

# The Influence of Christianity on Lisu People's Cultural Development

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**Abstract**—There are two kinds of opinions concerning the influence of Christianity on Lisu local belief and Lisu traditional cultures. One believes that the spreading of Christianity affect the Lisu people negatively. The other believes that Christianity enriches the local cultures. This paper carries out a case study in Shitou village where Christianity and local belief co-exist. It reveals that Christianity plays an important role in integrating different cultures, with local belief's extensive influence. With tensions and contradictions reflecting the competitions of authorities and interpersonal relationships, a state of equilibrium is achieved. The interviews of the local people reveal that they think they benefit much from the Christian culture, such as for their name traditions, the communication styles between men and women, and their marriage ceremony.

**Keywords**—Lisu people; Christianity; local belief; Christian culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the Christianity was introduced to Nujiang area in Yunnan province in 1913, its impact has steadily expanded to Lushui, Fugong, Gongshan, Lanping and other counties. In this area the believers are almost Lisu people along with some Nu minority people. There were about 100 foreign churchmen from the U. K, the U.S.A, and other countries. There are three kinds of religious churches: China inland mission, the Assemblies of God, and the Dianzang Christian church. Of the three, China inland mission is the most important and influential church, with more than 100,000 local Lisu believers.

As to the function and influence of Christianity, many researchers have carried out researches on it. There are two kinds of opinions: one states that there is contradiction between the local belief and Christianity, and the other insists that there is infusion between traditional belief and Christianity. SHEN Jian (2006) thinks that Christianity brings it along with western advanced scientific knowledge to Lisu believers and Lisu people benefit a lot from Christianity, but his focus is on the spreading history and historical situation of Lisu people without referring to the disadvantages of Christianity's spreading among Lisu people. LU Chengren (2017) analyzes the Lisu people's prayer meetings and Kuoshi festival case from the Wadi village to reveal the essence of continuity of traditional culture and the

changes of the times of external forms. He focuses on the fusion of the two cultures. Song Jianfeng (2010) analyzes the transformation of Lisu traditional culture from the perspective of Christianity. She concludes that the traditional Lisu culture disappeared along with the spreading of Christianity. Li Zhihuan (2013) considers that the original religion is very important in constructing the Lisu people's minority identity; Christianity could not really touch the core part of the Lisu people's ethnic belief. Moreover, in the process of cultural reconstruction, Christianity strengthened the sense of Lisu people's ethnic identity to some extent. Based on the previous researches, in order to make clear the influence of Christianity on Lisu people's cultural development, the paper carries out a case study in Shitou village of Nujiang prefecture of Yunnan province where Christianity and local belief co-exist. It first introduces the Lisu original religion and Lisu Christianity, and then analyzes the Christianity's influences on Lisu traditional culture, and lastly carries out an interview in Shitou village for better understanding of the practical influence of Christianity on local culture.

## II. ABOUT LISU PEOPLE

### A. The Origin of Lisu People

The Lisu people are a Tibetan-Burman ethnic group who live in the mountainous regions of Burma, Thailand, and the India state of Arunachal Pradesh and Southwestern China. In Burma, the Lisu people are known as one of the 135 ethnic groups and an estimated population of 600,000 live in Northern (Namhsan, Lashio, Hopang and Kokang) and Southern state (Namsang, Loilem, Mongton) and Wa special region, Sagaing Division (Katha and Khamti), Mandalay Division (Mogok and Pyin Oo Lwin), and Kachin state (Putao, Mkyiyina, Waimaw). Approximately 55,000 of them live in Thailand, where they are one of the six main hill tribes. They mainly inhabit in the remote mountainous areas. In China, about 730,000 of them live in Lijiang, Baoshan, Nujiang, Diqing and Dehong prefectures in Yunnan Province and some other areas in Sichuan Province. The Lisu forms one of the 56 ethnic groups officially recognized by the country.

### B. *The Development of Lisu People*

Lisu people's traditional culture is passed from one generation to the next in the form of songs. There are a large amount of Lisu songs among Lisu people. The Lisu minority are believed to originate from the eastern Tibet. They have inhabited in a region across Baoshan and the Tengchong plain for thousands of years. The Lisu, Yi, Lahu and Akha are Tibetan-Burman languages, distantly related to Burmese and Tibetan. After the Ming Dynasty, around 1140-1644 A.D., the Eastern and Southern Lisu languages and cultures were greatly influenced by Han culture of China. Taiping village in Yinjiang of Yunnan province in China was first established by Lu Shi Lisu people around 1,000 years ago. In the mid-19th century, part of those people moved to northern Thailand. Lisu are the descendants of Yi or Lolo major ethnic group. Yi minority or Nuosu minority's language is much close to Lisu and Burman languages. The majority of Lisu people are living in Nujiang of Yunnan province with the population of around 200,000. They are the important minority in Nujiang area. Lisu minority's language is different from the Yi minority's language branch and it includes black Lisu and white Lisu. Their language differs between the borderland and inland, due to the imbalanced social and economic development.

After the Ming Dynasty, most Lisu tribes moved to live in villages which stand high in the mountains or in mountain valleys. However, those who still lived in the Baoshan plains, standing on the side of the Qing Dynasty, fought against the Kingdom of Ming. The Lisu knife ladder climbing festival was first held as a memorial event of victory over Ming in 1644 A.D. The Lisu people invented their own traditional dance called "che-ngoh-che" along with the Lisu guitar which has no bars on the fretboard. They invented another musical instrument called fulu jewlew as well. It is a kind of flute which has about six or seven small bamboo tubes tied up together to a dried-hollow-gourd. They have different songs and dances for weddings, homecoming hunters and harvest time respectively. Lisu villages are usually built close to water to provide easy access for washing and drinking. Their houses are usually built on the ground and have dirt floors and bamboo walls. But now more and more Lisu people build houses with wood or even concrete. Lisu people's life foundation was based on paddy fields to grow rice, fruit and vegetables. However, they have typically lived in ecologically fragile regions which do not easily produce enough subsistence materials. They also faced constant upheaval from both physical and social disasters such as earthquakes, landslides or wars. Therefore, they have typically been dependent on trade for survival. They work as porters and caravan guards. With the introduction of the opium poppy as a cash crop in the early 19th century, many Lisu people were able to achieve economic stability.

After the introducing of Christianity, there is a big change in Lisu people's belief. It is an important turning point for researching Lisu people's religious culture.

### III. THE RELIGIONS OF LISU PEOPLE

Two kinds of religions co-exist among Lisu minorities in the northwest of Yunnan Province. One is the Lisu original religion which worships the natural spirit. The other is Christianity.

#### A. *The Lisu Original Religion*

Lisu practices a religion that is partial animistic and partial ancestor worship, but it is mixed within complex local systems of place-based religion. Most important rituals are performed by shamans whose position in Lisu original religion is the same as the priest in Christianity. The main Lisu Festival corresponds to the Chinese New Year and is celebrated with music, feast and drinking. People wear silver jewelry and best clothes at these times as a means of displaying their success in the previous agricultural year. In each traditional village there is a sacred grove at the top of the village, where the sky spirit or the Old Grandfather Spirit is propitiated with offerings; there each house has an ancestor altar at the back of the house.

Believing in the existence and immortality of spirit is the fundamental of Lisu original religion. In their mind, the reason why people are living in the world is that spirit is attached to human body, and then after death the spirit will be separated from the body. The spirit possesses super power, depending on itself but not the flesh. So Lisu people worship spirit. They believe that every living thing has spirit which is neither God nor evil. Lisu call them NI. It means the same as spirit and mana, but for a long time it has been misunderstood as evil spirit or God or celestial being.

Lisu people believe that the sky, soil, wind, lightning, forests and stones all have their own NI. All these NIs need to snuggle up to visible and realistic staff, and they can act sufficiently beyond the real staffs. If the real existed staffs suffer, their NIs will also be influenced. So Lisu people respect NI and behave carefully. In other words, the activities of offering sacrifice to soul or god is actually to sacrifice to different NIs. When Lisu people get ill or their livestock suffer, people think that it is NIs get angry with them and take revenge against them, so people have to figure out the way to reconcile with NIs by a kind of symbolizing exchange form, that is, to use the victims to sacrifice to NIs to stop the bad influence. The important role between the Lisu people and NIs is called NI PA (a man has the ability to connect with NIs) in Lisu language. The appellation of NI PA indicates the man who has the dual nature as NI and a human being at the same time. PA in Lisu language means *adult man*, therefore NI PA is permitted to play by an adult man who can connect NI via divination.

#### B. *Christianity in Lisu Area*

Since the Christianity was formally introduced to Nujiang area in 1913, it expanded quickly into Lushui, Fugong, Gongshan and Lanping counties. It had deep effect in these areas. The believers are mainly from Lisu people, and include Nu minorities as well. There were about 100 foreign churchmen from the U. K and the U.S.A. There are three kinds of religious churches: China inland mission, the

Assemblies of God and the Dianzang Christian church. China inland mission is the most important and influential church. The members of China inland mission are mainly from Lisu minority and some are from Nu minority. Until now, the number of the Lisu believers reach up to 100 thousand. And now, there are a small number of believers from other nationalities in Nujiang. But the main force of believers in Nujiang is the local Lisu people, and their daily activities may be characterized as follows:

Firstly, family-oriented Christian preach is an important way to spread good news to Lisu people, at the same time, it provides advice to people's habit. By this way, many Lisu people give up smoking. There are some Lisu Christians who are over 60 years old. Most of them cannot tell how they finally became Christians. One thing in common is that their grand-parents or parents are Christians so they became Christians eventually. According to the researcher's interview, the proportion of being Christians because of family members' influence occupies 45.81%, which is almost the half of the total members.

The church spreads the good news to those Christians, and then they spread the good news to other people. With the increased members and the development of the society, the place to teach Bible shift from house to church, more and more local Lisu people joined to be Christians.

Secondly, missionaries and local Christians organized training class for popularizing Lisu written characters. They taught Lisu people doctrines by using Lisu Bible as the text book. At the same time, they taught the Bible stories to students, so students learned the Christianity doctrines during this process. With the number of students increased, the classroom was transferred to church which was built by believers' donation. By this way of teaching Lisu people to study their own written characters, church became the common place to gather together and functioned as the school to teach people language and Bible. Naturally almost all those students became Christians.

Thirdly, missionaries and local believers actively raise money to build church whose surface looks similar to the common local buildings. The inner part of the church is decorated by fresh flowers, Jesus's statues, angels' pictures, and the like, instead of decoration with minority's traditional cultural features.

Fourthly, the information spreading is speedy and the time schedule for gathering is reasonable here in Nujiang Christian churches. Believers come to church three times a week: the night of Wednesday and Saturday, and the morning of Sunday. When the Lisu believers get together, they usually do religious services, sing worship songs, and share Bible stories. The purpose of going to church is to resolve troublesome things that already took place at local villages. The leader of the church asks believers to pray for good wishes, and share their sorrow and sadness. At the same time the leader of the church also tells the believers the recently happened bad things, such as: bluff, human trafficking, drug taking, etc. The Church advocates that everyone should protect themselves and their properties. Coming to church, they can relax themselves after heavy

physical work, get away from dull spare time, reduce the life stress, and improve interpersonal relationship. Local Lisu people like to live this way, and they like to go to the church periodically.

Finally, the Christianity doctrines and earthly life thoughts echo the Lisu people's original wishes. The earlier way of Christianity development in Nujiang area began with family parties, and the most important thing is to call on believers not to drink alcohol, not to smoke, and to give up their bad life habits. They are requested to care more with their own health and the family's wealth accumulation; and to attach much importance to the enhancement of family members' life quality. All the Christian doctrines correspond to the Lisu people's desire of improving quality of life and the community's overall development. As a result, more and more Lisu people became faithful Christians. This research then took a close look at how the Lisu culture is influenced by Christianity.

#### IV. CHRISTIANITY'S INFLUENCE ON LISU TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Christian missionaries have been working in the Lisu areas since the early 20th century. The influence on traditional culture mainly reflects on two aspects: written language and traditional musical culture.

##### A. *The Influence on Lisu Written Language*

James O. Fraser (1886-1938), a British Protestant Christian missionary to China with the China Inland Mission, is the first man worked with the Lisu people of Southwestern China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Fraser arrived in Yunnan Province in 1910, and then he learned Lisu language and commenced his work among the Lisu people. The initial success was followed by years of doubts and difficulties until 1916 when he and his fellow missionaries started to see scores of families convert to Christianity and enthusiastically pursue a new life without the fear of all kinds of spirits which were piously believed among Lisu people. By 1918, sparked by family evangelism carried on by the people themselves, 600 believers had been baptized. He began to work immediately on Mark's gospel and a book of hymns, since Lisu people showed great interest in writing and singing materials.

Fraser developed a script for the Lisu language and used it to prepare catechisms, and portions of Scriptures. Working initially on Mark's and John's gospel and then worked on a handbook of Lisu history and language, Fraser began to translate *New Testament* into Lisu language. He handed on the translation task to Allyn Cooke and his wife, Leila, then he came back to help the team with revision and checking in the mid-1930. The translation of *New Testament* was finished in 1936. Christianity is thriving in the Salween River valley where the Lisu live nearly 70 years after the death of Fraser. 18,000 Lisu people who lived in Fugong in 1950 professed faith in Christ. In Yunnan it is estimated that there are 100,000-200,000 total Lisu Christians. More than 75,000 Lisu Bibles have been legally printed in China following this explosive growth. In 1992, the Chinese



government officially recognized the Fraser alphabet as the official script of the Lisu language which make them released from the state of feeling inferior. The written system also provided the realistic conditions for Lisu people's unity and solidarity.

From this family to another family, from this village to another village, Lisu people are willing to study Lisu words. The first learners are the younger Christians and later they all became village school teachers who teach local Lisu people the written Lisu characters, at the same time, these young teachers are respected by local Lisu people. After the popularization of Lisu Bible and church building, Lisu people have more opportunity to accept the modern education. At the post-liberation period, the literacy rate of Lisu minority is over 50%. Meanwhile, churches not only teach written Lisu characters and Bible stories, but also teach Chinese, abacus calculation, music, gym and art, etc, which widely improved Lisu people's cultural quality. In the process Lisu people gradually gave up their old bad habits. Christianity also shed influence on Lisu traditional music and cheered up the younger generation.

### *B. The Influence on Lisu Traditional Musical Culture*

Lisu people like to dance and sing, especially in holidays, weddings, funeral arrangements, or on worship ceremonies. There are more than ten kinds of dances, such as Harvest Dances, Dachang Dances which are collective dances and musical performance. The Christian influence on traditional Lisu music showed up in two aspects. Some of the traditional music was banned and psalms were chosen as the main body of the church music. The Priest thought that folk songs may make believers "degenerate", therefore, the Priest was against believers to sing folk songs. This undoubtedly influenced Lisu traditional musical succession and development. On the other hand, missionaries and Christian introduced church music to Lisu people, and they made a series of revolution to implement the localization of Christian music. For example, in the process of introducing Christian music, missionaries used simplified musical notation. It is easier for Lisu people to master. In this notation, singing hymns was referred to as the "scratch" (wat ku mo Gw) by Lisu people. Because Lisu language itself has six tones, ups and downs, elastic, Lisu lyrics itself has a natural flavor, and the antithesis of words are easily flowing. By this way, it allows Lisu people to accept those hymns easily. So far, in Nujiang area there are countless types of hymns which are popular Lisu hymnal, containing 319 tracks and there are a lot of private collection of ancient poetry and dozens of mimeograph.

It contains many Christian classic songs such as "Trinity coming song; the song of God of drop; the hail Fountain songs and the like". It also contains many western national style of melody, and even some are literature style of poetries. The formation of the Lisu style hymns has a complicated history background. Early foreign missionaries had stipulated the so-called Ten Commandments Canon, including: no folk dance, and no folk songs. Because those missionaries think that the folk songs and dances are in

conflict with the doctrine of Christian customs in terms of content.

Since the 80s, after the recovery of religious activities, the number of Christians is gradually increased, and religious music activities are held more and more frequently and the content is expanded as well. The old hymn book's length and number of songs obviously cannot satisfy the reality's needs, so many new local Lisu worshipers appeared. Lisu hymns prints or manuscripts mainly come from the following ways:

Firstly, the border ethnic minority Christians have foreign friends who brought many new translation of Bible, psalm books and periodicals. Secondly, due to the lack of religious books in Yunnan, the outside Christians grasped the opportunity to expand the influence and they help issue religious books and teach sing hymns.

Thirdly, in order to increase religious books and periodicals of the church, some Christians made a lot of mimeograph. It is common that one Christian has three or four thick handwritten poems.

The newly produced songs, apart from the traditional western style of hymns, and popular religious music take up a large percentage. In the Lisu Christian region, religious music activities occupy a large proportion in the religious life. In the process of Christianity spreading, music played an important role. Lisu Christian social music life mainly relies on a variety of religious worship etiquette to reflect, or to worship.

After the liberation, in order to implement the Party's religious policy, all levels of governmental religious departments work with local churches to launch various pastoral staff training. Most of Lisu religious regions set up short-term guitar training classes and it helped train Lisu people to master their traditional music.

## V. CHANGES FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF LOCAL PEOPLE

Over an analysis on the longitudinal influence on Lisu people's traditional culture, an impression from the macro-level is got. In order to better understand the practical influence from the micro-level, an interview in Shi Tou village in Lu Zhang, Nujiang, Yunnan Province was conducted in this research. Among the 15 families, 8 are Christians.

From the interview, two interesting new findings are got. The first one is that the Christian influences Lisu Peoples' name-giving. Usually Lisu people are not named after their family names. Men and women have the tradition to be given names twice. The first time to be named is 7 days after being born for men; 9 days after being born for women. They are named by their grandfathers or fathers. But Lisu people's name giving does not have a certain standard. They give names by using encountered things. Due to their original belief, the intention of the first name is to disperse the evil who want to hurt the new born child. The second time to be named is at the time of engagement or marriage. For example, if the engagement gift is a head of black cattle, the

groom will be called “black cattle PA”, and the bride will be called “black cattle MA”. “PA” and “MA” stand for men and women respectively in Lisu Language. After becoming Christians, they will get a new name which was given by local missionaries picked from Bible. But after they believed in God, there is no any reason to keep the previous names, so the previous names will be abandoned.

The second aspect is that the Christian Influences Lisu people’s marriage values. The influence on Lisu traditional marriage customs embodies in two aspects. One is the manner which men and women communicate, and the other is the marriage ceremony.

From the way of communication between men and women, the traditional Lisu people adopt monogamy and arranged marriage. When young men and women take part in social activities, if they love each other, their family will ask a matchmaker for help. Missionaries are against premarital sex. They think singing love songs may bring bad influence to young people. The church made a rule that if a Lisu young man wants to marry a girl, he must write a love letter to her. This letter will be checked by ministers of the local church to check if the letter is permitted by the church before send it. The girls’ reply must also be handled by the same person in the same way.

For the wedding ceremony, on the wedding day, the groom is requested to sit at a table and ask the bride to drink together and then he should sing songs for the bride. The tradition of throwing rotten potatoes and carrots to bride embodies getting rid of the evil, and then bringing good luck. But Fraser proposed that this tradition should be abandoned. He introduced a new wedding ceremony. At this ceremony, the bride is asked to pray as soon as she arrives at the new home.

According to the villagers, they are thankful to the policy of religion freedom from the central government. The policy maintained their identification and aroused their patriotic enthusiasm. At the same time, there are patriotic organizations which help implement the government religious policy and guarantee to normalize religious activities. Those organizations are fighting for unity and peace. Their concrete jobs are: to assist the party and the government to carry out the policy on freedom of religious belief, to help believers and clergies enhance patriotism and socialism consciousness.

## VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, over an analysis on the Christian’s practical influence on Lisu people’s culture, it is found that the local culture is enriched and the traditional bad habits are rectified by the co-existing of the two religions. The local Lisu people are satisfied with their religion life under the guideline of the Party’s polices on freedom of religious belief and with the help of those patriotic organizations which are devoting to implementing the central policy of freedom of religions.

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