

# A Study on the Folk Belief Culture in Yi Language

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## ABSTRACT

Primitive worship is a common cultural custom and typical belief phenomenon among the Yi people. The vocabulary of belief in Yi language is rich and profound, which condenses the primitive worship thought and primitive belief culture of Yi nationality. The study of Yi belief vocabulary is of great value to the academic research of exploring Yi People's spiritual belief, internal world as well as culture and thought. On the basis of previous research results, this paper aims to observe and perspective the belief phenomenon, thinking paradigm and cultural connotation of Yi people by explaining the belief words in Yi language.

**Keywords:** Yi language, Folk, Belief, vocabulary, Culture

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is an important manifestation of culture. The existence of human belief, morality, customs and other cultural elements uses language as foundation and carrier. "The multi-functional performance of language reflects the cultural characteristics of human society from different perspectives, including religious characteristics." [1] The vocabulary of folk faith in Yi language, especially the nouns related to folk faith, are abundant and valuable materials for the study on the history and culture of Yi nationality. In the research field of Yi language and culture, scholars have investigated and studied the sacrificial words of Bimo and sacrificila sentences of Yi language. However, no scholar has specifically combed the folk faith vocabulary of Liangshan Yi language and conducted academic discussion on its cultural connotation. On the basis of previous research results, this paper aims to observe and analyze the belief forms, thinking patterns and cultural implications of Yi people by interpreting folk belief vocabulary in Liangshan Yi language.

## 2. THE ACADEMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF FOLK FAITH VOCABULARY IN YI LANGUAGE

The folk faith vocabulary in the Yi language is rich and diverse, with profound meaning, which embodies the Yi nation's spirit worship and belief culture knowledge for gods and ghosts. The study of folk faith vocabulary in Yi language is of great value to the exploration of Yi people's spiritual belief, spiritual world and cultural phenomena, as well as the academic research of Yi people's culture and ideology.

Folk belief is the concentrated embodiment of people's way of thinking, knowledge system, social relations, life experience, production practice and cultural customs, serving as the foundation of national folk culture. It provides a unique local narrative vision and rich historical materials of folk culture for the investigation and understanding of the cultural tradition and the panorama of the local society. At the level of belief, folk belief is the belief and worship of supernatural artistic images such as "gods, ghosts, ancestors, sages and celestial images". [2] The folk belief of the Yi people is reflected in the vocabulary of the Yi language. Yi people have developed their original thinking with rich vocabulary of belief. For almost everything they see, the Yi people hold corresponding

lexicons of belief and religious language interpretation. The Yi language retained the primitive folk beliefs and customs, as well as the ancient mythological thinking of the Yi people. According to their types, the folk belief lexicons in the Yi language can be divided into the legendary ghosts, ghosts that come from people and animals after they die, evil spirits and ghosts, hereditary diseases, and ghosts that come from animals after they died and so on.

### 3. DEFINITIONS OF FOLK FAITH VOCABULARY IN YI LANGUAGE

Ghosts and gods originate from early human beings' creativity and imagination, regarded as a way for primitive people to explore the unknown and think about the future. In essence, ghosts and gods are the same, and their difference lies in the good ghost for god, evil god for ghost. The Yi people have a saying, "The ghost of others' family is the god of my family." This shows that gods and ghosts are relative and there is no absolute difference between them.

#### 3.1. Demons and Ghosts in Ancient Legends

Numerous Yi classics and oral myths and legends not only record a variety of gods and spirits, but also all kinds of ghosts and monsters and specters. When constructing the system of ghosts and spirits, the Yi people invented both the very concrete ghosts and abstract ghosts.

ts<sub>1</sub><sup>55</sup> ts<sub>1</sub><sup>33</sup> ŋi<sup>33</sup> ndza<sup>55</sup>, "zyt nzyr hni nrat", means the beautiful ghost, the first devil on the ghost lineage; o<sup>33</sup> t<sup>h</sup>u<sup>33</sup> dze<sup>33</sup> ba<sup>33</sup>, "o qu jjie bba", represents another earlier ferocious ghost in history of evil after "zyt nzyr hni nrat"; ts<sup>h</sup>o<sup>33</sup> dzu<sup>33</sup> mo<sup>21</sup> ŋu<sup>55</sup> a<sup>21</sup> xo<sup>33</sup>, "co zze mop shut ap ho", is a legendary anthropophagous evil; ts<sup>h</sup>o<sup>33</sup> te<sup>h</sup>o<sup>55</sup> a<sup>33</sup> ma<sup>55</sup>, "co qot a mat", stands for the legendary anthropophagous sorceress; bu<sup>21</sup> ha<sup>21</sup> ts<sup>h</sup>o<sup>44</sup> ndo<sup>33</sup>, "bup hpxa cox ndo", refers to the legendary anthropophagous Python ghost; t<sup>h</sup>a<sup>21</sup> bo<sup>21</sup>, "tap bbop", is said to be a behemoth that eats anything and everyone it doesn't like, with its own laws; people have to work out the rules of its activities and avoid them, otherwise everything will go wrong. ŋu<sup>33</sup> ndz<sub>1</sub><sup>33</sup> ŋu<sup>33</sup> mo<sup>21</sup>, "nge nzy nge mop", denotes a legendary demon with jurisdiction over human life and health. In addition, pi<sup>33</sup> dz<sub>1</sub><sup>33</sup> dzi<sup>21</sup> h<sub>1</sub><sup>21</sup> ("by zzy jjip lyp"), va<sup>33</sup> zu<sup>33</sup> o<sup>33</sup> ku<sup>33</sup> ("va zze uo gur"), lo<sup>55</sup> ndz<sub>1</sub><sup>33</sup> dzi<sup>21</sup> ŋo<sup>21</sup> ("lot zzy jjip nyop"), and mo<sup>21</sup> k<sup>h</sup>u<sup>33</sup> da<sup>21</sup> dza<sup>33</sup> ("mop ke ddap rra") are celestial demons. According to the legend, they used to send envoys to hunt down people's spirits, causing illness and death. Therefore, Bimo of Yi nationality often curses these ghosts in rituals.

#### 3.2. Ghosts that cause illness and death

Based on the influence of animism, the Yi people have resorted to supernatural forces to explain the causes of illness and death. In the concept and consciousness of the Yi people, ghosts can not only dominate the human body, but also the soul. Therefore, the Yi people tend to attribute illness and death to ghosts. They believed that illness is aroused by being haunted by ghosts, and death is due to souls' being despoiled by ghosts, and that all kinds of ghosts are transformed by people who died abnormally. ŋi<sup>55</sup> ts<sup>h</sup>l<sup>33</sup>, "nyit cy", generally refers to the ghost that leads to people's sickness, pain and death; mo<sup>21</sup> ŋi<sup>55</sup> ts<sup>h</sup>l<sup>33</sup>, "mop nyit cy", indicates female ghost, who died of unnatural causes, such as hanging, taking poison, and falling from rocks; pa<sup>55</sup> ŋi<sup>55</sup> ts<sup>h</sup>l<sup>33</sup>, "bat nyiy cy", means male ghost, who died abnormally or whose body has been trampled by animals after death; t<sup>h</sup>o<sup>55</sup> xo<sup>33</sup>, "tot ho", denotes a ghost turned by slave owner without offspring after death. The ghost can become the powerful Suni wizard guardian god, and can also become the fierce ghost that can confer a person with sudden death; b<sub>1</sub><sup>33</sup> z<sub>1</sub><sup>33</sup>, "bby ry", represents evil ghost, a demon that causes suicide, homicide, or accidental death; ti<sup>21</sup> mu<sup>33</sup>, "dip mu", refers to grave ghost, sores ghost, baby ghost, formed from infants and other human beings or primates buried in the ground and often lived in the graves, causing skin diseases such as itching, sores and rashes for the people living in the neighborhood of the graves. ŋi<sup>44</sup> z<sub>1</sub><sup>33</sup>, "hnix ry", indicates girl ghost, turned by girl who died over the age of three and above the age of thirteen. b<sub>1</sub><sup>33</sup> l<sub>1</sub><sup>21</sup>, "bby lyp", is specified as a maiden ghost, who died when she is unmarried. zu<sup>21</sup>, "rep", is boy ghost, who died when he is underage; zu<sup>21</sup> t<sup>h</sup>o<sup>55</sup> o<sup>33</sup> ndz<sub>1</sub><sup>33</sup>, "ssep tuo o zi", connotes the male ghost, who died between the ages of 13 and 35; zu<sup>21</sup> l<sub>1</sub><sup>21</sup>, "ssep lyp", is the ghost, turned by a young man who died when he is unmarried and has children; zu<sup>21</sup> ŋi<sup>33</sup>, "ssep hni", is the ghost, changed by a dead infant who was eaten by animals because its body was not properly buried; gi<sup>55</sup> si<sup>33</sup>, "ggit si", denotes the ghost, shifted by childless people who died; gi<sup>55</sup> de<sup>33</sup>, "ggit die", is referred to the evil god, converted by people who had no heirs, able to make people die of violent illness; zu<sup>21</sup> si<sup>33</sup>, "rep si", represents chronic disease ghost, resulting from lung disease, liver disease and other chronic diseases without recovery for long treatment. "rep" is the local understanding of chronic diseases without recovery for long treatment, for example, tuberculosis is typical of "rep". nu<sup>33</sup> si<sup>33</sup>, "nu si", stands for leper ghost that causes leprosy. When people passed through thunder struck land, collapsed over mountains, and graves, etc., or inadvertently burned wood that has been struck by lightning or brought by floods, they shall be sick. ndzu<sup>21</sup>, "nrep" refers to a mentally ill ghost or crazy ghost, and Yi people believed that mentally ill people are haunted by this ghost; ts<sup>h</sup>u<sup>55</sup>, "cut", denotes a ghost

who causes incurable skin diseases; ts<sup>h</sup>u<sup>55</sup> po<sup>21</sup>, “cut bop”, represents a ghost that causes people to suffer from a slight skin disease; ts<sup>h</sup>u<sup>55</sup> mo<sup>21</sup>, “cut mop”, is a ghost, causing people to suffer from serious skin disease. At the same time, in the belief concept of the Yi people, there is a ghost, turned by animals that causes death and disease of people and animals after their death. The Yi people believe that animals have spirits just like human beings, so they will turn into ghosts to haunt people after they died. For example, after the dogs have contact with the dead body, when they died, they will become the ghosts, tend to injure children. Thus, this kind of ghosts are as follows: th<sup>i</sup>55 k<sup>h</sup>u<sup>33</sup>, “tit ke”, is a ghost turned by a dog that eats human flesh or drinks human blood, often hurting children under 13 years old; ho<sup>33</sup> k<sup>h</sup>u<sup>33</sup>, “hxot ke” refers to a ghost created by a dead dog that jumps over a dead body, often hurting children under nine years old; du<sup>33</sup> k<sup>h</sup>u<sup>33</sup>, “dde ke”, represents a ghost that changes from a dead dog under a body rack, often harming infants under two years old. In addition, ni<sup>33</sup> mu<sup>44</sup>, “nyi mux” is a kind of ghost that only eats livestock in the wild, and it can contribute the death of cattle, sheep and other livestock; tu<sup>33</sup> sha<sup>33</sup>, “tur sha”, is the ghost that causes livestock to pine away and die.

In short, Yi people believed that ghosts can haunt people and cause illness or death. In their consciousness, diseases are caused by ghosts. Diseases such as lung disease, liver disease and leprosy are caused by the corresponding ghosts. Therefore, many ghosts are often named after some kind of disease.

### 3.3. *Evil Spirits and Ghosts in Nature*

The Yi people believe in animism. When traveling in wild mountains, mountains, deserts, and deep valleys, ghosts and spirits can cause poverty, illness, and even death. Such ghosts are as below: mi<sup>55</sup> si<sup>33</sup> qo<sup>33</sup> si<sup>33</sup>, “mit si gguo si”, is the ghosts suffering from hunger and cold, and the family or individual who is attached by this ghost will be subject to poverty, hunger and cold; i<sup>55</sup> tsu<sup>21</sup> ni<sup>44</sup> ts<sup>h</sup>e<sup>33</sup> si<sup>33</sup>, “it zup nyix cie si”, refers to the ghost who always disturbs one’s sleep, with this ghost haunted, people will be hard to sleep and eat, troubled by sleeplessness and frequent nightmares; sha<sup>33</sup> si<sup>33</sup> ndu<sup>33</sup> si<sup>33</sup>, “sha si ndur si”, indicates toil ghost, with this ghost disturbed, people will rush everywhere for livelihood but always in a state of utter destitute; ndu<sup>33</sup>, “ndu”, denotes a ghost that often endows people with a feeling of hunger; tu<sup>55</sup> bi<sup>55</sup>, “dut bit”, is a ghost shining outdoors at night, causing evil spirits to haunt people; jee<sup>33</sup> na<sup>33</sup>, “jie na”, means the ghost, causing children to grow short, fear for strangers, and wet the bed at night. sy<sup>33</sup> si<sup>33</sup>, “sy si”, is specialized as the wild ghost. When people’s life palace encounters this ghost, they need to do Bi or Ni ceremony, otherwise this ghost will cause people’s limbs numbness, or even paralysis, it means that limbs suffer from pain and swelling, unable to flex

and stretch, together with articulus pain, almost covering all the symptoms of rheumatic-type diseases, as for “sy si na”, the main cause of the disease is the subsoil population of the “sy si”, which is often found in low-lying areas such as marshes, wetlands, rivers or deep valleys. ngu<sup>21</sup>, “mgep”, is referred to water ghost, and when people stamp over, play at or approach the water in the wild ditch, this ghost makes peoples’ eyes red, and throat painful and hoarse; va<sup>33</sup> hi<sup>33</sup>, “va hxi” is the ghost that makes people vomit, feel dizzy and tremble on empty stomach when walking in the wild and roadside. sy<sup>33</sup> lu<sup>21</sup>, “syr lyp”, represents the ghost that makes people dizzy with soreness of waist and tinnitus. so<sup>33</sup> bi<sup>55</sup>, “sho bbit”, stands for the ghost turned by non-Yi people after death; su<sup>33</sup> fi<sup>33</sup>, “shu fi”, is referred to the ill ghost, who can make the situation turn to be abnormal; li<sup>21</sup> ngu<sup>33</sup>, “lip mge”, is the cursing ghost made to curse the enemy when people ask Bimo to do the related witchcraft curse; vi<sup>44</sup> ngo<sup>44</sup>, “i ngo”, means the general name of the evil ghost, referring to the ghost that dominates a family or a region.

## 4. THE CULTURAL CONNOTATION OF FAITH VOCABULARY IN YI LANGUAGE

From the above-mentioned language materials, we can find the primitive belief phenomenon, folk customs and national cultural connotation of Yi people, as well as the unique original thinking and cultural prototype of Yi people contained in the terms of spirit and ghost in Yi language.

### 4.1. *Reflection of the Customs of Primitive Worship*

Belief in supernatural power is the essence of religious thought, while god (ghost) is the symbol of religious supernatural power, the product of human cognition of the external world, and the reflection of human primitive worship and belief thoughts. Human’s imagination and description of ghosts are essentially the primitive cognition of the world. When the primitive people could not understand and control the social and natural forces, they believed that there was a supernatural power in the underworld, that is, the gods and ghosts controlling the world and life. Reverence for ghosts and gods is kept in the mind of Yi ancestors. Yi people not only fear and revere gods and ghosts, but also worship and believe in gods and ghosts. They imagine the invisible power and inexplicable phenomena as superhuman entities, and select specific ghosts for sacrifice, prayer and worship according to their specific needs.

As a major feature of Yi religion, the worship for gods and ghosts has become a common religious concept of Yi people. From the lexical data of gods in Yi language, it can be found that polytheistic worship

occupies an important position in Yi religion at the immature and undeveloped stage of primitive worship. Yi people believed that gods and ghosts are everywhere, and the Yi people thought that there are many kinds of gods and spirits to numerate, and they have obvious tendency for the nature of primitive worship and polytheistic belief. The multi-ghost and multi-god belief system constructed by the Yi people reflects the achievements of religious system in the traditional Yi society, and the living environment and social conditions of the Yi people.

#### ***4.2. Embodiment of the Utilitarianism for Folk Belief.***

The gods and ghosts in Yi people's imagination and concept are of secular and utilitarian significance, which are connected with their social reality. Based on their own realistic needs, Yi people created ghosts, but their understanding of the nature of ghosts, the description of the image and function of ghosts lack rich imagination and bold rendering. Under the influence of religious psychology of emphasis on practical effect and concern about things related to their own interests, the Yi people believed that the social function of gods and ghosts is to bring benefits or disasters to people. It can be seen that the psychology of survival and life is the root cause of Yi people for polytheistic belief. In order to explore the meaning of life, the purpose of life, the root of death, and to prevent the occurrence of natural disasters, illness, death and other irresistible phenomena, the Yi people always try to use the mysterious power of gods and ghosts to act, the ultimate meaning of which reflects the fundamental psychological needs of believers. It can be concluded that the status and significance of ghost worship in Yi people's real life is significant.

#### ***4.3. Construction of the Concept of Ancestor Worship.***

Ancestor worship plays an important role in the primitive religious belief of Yi nationality. Based on the importance of the original consanguinity, the Yi people who worship ancestors yearn for the group life and pursue the cultural ideal that blood kinship is the priority. Thus, the family society was established with the patrilineal consanguinity organization as the basic unit. The concept of gods and ghosts is a kind of belief power and social consciousness handed down from generation to generation. Yi people's concept of ancestors is stronger than that of gods and ghosts, and ancestor worship is higher than that of gods and ghosts, therefore, the family ancestor worship ceremony is more pious and grander than the family ghost worship ceremony. Meanwhile, the concept of gods and ghosts together with the family consciousness strengthen the Yi people's religious thought of ancestor worship, and boost the Yi people's cultural psychology of respecting

tradition and worshiping ancestors, so that the concept of gods and ghosts for the divine power deify the ethic concept of ancestors.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

“Language and religion are inextricably linked mutually, both of which are subordinate to culture. On the one hand, the birth, dissemination and characteristics of religions will be retained to some extent in the language; on the other hand, as an important manifestation of culture, language can reflect the emergence, change and dissemination of religions, as well as the characteristics and evolution of different religions.”[4] Human's religious belief and ideological culture are always retained and reflected in human's discourse description and language expression. The concept of gods and ghosts, as a primitive belief of the Yi nationality, has been deeply rooted in the Yi language and rich cultural implications have been accumulated. Admittedly, the belief vocabulary in Yi language integrates the mysterious thoughts for gods and ghosts and belief mode of Yi people, reflects the unique cultural psychology and ideological consciousness of Yi people, and embodies the religious psychology and cultural structure of Yi people, which is of great significance and value to the study of the relationship between Yi language and religion.

### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

Zhang Dehua, Ph.D., associate researcher of research institute of Yi nationality in Guizhou University of Engineering Science, academic backbone of ethnology, Member of China Translation Society, member of China folk custom society, Deputy Secretary General of Guizhou Society for Religious Studies, and member of a council of the fourth Yi studies society in Bijie City. He has successively obtained the bachelor's degree and master's degree in minority language and Literature (Yi language and Literature) of Southwest University for Nationalities and the doctor's degree in Philosophy (Religion) of Sichuan University, mainly engaged in the study of Yi people's culture, ethnology and religion. He published multiple academic articles and Presided over various projects.

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