

Mosuo

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The **Mosuo** (Chinese: 摩梭; pinyin: Mósu ; also spelled **Moso** or **Musuo**) are a small ethnic group living in Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces in China, close to the border with Tibet. Consisting of a population of 50,000, most of them are found near Lugu Lake, high in the Tibetan Himalayas 27°42′35.30″N, 100°47′4.05″E. Although culturally distinct from the Nakhi, the Chinese government places them as members of the Naxi (or Nakhi) minority. Their culture has been documented by indigenous scholars Lamu Gatusa and Latami Dashi (the collection of papers that he edited, published in 2006, contains an extensive list of references in Chinese, and a bibliography of books and articles in other languages (especially English) compiled by He Sanna; see references below.

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Script

Generally, the Mosuo uses the [Han script](#) for daily communication. The [Tibetan script](#) is mainly used for religious purposes.

The Mosuo also have their own native religion, called Daba, which uses 32 symbols. Often mistaken for a written script, these symbols do not represent a written language, no more than a cross in Christianity or a Star of David in Judaism is a letter in a written language.

There is currently no written form of the native Mosuo language; it is a purely oral language in which all history, tradition, and ceremonies are passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. However, there are currently efforts underway to develop a written form of the Mosuo language, most notably by the [Lugu Lake Mosuo Cultural Development Association](#), which plans to have a prototype written language ready by summer of 2007.

Language

The Mosuo speak a dialect of the [Naxi](#) language, which resides in the [Tibetan-Burman](#) family. While there is no question that the language of the "Mosuo" and that of the "Naxi" are very closely related (i.e. dialects of one and the same language), some "Mosuo" speakers resent the use of the language name "Naxi", which is commonly used to refer to the dialect of the town of Lijiang and the surrounding villages; a more adequate name would be "Na", which is the common autonym of the "Mosuo" as well as of the "Naxi".

Customs

Introduction

The Mosuo culture is most frequently described as a matriarchal culture; in fact, the Mosuo themselves frequently use this description, to attract tourism and interest in their culture. Sometimes, the Mosuo will be described instead as “matrilineal,” which is probably more accurate, but still doesn't reflect the full truth.

The fact is, the Mosuo culture defies categorization within traditional definitions. It is true that they have aspects of a matriarchal culture, in that women are, in many households, the head of the house, property is passed through the female line, and women tend to make the business decisions. But political power tends to be in the hands of males, which disqualifies them as a true matriarchy.

Coming of age

The coming of age ceremony, usually at around 12-14 years of age, is one of the most important events in a Mosuo child's life. Before this ceremony, Mosuo children will dress the same and are restricted from certain aspects of Mosuo life. But once they come of age, girls are given their skirts, and men are given their pants (thus, it is called the “skirt ceremony” for girls, and the “pants ceremony” for boys).

Before coming of age, children are forbidden from participating in certain activities, particularly those that involve religious ceremonies. Also, a child who dies before having this ceremony will not receive the traditional funeral.

After coming of age, Mosuo females can get their own private bedroom; and, once past puberty, can begin to invite partners for “walking marriages”.

Matriarchy

Mosuo families tend to trace their [lineage](#) through the female side of the family (they may sometimes not even know who the father of a particular child is, so tracing through the paternal line is impossible). But there is also a practice in which families that don't have a female to take the role of a family's matriarch may “adopt” a woman from another family, and she will take over as head of the house when the current matriarch dies. She, and her offspring, will be included in the '[family genealogy](#)'.

Some anthropologists studying the Mosuo describe it as a culture that focuses not so much on the female lineage, as on the lineage of the house itself. Mosuo usually live in large, [extended families](#), with many generations living together. It is not uncommon for families to “[adopt](#)” outsiders into their family. This may be to maintain gender balances; it may be because another family has gotten too small to maintain its numbers; it may be due to orphaning of a child, etc. Once adopted, that person is considered a part of the “house”, on equal footing with everyone else in the house, and sharing in that house's history and heritage.

There is also a very important historical component which is often unknown to (or ignored by) those studying the Mosuo. Historically, the Mosuo actually had a feudal system in which a small “nobility” controlled a larger “peasant” population. The Mosuo nobility practiced a more ‘traditional’ patriarchal system, which encouraged marriage (usually within the ‘nobility’), and in which men were the head of the house.

It has been theorized that the “matriarchal” system of the lower classes may have been enforced (or at least encouraged) by the higher classes as a way of preventing threats to their own power. Since leadership was [hereditary](#), and determined through the male family line, it virtually eliminated potential threats to leadership by having the peasant class trace their lineage through the female line. Therefore, attempts to depict the Mosuo culture as some sort of idealized “matriarchal” culture in which women have all the rights, and where everyone has much more freedom, are often based on lack of knowledge of this history; the truth is that for much of their history, the Mosuo ‘peasant’ class were subjugated and sometimes treated as little better than slaves.

The truth is, as in most situations, both more complicated, and more fascinating. There

is a very viable argument to be made that the “matriarchal” system of the Mosuo was actually enforced to keep them in servitude to the ruling Mosuo class. Yet, practically speaking, this system has led to a number of unusual traits within Mosuo society. Mosuo families have an incredible internal cohesiveness and stability; and certainly, Mosuo women do not (within their culture) face many of the struggles and barriers that women in many other cultures do.

Walking marriages

Probably the most famous and most misunderstood aspect of Mosuo culture is their practice of “[walking marriage](#)” (or “zou hun” in Chinese), so called because the men will walk to the house of their ‘partner’ at night, but return to their own home in the morning.

The Mosuo generally live in large extended families, with many generations (great grandparents, grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, etc.) all living together within the same house. For the most part, everyone lives within communal quarters, without private bedrooms or living areas. However, women between certain ages (see the section on “coming of age” above) can have their own private bedrooms.

Traditionally, a Mosuo woman who is interested in a particular man will invite him to come and spend the night with her in her room. Such pairings are generally conducted secretly, so the man will walk to her house after dark (thus the description of “walking marriage”), spend the night with her, and return home early the next morning.

While it is possible for a Mosuo woman to change partners as often as she likes – having only one sexual partner would be neither expected nor common – the majority of such couplings will actually be more long term. And few Mosuo women will have more than one partner at a time. More than one anthropologist has described this system as “serial monogamy” as many of these pairings may last a lifetime. In recent years, much information about the Mosuo has portrayed their culture as a sexually promiscuous one in which women change partners frequently; this is addressed in greater detail in the “Myths & Misinformation” section below.)

Even when a pairing may be long term, however, the man will never go to live with the woman's family, or vice versa. He will continue to live with and be responsible to his family; she will continue to live with and be responsible to her family. There will be no sharing of property.

Most significantly, when children are born, the father may have little or no responsibility for his offspring (in fact, some children may not even know who their father is). If a father does want to be involved with the upbringing of his children, he will bring gifts to the mother's family, and state his intention to do so. This gives him a kind of official status within that family, but does not actually make him part of the family. Regardless of whether the father is involved or not, the child will be raised in the mother's family, and take on her family name.

This does not mean, however, that the men get off scot-free, with no responsibilities for children. Quite the opposite, in fact. Every man will share responsibilities in caring for all children born to women within their own family, be they a sister, niece, aunt, etc. In fact, children will grow up with many "aunts" and "uncles", as all members of the extended family share in the duties of supporting and raising the children.

One particularly important result of this practice is the lack of preference of parents for a child of a particular gender. For example, in most cultures, the female will join the male's family when she gets married. The result is that if a couple has a lot of female children, they will lose them after marriage, and have no one to care for them in old age; but if they have male children, their sons (and their sons' wives) will care for them. So, in poorer populations in particular, there will be a strong preference for male children.

However, among the Mosuo, since neither male nor female children will ever leave home, there is no particular preference for one gender over the other. The focus instead tends to be on maintaining some degree of gender balance, having roughly the same proportion of male to female within a household. In situations where this becomes unbalanced, it is not uncommon for Mosuo to adopt children of the appropriate gender or even for two households to 'swap' male and female children.

Myths and misperceptions

Due to the unusual and poorly understood aspects of Mosuo culture, a number of myths exist about their society.

Myth 1: The Mosuo and the Naxi are the same

It is true that the Mosuo are officially classified as part of the Naxi minority by the Chinese government. This often causes a great deal of confusion.

The Mosuo culture is distinctly different from Naxi culture. They have a different language, practice a different religion, and have a completely different culture. However, due to some historical confusions (at various times in history, the Chinese term “Mosuo” was actually used to describe different ethnic groups, including the Naxi), and lack of real knowledge about the Mosuo, they ended up being grouped with the Naxi.

Myth 2: Mosuo women are sexually promiscuous

It is true that Mosuo women are free to have different sexual partners, and frequently do not get married. It is true that having multiple lovers, or having children by different men, does not carry a negative stigma.

However, it is common to see the Mosuo portrayed as a culture in which Mosuo women frequently change partners, a kind of “sexual utopia” where women are waiting to seduce men. This image has been portrayed particularly frequently by tourism operators who seek to attract more people (mostly men) to visit Lugu Lake. There is certainly a thriving prostitution industry at Lugu Lake; however, most of the “Mosuo girls” who work in the brothels are actually girls from other areas brought in to dress and act like Mosuo women.

While promiscuity is certainly not frowned on among the Mosuo like it is in most other cultures, most Mosuo women tend to form more long-term pairings, and not change partners frequently. It might be better described as a system of “serial monogamy”,

wherein women can change partners, but tend to do so relatively rarely; and while with one partner, will rarely invite another.

Having a “walking marriage” with non-Mosuo is very strongly frowned on; in the past, Mosuo women who had such a relationship could face very severe punishment from their family if discovered.

Myth 3: The Mosuo language has no words for murder, rape, etc.

Technically, it is correct to say that the Mosuo language has no words for murder or rape. However, this information is frequently used in a misleading or inaccurate manner, to falsely portray a culture in which murder and rape are non-existent. The Mosuo do have a word for “kill,” which is used to describe all forms of killing, including murder. Mosuo also recognize the existence of rape, which is traditionally punished by execution.

Myth 4: Mosuo men don't work, and are there mainly to fulfill conjugal duties

This particular myth is more common in Chinese literature than English.

Traditionally, Mosuo women tend to take on most of the labour duties at home. They take care of the animals, tend the fields, etc. This system derives from a historic division of responsibilities where Mosuo men were mostly traders, traveling long distances by caravan to trade with other groups. Since the men were frequently gone from home, the women were left to take care of the work. However, when the men were at home, they would also share in the duties there.

In modern times, the practice of having trading caravans has effectively ceased; with the result that one of the primary male roles has been rendered irrelevant. It is true, therefore, that sometimes men may be found lounging around while women work hard; however, this is not universal.

Lifestyle

Daily life

The Mosuo are primarily an agrarian culture, and their daily life reflects this. Most work centers on raising crops, such as grains and potatoes, and caring for livestock, including yaks, water buffalos, sheep, goats, and poultry. So far as dietary needs go, the Mosuo are largely self-sufficient, able to raise everything they need for day-to-day life. Meat is a significant part of the Mosuo diet; as the Mosuo lack refrigeration, most meat tends to be salted or smoked, to be preserved for future use. The Mosuo are somewhat famous for their preserved pork, which can be kept for 10 years or more and used when needed.

The Mosuo also have their own local alcohol, called Sulima, which is made from grain and is similar to strong wine. It is drunk quite regularly, and almost always offered to guests. It will also be drunk at all important ceremonies and festivals.

Local economies tend to be barter-based, with people simply trading for what they need with each other; however, as interaction with the outside world becomes more common, there is also greater use of a cash-based system of trade. As average incomes are quite low (as low as \$150-200 US in some areas), there are severe financial restrictions when cash is necessary, such as for education, travel, etc.

Mosuo homes are generally designed as four rectangular structures, built in a square, with an open central courtyard. Animals and humans will live together in this home, with much of the first floor dedicated to housing for the livestock, such as water buffalo, horses, geese, and poultry. It is, in fact, not uncommon to have animals wandering in and out of the house all day. The first floor will also have the main cooking area, and the main eating/visiting area. The second floor is used most commonly for storage, and for the private rooms for Mosuo women; the rest of the family will sleep in communal quarters.

Electricity has only recently been introduced to Mosuo communities; in fact, many villages still have no electricity. And running water is almost non-existent, with

communities tending to rely more on local wells or streams. However, things are changing very quickly, and it is not uncommon to find at least one or two homes in a village that will have a satellite dish in their courtyard, and a karaoke machine hooked up to their TV.

Religion

The Mosuo actually practice two different religions. They have their own religion, called Daba, which has been a part of their culture for thousands of years, and which is based on animistic principles and involves ancestor worship and the worship of a mother goddess: "The Mosuo are alone among their neighbors to have a guardian mother goddess rather than a patron warrior god" (Mathieu, 2003). Mosuo also practice Tibetan Buddhism, which became part of their culture in more recent history, but today plays a far larger role in their daily life and is the predominant religion.

The Mosuo even have their own "living Buddha", a man said to be a reincarnation of one of the great Tibetan spiritual leaders. He usually lives in Lijiang, but returns to the main Tibetan temple in Yongning for important spiritual holidays. Many Mosuo families will send at least one male to be trained as a monk, and in recent years, the number of such monks has increased quite significantly.

In most Mosuo homes, a statue of some Buddhist god can be found above the cooking fire; the family will usually put a small portion of whatever they are cooking in the fire, as an offering to their god. Tibetan Buddhist holidays and festivals are participated in by the entire Mosuo community.

Daba, on a day-to-day basis, plays a far smaller role in the lives of the Mosuo. The Daba priest (or shaman) is also called "daba", and is mostly called on to perform traditional ceremonies at key events, such as naming a child, a child's coming of age ceremony, a funeral, or special events such as the Spring Festival. The daba will also be called on to perform specific rites if someone is sick.

The Daba religion also functions as the repository of most of the Mosuo culture and history. Since the Mosuo have no written language, their history/traditions are passed on

orally from generation to generation; it is primarily the responsibility of the Daba priest to memorize this, and keep it for future generations.

This has resulted in something of a cultural crisis; due to past Chinese government policies, which made being a Daba priest illegal (this policy has now ceased), there are very few remaining dabas, most of whom are old men, leading to the worry that Mosuo history and heritage may be lost when the current generation of dabas is gone.

See also

- [Naxi](#)
- [Matriarchy](#)

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External links

- [Website for the Lugu Lake Mosuo Cultural Development Association](#)
- [The Mosuo marriage system](#)
- [Girl's kingdom](#) (via archive.org)
- [The Mosuo](#)
- [Pictures of Mosuo in Buddhist prayers](#)

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