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The “body of ritual” transformed: discourses and actions in the Daba rituals among the Na (Moso)

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Abstract

Anthropologists have adopted different approaches in order to analyze discourses in ritual context. This paper, based on long-term field investigations, aims to discuss the Na's Daba rituals from the angle of enunciation. By describing the system of ritual knowledge, namely the “body of ritual” to the Na, and by presenting the transformations of such a system in the ritual “mukrabu,” the author argues that the decomposition and the arrangement of ritual actions are essentially accomplished by the Daba's performances of enunciation, which represents a crucial aspect of ritual processes. In this perspective, modes of various practices of discourse should constitute an important dimension of ritual studies.

Keywords: The Na, Daba, Ritual action, Ritual process, Enunciation

Introduction

Bronislaw Malinowski proposed that “besides the firm outline of tribal constitution and crystallized cultural items which form the skeleton, besides the data of daily life and ordinary behavior, which are, so to speak, its flesh and blood, there is still to be recorded the spirit – the natives' views and opinions and utterances.” (Malinowski 1922, p. 25) With respect to ritual studies, exploration and analysis of ritual discourse are conducive to anthropologists' in-depth understanding of various societies and cultures. Demmer and Gaenzle stated that “rite creates an arena of discourse (‘discourse’ shall be understood as linguistic performance in interaction), in which various verbal strategies are used to change social relationship, moral problems and people's opinion on social cultural reality.” (Demmer and Gaenzle 2007, p. 1).

Influenced by linguistics and semiology, the “performative approach” of ritual discourse was very popular in the western academic circles. Ritual discourse was studied as an independent “Text.” It is deemed that discourse has powers of communication, persuasion, warning and comforting, thus forming ritual action (Austin 1962). This mode of thinking is reflected clearly in Claude Lévi-Strauss's classic analysis on the curing ritual performed among the Cuna Indians of Panama in the event of a difficult childbirth. He believed that just like the psychoanalysts to deal with the unconsciousness of their patients, the healing spells of Cuna shamans reproduce a certain “deep structure” of local mythological systems; thereby, the ritual has some magical

“symbolic efficacy” (Lévi-Strauss 1958, p. 205–226). Similarly, Victor Turner suggested to discussing the “semantics” of ritual symbols. In his analysis of Ndembu rituals in Zambia, Victor Turner used various types of oral performances (including singing, speech, quarrel, and guessing) to investigate the semantical significance of symbols by combining them with ritual process (Turner 1995).

However, semiotic interpretation of ritual discourse has been criticized by many scholars. Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw pointed out that traditional anthropology over-emphasizes on ritual’s functions of communication and expression. Ritual sequence is composed of specific “actions,” including verbal actions (e.g., singing odes and reading prayers) and non-verbal actions (e.g., waving lamps and walking around statues). Information transmission is not the primary goal of ritual since the participants cannot understand the language or behaviors of ritual experts on many occasions (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). In the same spirit, Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi revisited the famous ritual case “naven” and put forward the following statement:

“Casting our minds back to the role played by certain utterances in naven, we might even say that we are thus moving on from the study of actions in *loco verbi* to the study of *verba in loco actus*. We are thus moving on from the (sociological or semiological) interpretation of symbolism to the establishment of a model which accounts for its persistence in time in terms of the organization of a sequence of acts” (Houseman and Severi 1998, p. 255).¹

Based on investigation on practices of ritual discourse, oral performance consists for numerous anthropologists an important component of ritual action. Pierre Déléage discussed the initiation ritual among the Sharanahua in the west of Amazon Basin. Through examination of related singing contents, he explained how young candidates absorb step by step new knowledge during different learning stages and finally become shaman (Déléage 2009). Based on investigation on the writing system and the chanting practices of the Bimo among the Yi in Shilin of Yunnan Province, Aurélie Névet described the process of “revitalization” of local communities in ritual contexts (Névet 2008). By contrast, a large number of related researches in China consist of data collection and text analysis. For example, Zhao Zhizhong translated and interpreted the “spiritual songs” of Manchu shamans in the Songhua River basin from the angle of “minority literature” (Zhizhong 2010). Lamu Gatusa organized to translate more than 70 pieces of the Na’s Daba enunciation, but there is lack of description of corresponding ritual context (Lamu 1999). Multiple volumes of *Research on Chinese Folk Ritual Music* edited by Xiao Mei; Cao Benye and Liu Hong introduced musical elements of folk oral rites in Northeast China, Central China, South China, and East China (Cao, 2007a; Cao, 2007b; Liu, 2012; Xiao, 2014).

In this paper, the author tends to demonstrate how *verba in loco actus* plays an important and unique role in the Na’s Daba ritual process, by presenting his own studies on ritual discourse based on a long-term investigation. The Na (also known as the Mosuo People) on the Sichuan-Yunnan Border in the Southwest China have long been a “hotspot” of anthropological and ethnological studies. They call themselves “nazi,” “naRu,” or “nahing,” while “Zi,” “Ru,” and “hing” all refer to “people.”² The Na are an

agricultural group with a population of about 30,000. They mainly live in Muli County and Yanyuan County in Sichuan Province and Zhongdian County (now known as Shangri-La County) and Ninglang County in Yunnan Province. The Na's kinship system is matrilineal: "lhe" is the basic kinship and economic unit, which is translated as "lignée"; the kinship unit superior to lignée is "sizi," which means "lineage" (Cai 1997, p. 97–99, p. 129–132). The Na have their own language, which is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Sino-Tibetan family, but there is no writing system. They are adepts of Tibetan Buddhism since at least the Ming Dynasty (Compile Committee of *Yanyuan County Annals* 2000, p. 1153). Meanwhile, the Na have their own religious tradition, which is represented by—and named after—the character "Daba," specialist of ritual and divination.

The academic circle has made few researches on the Daba and related ritual practices. Most of existing researches on the Na's society and culture focus on their matrilineal system, sexual life modes, and related cultural symbols. Two important works published in 1980s (Zhan et al. 1980; Yan and Song 1983) introducing the social organizations of the Na have attracted gained attentions from scholars in anthropology, ethnology, and history, as well as from the public. Based on a long-term field investigation, Cai Hua has made a profound study on the Na's social structure and kinship system and introduced the Daba tradition and related rites (Cai 1997). In *Naxi and Moso Ethnography*, Shi Chuangang described the Na's funeral rites and related symbols; Christine Mathieu introduced the Daba tradition in Labo County, Yunnan Province (Oppitz and Hsu 1998). On the other hand, due to influences from the development of tourism, commercialization, and globalization, the Na's society and culture is experiencing great changes. The ritual tradition represented by the Daba is now fading quickly. From 2003 to 2017, the author has conducted multiple fieldworks of a total length of 22 months in the Na's villages in Sichuan and Yunnan,³ in order to understand various ritual practices of Daba, especially the enunciation ("cho" in local language) during ritual processes. "Enunciation" refers in the present paper to the fact that the officiant Daba pronounces, recites, and sings specific contents through various rhythms, melodies, tones, volumes, and moods during the ritual.⁴ The author has cooperated with multiple Daba and local people to observe, interpret, and analyze different ritual cases. More than 60 pieces enunciated by Daba have been systematically recorded and translated. Moreover, the author has served as assistant of several Daba in actual ritual processes to understand, verify, and review continuously learned knowledge.

The role of enunciation in Daba's ritual process is examined in this paper in two steps: firstly, the author presents the contents, ways, and basic characteristics of ritual enunciation of the Daba; secondly, he describes a specific ritual case ("mukrabu") to demonstrate the Daba's performances of enunciation as essential ritual actions.

Daba's enunciation

Traditionally, each Na lineage has its own Daba who is responsible for internal religious affairs. The old Daba will select one or several young clever boys with excellent memories from the lineage and teach them as apprentices.⁵ During the long learning process (generally over 10 years), the apprentices train and strengthen their enunciation ability continuously, mainly in two aspects: firstly, since the Na have no characters, the Daba

master has to teach the enunciation contents sentence by sentence to apprentices orally, and the apprentices have to remember them well by heart; secondly, the apprentices are also assistants of the Daba (“bidha” in vernacular terms) in rituals, in order to observe and learn how to perform enunciation. The latter includes adjustments of contents, changing the order and mode of enunciation (e.g., tone, volume, melody, and rhythm), and completing corresponding gestures or bodily movements.

Fundamental enunciation and general enunciation

Daba’s enunciation can be divided into two types according to the contents. One type is “bugumi.” The name refers to “the body of ritual,” where “bu” means “ritual” and “gumi” means “body.” The author calls this as “fundamental enunciation.” The other type includes all enunciations except for fundamental enunciation. They have no uniform name and the author calls them as “general enunciation.”

Contents of fundamental enunciation are shown in Table 1. The enunciation order is fixed (1~11):

As its name implies, fundamental enunciation actually covers all kinds of ritual practices. In relatively simple ritual processes, the Daba who officiates has only to enunciate from “hanagu” to “pudZiola” then repeats them for one or two times. In large and complex ritual processes, the Daba has to accomplish all fundamental enunciation from “hanagu” to “mulidZibu” and repeats for several times.

Now, let us examine more closely the contents of fundamental enunciation. Firstly, fundamental enunciation involves specific ritual actions and refers to ritual processes directly: through “Zimukrua,” the Daba introduces both the reason (strange dreams) and the opportunity (good divination in front of gods) of current ritual practices; then, he adopts important measures towards the object—malefic spirits that threaten greatly the human beings—through “bujutu” and “émiso”; he then demonstrates the material guarantees of ritual process through “jiZi,” and fights against the enemies in actual life to ensure the success of the ritual through “dhigaidagai.”

Table 1 Fundamental enunciation

No.	Title	Main content
1	“hanagu”	Basic code of human conduct
2	“Zimukrua” ^a	Human dreaming many fantastic scenes, then performing good divination in front of gods
3	“dhadha”	Succession of Daba in the lineage since the ancient time
4	“bujutu”	Admonitory talk to malefic spirits (“tsi”)
5	“émiso”	Recognizing and describing species and sources of malefic spirits
6	“jiZi”	Describing ritual offerings and tools
7	“pudZiola”	Geneses and development of the societies of the Han, Tibetans and Na
8	“luee”	Birth and development of the human society
9	“dZitsiradZio”	Birth of the external world (e.g., mountains, valleys and rivers)
10	“dhigaidagai”	Fighting back against the enemies in human society
11	“mulidZibu” ^b	Legendary black-white war representing the Good and the Evil

^aThis can be further divided into “Zimukrua” and “wangtsiyé.” The former means dream and the later refers to divination process and good results

^bAccording to different accents, some Daba also call it “mulidZiba”

Secondly, fundamental enunciation also involves the question of “legitimacy” of Daba’s ritual practice, for “dhadha” consisting of the names of previous Daba masters and the gods reflects the history of inheritance of the Daba’s knowledge, and “pudZiola” introduces the important role played by Daba in different societies, such as how they bless ordinary people through rituals. If the enunciation of “dhadha” from one hand underlines the continuity of the legitimacy of the officiant Daba in a temporal span, “pud-Ziola,” on the other hand, emphasizes its spatial diffusion among various ethnic groups.

Finally, fundamental enunciation also refers to the basic code of human conduct (“hanagu”), the genesis and development of different societies (“pudZiola”), the evolution of the human society (“luee”), the birth of the external world (“dZitsiradZio”), and the legendary war between the Good and Evil (“mulidZibu”). While these contents reflect traditional morality, values, and cosmology in the Na’s culture, it is crucial to point out that when the officiant Daba enunciates, he actually “animates” the knowledge that he has learnt from his master to accomplish current ritual processes. In this sense, “hanagu” is not only a declaration of the Na’s basic principles of daily production and life but also a mean for the Daba to initiate and perform a series of ritual actions. Similarly, the legends and myths on ethnic groups, developments of societies, wars, and cosmogenesis, they all become practical tools for the Daba to carry out rituals. For example, when Daba enunciate “luee” and “dZitsiradZio” repeatedly during the worshipping of specific spirits, it is believed to be the proper way to maintain equal communications between humans and spirits, like “chatting.”

Compared to fundamental enunciation, general enunciation involves more extensive contents, including a lot of common enunciation contents which are present in all kind of rituals (e.g., “burning incenses” or “sogai” in the Na language) and specific contents which are only present in certain ritual processes (e.g., “gubumuzoZi” which is used in worshipping the powerful spirits “gu”). Topics of general enunciation might be the description of certain entities (such as spirits and gods) or of specific actions.

Characteristics of enunciation

Depending on its content, the enunciation varies from several minutes to over 1 h. According to the ritual occasion, the officiant Daba chooses and adjusts enunciation contents and ways of enunciation. Basically, larger rites involve more enunciation contents and diversified ways of enunciation, thus putting forward higher requirements on the Daba.

In general, Daba’s enunciation has following characteristics:

Firstly, the enunciation is a kind of oral behavior and does not involve any character writing. The Na call the Daba learning process as “dabaso,” where “so” means “learning.” In contrast, the learning of Tibetan Buddhism and the modern school education are called as “book-learning” or “paper-learning” (“tarso” in the Na’s language, where “tar” means “book” or “paper”).⁶ Such naming differences reflect an essential feature of the transmission of Daba knowledge. Daba themselves have one classical explanation to this:

“Long time ago, the Daba had characters and wrote the enunciation contents on pieces of cattle skin. One day, the Daba and the Lama walked together and they got hungry. The Lama said, ‘My books are made of paper and couldn’t be eaten.’ Therefore, they boiled and ate the Daba’s book. The Daba ate his knowledge and had no book since then.”⁷

This anecdotic story discloses perfectly how Daba connect ritual enunciation to the “interiorization” of their knowledge. According to the story, the earliest difference between two major religious traditions in the Na society only lies in the materials of books: the Daba lost his book in one accident, but the original knowledge was kept; instead, the Daba ate the knowledge and made it an internal part of his body. In this sense, the tradition represented by the Daba is stabilized.

Daba also have explanations to the use of interiorized knowledge. The common one is that they have to drink a lot of strong alcohol during ritual processes—which agrees with reality—in order to “stimulate” the knowledge they ate. Another explanation is more dramatic:

“Long time ago, the Daba went to others’ home to do the ritual. He couldn’t remember the contents of enunciation. At this time, the dog barked and the Daba made similar tones. Suddenly, he remembered the enunciation contents and accomplished the ritual process smoothly.”

This reflects that Daba need external stimulus to use the knowledge inside his body. Both drinking and imitation of animal barks help Daba to finish enunciation. In reality, Daba will pronounce a short “O” as an interjection at the beginning of every enunciation, a common habit to help them to recall following contents. The second explanation makes the behavior reasonable through a humorous way.

Secondly, Daba’s enunciation is highly structured, marked by its “sequentiality,” accuracy, and integrity. In both fundamental enunciation and general enunciation, Daba have to follow the fixed order and approaches of enunciation, to assure the accurate deliverance of every paragraph. Enunciation paragraphs are interconnected tightly, thus forming sequences. Any random change of the order, content, or approach of enunciation will be punished by gods.⁸ In fact, the source of Daba’s knowledge—“dhu” and “sé”—are both the supreme gods of the Na people. It follows that the contents of fundamental enunciation are described as “words of Gods dhu and sé” (“dhukruasékrua,” where “krua” refers to “words”) (Chen 2012, p. 287). This implies that the primary goal of the Daba in a ritual process is to mobilize the knowledge of gods accurately and faithfully. No extemporaneous play is allowed.

Thirdly, the meaning of enunciation rests “opaque” to common Na people, sometimes even to Daba themselves. Actually, the author has discovered during the field investigation that most interviewees have no idea or interest in the contents of enunciation of Daba. On the one hand, this is caused by great differences between ritual and daily discourses, the former involving abundant unfamiliar words (e.g., name of spirits and gods), “versification,” and long articles, which caused difficulties to understand. On the other hand, Daba do not emphasize themselves on the explanation of meanings. Indeed, Daba will teach his own understanding to apprentices; with increased knowledge and experiences, apprentices may also understand better the meanings. However, these comprehensions are neither a main component of the learning process nor standards to examine the qualification of Daba.

Ritual actions and process of “mukrabu”

“mukrabu” is a large rite to expel malefic spirits. “tsi” in the Na language refers to spirits that threaten humans’ health and welfare. In daily conversation, they are also

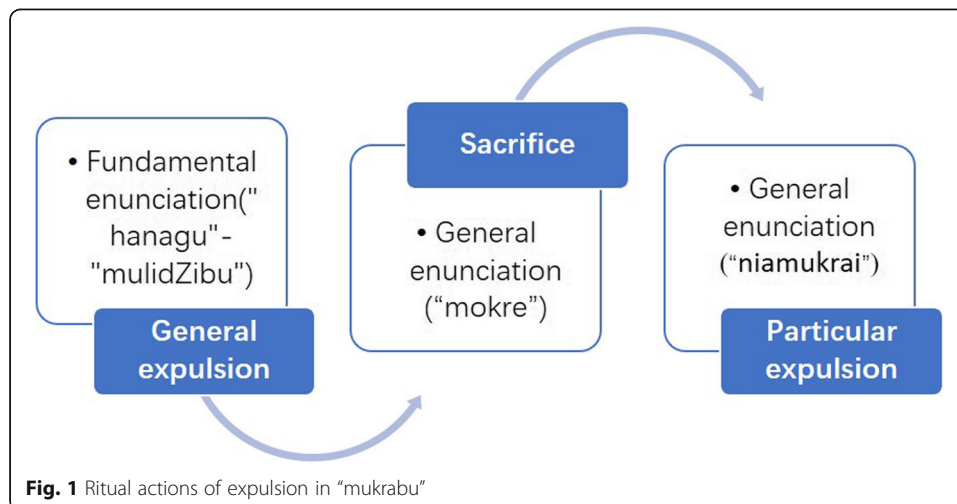
called as “tsikrua” or “tsikruami,” where “krua” and “mi” are suffixes. There are many types of malefic spirits and each type has their own name, source, and characteristics. The Na believe that malefic spirits live in mountains; they sneak into villages at every opportunity and bring various misfortunes to humans, such as illness, damages, even abortions, and deaths. Daba are devoted to expel all malefic spirits from human-dwelling zones through rituals.

The malefic spirit “mukra” represents conflicts caused by rumors and quarrels and is the main object to expel in “mukrabu.” Meanwhile, the officiant Daba faces in reality more than ten types of malefic spirits in “mukrabu.” Except for “mukra,” there are “cha” representing dirtiness, “dZi” and “ang” representing abuse, “çi” and “do” representing omen, “bu” and “wang” representing division, “shidhidona” representing destiny, “shuashua-mukra” representing intemperance and gambling, “loçitsiza” representing death, etc.

“mukrabu” is often held in the unit of lineage, and the whole process takes more than 10 h. The preparation (e.g., manufacturing ritual tools and preparing offerings) will consume great manpower and materials. There are two types of mukrabu according to different occasions. One is called as “manure-collection mukrabu” (“kraiguamukrabu”), which is held annually in November of the lunar calendar. It happens when members of the lineage carry manure in livestock pens to fields to prepare production in the next year. The aim of this type of mukrabu is to purify homes and welcome the New Year. The other one is called as “human death mukrabu” (“hingshimukrabu”). It is held in the last day of funerals and is to eliminate impurities in home after the coffin is sent away. The Daba aims especially at gossips and quarrels brought by the people who gather at the funeral, thus protecting smooth production and lives of people after the events. These two types of mukrabu have slightly different procedures, but they have consistent key steps.⁹

The expulsion of malefic spirits forms the essential ritual actions of mukrabu (Fig. 1). These actions are mainly carried out through the following steps:

Step 1: The Daba calls all malefic spirits to the ritual place and tells them a series of important “reasons”. This action refers to the completion of fundamental enunciation (from “hanagu” to “mulidZibu”). The author called this step as “general expulsion.”



Daba explain that facing with dangerous bad ones (malefic spirits), they have to call their attention to tell them “what is right and wrong” (fundamental enunciation). The general expulsion forms the basis of convincing malefic spirits in following steps.

Step 2: After finishing the general expulsion, the Daba orders the assistants to kill a cock. He will enunciate the corresponding content (“mokre”) and distribute chicken meat, bones, and blood among gods, malefic spirits, and humans. This action forms one typical “sacrifice.” In this step, the Daba ensures that gods, malefic spirits, and humans reach an agreement, thus taking the expulsion to the substantial level.

Step 3: The Daba enunciates a series of special contents (“niamukrai”) to send orders to each group of malefic spirits and to interact with them. By following step by step these orders, the malefic spirits will leave the residence, finally withdrawing from human-dwelling zones. The author calls it as “particular expulsion.” So far, the expulsion is accomplished.

General expulsion

The general expulsion lasts for 4 to 5 h. To save space, the author demonstrates the corresponding ritual action through the presentation of “bujutu.” The title means literally “occurrence of reason,” where “buju” refers to “reason” and “tu” to “occurrence.” As mentioned above, the topic of “bujutu” is to give an “admonitory talk” to all malefic spirits. With respect to the whole general expulsion process, the enunciation of “bujutu” serves as a key point: at first, the Daba demonstrates the general code of behavior through “hanagu”; then, he illustrates the reason and opportunity of current ritual practices through “Zimukrua”; next, he shows his identity and the inheritance of knowledge through “dhadha”; when it comes to “bujutu,” the Daba starts to deal with his essential adversaries—the malefic spirits. After giving the admonitory talk to them, the Daba can make a series of conversations and interactions (e.g., the following recognition and description of malefic spirits in “émiso”) to expel the malefic spirits.

The content of “bujutu” is as follows:

“(If) reasons are not told

malefic spirits won’t disappear,

...

Now, let me tell reasons to you

(like) cutting (malefic spirits’) feet

God of mountains will help me

God of earth will help me

I want to solve the problem

I explain to you and the problem is solved

Many malefic spirits

(If you do not listen to me), I'm going to cut your feet and hands

Daba in the heaven tell reasons

Daba on the earth tell reasons

(so) the headless cow barks happily

Kernel is dancing happily

Reasons are told in the X lineage,

Reasons are told in the Y lineage¹⁰

.....

Reasons are told in our lineage

(So) there's no soil blocks behind the farm cattle

There's no dust is behind the running horse

Malefic spirits can't jump in the village surrounded by cliffs

Fish in pools won't jump in the river."

Here, the Daba is emphasizing on the significance of "reason-telling," which refers to the process of fundamental enunciation. He demonstrates in the very beginning that this is necessary and constitutes the only way of expulsion (If reasons are not told, the malefic spirits won't disappear). Besides, he needs the help from gods (God of mountains will help me, God of earth will help me) to accomplish the ritual process. In reality, the Daba will wear a crown painted with five gods ("eNa" in vernacular terms) and combust pine needles in the beginning of the ritual to call and consecrate gods. Daba interpret that the malefic spirits are very cruel and they need protection of gods to fight against them, just like ordinary people need assistance.

In "bujutu," the Daba also depicts scenes of fundamental enunciation ("Daba in the heaven is telling reasons Reasons are told in our lineage"). Details are exaggerated, creating a sort of vivid and almost "surrealistic" effect ("so the headless cow barks happily, kernel is dancing happily"). In the end of enunciation, the Daba uses parallelism to demonstrate the outcome of fundamental enunciation: while the first two are metaphors of the effectiveness of ritual actions ("there's no soil blocks behind the farm cattle, there's no dust is behind the running horse"), the latter two emphasize on the success of expulsion, namely the permanent isolation of humans and malefic spirits ("malefic spirits can't jump in the village surrounded by cliffs, fish in pools won't jump in the river").

It is important to note that during the enunciation process the officiant Daba gives order to malefic spirits by using a threatening violent tone ("I want you to cut your hearts into two pieces I want to cut your feet and hands"). This is rare both in fundamental

and general enunciation. During mukrabu, the Daba hangs a drum on the beam of the house. He knocks continuously the drumstick in the right hand and shakes rapidly cymbals in the left hand. He is making quick rhythms and acute tones. This performance evidently agrees with the theme of “bujutu.” One Daba explained to the author as follows:

“Imagine you are talking to a bad guy and you make a fist with one hand and beat wall with the other hand. Won’t you feel stronger?”

In reality, beating drum and shaking cymbals do have a resemblance to the “beating wall” and “making a fist.” These gestures allow the Daba to “beat his breast and stamp his feet” when he makes an admonitory talk to malefic spirits. Soft and gentle wording (including rhythms of drum and cymbal to strengthen effect) will fail to frighten the spirits and to make them cooperate during the long process of fundamental enunciation.

Sacrifice

After finishing the general expulsion, the Daba and his assistants are ready to have a short rest. But before this, they still have to execute one crucial step—“mokre”—namely the sacrifice. Here, “mo” refers to “offering” (a cock in “mukrabu”) and “kre” to “placing” or “giving.” The term means to make offerings to the gods and malefic spirits.

The sacrifice is accomplished under the help of the Daba’s assistants. One assistant holds the cock, sprinkles clean kernels over it, and ties up colorful wires on it. Another assistant will fumigate it by burning cuckoo leaves to get rid of dirtiness. At this moment, the Daba does not beat drums or cymbals, his tone softens, and the enunciation is respectful and slow.

When killing the cock, the Daba enunciates:

“We are making the blessing rite

Now, we offer the ‘mo,’

To the gods above

To the malefic spirits below

To the underground malefic spirits at right

‘dZi’ won’t bother us

‘wang’ won’t bother us

‘mukra’ won’t bother us

To the gods above in the left

Please come and get your offerings

(malefic spirits) come and take (‘mo’) feather

Take its blood

(‘mo’) please fall asleep

Now I’m going to kill you

It is not Daba killing you

It is not his assistants killing you

It is God dhu killing you.”

Through “mokre,” the Daba makes the following statements: firstly, the sacrifice is to protect people from malefic spirits, in particular from the present ones in mukrabu (“dZi’ won’t bother us.....”); secondly, the humans represented by the Daba win supports both from the gods and malefic spirits, thanks to the distribution of offerings (“To the gods above.....”); finally, killing the cock is actually implemented by the gods (“It is not Daba killing you.....”), which improving the legitimacy of the sacrificial action.

The ritual of mukrabu is mainly implemented in the living room (“Zimi” in the Na’s language): the Daba sits at the upper seat of the fireplace and faces with the front door. There are objects that represent the gods (e.g., dhu and sé) in the left, including the statues (“niamu”) made of flour and butter, a wooden statue representing dhu, and tree branches and swords representing the weapons of gods. A large number of statues representing the malefic spirits are put in the right. The most dangerous malefic spirits (e.g., mukra) is imprisoned in a wooden “cage” (“diZi” in the Na’s language) which has been made in advance. The Na believe that the according positions of gods and malefic spirits (two sides of the fireplace) stand for the “upper” (“ge”) and the “bottom” (“mu”). After killing the cock, the assistants offer the heart, one piece of bone, and blood to the gods sitting “above,” and feathers, claws, viscera, and apexes of the wing to the malefic spirits sitting “at bottom.” The meat is boiled then ate by attendees (including the Daba and the assistants).

Particular expulsion

The ritual enters into the key stage of particular expulsion after the rest. The Na also call the particular expulsion as “niamukrai” which means literally “make statues disappear.” “niamu” refers here to the statues put on the ritual site to represent different malefic spirits. “krai” means “disappear.” To accomplish the particular expulsion, the officiant Daba beats drum and cymbals quickly and enunciate violently. The contents delivered to each type of malefic spirits are listed in Table 2.

Undoubtedly, the process of particular expulsion reflects the consistency and integrity of Daba’s enunciation. It also shows the close relation between enunciation and expulsive actions. The Daba’s enunciation “unfolds” layer by layer: firstly, he emphasizes on the recognition of individual malefic spirits (“so”), indicating the mature conditions of expulsion (“Zi”); secondly, he makes final interactions with malefic spirits, including seating them (“ke”), calling them (“ku”), cutting connection with them (“tçi”), and offering gifts to them (“dha”); thirdly, the Daba sends the formal order of expulsion (“krai”

Table 2 Particular expulsion

No.	Title	Main contents
1	"so"	Teach malefic spirits their name, source and features
2	"Zi"	Show malefic spirits available resources, including ritual tools and assistance from others
3	"ke"	Put malefic spirits at specific positions to prevent them from hurting attendees
4	"ku"	Call all malefic spirits of the same type
5	"tçi"	Cut connection between malefic spirits and human beings
6	"dha"	Offer gifts to malefic spirits
7	"krai"	Order malefic spirits to disappear
8	"lo"	Give order of expulsion
9	"dhen"	Let malefic spirits stand up
10	"pié"	Open roads for malefic spirits to leave
11	"tsi"	Block the road after malefic spirits left to prevent their return

and "lo") and asks the malefic spirits to stand up and leave ("dhen" and "pié"); finally, he blocks the way in case of their return ("tsi").

During the enunciation, the Daba also has to accomplish a series of gestures. For example, he takes the statue which stands for the particular malefic spirit and talk to them, when he is seating them ("ke"). In the fifth step ("tçi"), the Daba asks the assistants to cut the straw ropes which symbolize the connection of malefic spirits and humans, then sprinkles the cut ropes over the statue. In the sixth step ("dha"), the Daba puts specific offerings on the statue of malefic spirits. In the ninth step ("dhen"), he moves the statue to let them face with the front door of the living room. In the tenth step ("pié"), he asks the assistants to send the statue out of the residence. During mukrabu, the Daba has to expel dozens of malefic spirits, indicating that he has to repeat above enunciation and gestures for over ten times. The whole process is accomplished continuously.

The author chooses "pié" to demonstrate the contents:

"(Let malefic spirits) stand up and now open the road,

Malefic spirits won't leave

If the road hasn't been opened

(And) if the road hasn't been opened

They will hide in the fog

.....

The work is difficult

(but) damage is easy

The rite is difficult

(but) loss is easy

We human work hard in fields at daytime

Our lives are as hard as copper and iron

The place you (malefic spirits) are sitting, we won't sit

The place you (malefic spirits) are standing, we won't stand

.....

(we) open the road and see the sky

(we) open the road and see the earth

We won't open the road to 'dZilu'

We won't open the road to 'tçi'¹¹

.....

We will open the road to a good place in the X direction¹²

You will go to the high

You will go to the low

You will go along the X direction

(There's) bridge and road over the water

.....

You walk, but do not jump

You go right now

Dogs won't bark

Chicken won't call

People won't speak

The heave opens you a road as firm as iron

The earth opens you a road as firm as copper

(we) have opened a stable road to you"

Firstly, the Daba uses a formula both in the beginning and end of enunciation: he states in the beginning that the following action is to be taken after the last action is accomplished, and in the end, he affirms that this action is now accomplished stably. During the process of particular expulsion, this formula re-occurs to ensure the coherence and interconnection of individual ritual actions.

Secondly, the Daba uses different rhetorical devices to persuade malefic spirits, including reasoning (“The work is difficult... but loss is easy”), reconciling (We human work hard in fields at daytime...we won’t stand), luring (We will open the road to a good place in the X direction...There’s bridge and road over the water), forcing (You walk.....You go right now), etc. While these techniques are used because of the stubborn, greed, and wicking characteristics of malefic spirits, it equally shows the skills of ritual enunciation of the Daba.

Conclusions

Richard Bauman proposed that oral communication should not be viewed as “text-centered.” Instead, he proposed a “performance-centered conception of verbal art” (Bauman 1984, p. 8). This view is supported strongly by the investigation on Daba ritual practices. Through enunciation, Daba construct a knowledge system which ties up closely with ritual process. Occupying the central position of this system is the so-called fundamental enunciation or the “body of ritual.” In addition, there is the general enunciation. The ritual knowledge is completely “interiorized” for Daba. To use them in ritual processes, the Daba needs to “stimulate” this inner part of body. Daba’s enunciation is characteristic of the sequentiality in structure and the opacity in meaning.

In practice, enunciation becomes the “engine” that promotes ritual actions. In the ritual “mukrabu,” the process to expel malefic spirit includes the general expulsion, sacrifice, and particular expulsion. The Daba who officiates the ritual makes full use of various enunciation contents (fundamental enunciation and general enunciation), approaches (tone, rhythm, and accompaniment), and bodily performances (appearance and gestures), to accomplish the expulsion. It is important to note that the process involves repeated decomposition and arrangement of specific actions (e.g., interactions with each type of malefic spirits in the particular expulsion). The Daba accomplishes his task (e.g., repetition of “niamukrai”) through performances of highly structured and sequenced enunciation. In this sense, enunciation is the core of Daba ritual process.

Endnotes

¹Emphasis added by the original author.

²The author follows the transcription system created by Cai Hua (Cai 1997, p. 11–12). For the transcription of Chinese characters, the author uses the pinyin system.

³These investigations are the following: Yongning Town, Ninglang County in Yunnan Province and Qiansuo Town, Yanyuan County in Sichuan Province on July, 2003; Ninglang County in Yunnan Province and Qiansuo Town and Zuosuo Town, Yanyuan County in Sichuan Province during January–July, 2004; Qiansuo Town of Yanyuan County and Wujiao Town of Muli County in Sichuan Province from September, 2006 to August, 2007; Wujiao Town of Muli County in Sichuan Province during July–August, 2013; Wujiao Town of Muli County and Qiansuo Town in Yanyuan County in Sichuan Province in August 2017.

⁴For a detailed discussion on the notions “enunciation/énonciation,” “chant/chant,” and “psalmody/psalmodie” in English/French, cf. Benveniste, Émile. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*. I. Paris: Gallimard, 1966/1978, p. 254.

⁵This means that Daba are males only. Cai Hua suggested that there is female Daba in the Na’s society before 1940 (Cai 1997, p. 78). However, the author of this paper did not discover any female Daba during the field investigation and all interviewees insisted that Daba are males.

⁶Influenced by popularization of mandarin Chinese, the Na now also use “learn culture” to indicate modern school education (“wenhuaso,” where “wenhua” means “culture”).

⁷According to different interviewees, some details vary. For example, the book of the Daba might be made of pigskin.

⁸The author has collected related cases during the investigation. Cf. Chen 2012, p. 26.

⁹Detailed description and analysis of mukrabu are introduced in Chen 2012, p. 140–288.

¹⁰“X” and “Y” are names of different lineages from the same legendary lineage.

¹¹“dZilu” and “tçi” are both monsters dwelling in different directions according to the Na’s legends. Cf. Chen 2016.

¹²“X” represents the direction which the Daba chose in advance. Similarly hereinafter.

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Availability of data and materials

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Author’s contributions

The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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