

Folk wisdom in Bouyei proverbs and songs

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1. Introduction

Before delving straight into the storehouse of Bouyei folk wisdom, I think it only fair and necessary and helpful to give an introduction into the Bouyei people themselves, their language and present writing system. This introduction will give you a place in which to think about the Bouyei, a background, a context. My hope is that the Bouyei, traditionally little known and often neglected, will not remain so distant from your experience, but you will come closer in knowing them and seeing them as definitely related to the rest of the Tai peoples.

1.1 The Bouyei people and language

The Bouyei live mainly in Guizhou Province southcentral China. There are also some Bouyei in Yunnan Province and some transplanted Bouyei in Vietnam. According to the 1990 census, there are 2.5 million Bouyei in Guizhou, 34,000 in Yunnan (Ma 1995), and perhaps some 40,000 in Vietnam (otherwise known as Gay or Yay, see Edmondson forthcoming). The Bouyei have a long history, being some of the original inhabitants of Guizhou. They are not a flashy flamboyant people, but rather go quietly about their work, which is mostly agriculture. They have long assimilated into the majority Han society around them, while still keeping their own traditions. They live simply and dress simply, but as you will see from this study, they think deeply. Although not as prevalent as in the past, Bouyei women still weave their own cloth with treadle looms, embroider their own cloth shoes, and wear the traditional button-down-the-right-side shirts. Young people still enjoy singing the traditional songs, and when they are recorded, everyone loves to listen to them, saying they are very moving. Their lives are interspersed with proverbs throughout each day so that they become ingrained, practical wisdom being passed down as naturally as the air they breathe.

Bouyei is considered to be the northernmost Tai language. Figure 1 shows the relationship of Bouyei to other Tai languages.

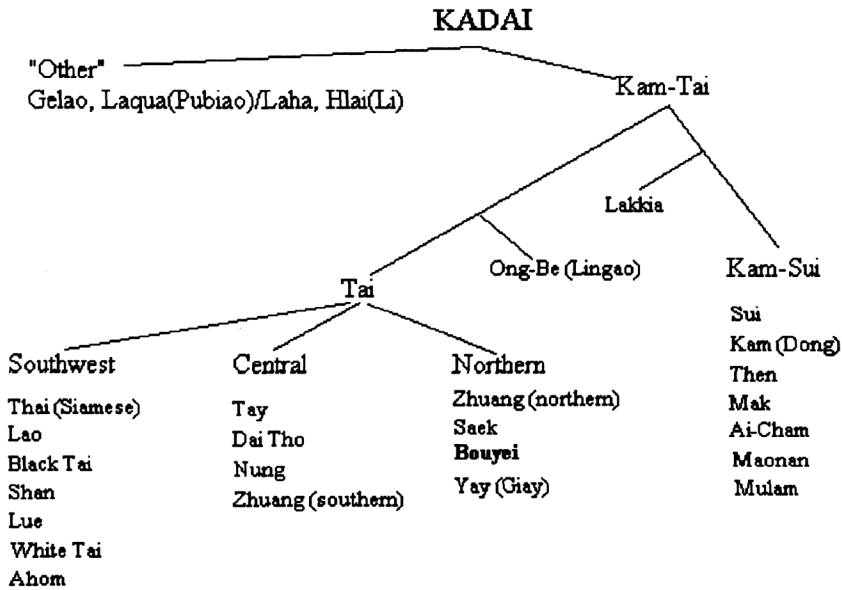


Figure 1. Relationship of Bouyei to other Tai languages. (adapted from Edmondson 1997:2)

As seen in Figure 1 above, Bouyei is classified as a Northern Tai language, according to Li Fang Kuei 1960. This Bouyei classification has been widely accepted by Kadai linguists over the years since then. The closest related languages to Bouyei are the other Northern Tai languages, northern Zhuang in neighboring Guangxi province, Saek in Thailand and Laos, and Yay in Vietnam, which has recently been equated with the Bouyei of Guizhou (Edmondson forthcoming).

A typical Bouyei lect has six tones in open syllables. Tones on checked syllables range from two to four, depending on area (Snyder 1995). Tone values vary from place to place which can affect the reading of proverbs. Vocabulary also differs from place to place, anywhere between 40% and 90% similar, which changes some of the wording of the proverbs, but for the most part, keeps the same meaning. Even accounting for this, there is a large percentage of proverbs that have stood the test of time and space and are still used widely today. This fact shows the long lasting character of proverbs in general and the durability of values in a culture.

1.2 A word about the orthography

An orthography for Bouyei was first created in 1956 by Chinese linguists. It was not until 1982 that promotion of the orthography was encouraged with small

pilot programs. The standard orthography for all of the varieties of Bouyei is based on the Wangmo lect (Buyiwen Fang'an 1985). Wangmo is centrally located, therefore is representative of a large percentage of the regional varieties, allowing for slight modifications. Table 1 shows the IPA symbols (according to place and manner of articulation) for the phonemicized consonants and the representative orthographic symbol next to it. The proverbs in this paper are written using the Bouyei orthography.

Table 1. International Phonetic Alphabet symbols for consonants with corresponding Bouyei orthography

	Labial	Dental	Alveolo-palatal	Palatal	Velar	Laryngeal
Stops	p, b	t, d			k, g	ʔ, q
Fricatives	f, f	s, s	ç, x			h, h
	v, w	z, r				
Affricates			tç, j			
Nasals	m, m	n, n		ɲ, ny	ŋ, ng	
Liquids		l, l				
Semi-vowels	w, v			j, y		
Labialized					kw, gv ŋw, ngv	
Palatalized	pj, by					
Preglottalized	ʔb, mb ʔw, qv	ʔd, nd		ʔj, qy		

Vowels are represented as shown in Table 2. Note that those symbols representing more than one sound are due to regional variations.

Table 2. Phonetic vowels and their orthographic symbols

IPA	Bouyei orthography
a:	a (syllable final), aa (syllable dial)
ɐ, e	a (syllable medial)
i	i
ɛ	ee
u	u
ɔ	o
o	oo
i, ɯ, ə	e
i:, ɯ:, ə:	ea

Since Bouyei is a tonal language, each syllable being assigned a certain pitch value, it is important to represent the tone in writing. Tone is represented by a letter at the end of each syllable as seen in Table 3. Tone values (based on a scale of 1 to 5, low to high) vary from place to place, but the tone categories (derived historically) are very consistent.

Table 3. Representation of tone in Bouyei orthography

Tone category	Wangmo tone value	Written representation, with example
1	24 low rising	l <i>nal</i> 'thick'
2	21 low falling	z <i>naz</i> 'field(wet)'
3	33 mid level	c <i>nac</i> 'face'
4	41 high falling	x <i>nax</i> 'uncle'
5	35 high rising	s <i>nas</i> 'arrow'
6	55 high level	h <i>nah</i> 'otter'
7	35	t <i>naqt</i> 'heavy'
8	33	(no symbol) <i>nab</i> 'chase'

Tones 1 to 6 occur on syllables that end in a vowel or nasal. Tones 7 and 8 occur on syllables that end in b [p], d [t], or g [k]. It is helpful to note that the letter representation of tone looks somewhat like the number it represents, e.g. l=1, z=2, c=3, x=4, s=5, h=6.

When citing proverbs I use written Bouyei with word for word English glosses (note that *cl* stands for classifier), and a free translation in English. As far as I am aware, this paper is the first instance of English translations of Bouyei proverbs. Any errors in translation or misinterpretations are solely mine. Any comments, corrections, or additions are greatly appreciated.

2. Folk wisdom

Folk wisdom in Bouyei culture has been preserved orally through proverbs and songs. The vast majority of Bouyei folk wisdom has been passed down through generations by word of mouth. Occasionally Chinese characters have been used to write down Bouyei songs, but they do not accurately or consistently represent the sounds of Bouyei. Only recently have any written records in the Bouyei orthography appeared. The fact that this wisdom has lasted so long without any written documents shows how integral a part this wisdom is in Bouyei culture. It also shows how language is a strong reflector of culture (see Huang 1992), whether written