

An Introduction to the Ritual Music of Lisu Nationality in Weixi, Yunan Province: Hunt and Sacrifice to the Tree God

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Received 3 November 2015; accepted 8 January 2016

Published online 26 February 2016

Abstract

Based on the preliminary record and simple analysis of the ritual music of Lisu nationality for hunting and sacrificing to tree god in Weixi, Yunnan Province, this article summarizes some features of the ritual music of Lisu nationality in Weixi, and hopes to attract more interests on in-depth study of Lisu ritual music.

Key words: Weixi; Lisu nationality; Sacrificial ceremony; Music

Wang, J. (2016). An Introduction to the Ritual Music of Lisu Nationality in Weixi, Yunan Province: Hunt and Sacrifice to the Tree God. *Canadian Social Science*, 12(2), 35-39. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/8145> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8145>

INTRODUCTION

Lisu nationality was originated in the northwest plateau. From the distant era, Lisu people trekked through rugged southern mountains and plateaus, came to the Jinsha River and Yalong River area bordering Sichuan Province and Yunnan Province, and gradually settled down along Jinsha River, Lancang River and Nujiang River Basin. From 1548 AD, the hero Gua Mu Bi began to lead the tribal expedition with the totem of buckwheat. In the following hundreds of years, many Lisu tribes trekked from the distant Jinsha River to the west, across the Hengduan Mountains and Three Rivers into the Nu River. The great journey to find an ideal home has reached the farthest

place of “Ming Luo Ming” where the sun sets, which is in today’s Myitkyina, Myanmar. Weixi has become Lisu people’s “Wang Ba Ming”, namely “a place where all people wish to go” (Liu, Li, & Cai, 2000).



Figure 1
Three Parallel Rivers



Figure 2
Lisu Village

High snowy mountains, steep grand canyons and rushing rivers have formed the three-dimensional climate as “a mountain has four seasons, ten miles have a different

weather”, providing a unique condition for the diverse growth of many species. The magical landscape has created magic lives and magnificent scenery, and also a unique Lisu musical culture.

For the Lisu people, the traditional musical memory remains more in their folk sacrificial activities. The majestic mountains and rivers, colorful trees and flowers, beautiful birds and animals, even those obscure rocks in Weixi are the representatives of spirituality to Lisu people, though they are only beautiful scenery of nature in the eyes of ordinary people. They are the unique religion of Lisu people - animism, representing Lisu people’s awe and gratitude to nature for a long time.

Lisu people believe that the greatest god in heaven is “Wu Sa Sa La”, or the “Buddha in heaven”, who then sends many “Pu La” (Buddha) to the world for management. Among them, the Pu La managing mountains is the greatest, so in ordinary rites the sacrifice will be made firstly to the mountain god—“Gong Gan Pu La”, secondly to the earth god—“Ming Nai Pu La”, and then to the river god—“A Jian Pu La”. The animal god is called “Li Jing Hua Mi Shi”. Before a hunter begins his hunting, he will firstly leave home to live under the cliff of “Li Jing Hua Mi Shi”, and hold a sacrificial ceremony.

The Lisu in Weixi, Yunan Province believed in primitive religions from the ancient times, that is, a “totem culture” described in many academic articles. For example: when the sky thunders, they believe gods are in heaven. The greatest god in the totem culture is “heaven”, so they will call “heaven” when carry out important sacrificial rites, and the priest will firstly shout, “Oh ... Wu Sa”.

1. HUNTING SACRIFICE

Until now, the Lisu retains the habit of hunting. Although not many people go hunt for a living today, as a tradition, they still go hunting every year or when have distinguished guests. Hunting has a set of special clothes: Leathers are worn from head to toe. According to the old Lisu men, the Lisu go hunt because there’s no arable land. Therefore, the hunter’s tobacco bag, pant, hat, clothes, etc. are all made of leather. A fire hoop is hung on his girdle, that is, a triangular hoop which can make sparks by rubbing and produce fire by blowing. Meanwhile, the hunter hangs a knife around the waist and carries a crossbow on the back. He also brings a “Huang Duo Ding” with him. A worship should be carried out before hunting, which can bless the hunter to be successful and return with fruitful results. Sometimes the hunter needs to go out hunting for several months, so he has to cook in the mountains. It is necessary to bring a cutting board, so cutting board becomes an essential item and owns a sacred status.

Before departure, women are not allowed to cross the cutting board, otherwise it would be considered ominous.

When a prey is captured and chopped on the cutting board, the blood left on the board is not allowed to wipe, otherwise it’s also considered bad. Portable kettle is generally made of bamboo to hold wine or water, and it is used to hold wine in dancing sometimes. Arrow bag is mostly made of bearskin, which has two bamboo tubes to hold arrows. One tube is filled with nonpoisonous arrows to shoot birds, and the other is filled with poisonous arrows to shoot large animals such as bear and red deer. The belts are completely made of wool, which has a white color and a black color, and can be tied up together or used separately. The black belt is used to carry preys on the back and the white is used to fasten around the waist.

Before hunting, the hunter himself shall act as a priest to perform blessing and exorcise demons. He shall shout a group of regular beats of “Zu Guo, Zu Guo Zu Guo; Zu Guo Zu Guo Zu Guo”, then knock his jug, and knock the cutting board uniformly three times.

he rhythm is as follows:



After that, he shall call again with the same rhythm, knock the chopper; After another call, knock three times, then turn to pour the wind of the jug onto the next pile of fire, and call twice “Wu Si Ma Hei Guo” in the rising smoke. The rhythm is as follows:



After the call, he shall bow to the mountain holding a crossbow three times, then raise the chopper above his head with both hands to bow to sky three times, put the leather bucket loaded with arrows around the smoke, and finally bow solemnly to sky three times. After all these steps, the hunter shall raise the chopper to knock the cutting board and bow, which shall perform three times. During the whole ritual process, the hunter shall not sing but read Lisu words occasionally, and knock the cutting board rhythmically.

2. WORSHIP THE TREE GOD

In the Lisu tradition, the gods in charge of heaven and earth are collectively referred to as “Ni” or “Si”. Among them, the great god controlling everything’s destiny is called “Mu Te Wu Sa”, who is considered as the creator of the world. The god is in charge of human wealth, prosperity and happiness is called “Mi Si”, or “god of wilderness” in Chinese language (Yang, 1996). Lisu people hold that “Mi Si” lives on Yunnan pines in the forest. This god controls everything in the forest, including trees, rocks and springs, representing a natural concern and human behavior restriction in real life. “Mi Si” ranks only next to “Mu Te Wu Sa” among the gods. Lisu people hold that human production and living in the

forest and field must follow the will of “Mi Si”, otherwise he will punish the offenders with illness or even death.



Figure 3
Lisu Hunter

This awe and fear to “Mi Si” makes the Lisu maintain a long-term concern and fear to the nature. In Lisu’s traditional life, before a hunter goes logging in the forest, he must divine on the selected tree to judge the will of “Mi Si”, based on which he shall decide whether to carry out the logging. Even hunting, mining and quarrying must obtain the acquiescence of “Mi Si”.

“Mi Si” is not only the defender of the wilderness and forest, but also the defender of a tribe or a village, which fully proves that the Lisu traditional thinking of symbiosis with nature, and their environmental philosophy of equality, modesty and interdependence. As the god of wilderness, “Mi Si” does not protect nature without limit, but is given with human characteristics. As long as human attaches importance to his existence and comforts him, “Mi Si” shall bring benefit to human. The worship to “Mi Si” is called as “Mi Si Ni Gu” in Lisu traditional life, meaning “worship the god of wilderness”.

“Mi Si Ni Gu” is an important traditional group activity of Lisu nationality. As every tribe or every village has a “Mi Si”, tribes and villages hold a ceremony of worship to Mi Si every three years, known as “Mi Si Ni Gu”. “Mi Si Ni Gu” is held every three years and is completed with three times, throughout a total of nine years. In Lisu’s long history, “Mi Si Ni Gu” has become a relatively fixed festival and formed a substantially fixed procedure.

In “Mi Si Ni Gu”, a Ni Ba (Lisu priest) should firstly choose a specific time. The Chinese zodiac of the day of the worship ceremony generally avoids the zodiacs of the village elders and the priest himself. “Mi Si Ni Gu” is one of the blood sacrificial ceremonies of the Lisu. The first and second ceremonies need a three-year-old white male sheep and a three-year-old rooster. Before the ceremony

begins, the villagers shall firstly select an exuberant Yunnan pine in the forest near the village. Then the strongest man in the village shall climb the tree to attach a white paper at the top of the tree, meaning “Mi Si’s flag”, then clean up all dead twigs and withered leaves from top to bottom of the tree. Ni Ba shall pile up an altar under the tree, and place a hard stone between the altar and the roots, meaning to command the gods of trees, rocks and earth to get together.

People in the worship shall ignite the fire covered with pine leaves, and when the smoke rises, the “priest” shall chant sutras while throwing buckwheat to the forest. When he mentions the day of the worship, he shall describe that the day is a good day for worship, and that they have brought a three-year-old male sheep and a three-year-old rooster for the gods to review. After the chant, each household in the village or tribe shall place a bowl of rice, an egg and a bottle of liquor in front of the altar.

The priest shall stand next to the burning pine leaves, and lead the chant in Lisu language, “Oh” (Chinese transliteration). B Yu:



There are also two ritual assistants, one hugging a rooster, and the other kneeling next to a dustpan containing pancakes, rice, water, lamb and other offerings. When the priest reads the Lisu offering words, the assistants shall take out the offerings and place under the pine tree. The melody is as follows: B Yu



The blood sacrifice begins when the priest recites sutra the second time. The priest explains the reason of the blood sacrifice to the gods of heaven and earth and “Mi Si”, and kills the rooster and sheep, spills the rooster blood onto the tree, and hold the sheep blood in a container. At the end of the sacrificial ceremony, the sheepskin and cutting board shall be tied to the tree. After the sacrifice there is a short break, the people shall cook the chicken and lamb in a large pot. It’s particular about how to chop chicken and lamb. A half chicken should be left for “Ni Ben” (god’s part), namely the half with chicken head, chicken wings, chicken legs, chicken tail shall be put on the altar after cooking, as well as the sheep brain, four hooves and offal. People normally will take a lamb leg home as a gift to the priest.

The melody is as follows: B Yu



At this time, the other priests shall spread meat and rice to the trunk, and then pour the wine to the tree from top to bottom. Through the smoke, they shall be blessed by the tree god.

When the delicious chicken and lamb are neatly put on the altar, the priest shall begin to recite the third passage of sutra:



The main content of this passage is to show the worshipers' sincerity, requesting "Mi Si" to protect human, and bless them with a bumper grain harvest, good luck and happiness. At this time, the people shall kowtow to the altar three times in turn according to age. After the salute, the most important procedure shall be implemented – divination.

Divination is carried out based on the dedicated chicken skull, chicken tongue, chicken leg bone and lamb tongue, etc.. The priests shall predict auspiciousness and inauspiciousness in the coming year according to these conditions. Every bone and organ on the altar seem to be the god's password and have a specific symbol. Take the symmetrical chicken tongue for example. The left part represents the villages or tribes involved in the ceremony, the right part represents the priest himself, and the middle part represents "Mi Si". If the chicken tongue is perfectly symmetry and folds inward, it indicates that the sacrifice obtains "Mi Si"'s approval. Chicken head can be used to predict wealth, disease, harmony and so on. In the divination the sheep head is critical. If the sheep lips bite the tongue after cooking, it's considered that "Mi Si" objects to the worship, and ritual procedures should be adjusted for remediation.

After the divination, the due process of "Mi Bi Ni Gu" is largely completed. The people can sing, share food, but not fight or argue. In some areas, "Mi Si Ni Gu" also prohibits people from speaking languages other than Lisu language.

Sharing food, drinking and singing constitute a joyful scene for both human and gods. Village elders and all the people willing to participate to get together, even passers-by can have a fair share. In the ritual site, old men will sing some old Lisu songs, guiding people to adhere to the ancient rules and respect for reality. They will even sing a number of songs about the seasons, educating people to love laboring and plant crops according to season change. The revelers usually leave until sunset or twilight. Then the priest begins to complete the final procedure of "Mi Si Ni Gu"- Yi Ha Ku (ie, spiritualism).



"Yi Ha Ku" is for the people participating in the ceremony, implicating that after the "Mi Si" carnival, people shall eventually return to real life and the gods go

back home. If the priest does not call back people's minds, they would accidentally get into the invisible world and cause disease and even death because of excessive happiness. "Yi Ha Ku" is actually the redefinition of the boundary between human and gods, warning that though "Mi Si" is with human, human still must comply with "Mi Si"'s nature protection rules after the ceremony, and must not offend discretionarily. After the end of "Yi Ha Ku", the people can take the sacrificial offerings back home, indicating to take back happiness and good luck. At this point, all the procedures of "Mi Si Ni Gu" are completed.



Figure 4
In the Field Trips to Record

Old men in the village said: the annual symbol of "Mi Si Ni Gu" is the banner on top of the tree. In the first three years, the tree tops are just plugged with a white flag. In the second three years, the treetop is inserted with golden bamboo and the white flag. In the third three years when the time span reaches nine years, the treetop is inserted with cedar and the white flag. The offerings are also different in the ceremonies. In the first and second three years it needs a white male sheep and a rooster, and in the third three years it needs only a white rooster. In the ninth year, "Mi Si Ni Gu" is completed, human and gods will live in peace.

"Mi Si Ni Gu" is preserved in Weixi Lisu region as the basic form of the ancient civilization

3. MAIN FEATURES OF LISU RITUAL MUSIC

(a) In Lisu ceremonies, music comes from language and has not much pitch change.

(b) The first sentence with a drawl is the unified form of major ceremonies, aiming to call the gods. The first syllable is stressed and the chanting end is whispered, whose tempo is controlled by the priest.

(c) When the Lisu in Nujiang region sing folk songs, they often use throat vibrato which is a unique singing style for Lisu folk songs. The melody is characterized by longer posterior tempo or shorter posterior tempo. The lyrics sound like "Ni Wu Ni Gu E" if translated in Chinese.

(d) Ritual music almost has no instruments, which are mainly performed by the priest's chanting and

occasionally harmonized by others. Because of different pronunciations, there are different pitches.

(e) Ritual music is dominated by males.

This shows that in ritual music, the original elements dominate – the rhythm has no much change, and melody is not complicated. Different music have relatively stable rhythms and melodies as the ritual process goes. This is inseparable with the Lisu isolated living environment and underdeveloped productivity. Lisu nationality has still many types of ritual music worthy of further study, which requires us to make more efforts on them.

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