prosperity and strong guardian spirits of his once threatened family line are living proof that starting the Torch Festival with the sacrifice

of an egg, rather than a chicken, benefits the whole household. Here, Bahmat worked to persuade me of the value of opening oneself up to an egg sacrifice, which like divination and other predictive methods, unleashes the creative benefits of divine agency and calculation.

Cracking Open Eggs: Mapping Positions in the World

Up to this point, I have considered the hybrid nature of Nuosu divination, other predictive methods, and the hatching out of new creation stories, ritual approaches, or family traditions. In this final ethnographic vignette, I show that ghostly interference may also shape the ways in which divinatory results are understood. Not long into my 2019 fieldwork, I was invited by Pilu, a frequent visitor to the offices of Mitsu, Bahmat, and their ethno-historian colleagues, to accompany him to a rural village just an hour and a half's drive from the Ninglang county town center. Pilu gave little information about this trip, other than that he wanted to invite a priest to hold an egg divination for him so that he could address some pressing questions. Later Mitsu admitted to me in private that the main reason Pilu was arranging the trip was that he wanted to help my research. Being curious nonetheless, I agreed to accompany Pilu and his wife on that day. After a cheerful car ride, we arrived at the home of a priest in Pilu's lineage, who promptly arranged to slaughter a large black chicken for us to eat. As it cooked indoors, the priest asked Pilu, his wife, and me to join him in his courtyard, where he held two egg divinations.

We gathered in an open cement square, flanked in the Nuosu style by wooden livestock pens, where Pilu and his wife drew the eggs they had brought for the divination from an immaculate box. The priest chanted while starting the first divination for Pilu's wife, who complained of a sore knee joint. After she had blown into the egg and rubbed it against her torso and limbs several times so that it would inhale her illness, she handed it to the priest, who chose not to use a knife but to crack it directly against a lacquered wooden bowl half-filled with water. Decanting the egg into this bowl, the priest took a moment to carve open and separate its yolk using the sharp edges of its two empty eggshell halves. Guided by his spirit helpers and the guardian spirits of Pilu's household, he reflected for a while on the divination before noting that a bubble near the yolk revealed that the ghost of rheumatism (*sy si* ㄣㄣ) had caused his client's illness. He looked long and hard at a cluster of bubbles trapped deep beneath the surface of the reading before following his creative hunch to test it. Repeatedly scooping up water from the bowl with an eggshell and pouring it onto the trapped bubbles until he was certain they would not move, he collected a piece of straw from the courtyard floor, pointed at them, and declared that they indicated the soul of Pilu's wife had left her body. Taking a few more moments to

pour water onto the egg, the priest noted that many other bubbles had appeared together in the center of the bowl. However, he considered this to be a good sign, which showed that the whole family was united rather than apart. This would help Pilu's wife to overcome the rheumatism and soul loss.

Having disposed of the egg and again filled the bowl halfway with fresh water, the priest held another divination for Pilu, who was suffering from tinnitus. As the priest chanted, Pilu blew into the egg (see fig. 5) and rubbed it against his torso and limbs several times so that it would inhale his illness before handing it to the priest, who cracked it directly into the bowl. Contemplating the divinatory scene with his spirit helpers and the guardian spirits of Pilu's household, the priest prepared to identify the sources of his illness. Pointing at a bubble that had appeared on the yolk, he declared that this indicated the wily ghost of an animal (*sy lup* ཡལུཔ) that had lived on a mountaintop or been kept as livestock. But he had a creative hunch that another bubble indicated a particularly powerful and tenacious ghost. To test for this, he scooped water from the bowl and poured it repeatedly onto the egg until he was satisfied that he had identified the ghost of an ancestor (*nip jjup wa sa* རྒྱུ་ཤུལ་བ་ས་ཤུལ་) that lacks immediate descendants. Pilu explained that Nuosu typically provide their ancestors with routine offerings of meat, grain, and alcohol, as well as the fire, smoke, and warmth of the hearth. But as this kind of ghost lacks descendants, it travels

FIGURE 5: Blowing into the egg to make it inhale illnesses for the divination. Photograph © Katherine Swancutt

to the homes of its near relatives to obtain the needed offerings. Like all ghosts, it invariably brings illness in its wake. Not yet content to finish his search, the priest scooped and poured more water at length onto the egg before pausing to discuss a cluster of bubbles that had appeared on its surface, near to its middle, which revealed the presence of the mountain spirit. He poured one more round of water onto the egg, as a final test, and let its contents settle (see fig. 6). A large bubble appeared just under the surface of the water, close to the cluster of bubbles signifying the mountain spirit. The priest confirmed this to be a good sign, explaining that this large bubble represented Pilu's soul. Since they were in close proximity, the mountain spirit would protect Pilu. Reassuring us both, he added that the human soul is only lost when this kind of large bubble is deeply submerged or, alternatively, positioned clearly on the surface of the water. Note that in Pilu's reading and in the divination that I described at the opening of this article, both priests attributed a similar appearance to the bubbles that they identified as the mountain spirit or the client's soul, but that Pilu was found to be in possession of his soul.

FIGURE 6: The priest pours water onto an egg divination as his client, using a straw, points at a bubble within it. Photograph © Katherine Swancutt

When the divinations were completed, Pilu and I took a moment to discuss different kinds of ghosts with the priest, including the ancestor that lacks immediate descendants. However, our conversation was cut short after a few minutes when Pilu paused, tightly shut his eyes, and pressed his thumb and index finger against his tear ducts. It appeared as though he were suffering from tinnitus again—and inwardly I wondered whether this was because he was being haunted in our presence by his ancestor. Nuosu consider that ghosts are attracted to conversations about them, which they disrupt in the ‘capricious’ sense of troublemaking that Olaf Almquist (this issue) attributes to the Greek gods of antiquity. Sensing that this may have been the case, I waited soberly for the moment to pass. We then stood up collectively, without saying anything more, and returned to the priest’s home to enjoy the chicken lunch awaiting us.

On the following day, I visited Mitsu in his office and discussed the egg divinations that Pilu had requested. Mitsu asked what I had understood, and I recounted what I had seen. Quietly, I asked Mitsu about Pilu’s tinnitus, admitting my fear that our conversations about ghosts might have exacerbated it. But Mitsu calmly replied that he did not think this was the case, as the ancestor that lacks immediate descendants is known to cause an eye illness. He noted that once a ritual is held for this kind of ghost, it tends to depart from the home satisfied, without returning. I then asked if this ghost also causes tinnitus, and Mitsu confessed that it does, but added that the responsibility ultimately lay with Pilu to hold a ritual that would send it away. Although Mitsu felt that the ritual was necessary, he explained that Pilu may not hold it if his tinnitus is not too extreme. Since the ghost haunting him wanders between the homes of its near relatives, Pilu might wait for someone else to pick up the burden and costs of hosting the ritual.

Casting a glance at the gradually relaxing expression on my face, Mitsu provided me with the backstory to Pilu’s egg divination. He said that in late 2016, Pilu’s elder brother had died aged 78 or 80. Ordinarily, Pilu would have invited a senior priest whom he had known well to conduct the funeral, but this priest also had died some time earlier, so he invited the priest who had held the egg divinations instead. Several months later, Pilu invited him again to conduct the elaborate final post-mortuary rites (*nipmu cobi* 尼普木措比) for his elder brother. However, the problem remains that Pilu’s elder brother has no descendants to offer him meat, grains, and alcohol, along with the warmth, fire, and smoke of the hearth. Mitsu thus surmised that when my conversation with Pilu and the priest was stopped short after the egg divinations, it was not because the ghost had hurt Pilu’s eyes or ears. Instead, Mitsu felt that Pilu had suddenly recalled his elder brother in the midst of our conversation and realized that the egg divination confirmed he had become the ghost of a forlorn ancestor. Making this connection, Mitsu said, must have filled Pilu with deep sadness. I remembered

that Nuosu mourning often continues long after a death, even if it is ideally meant to end after the final post-mortuary rites. One common sign of long-term mourning is the effort to staunch the flow of tears by holding a thumb and index finger to one's tear ducts. It was therefore possible that both Pilu's grief and some amount of ghostly induced tinnitus had been brought about by our divination session. As though sensing this possibility, Mitsu concluded that the ancestor haunting Pilu only comes to its relatives when the post-mortuary rite is not held or when something has gone awry after it. To underscore this, he repeated that the solution to Pilu's haunting is holding the necessary ritual, which like the egg divinations we had seen, would creatively harness the priest's spirit helpers and calculatory skills to good effect.

Concluding Reflections on Creativity and Hybridity

Throughout this article, I have proposed that the hybrid nature of divine agency and calculation underpins Nuosu divination, other predictive methods, and the hatching out of new creation stories, family traditions, or ritual approaches. In particular, I have suggested that Nuosu inhabit a hybrid world, to which the creativity of divination responds. To illustrate this ethnographically, I have presented my case studies on the creative connections that Nuosu draw between chickens, eggs, and finding the good fortune to land on their feet. One important realization along the way has been that the Nuosu penchant for generating and absorbing new hybrids problematizes Descola's (2013) project of determining which mode of identification (animism, totemism, analogism, or naturalism) might be dominant among them. My ethnography has shown that each of these modes is actually co-implicated in Nuosu life to such an extent that they shade into each other, rather than operating as contrasting elements on an ontological grid.

But I want to suggest that ethnographic studies of divination should go further by revealing that creative ways of engaging with the world often push at the edges of multiple and co-implicated ontologies. Bahmat's family tradition is a case in point that is worth briefly revisiting here. Since 2015, when he first joined the ethnological institute in Ninglang, I have watched Bahmat recommend his family tradition to Mitsu and other colleagues on numerous occasions. In turn, they have shown genuine curiosity about his egg sacrifice and openly pondered its benefits with me and among themselves. But to my knowledge, no one else has yet tested out the egg sacrifice in their homes. This is the case even though Nuosu often slightly adjust their sacrifices for the Torch Festival every few years by choosing animals of a different color or type to prevent the reoccurrence of anything inauspicious from the previous year. When this happens, they creatively allow their guardian spirits to guide

their calculatory reflections on which ritual approach might work best. Their creativity here is modest and certainly not designed to overturn the ontological assumptions of Nuosu at large, such as their notions about the kin-like relations among the six tribes with blood. Yet it is precisely this sort of spontaneously ‘natural’ creativity that encourages them to test out hunches for how to improve their positions in the world, through divination and hybrid methods such as Bahmat’s egg sacrifice or Jiarimuji’s sacrifices to cars. Hybrid methods like these do more than encourage internally varying traditions among Nuosu. They give anthropologists (and other scholars) of divination good reason to start their analyses from an exploration of proliferation in the cosmos, rather than from perhaps unduly rigid assumptions that may obfuscate the ways in which the creativity of divination responds to ontology.

Beyond this, there is the question of whether diverse approaches to the same divination practice might show that diviners are in doubt about the logical interdependence of divine agency, calculation, and their own ontological suppositions. Some Nuosu priests I know have expressed not so much doubt as curiosity and wonder over how humans and spirits might shape the directions in which their divinatory practices or ontology may ‘go’ over time. However, due to the hybrid nature of divine agency and calculation, they are reluctant to offer any universal pronouncements on this. They remain acutely aware of the difficulties in analyzing their own particular modes of creativity, which complicate humans and spirits.

What I have shown, then, is that Nuosu both conceptualize and engage with the world in terms of how they are positioned within it. Neither fixed nor static, they experience moments of prosperity but also its absence when spirits or ghosts assail them, causing illness, soul loss, and any number of problems. Nuosu push back against adversity with divination, other predictive methods, and novel ritual approaches that carry their own creation stories within them. Yet as even the most experienced of diviners cannot reveal the cosmos in full, they must creatively rely on their spirit helpers, guardian spirits, skilled calculations, and clients. Anthropologists may be tempted to ask what might hatch out of this ‘natural’ approach to divination next. But among Nuosu, the matter of which takes precedence—divine agency or calculation—remains a chicken and egg question.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank William Matthews for inviting me to speak at the workshop “Ontology and Prediction in Divination: Ethnographic and Historical Perspectives,” held at the London School of Economics on 20–21 June 2019. While this article emerged afterward, it benefited from the generous comments shared at that event. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers and to Hans Steinmüller for stimulating comments. Any shortcomings are mine alone. This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant agreement No. 856543).

Katherine Swancutt is a Reader in Social Anthropology, Director of the Religious and Ethnic Diversity in China and Asia Research Unit, and Project Lead of “Cosmological Visionaries” (ERC Synergy Grant No. 856543) at King’s College London. For over two decades, she has conducted fieldwork across Inner Asia on shamanism and animism. Her most recent research is on dreams, cosmology, and climate change. She is the author of *Fortune and the Cursed* (2012), co-editor of *Animism beyond the Soul* (2018), and editor of *Crafting Chinese Memories: The Art and Materiality of Storytelling* (2021). E-mail: katherine.swancutt@kcl.ac.uk

Notes

1. According to the Book of Origins, in myth-historical times the Spirit Monkey, Anyut Ddussyt, clumsily sacrificed a chicken, which caused the earth to overheat (Bender 2008: 30; Bender and Aku Wuwu 2019: lxviii; see also 18–20). This botched sacrifice may be taken as evidence of the Spirit Monkey’s incompetence when it comes to sharing the same culture, ethics, and institutions as human beings. However, Jiarimuji (pers. comm., 30 April 2021) explained that Anyut Ddussyt should be understood not as monkey per se, but as a monkey-like and proto-human being, which adds an additional layer of complexity to the ontological hybrids that have emerged from the six tribes with blood.
2. In everyday Nuosu life, the right side is associated with insiders, men, and the living, whereas the left side is associated with outsiders, women, and the dead. However, Nuosu consider that this orientation is inverted both among the dead and within the sacred world of the spirits, which is what they engage with during divination. Therefore, when interpreting chicken bones, the left side is routinely associated with the insiders and the right side with the outsiders.

References

- Århem, Kaj. 2016. "Southeast Asian Animism in Context." In *Animism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kaj Århem and Guido Sprenger, 3–30. London: Routledge.
- Bamo Qubumo. 2001. "Traditional Nuosu Origin Narratives: A Case Study of Ritualized Epos in *Bimo* Incantation Scriptures." *Oral Tradition* 16 (2): 453–479.
- Bender, Mark. 2008. "'Tribes of Snow': Animals and Plants in the Nuosu *Book of Origins*." *Asian Ethnology* 67 (1): 5–42.
- Bender, Mark, and Aku Wuwu, trans. 2019. *The Nuosu Book of Origins: A Creation Epic from Southwest China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Brightman, Marc, Vanessa Grotti, and Olga Ulturgasheva, eds. 2012. *Animism in Rainforest and Tundra: Personhood, Animals, Plants and Things in Contemporary Amazonia and Siberia*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Descola, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jiarimuji. 2010. "Lun Liangshan Yizu zu shu Rentong de Dan Xing Gouzao: Cong Xiao Liangshan de 'Nongchang' Xianxiang Shuoqi" [On the egg-shaped structure of Liangshan Yi ethnic identity: A field study of 'slave villages' in Xiao Liangshan]. *Shehuixue Yanjiu* [Sociological Studies] 5: 192–207.
- Swancutt, Katherine. 2012. "Masked Predation, Hierarchy and the Scaling of Extractive Relations in Inner Asia and Beyond." In Brightman et al. 2012, 175–194.
- Swancutt, Katherine. 2016. "The Art of Capture: Hidden Jokes and the Reinvention of Animistic Ontologies in Southwest China" *Social Analysis* 60 (1): 74–91. <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2016.600106>.
- Swancutt, Katherine. 2020. "Animal Release and the Sacrificial Ethos in Inner Asia." *Inner Asia* 22 (2): 199–216. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22105018-12340147>.
- Wang Mingming. 2017. "Some Turns in a 'Journey to the West': Cosmological Proliferation in an Anthropology of Eurasia." *Journal of the British Academy* 5: 201–250.
- Willerslev, Rane, and Olga Ulturgasheva. 2012. "Revisiting the Animism versus Totemism Debate: Fabricating Persons among the Eveny and Chukchi of Northeastern Siberia." In Brightman et al. 2012, 48–68.