

## **A Quantitative Analysis of Female Appellation Terms in Miao Love Songs**

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**Abstract:** The appellation terms of the Miao people are rich in content and exhibit both colloquial and non-colloquial usage characteristics. Non-colloquial Miao appellation terms are most prominently manifested in orally transmitted native-language poetry. In traditional Miao love songs, there are not only many different male appellation terms, but also an extremely rich variety of female appellation terms. Therefore, taking female appellation terms in Miao love songs as an example, we conduct some illustrative analyses of their usage in non-colloquial contexts.

**Keywords:** Miao People; Qiandong Dialect; Love Songs; Female Appellation Terms

### **1. Introduction; Hmong language**

The Miao are one of the ethnic minorities with a relatively large population in southern China. According to statistics from 2022, the Miao population residing in China exceeds 11,067,900. Based on surveys conducted by Chinese ethnologists in the 1950s, the Miao language is primarily divided into three major dialects: the Qiandong (Eastern Guizhou) dialect, the Xiangxi (Western Hunan) dialect, and the Chuan-Qian-Dian (Sichuan-Guizhou-Yunnan) dialect. Within the Qiandong dialect, four sub-dialects are distinguished; the Xiangxi dialect has three sub-dialects; and the Chuan-Qian-Dian dialect includes seven secondary dialects with numerous sub-dialects (which, after further verification in the 21st century, have been reclassified into eight secondary dialects).

The cultural community that uses the Qiandong dialect of Miao is mainly concentrated in the following areas: the sixteen counties and cities of the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in Guizhou Province; Duyun, Sandu, Fuquan, Libo, Weng'an and other counties and cities within the Qiannan Buyi and Miao Autonomous Prefecture;

Xingren, Zhenfeng, Anlong and other counties and cities within the Qianxinan Buyi and Miao Autonomous Prefecture; and Zhenning, Guanling, Ziyun, Pingba and other districts and counties within Anshun City. In addition, speakers are found in Rongshui Miao Autonomous County and Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, as well as in Jingzhou Miao and Dong Autonomous County and Tongdao Dong Autonomous County in Hunan Province. Although the various sub-dialects of the Qiandong Miao dialect exhibit considerable phonological differences, their lexical and grammatical structures are largely consistent. Therefore, Miao songs in most regions are primarily composed of five-syllable lines (although some areas have six-syllable lines, this is not common). Each song varies in length: the shortest consist of only three lines, while the longest can exceed one thousand lines, with no fixed length in between.

The Miao are an ethnic group that has, since ancient times, pursued freedom and cherished a love for life. In their interpersonal interactions, they frequently use songs to make friends, convey emotions, and serve as a medium for courtship. These "songs" are precisely the "culture" that everyone delights in and enjoys, and culture is expression [1], therefore children have nursery songs, middle-aged and elderly people have ancient ballads, and young people have widely popular love songs. The content of Miao love songs is extremely rich, including over a dozen types such as Hxak Yangt "flying songs," Hxak Xit Nais "questioning songs," Hxak Xit Hent "praising songs," Hxak Xit Hlib "yearning songs," Hxak Ed Bongl "courtship songs," Hxak Senl Sangt "couple-forming songs," Hxak Xit Hsongt "farewell songs," Hxak Xit Niangs "elopement songs," Hxak Bangl Ot "singlehood songs," Hxak Hxat "bitter-love songs," Hxak Zok Khat "escape-from-marriage songs," Hxak Wal Khat "divorce songs," and Hxak Dol Diut "heartbreak

songs," among others. In these love songs, there are various appellations used by women for men, as well as many terms used by men for women. Due to space limitations, we will here only sort out and analyze a selection of female appellation terms in the love songs, leaving the male appellation terms for a separate discussion. In the Miao love songs of the Qiandong dialect, the female appellation terms include ad ("elder sister"), nil / dail nil / niangx nil ("sweetheart / younger sister"), mait / mit / mait dlol ("girl"), naos ("bird"), niux / niux nangl ("younger sister"), niangx ("young lady"), xenb / niangx xenb ("younger sister" self-reference), daib pik ("maiden"), mul ("younger sister"), pik nes ("girl"), khad hxad ("maidservant"), eb ("water"), vob ("vegetable"), bangx / bangx bel ("flower"), nax ("rice"), dob ("cloth"), dlol ("younger sister"), sangs ("generation"), xex ("elder sister"), xok ("girl"), daib xenb ("sweetheart"), fab ("melon"), wangb ("winnowing basket"), ongd ("pond"), zend ("fruit"), among others. The following is a brief overview and analysis of these female appellation terms in the love songs.

## 2. Ad ("Elder Sister")

In the Miao language, ad is a respectful term for "elder sister." It is commonly used in everyday spoken language as a general reference to women (as opposed to men). For example, in a Miao song we find: Hnaib nongd dios hnaib lal "Today is a good day," Ad ad dial dial lol "men and women all come here." In Miao songs, modifiers are often added to praise women. For instance, young women are called ad dlol, where dlol carries a respectful connotation of "lovely beauty": Dail ad dlod dab hveb "The younger sister replies," Dial hnangd dial ghangb hvib "The elder brother is very happy to hear."

In some regional varieties of Miao, love songs often begin with the exclamation ad leib ab! meaning "Dear elder sister!" or "Dear girl!" Women, to show modesty, also refer to themselves as daib ad. For example:

Dos liek laix daib ad  
Just like this young lady myself,  
Kaod sat diongb hnaib kaod  
The partner I chose during the day,  
Jeet mais jeet lax aod  
With my own eyes I looked,  
Feet mais beb dieb hxeed  
I went to the scene and carefully observed,  
Sangt gaos dol hvab xab

Yet I married the wrong man,  
Sat hxat dlaob zab gid[2]  
Causing myself endless suffering.  
Here, daib ad is a non-colloquial term for "I," referring to the singer herself. Besides being used as a self-deprecatory term in love songs, daib ad also appears as a term of praise:  
Gangx daib ad bongl ad  
Two beautiful elder sisters,  
Gangx daib ad bongl mait  
A pair of fine sisters.  
In this context, daib ad carries a complimentary meaning.

## 3. Nil / Dail Nil / Niangx Nil ("Sweetheart / Younger Sister")

### 3.1 About Nil

In Miao love songs, nil is used both by men when addressing women and by women when referring to themselves. For example:

Niangb dlangt ax niangb yel  
Is there any single man left?  
Niangb sut laix sut dail  
If there is still one,  
Niangb sut laix qangb lol  
Bring that leftover man over,  
Qangb sut laix baib nil  
Match one for me.[3]  
This is a love song sung by a woman to a man; here nil means "I." The use of nil in love songs is very common, especially in songs sung by men to women. For instance:  
Diod dul bongf jox ib  
Burning firewood, I see smoke rising,  
Dliod yol bongf jox wangb  
Dressed up, you look so charming.  
Wil xil bongf mongx hlieb  
The first time I saw you, you were so radiant,  
Wil bil des mongx niangb  
I have never sat with you even once,  
Bub nil zaid dex dinb  
I don't know if you, my dear, are single,  
Ghaid nil zaid wangx yeb  
Or if you already have a sweetheart.  
Hangd nil zaid wangx yeb  
If you, my dear, are single,  
Hot nil lob longx lob  
Please move your feet,  
Hlongt lol diub dangx hlieb  
Come to the big singing pond,  
Ait bul das jox hvib  
Make friends and fulfill my wish,  
Xuk niongx das niongx hsab

Life is too short,  
Vut dol ghab nangx vob  
Don't miss the good opportunity,  
Dad lol yis dangx hvangb  
Nourish plants and feed livestock,  
Hat dail khab senx diub                      Otherwise,  
your life will be wasted [4].  
In this love song, the man consistently addresses  
the woman as nil, which is a warm and intimate  
form of address.

### 3.2 About Dail Nil

The terms dail nil and niangx nil are  
self-deprecatory forms used by women when  
singing. Dail is a classifier meaning "individual"  
(used as a prefix), and here it is extended to  
mean "this younger sister myself." For example:  
Dangl nil vut nangs dax  
When my dear has good fortune,"  
Dail xongt ghot bens yangx  
My beloved will have married another,"  
Dail nil ghot dlens liex  
I can only secretly grieve."

According to normal Miao spoken usage, the  
prefix for "person" should be laix, e.g., ib laix  
naix "one person," ib laix wil "one me." Here,  
dail is originally a prefix mainly used for animal  
names, such as ib dail dlad "a dog," ib dail mal  
"a horse," etc. Because of the misfortune in love  
and marriage, this prefix is transferred to  
sorrowful expressions, thereby conveying a  
depressed mood.

## 4. Mait (Mit) / Mait Dlol "Girl"

### 4.1 About Mait (Mit)

mait is pronounced as mit in some areas. It  
generally refers to young women. In Miao love  
songs, it carries meanings such as "younger  
sister," "sweetheart," or "girl." For example:

Liob mait jangx liob dlad  
scolding the younger sister like scolding a dog,  
Dib mait jangx dib liod  
beating the younger sister like whipping a  
buffalo.

This is a bitter love song, telling the story of a  
beautiful young girl who, deceived by a  
worthless man's glib tongue and handsome  
appearance, married him. After the wedding,  
she found him lazy and gluttonous, and she also  
suffered domestic violence from him. She sang  
this song to recount her misfortune. Here, mait  
refers to the singer herself, used as a  
self-reference.

Mait maix hvib ed bongl  
the sweetheart is willing to pair up,  
Xongt maix hvib ed bongl  
the beloved is willing to become a couple.  
Here, mait means "sweetheart," referring to both  
parties in a deep emotional relationship.  
Another example:

Deid        mait        hvib        naix        lol  
encountering a girl who suits one's heart,  
Deid        xongt        hvib        naix        lol  
encountering a young man who pleases one's  
heart.

Here, mait is a general term for all young  
women, i.e., "girls."

### 4.2 About Mait Dlol

In Miao love songs, mait and dlol are originally  
two separate words that can appear  
independently. Here, mait dlol is used to  
emphasize and give special attention. For  
example:

Hlib mait sot jangx songt  
thinking of the younger sister makes one  
emaciated,  
Hlib laib mait vangl wat  
the heart is tied to the sweetheart's village,  
Diangd nil diangd dot hxat  
deep love brings much sorrow,  
Liex hlib mait dlot bongt  
the brother's longing for the sister is truly  
painful.

Young men express their unforgettable love for  
women through these appellation terms, with  
deep affection overflowing in their words.

## 5. Naos "Bird"

The word naos ("bird") is quite common in  
Miao love songs. In female appellations, naos is  
also frequently used as a personal name for  
women. From the antiphonal singing of love  
songs, naos (sometimes written as nes) is both a  
non-colloquial self-reference for women and a  
common term used by men to address young  
women. For example:

Gheid mais ax sux nal  
Whose mother cannot give birth,  
Naos mais ax sux nal  
My mother did not teach me,  
Naos liaf bix dab lol  
I have just begun to experience the world,  
Liaf bangf wix eb niul  
Just starting to step into society.  
Here, naos is a self-reference by the woman  
using "I" as her identity. In Miao songs, the

colloquial first-person pronoun *wil* ("I") is seldom used to express self-identity. Likewise, when men address women in love songs, *naos* also appears as a non-colloquial appellation. For example:

*Naos niangb ib pit vangl*  
The sweetheart lives in a village on one side,  
*Nios niangb ib pit vangl*  
The brother lives in a village on the other side,  
*Nongf dliangx hveb xit gol*  
Only by relaying messages did they meet,  
*Nongf dliangx qeb vot mail*  
Only by exchanging letters did they gather,  
*Naos dengt seil ax seil* Sweetheart,  
think carefully are you cold-hearted?  
*Sangs hsent niul ax niul*  
Beloved, ponder—are you not sorrowful?  
In the linguistic expression of these love songs, women are generally not addressed with the second-person pronoun *mongx* ("you"), but rather with non-colloquial appellation terms such as *naos* or *sangs* ("cousin of the same generation"), and so on.

## **6. Niux / Niux Nangl "Younger Sister"**

### **6.1 About Niux**

In colloquial Miao vocabulary, *niux* originally means "mouth." For example, "open the mouth" is *diaf niux*, "talk too much" is not *niux*, and so on. However, in love songs, it is extended to mean "younger sister," "sweetheart," "girl," etc. For example:

*Hlib dot niux lol ghot*  
longing for the younger sister to come marry,  
*Seix hxib niux nal tat*  
yet fearing that her mother would scold.  
Here, *niux* directly refers to the girlfriend whom one misses day and night. This girlfriend is like one's own mouth, deeply attached to the boyfriend, having become one, reaching a state of inseparable unity.

### **6.2 About Niux Nangl**

*Dongf hent dail niux nangl*  
everyone praises the girl's beauty,  
*Dongf hent dlol seix niul*  
amid the praises, the girl feels sorrow.  
In love songs, different terms are used to refer to women. In *niux nangl*, the word *niux* not only means "girl" or "sweetheart," but its original sense also includes "beautiful countenance." The other syllable *nangl* in the compound has multiple meanings: first, it refers to "east," as in

*mongx gangl nangl lol xit gangl jes dax?* "Are you coming from the east or from the west?"; second, it means "to wear (clothes)" or "to decorate," as in *tub bangx diot ud nangl* "embroidering flowers on clothes for decoration"; third, it means "to betroth" or "to marry," as in *dad Niangx Eb Seil khat diot laix hnaib nangl* "betrothing Niangx Eb Seil to the Sun." As a compound, *niux nangl* carries the meaning of "a girl with a radiant countenance."

## **7. Niangx / Niangx Nil "Young Lady" / "Younger Sister"**

### **7.1 About Niangx**

*niangx* means "young lady" (*niang*). It is a tonal variation of *niangb* ("wife" or "to be at home"). To distinguish it from the married "wife," Miao songs change the tone from tone b (33) to tone x (55). In love songs, *niangx* is frequently used as a female appellation. For example:

*Liex hlib nil nend yut*  
The brother misses his sweetheart just a little,  
*Niangx hlib dial gid bongt*  
I, the younger sister, cannot help missing you.  
When used alone, *niangx* can mean "young married woman." In the antiphonal singing of love songs, if referring to an unmarried woman, it indicates that she has reached marriageable age.

### **7.2 About Niangx Nil**

*niangx nil* signifies a woman who is already of marriageable age. For example:

*Bib dios deik niangx nil*  
We are married sisters,  
*Diangd lol ngit dail dial*  
Returning to see our beloved brothers.  
In the first line, the term *deik* ("paternal aunt") is deliberately added before *niangx nil* ("sisters") to indicate that the singer is a married woman. In traditional Miao society, love and marriage were relatively open, and young men and women enjoyed considerable freedom in their interactions. It was common for them to continue singing love songs until after they had children, when they gradually returned to family life; before that, there were few restrictions on singing love songs to each other.

## **8. Xenb / Niangx Xenb "Younger Sister" / "Sweetheart"**

### **8.1 About Xenb**

In the Miao language, xenb originally means "gallbladder" of animals, e.g., xenb bat ("pig gall"), xenb nail ("fish gall"), etc. In Miao love songs, the term xenb ("younger sister") extends metaphorically to mean "treasure of one's heart" or "sweetheart" in the singing context. For example:

Xenb dax mongl dliof bil

The sweetheart takes the initiative to hold hands,

Hangb jangx dial bangf bongl

From then on, she becomes one family with her beloved.

Here, xenb means "beloved one," expressing a deep affection in addressing the woman.

## 8.2 About Niangx Xenb

In Miao love songs, young girls are often called niangx xenb. However, in some song lyrics, this compound may be reversed as xenb niangx. For example:

(1) Niangx xenb niangb qongd jel

The younger sister lives in the rice-pounding room,

Niangx xenb dab hot hel

The younger sister says to her mother:

"Vob hvid lul nongf lul Although  
my man is very poor,

Dinb xad wil nongf bangl."

No matter how poor, I will marry him.

(2) Xenb niangx jas vut mongl

The younger sister has found a good family,

Xenb max ab xongt yel

The younger sister no longer loves me and has left me,

Hangd xenb niangx ab xongt liel

If you, my dear, still love me,

Xenb ghax vangs det lol

Please find a bamboo branch for me.[5]

In the first song of (1), niangx xenb is used, the first-person pronoun employed by women serves as a modest self-reference (e.g., niangx or xenb), and this appellation is likewise used as a given name for women [6]. In the second song of (2), xenb niangx is used, and the male singer addresses the woman, carrying a complimentary nuance. Also, brother and sister can be used figuratively to indicate a close relationship [7]. Although both refer to women, in their specific contexts they are used by singers of different genders.

## 9. Daib Pik / Pik Nes "Maiden" / "Girl"

In Miao love songs, daib pik and pik nes are

essentially the same term, both meaning "maiden" or "girl." Sometimes they are combined, as in:

Mongx dios daib pik nes

Are you an unmarried girl,

Xit dios daib nongd longs

Or are you already a married woman?

Whether daib pik or daib pik nes is used, the term mainly refers to unmarried young women in love songs.

## 10. About Mul ("Younger Female Cousin")

The term mul is not very common in love songs; it has distinct regional characteristics and means "younger female cousin." For example:

Zab jex nangl xongt yaf

Five nine, then seven and eight,

Laib liex mul hos jif

The younger cousin is truly captivating,

Mul hox jif hos jif

The cousin's singing voice is so beautiful,

Mul hox jif dos laf

The cousin speaks nothing but pleasing words,

Hof vangx hveb gid nenf

Her words express all the heartfelt harmony[8].

This is a love song sung by a man to a woman, and mul here means "younger female cousin."

## 11. About Dlol ("Younger Sister")

In Miao love songs, dlol is frequently used both as a self-reference and as a term of address for women. For example:

Nieel jeel nil taik dut

The sweetheart returns from playing,

Dlol diangd mais qot hlat

The younger sister returns to her mother's home,

Dlol nal deil vut hxut

The younger sister's mother is delighted,

Zab songx lal diet mait

She makes the bed for the younger sister to sleep soundly,

Dlol tad od hniant qut

The younger sister takes off her clothes and goes to bed,

Hvib hed dlol vut bit

Carefree, she falls into a deep sleep,

Bit dangx daob mul mait

The younger sister sleeps without a care,

Daot nenx hsenb deil xongt

In her deep slumber, she forgets her beloved.

This is a love song sung by a young man to a young woman. When women use dlol as a self-reference in love songs, it also appears, as in:

Dius bangx dlol lob hlongt  
The younger sister arrives with graceful steps,  
Jas liex dial hveb hmat  
Meeting her beloved brother, she sings in reply.  
Vob vangx vud yis bat  
Mountain herbs and wild vegetables feed pigs  
and cattle,  
Hniangb nax ghol yis mait  
Grains and rice nourish the younger sister's  
body,  
Dius bangx dlol dles hxut  
The excellent brother makes the younger sister  
admire him [9].

The original meaning of dlol evolved from the  
term for a female shaman-priestess. In Miao  
sacrificial activities, a female priestess who  
could communicate with the heavenly spirits  
and also converse with people was called dlol.  
Therefore, when singing love songs, men would  
use dlol to praise or elevate the woman.  
Likewise, women would also use this term to

express their own cleverness.

## 12. About Sangs ("Generation" / "Peer")

In love songs, sangs is used in correspondence  
with naos. For example:

Dax ob jongl weid naos  
Come and play with us, young lady,  
Dax ob nas weid sangs  
Come and join us, friend.

In the antiphonal singing of love songs, sangs  
and naos often appear in parallel couplets, and  
their meanings are essentially the same.

## 13. On the Interchangeability of Miao Female Personal Names and Female Appellation Terms in Love Songs

Many Miao female personal names are  
frequently used interchangeably as female  
appellation terms in love songs, and they carry  
various cultural symbolic meanings. A list of  
examples is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. Cultural Symbolic Meaning Expressed in Love Songs**

| Miao pronunciation<br>of female name | Chinese<br>meaning  | Cultural symbolic meaning expressed in love songs.                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| eb                                   | water               | Purity of heart, transparency; contains cultural elements that nourish human life both materially and spiritually.                                                       |
| vob                                  | vegetable           | Evergreen, with long-lasting vitality; also the productive material women are most frequently in contact with in daily life.                                             |
| bangx                                | flower              | Born in the season when spring is warm and flowers bloom, displaying beautiful colours; a lovely plant.                                                                  |
| nax                                  | rice (grain)        | Born in the harvest season of autumn rice; an important fruit of grain production. Meanwhile, rice has consistently been the main food staple in many Miao regions [10]. |
| dob                                  | cloth               | Not only covers shame but also protects against cold; a decorative material of human civilisation.                                                                       |
| ongd                                 | pond                | A place in nature that stores and nurtures the sources of life for animals and plants.                                                                                   |
| zend                                 | fruit               | A representative of delicacies and a symbol of abundance.                                                                                                                |
| wangb                                | winnowing<br>basket | An indispensable tool in daily life, and also an image expressing completeness and fulfilment in life.                                                                   |
| Nes(nex)                             | bird / leaf         | Freedom, full of vigorous green vitality.                                                                                                                                |

## 14. Conclusion

There are many more female appellation terms  
in love songs. Because the Qiongzhusi Miao  
dialect is spoken over a wide area and each  
locality has its own distinctive features, other  
terms include fab ("melon"), xok ("girl"), xex  
("elder sister"), ad khat ("older female cousin"),  
and so on. Due to space limitations, we have  
only provided a brief, illustrative overview  
based on the above data, hoping to offer some  
initial reflections for a sociolinguistic  
investigation of Miao appellation terms. We

welcome further discussion and research to  
address any shortcomings.

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