

Analysis of Yi Ethnic Group's Fire Culture

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Abstract: The Yi people are an ancient ethnic group primarily distributed in the southwestern Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan. As a typical mountain-dwelling people, fire plays a vital role in their production and daily life due to the unique geographical characteristics of the southwest. Over a long period, this has led to the formation of a systematic and rich fire culture, encompassing fire myths, fire pit culture, fire worship and taboos, and the Torch Festival culture.

1. Introduction

The Yi people are an ancient ethnic group primarily distributed in the southwestern regions of China, specifically Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan provinces, with a population of over 9 million. They are a typical mountain-dwelling people, with the majority residing in remote mountainous, semi-mountainous, and high-altitude cold areas characterized by towering peaks, deep ravines, and rugged terrain. The saying “You can see someone across the valley, but meeting them takes half a day” vividly illustrates the nature of the mountainous landscape. Areas such as the Daliang Mountains in Sichuan, the Xiaoliang Mountains in western Yunnan, the Ailao Mountains in central Yunnan, and the Wumeng and Wulian Mountains in northeastern Yunnan are all Yi settlements. These regions are characterized by high altitude, cold temperatures, remoteness, isolation, relatively low productivity, backward production methods, inconvenient transportation, and difficult connections with the outside world. Consequently, the Yi people exhibit a strong dependence on fire. With fire, the Yi people can cook food, keep warm, and illuminate their surroundings. They use fire to defend against wild animals, to forge tools and weapons, and to clear land through slash-and-burn agriculture. Given the significant role fire plays in their production and daily life, they regard fire as life itself, calling themselves the “People of Fire”. They hold deep reverence and gratitude for fire, leading to the formation of a systematic and rich fire culture over the long course of history.

2. Fire Myths

During the transition from using natural fire to mastering artificial fire-making, the Yi people, through observation and contemplation of the origins of natural fire and the practice of fire-making, created a series of fire myths.

Natural Fire Myth from Liangshan, Sichuan:

A fireball fell from the sky,
Landing on Mount Enjiejieli,
Igniting a blazing fire,
Burning nine days and nights bright.
By day, black smoke billowed high,
By night, fiery sparks lit the sky,
Thus burned the heavens vast,
Thus blazed the earth steadfast,
To create humankind it burned,
For ancestors' birth the fire churned.[1]

Fire-Making Myth from Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan (about Ancestor Apu Dumu):

There was a king of men,
With two eyes keen,
No fire existed in the world,
Fire by his hand unfurled.
Unable to bite a hard fruit,
He struck it with a stone,
And sparks flew out, ablaze. [2]

Furthermore, the Yi epic Zhamu states, “Striking a hard nut with stone, sparks flew out; sparks fell on leaves, causing a mountain fire. Fruit fell into the fire, cooked it tasted better... Using fire to ward off cold, treating fire as a companion, they knew warmth and cold, distinguished raw from cooked.” ...and so on. These illustrate that during the long development of the relationship between humans and fire, the Yi people fully recognized the crucial role of fire. Based on observations of real life, coupled with continuous contemplation and rich imagination, they created these splendid fire myths. While these simple myths contain unrealistic imaginative elements, they remain grounded in the reality of life. They are the crystallization of the collective wisdom of the Yi people.

3. Fire Pit Culture

The deep valleys and significant elevation differences form the unique geographical features of the southwest. The vertical climate, described as “four seasons on one mountain, different weather within ten li (5 km)” and “flowers blooming at the mountain’s foot, snow swirling at its peak,” results in large daily temperature fluctuations, with differences of nearly twenty degrees Celsius. This objectively provided the conditions for the Yi people’s intimate connection with the fire pit.

During their struggle with nature, inspired by natural fire, the Yi invented methods of artificial fire-making and moved this artificial fire from caves into their dwellings. In every Yi home, the fire pit is located at the front-left side upon entering. The fire pit reflects the Yi sense of space and embodies the sacred meaning of the eternal flame. For instance, in many Yi regions today, the household fire pit burns year-round, commonly called the “eternal fire” (wannian huo). Additionally, the fire pit is the sacred place for preserving embers. When not actively using the fire, ashes cover the embers to allow slow, smoldering combustion; when fire is needed, the ashes are simply raked open, pine splints or grass are added, and it is blown into flame. In the main hall (tangwu) of a Yi house, a circular or square pit is typically dug and lined. Three cooking stones or an iron tripod stand are placed around its edge. Seating around the fire pit follows specific divisions. The side facing the family altar is considered the upper position, signifying the dwelling place of ancestral spirits. Neither hosts nor guests may sit in this upper position; they may only sit on the sides or the

lower part of the fire pit. The left cooking stone represents young men, the right represents young women. These two stones stand on opposite sides facing the upper stone representing the ancestral spirits, signifying that all are descendants of the same ancestors. Almost all daily activities of the Yi family center around the fire pit. Women do their needlework around it. Ethical rules for young and old are established beside it. Eating, discussing matters, and receiving guests all take place around it. Bimo (shamans) perform rituals beside the fire pit. Offerings are held over the fire pit and circled several times. Various ritual items are purified by dipping red-hot stones from the fire pit into a basin of water, and as the steam suddenly rises, the items are placed within the steam for fumigation... The Yi people believe the fire pit is sacred and the extinguishing or burning of its fire is closely linked to the fortune and misfortune of the family.

The fire culture reflected in Yi architecture is prominently displayed in the layout of the fire pit. The fire pit embodies spatial inclusivity and diversity, serving as the intersection of Yi practical and spiritual life. To a certain extent, it reflects the historical process of change and development in Yi people's lives. [3]

4. Fire Worship and Fire Taboos

The Yi regions of the southwest are characterized by high altitude, cold, remoteness, isolation, and a harsh natural environment. In the past, Yi people had low productivity, backward production methods, slow socio-economic development, and difficulty obtaining necessities. Consequently, the local Yi developed a strong dependence on fire. They cannot live without fire in life nor in death. Fire accompanies them throughout their entire existence. Over time, they formed a worship of fire, developing the concept that fire “originates in heaven, burns on earth, and connects heaven and earth”.

The Yi myth *Apu Dumu* recounts that humans endured nine tribulations, the first being a fire disaster caused by the evil fire god, leading to many customs of worshipping the fire god. For example, the Axi people, a Yi subgroup in Mile, Yunnan, believe the fire god is the chief culprit causing fires. Therefore, they hold a grand ceremony to send off the fire god annually on the 23rd and 24th days of the first lunar month. Yi people in Luotu and Chijiu townships of Fumin County, Yunnan, believe that if a fire occurs, they have offended the fire god, who has buried sparks as punishment. They must then perform the “finding the sparks” ritual, during which the Bimo chants the *Song of Sending off the Fire God*. Another custom in Yongren County, Yunnan, involves worshipping the household fire pit during the New Year to ensure it never extinguishes; when burning mountains for cultivation, they worship the mountain fire, praying it doesn't cause mischief but burns all pests to ensure a good harvest the following year; when cooking outdoors using three stones, they worship the cooking stones; hunters sleeping overnight in the mountains must worship the fire they make to ward off wolves, insects, and mountain ghosts and ensure a successful hunt; when a fire disaster occurs, they slaughter cattle and sheep to worship the fire god, praying it will no longer bring calamity upon people.

The Yi people form an inseparable bond with fire throughout their lives, spending their entire existence nestled beside it. When Yi brothers grow up and establish separate households, an important ceremony involves dividing the fire. Presided over by a respected elder of the clan, a torch is lit from the hearth and solemnly presented to the one moving to the new home. The cultural meaning is that while the household may divide, the bloodline remains unbroken. Yi weddings also involve welcoming the bride with fire. In Xishan, Midu, on the wedding day, as the groom's procession approaches the village, the groom's Bimo lights hemp stalks, holding a blazing torch, and welcomes them at the village entrance, burning incense and paper money for blessings. Only after this ritual can the procession enter the groom's home. Upon death, Yi people practice

cremation. Many Yi villages have a communal cremation ground where grand cremation ceremonies are held. The Yi in Chuxiong who call themselves “Luoluopuo” believe that after cremation, the deceased’s soul ascends to heaven with the smoke. Without cremation, the soul cannot ascend to protect descendants; instead, it becomes a malevolent ghost. Therefore, Yi cremation is closely tied to concepts like “ascending to heaven through cremation” and “returning to the ancestors through fire”. As the flames flicker, the body turns to ashes, while the soul is thereby restored. Without death, there is no life. In this cycle of life and death, fire plays an indispensable role.

In the Yi mind, fire has transcended its concrete natural form to become an abstract supreme deity. Fire is god, god is fire. Tangible objects like the fire pit, cooking stones, tripods, and torches are the external manifestations of the fire god. Consequently, they possess spirituality and are objects of worship, giving rise to a series of fire taboos. Yi people in Xishan, Midu, believe that when visiting relatives at night, one should not light two pine torchlights simultaneously while walking to and fro. Only ghosts carry multiple torches at night. Moreover, upon returning home, one must spit backward several times to block filth and evil ghosts from entering. Similarly, when lighting the hearth fire with pine splints, only one kindling source is allowed. Otherwise, it will attract lonely souls and wild ghosts to cause mischief. Throughout Yi areas, common taboos include: spitting or farting into the fire pit; turning one’s back to the fire pit; stepping on or stepping over the cooking stones or tripod; and even singing love songs near the fire pit. When adding fuel to the fire pit, wood must be fed from the lower side; it cannot be added haphazardly from all directions, as this causes crackling noises that anger the fire god. When cooking, utensils must not be placed on top of the cooking stones, as this is also disrespectful to the ancestors.

5. Torch Festival Culture

The Torch Festival (Huobajie) is a traditional festival of the Yi people and one of the concrete manifestations of cultural identity shared by Yi communities across Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan. The festival originated from the “Star Returning Festival” (Xinghuijie) in the Yi Ten-Month Solar Calendar, but numerous folk legends explain its origins: 1) During the Three Kingdoms period, Zhuge Liang fought the Yi chieftain Meng Huo. On the 24th day of the sixth lunar month, Yi soldiers used fire to defeat the Shu army. 2) Heavenly gods sent countless insects to devour crops; the hero Atilaba led the Yi people in making torches to burn the pests to death. Besides folk legends, the festival’s origin is also documented in historical texts. According to books like *Jigu Dianshuo* (Records of Ancient Yunnan, appeared in the Ming Dynasty), Yang Shen’s *Dian Zaiji* (Yunnan Records), and Zhuge Yuansheng’s *Dian Shilüe* (Brief History of Yunnan), the rulers of the Nanzhao Kingdom, surnamed Meng, were ancestors of the Yi people. After Piliuoge came to power seeking to unify Nanzhao, he lured other chieftains (zhao) to a gathering on June 24th and burned them. Lady Cishan (Charity), wife of the Dengdan Zhao chieftain, hearing of her husband’s death, committed suicide. Later generations commemorated them on this day by lighting torches.

Regarding legends of the Torch Festival among different Yi subgroups, *History of Yi Literature* records legends such as “The Torch Festival of the Samei People”, “The Torch Festival of the Sani People”, “The Torch Festival of the Axi People”, “Origin of the Torch Festival” from Nanjian Yi, “The Magpie Girl” Torch Festival legend of the Luo Wu subgroup in Shuangbai, and the Liangshan Yi Torch Festival legend. In summary, there are many historical records and folk legends about the origin of the Torch Festival, each recounting historical events or stories specific to different regions or Yi subgroups. While details vary, they generally converge on themes of: Yi people tying torches to the horns of cattle or sheep to intimidate and defeat enemies in war; conquering nature with fire; and using fire to dispel disasters. For example, to resist the Heavenly

King Sitiguzi, each Yi person lighted a torch to burn the pests he scattered, ensuring a bountiful harvest. The Shansu people, a Yi subgroup in the Daxishan area of Tadian Township, Eshan Yi Autonomous County, celebrate the Flower Street Festival (Huajie Jie) atop Daxishan on the 24th and 25th days of the lunar calendar, which is also a variant of the original fertility-seeking prototype of the Torch Festival. On festival nights, bonfires are lit on the mountain, and young couples who fancy each other snuggle beside the fire, whispering their feelings.

The Yi people regard the Torch Festival as their most important celebration, though customs vary regionally. In some areas, pigs and sheep are slaughtered to worship gods during the festival; in others, a chicken is sacrificed at the fields to worship the “Field God and Land Mother”. Believing torches can exorcise ghosts and evil spirits, after lighting torches, people go from house to house, waving the torches and scattering pine resin powder onto the flames along the way, an act called “sending off evil” (song sui). In Dali, on the first day of the Torch Festival, people select good, long pine logs, split them into thin strips, add flammable pine splints in the middle, and bundle them into torches. By evening, the torches in front of each household are lit. The torches on the second day are generally taller than those of the first day. The third day is the climax: torches are made even taller and larger, decorated beautifully. People use them to illuminate every corner, seeking to shine light on the crops, eliminate pests, and pray for a good harvest. Afterwards, a pagoda-shaped bonfire pile is built in the center of a square. A green pine tree, three to four zhang (10-13 meters) tall, is erected in the middle, surrounded by layers of dry firewood stacked into a pagoda shape. The top is adorned with a verdant branch hung with red flowers, white cakes, and crabapples. In the evening, men, women, and children, holding torches large and small, gather in the square to the sound of gongs and horns, and light the tree-pagoda. Instantly, flames leap skyward, the crackling of dry firewood mingling with the sounds of gongs, drums, and cheers, shaking the mountains. In Liangshan, during the Torch Festival, a beauty contest is held. An esteemed elder acts as judge. After the judge announces the start, the competing Yi girls form a circle, each holding the floral handkerchief of the girl in front, walking and singing local folk songs. Young men watching from the sidelines, deciding which girl is the most beautiful, hand gifts they have prepared to the judge, asking him to pass them to that girl. The girl who receives the most gifts is declared the winner. Friends and relatives then gather to congratulate her, and the young men surround her, strumming moon lutes (yueqin) to express their feelings.

6. Conclusion

As an ancient ethnic group in southwestern China, the Yi people have created a rich and diverse ethnic culture throughout history. Fire culture is a distinctive flower in this cultural garden. It plays a significant role in Yi production and daily life, carrying profound cultural implications. Fire myths, fire pit culture, fire worship and taboos, and Torch Festival culture reflect the rich connotation of Yi fire culture from different angles, revealing how fire evolved from a survival tool for the Yi into a spiritual symbol of the ethnic group. Fire occupies a uniquely important position in Yi civilization.

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