

Original Paper

Influence of Lisu People's Religious Beliefs on their Traditional Medicine

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Received: August 15, 2023 Accepted: September 7, 2023 Online Published: September 22, 2023

doi:10.22158/jrph.v6n3p53 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jrph.v6n3p53>

Abstract

The Lisu, inhabitants of Nujiang River Canyon in China's northwestern Yunnan Province, believe in three set of religious beliefs: their own primitive religion, Christianity and Catholicism, introduced by Western missionaries in the 18th century (Yang et al. (Eds.), 1993). Religious convictions permeate all aspects of life conducted by Lisu and do have a profound impact upon various aspects of their traditional culture. The present article explores how religious tenets have helped shape and have affected traditional Lisu medicine, investigating the relationship between religion, culture, and traditional medicine, tracking the path from Lisu ancient history down to modern times.

Keywords

ethnic minority, religion, culture, traditional medicine

1. Introduction

The Lisu are a small but relatively ancient ethnic minority in Yunnan Province, China. In the 8th century A.D., disputes between the Tang and the Tibetan Tubo dynasties deepened, and the traditional settlements of the Lisu ancestors were caught up between the two powerful dynasties, thrusting them into wars. It was during that very period that the name "Lisu" emerged for the first time.

The Lisu have historically been a hunting people, living in the jungles and mountains for long periods of time. They have been migrating because of hunting needs and historical ethnic strife, and as openly said in their own folk proverb, "There is no place the Lisu cannot go."

According to some scholars, the Lisu are found throughout Southeast Asia, especially in Burma and Thailand, where they migrated from China in the 19th century, while in the mid- to late-1990s, some of the Lisu from Burma and Thailand immigrated to Malaysia, the United States, Australia, Norway, and other countries.

Today China is home to the world's largest Lisu community, with the biggest concentration in Yunnan Province. Yunnan's Lisu are mainly inhabiting the Vixi Lisu Autonomous County of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Nujiang Autonomous Prefecture. Most of Lisu settlements are thousands of meters above sea level (some as high as 3,000m), making them a typical mountainous ethnic group. The Lisu of Nujiang settlement are based in the famous "Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas" (Note 1) (Guo, Duan, & Yang (Eds.), 1999). With its high mountains and deep valleys, large altitude differences, and multi-layered three-dimensional climate ranging from subtropical to cold-temperate, the area is rich in herbal resources. In Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture alone there are more than 1,200 species of medicinal herbs, including 689 species of Lisu botanicals and 32 species of animal medicines, according to the Nujiang Herbal Medicine book (Note 2) (Zhou et al. (Eds.), 1991).

Lisu ancestors accumulated valuable experience in ethnic medicinal knowledge during their long struggle with nature and diseases for survival and ethnic reproduction. Due to geographical and cultural constraints, the Lisu have been unable to develop their own medical theory. Their experience in the treatment of diseases and their use of herbal medicines have been significantly influenced by their religious beliefs, which have been passed down orally and developed continuously, and have served as the backbone of their methods in treating diseases, and safeguarding the health of their community members. This article examines how the Lisu's religious beliefs in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, have influenced the shaping and evolution of their traditional medicine.

2. Religious Beliefs of the Lisu of Nujiang

There are three main sets of religious convictions followed by the Lisu: the primitive religious beliefs inherent to them since ancient times; the primitive clan totem worship and the faith in natural animism; Christianity and Catholicism introduced through Western missionaries.

2.1 Primitive Religion of the Lisu

As with many other cultures at the same stage of historical development, the belief in the immortal spirits and animism was the ideological basis for the religious beliefs of the Lisu ancestors, due to their inability to understand and explain many natural phenomena and the constraints and influences of their backward and low productivity. They maintain that the sun, the moon, mountains, rivers, trees, beasts, etc. in nature carry a soul, and that gods dominate human life.

The Lisu argue that there is one god dominating all natural phenomena named "Misni." Different natural phenomena have been controlled by different gods: there is god of mountain (Misni), god of water (Edusni), god of house (Haikuani), god of yard (Ushani), god of road (Jaguni) and so on. For daily life, disasters or diseases, there are corresponding gods as well: god of dream (mikani), god of women (nikumuni), god of blood (chakani), and god of offending (truni). Even the conflicts between regional ethnic groups are attributed to gods, thus there exists the god of Memeng named by the Naxi people, god of Leme by the Bai, god of Nuzu and so on (Li, 1997). In short, in the Lisu religious beliefs,

all aspects of people's daily lives are in the hands of various gods. Be it people's calamity, fortune, birth, sickness and death, all are the results of gods' will, ways and activities. Therefore, the Lisu have a diverse range of religious rituals meant to drive away gods in their daily lives and give way to good fortune, pushing back on disasters and diseases. (Yunnan Province Editorial Group, 1984)

However, since the twentieth century, most of the older native religious shamans (niba) have gradually disappeared, making the actual current life of the Lisu distinctly different from that of their ancestors.

2.2 Spread and Influence of Christianity and Catholicism in the Lisu region—Nujiang

In June 1881, the China Inland Mission's (Note 3) missionary George Clarke and his wife, took a detour from Shanghai to Burma before embarking from Burma through Tengchong and Baoshan to Dali, where they were the first to open a church, becoming the frontrunners of the dissemination of Christianity in Yunnan, and kicking off the first Christian mission in Yunnan (Liu, 2004).

After the introduction of Christianity and Catholicism into the Nujiang region, missionaries conducted a series of activities. Over half a century, these two foreign religions have developed rapidly in the Nujiang region and even went close enough to replacing the primitive religions. By 1956, 207 Christian churches had been established in the entire Nujiang region, with 916 clergies at all levels, including 11 "Mieru Ba" presidents and vice-presidents, 66 "Ma Ba" missionaries, 413 "Mizhi Ba" administrators and 413 "Miku Ba" chanting men, making up a total of 21,062 believers (1981).

By founding schools, creating words and a phonetic system for the local language, translating the Bible, opening hospitals and clinics, formulating strictly canonical rules and constraining the believers with the "Fatalism," among other measures, Christianity and Catholicism gained a widespread reach in Nujiang region where the Lisu live.

Such activities left a tremendous impact upon local social life as well as ethnic religion, and culture. In such circumstances, when someone faced severe illnesses, in addition to finding a Lisu doctor, the families would normally ask a Christian already based in the village to pray to God, as the healing is often attributed to the Lord's gift, and this has often served as the reason for conversion.

The extensive preaching of Christianity in Lisu settlements and its gradual replacement of local primitive religions has led to changes in the way the Lisu interpret the means of treatment, and that spreads even to the understanding of themselves. When some locals were asked about the origins of their nation, they would trace it back to the three sons of Noah in the Bible, an indication of how they have replaced the original Lisu myths.

3. Influence of Religious Beliefs on Traditional Lisu Medicine

3.1 Traditional Medicine of the Lisu under Primitive Religions

The traditional medicine of the Lisu, which originated from a low level of productivity, has been profoundly influenced by the primitive religion. It can be described as some sort of a combination of medicine and religion in a larger context.

While engaged in divination and ritual activities, the shamans in Lisu villages served as physicians, medicine practitioners, and even psychotherapists. Therefore, to explore traditional Lisu medicine, it is necessary to gain a brief understanding of the important role played by the shamans in Lisu's production and life.

There are two types of Lisu shamans, the "Niba" and the "niguba," who are considered to be the communicators between humans and the gods. Among them, "Niba" enjoys an elevated social status, and so is "Niba," as the village leader, who is mainly engaged in exorcism, divination, chanting sutra and other activities.

However, the social status of the "niguba" remains lower. They can only engage in divination or sacrifice animals to drive away bad ghosts (Li, 1997). The "Nipa" in a tribe is generally "divinely ordained," while the "niguba" is mostly family heritage. Both are not, however, exclusively religious professions and need work the way others do. The shamans, who are able to communicate with the gods and people, are the religious leader and the secular authority both. They combine witchcraft with medicine in religious rituals and serve as physicians to a certain extent.

The Lisu believe who in the primitive religion, maintain that sickness is haunted by ghosts: "Aiduni" (water ghosts), "Aiqini" (chronic illness ghosts), "Aodouwenni" (the headache ghost), "Obieni" (the scar ghost), "Baijiani" (the heavenly ghost), "Haikuani" (the home ghost), "yansenani" (the eye pain ghost), and 22 other ghosts (Zhou & Zheng (Eds.), 2010). Therefore, when people fall sick, they have to find the relevant shaman to sacrifice to the ghosts, and different ghosts are sacrificed for different diseases. For instance, for headaches, vomiting, diarrhea or stomach pains, they sacrifice a bowl of wine with a chicken or a pig to the "Quni" (ghost of the offender). For nausea with vomiting, hair loss and bloodlessness, sacrifice goes to the "Aiduni" (ghost of water) with a cow or a pig. When it has to do with deafness and coughing, it goes to "Baijani," that is, the sky ghost. Tradition has it that the sacrifice should take place in front of the courtyard, where the courtyard ghost is called upon. A cow, a chicken and even a branch of pine, wild bamboo, golden bamboo and aspen could be sacrificed to send the ghost to heaven. Itchy blisters should be sacrificed to the "Nipuni," for which there is a thorny plant ghost, with the sacrifice being a small pig (1981).

Along with the shaman's rituals, herbs are often used in the treatment of illnesses. For example, in the Lisu syllabic literature there is a record that shells can heal sore eyes, while the medicine for sore upper limbs is beeswax, and for headaches it is stone vine. It goes on to say that the medicine for back pain is grass root, as wild fruit tackles heart disease, and lower limb pain is kicked by ghee." (1999).

In Lisu folklore, horsetail is commonly used to treat colds, ascariasis, hookworm disease, edema, and enteritis; fishy grass for whooping cough; an arrow for pediatric chancre; ear digging grass for otitis media; blood full of grass for edema; green thornhead for pediatric convulsions; earth panax notoginseng for bruises; and nibuzi for bone setting (Long, 2010), Hertz, with roots pounded and stuffed into septic wounds to kill maggots, pus extraction and muscle growth; grass blood exhaust, with roots and rhizomes into medicine, mainly for the treatment of chronic gastritis, swelling, duodenal ulcer,

also can be used for bruises and injuries; verbená, with the whole herb into medicine, is capable of clearing heat and detoxification, intercepting malaria and killing worms, cooling the blood, opening the channels and dispersing silt; az juice, when applied externally to the affected area, treats baldness (Zheng & Zhang (Eds.), 2008). Upon investigation, the traditional Lisu medicine that has been preserved involves internal, external, gynecological, pediatric, five senses, skin and other disciplines.

In addition to the belief in ghosts and gods and the worship of nature spirits, there are many taboos preserved in the traditional culture and living customs of the Lisu, many of which have to do with diseases and have been passed down orally through their own ethnic poetry and myths. Children, for instance, should not defecate in the middle of the road, otherwise they will offend the ghosts of the big and the small roads and will thus fall sick. You can't roll your eyes at people or you will get boils and redness in your eyes. Lisu children cannot just touch the head of the elderly, not to mention the random rummaging adults' satchel, arrow bag, or fingers will be red, swollen and painful (Jin (Ed.), 2004).

Primitive religion permeates every aspect of Lisu production life and also significantly influences their medical prescriptions, due to the obsessive belief in the role of ghosts and gods and a blind reliance on shamans to exorcise ghosts and sacrifices. While this may play a role in psychological comfort for some serious diseases, the treatment is still associated with delays. It is also due to the overpowering feature of the primitive religion that witchcraft has to some extent replaced medical sciences, keeping traditional Lisu medicine constrained to empirical use of medicines, not able to develop its own unique theoretical system in which medical experiences could have been orally transmitted, written records could have been kept and relevant literature would have been currently available.

3.2 Christian Catholicism's Influence on Traditional Lisu Medicine

At the end of the 19th century, Christianity and Catholicism began to spread into the Nujiang region of Yunnan. According to 1990 statistics, the number of Christian believers in the state was nearly 80,000, accounting for about 18.6% of the state's total population, and the proportion in Fugong County was as high as 63.6% (Peng & Li (Eds.), 1999). With the arrival of Western missionaries and their targeted missionary brainwashing of the local population, Christianity and Catholicism began to gradually replace primitive religions in the minds of the Lisu masses, and left an inevitable impact upon local traditional medical practices, one that has been associated with both positive and negative implications. One is able to see the positive side, first. The Church set up hospitals and clinics in the area, and as some of the missionaries were already doctors themselves, they often treated the local minority people for free. The medicine practiced at the time was simple and common for coughs and diarrhea, yet very effective in the Lisu region where medicine had been a rare commodity. After a thorough investigation of local customs, the missionaries formulated more specific rules that the believers were required to strictly adhere to. For example, it was stipulated that members should take medicines and injections when falling sick, rather than slaughter animals as sacrifices to ghosts. It would also require attention to daily hygiene and avoidance of smoking and alcohol drinking (Li, 1997). These rules have, to some extent, reduced the number of serious illnesses caused by poor hygiene and blind exorcism of ghosts

without medical care, eliminating some of the negative habits that tend to waste productive resources and spread further diseases.

Western religions have, however, impacted the original Lisu faith in other ways, altering not only the Lisu's beliefs, but their lifestyle and medical care as well. The introduction of Western medical technology, while to some extent improving the lack of medical care in ethnic areas, has also severely impacted the already fragile ethnic medicine patterns. In particular, the impact and influence on traditional Lisu medicine has been profound and not too much to say, devastating.

As the missionaries entered the Nujiang region, they worked to establish a so-called "attachment" with the local people, successfully starting a "proselytizing movement." The missionary Fu Nengren translated God as Ursa, the spirit of creation in the original Lisu religion, except that he was not usually worshiped, and the Lisu chose to join the church, meaning they had to choose either worshipping the spirit or worshipping Ursa. "The first thing they did when they decided to convert was to remove all objects from their homes that were used to 'worship the spirits,' and in times of sickness and calamity, they must choose between praying and sacrificing to the spirits." (Han, 2000). This means that the Lisu, in abandoning their primitive religious beliefs, also abandoned the ritual process of traditional medicine, and thus further left behind the procedure of taking herbs during their rituals, thus gradually giving up on traditional medicine as a symbiosis of primitive religions.

Secondly, the important inheritors of traditional medicine, the "nipa" and the "nikipa," are also facing the same fate of having no successor because of the same proselytizing notion. The first to join the church is often the tribe of young people. They accept the doctrine, the rules, but also abandon their own cultural traditions, as well as some medical practices, leading to the gradual abolition of folk experience in medicine. Thus, the reliance on Western medicine has weakened the inheritance and development of their own ethnic medicinal experience, causing an increasing marginalization of Lisu medicine in the Nujiang region.

In addition, under the church's propaganda, the almighty God is able to heal all diseases, with believers recovering their health without taking drugs as long as they pray sincerely. As a result of the church's spiritual brainwashing, the Lisu have abandoned their primitive religion and accepted what is called "fatalism," where illness and death become fated events (Qin & Xu (Eds.), 2008). Attributing everything to "God's will," such a conviction has, therefore, triggered to some extent an abandoning of the medical treatment of diseases, or at least partly limiting the possibilities, largely restricting the further growth and development of traditional Lisu medicine.

4. Conclusion

The Lisu have practiced a primitive religion that is still partially preserved and has turned into an integral part of their traditional culture, with a profound presence in other aspects of their heritage from antiquities, such as literature, art, technology, morality, law, and medicine. In the case of the Lisu in the Nujiang region of Yunnan, for historical reasons, there is a peculiarity in their religious beliefs, as

Christianity and Catholicism do also have a significant local following there. The development of Lisu medicine under the influence of dual religions has given birth to unique characteristics: it has always been suffused with the fog of primitive religion; it is chaotic in the primitive religious culture and has not formed its own theoretical system, remaining at the stage of empirical medicine; it is maintained within a region sitting on medicinal resources, with a wide variety of empirical medicines and powerful curative effects. At the same time, prior to the growing influence of Western medicine, part of the oral Lisu medicine knowledge has been lost, making it an urgent need for professional medicine personnel to explore, collect and organize in an attempt to revive and restore it back into Lisu culture.

Supported Project

Funded Project:

1. Yunnan Province Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project in 2022 (No. YB2022063)
2. Project of Scientific Research Fund of Education Department of Yunnan Province: Research on Translation of Public Notices of Medical Institutions in Yunnan Province from the Perspective of Translation Studies. (No.2023J0566)

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Notes

Note 1. The Nujiang river, the Lancang river, and the Dulong river.

Note 2. Published in 1991, Yunnan Science and Technology Press.

Note 3. It is a non-denominational, transnational Christian mission organization founded by the British pastor Hudson Taylor in 1865. In 1964, it was renamed as Overseas Christian Mission or OMF International.