

# Heritage and Transmutation: A Study on the Changes of Wa Moba Culture in Ximeng since the Reform and Opening-up

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## ABSTRACT

Moba culture is the core part of the traditional religious culture of the Wa people in Ximeng, China, it is a religious, cultural and social system that exists in the central region of Wa culture and has the characteristics of Wa culture. This paper uses classical research methods such as literature review method and historical comparison method to analyze the process of changes in Moba culture since the reform and opening up and the influencing factors of the changes, on the basis of explaining the concept of Moba culture and previous studies. Influenced by social structure, psychological structure and personal personality structure, Moba culture has undergone major changes in both cultural content and cultural structure. Multiculturalism is becoming the basic form of Wa society, and Moba culture is bound to be reborn in the process of cultural adaptation.

**Keywords:** *Ximeng Wa, Moba, culture, change, religion*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Reason for choosing the topic

Socioculture and its changes are topics that have been popularly explored in sociological anthropology. Cultural change has been the darling of sociological research since the introduction of works such as British anthropologist Malinowski's *Voyagers in the Western Pacific* and Radcliffe Brown's *The Structure and Function of Primitive Societies*. More and more advanced theories and ideas were born and successively dominated the mainstream approach when ethnic contact and intermingling. From ancient times to the present, the development of cultural change theory has played a significant role in promoting ethnic development, cultural diversity and social stability. Since its founding, China has attached great importance to the social development and livelihood of ethnic minorities. Since the 1980s, the focus of research has shifted from the study of the theory of social forms to the analysis of specific cultural phenomena and modernization processes of individual ethnic groups. With the modernization of society, the traditional culture and customs of ethnic minorities and ethnic regions have undergone minor or

major changes due to the impact of modernization. Since China's reform and opening up, the lives of the Wa people have undergone radical changes, and the changes in Moba culture, a traditional Wa religion, are even more typical. The changes in Moba culture have a certain mapping effect on the changes in the daily life, way of thinking and cultural characteristics of the Wa people.

### 1.2. Research Method

1. Literature review method. Literature review is a way to explore and analyze various social behaviors, social relationships and other social phenomena by collecting and analyzing existing literature materials in the form of words, figures, symbols, pictures and other information.

2. Fieldwork method. Fieldwork refers to the research method in which the researcher personally enters a community and obtains first-hand information through participant observation, residential experience, and interview method over a relatively long period of time, and understands and interprets the research object through qualitative analysis of these data. Some of the materials for this study come from the author's preliminary research materials in the Wa region of Ximeng.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Related Concept Definition*

1. Cultural change. Cultural change refers to the change of a community's culture due to the development within the community society or due to the contact between different communities. Cultural change can be divided into unconscious change and conscious change, and the latter includes active change, guided change and forced change.

2. Wa religious culture. In the early days, the idea of animism occupied a central position in Wa religious culture. Wa people especially respect nature and attach importance to harvest and death. With different levels of sacrificial rituals, totem worship and mages, the religious forms are mainly rituals and divination. At the same time, hunting culture has a great influence on religious culture, and most of the religious purposes and rituals are closely related to it. Here, both men and women had the right to freedom of religion. Later on, Christianity and Buddhism also had an influence in the Wa region.

3. Moba culture. Moba culture refers to a cultural phenomenon that exists in the central area of Wa culture and represents the characteristics of traditional Wa culture. It is preserved in the central area of Wa ethnic group centered on Awa Mountain (Ximeng area). During the Tongzhi period of the Qing Dynasty, the leader of the Lahu tribe, Sanfuzu, led his troops into the Awa Mountain area of Ximeng to avoid the pursuit of the Qing army, which had a great influence on the Wa people. The term "Moba" is a testament to the mutual cultural influence and also names the religious activists in the central Wa region as Moba. The survey in the 1950s proved the regional nature of the concept of Moba: "Wa Moba exists in the Ximeng region, and other Wa regions also have religious leaders or people who manage and preside over ghosts, who are generally not called Moba. This shows that the name and role of Wa religious ritualists vary from region to region. The name Moba is popular in the central Wa region, which is the core area of Wa culture. It preserves the core qualities of Wa religion, politics, economy and culture, and the Moba culture shows us the traditional Wa social structure system and the way of operation.

### 2.2. *Review of existing studies*

1. Research on the social changes of the Wa people in Ximeng. A number of monographs have been published since the 1990s on the study of Wa social and cultural customs. Luo Zhiji gave a comprehensive introduction to the Wa from seven aspects: distribution and living conditions, language, ethnic origin and history, social production and economic system, political and social system, marriage, funeral and religious beliefs, material life and science and culture, and development and

changes in the Wa region since liberation. Luo Zhiji gave a comprehensive introduction to the Wa from seven aspects: distribution and living conditions, language, ethnic origin and history, social production and economic system, political and social system, marriage, funeral and religious beliefs, material life and science and culture, and development and changes in the Wa region since liberation, and also believed that the Wa society of Ximeng had not developed into a class society before the founding of New China, but was in the process of disintegration of the primitive society and the class society being formed [1]. Wei Deming explored the inheritance of Wa culture and its interaction with other ethnic groups on the basis of Luo Zhiji's work, and believed that Wa culture has undergone a process of change from prosperity to decline and then revival in its long history, and that Wa culture has not been eliminated by the flow of history, but has been steadily inherited and interacted with other ethnic groups[2]. Li Jie describes and analyzes in detail the social development of the Wa in Lincang, Yunnan over the past hundred years from the perspective of social change, especially the social development of the Wa region since the reform and opening up, and expands the scope of the study to the low states of Myanmar across the mountains from China's Yunnan province on the basis of previous studies, and discusses the issues that the Wa should pay attention to in their future development as a cross-border ethnic group from the perspective of ethnic relations [3].

2. Research on Wa social and cultural customs. Luo Zhiji, Wei Deming, Li Jie and other scholars mention the description and analysis of Wa social customs in their works, while Zhao Furong specializes in systematic and in-depth research on Wa customs[4]. In his book "Wa Customs", the author makes detailed discussions on family and social organization, marriage customs, rituals and funerals, religious beliefs and sacrifices, festivals and taboos, folk arts, etc., which provide scholars who want to understand the book provides valuable textual materials for scholars who want to understand the customs of the Wa people. Zhao Yanshe describes and introduces in more detail the Wa social customs in different regions on the basis of previous studies, and argues some controversial points through actual cases, solving the doubts that have been troubling scholars on some controversial issues [5]. In analyzing specific social customs, Yang Baokang believes that Wa funeral customs have three social functions, such as ethical edification, adjustment of social relations and ecological environmental protection. Although local Wa people are not necessarily aware of the existence of these functions, they practiced them practically under the guidance of these functions [6].

3. Research on the religious culture of the Wa people in Ximeng. Through the analysis of Wa ghost beliefs, Xu Hualong believes that the Wa concept of everything having ghosts has made great progress compared to the

low-level single-mindedness of human beings in the very primitive period, because human beings have gradually transformed from being overwhelmed with fear of nature to realizing that there is an invisible magical power behind these natural changes, and this power that controls everything in nature is the ghosts that cannot be seen by human eyes [7]. Xu Hualong and Zhao Furong conducted a study on "hunter sacrificing to ghosts", which is a major religious form of the Wa people. The Wa people believe in hunting people to kill their heads and sacrificing them to ghosts to make crops abundant, agriculture smooth, village life smooth and people live longer. Li Lian conducted a study on the ritual form of pulling wooden drums, showing that wooden drums are a traditional ritual instrument and pulling wooden drums is the main form of ritual, and that wooden drums have become a cultural symbol for the Wa people to unite the masses and form a national identity[8][9]. Other studies on Wa religious beliefs include Yang Baokang's and Zhou Jiayu's "The Relationship between Wa Primitive Religion and Ethics", Ma Tingsen's "On Wa's Religious Ritual Behavior", and Zhang Yanjuan's "Wa Customs and Religious Beliefs"[10][11][12].

### **3. CHANGES IN WA MOBA CULTURE IN XIMENG SINCE THE REFORM AND OPENING-UP AND THE INFLUENCING FACTORS**

#### **3.1. Moba Culture**

The "Moba" is the ritual and presiding officer of the original Wa religious activities, the inheritor and educator of Wa history and culture, the interpreter of moral and social customs, and the regulator of social conflicts. "They enjoy a high social status among the Wa people. The Moba system is one of the important components of the Wa social system and an important part of religious activities. The original religion of the Wa is the worship of multiple gods, believing that all things have spirits. Most of the religious activities are sacrifices to ghosts and gods, with ghost sacrifices being the main focus. The Moba sacrifice is carried out in the form of "Ramu drums" and "head hunting sacrifice". The Moba system is a regional cultural system that demonstrates the characteristics of Wa religious culture. The Moba system mainly exists in the central area of the Wa ethnic group centered on the Awa Mountains, while in other Wa areas, the worshippers are mostly called headmen [13].

The Moba culture is usually expressed in the form of "Ramu drums" and "head-hunting sacrifice". At first, the wooden drums were used as a ritual instrument to communicate with the gods and were often used in ritual dances. Later, the wooden drum saying evolved into a wooden drum god and was deified. People began to pay attention to the ritual of making and pulling back the wooden drums, and a culture of pulling wooden drums

was formed. The wood for the drums is a special species of wood that grows in a specific area. Before cutting the wood, the Wa people will do the usual divination to choose the right location and cutting time. The drums are dragged back to the village entrance, where they are sacrificed by shamans who plagiarize the cattle, slaughter and divide the live cattle, then dance and chant incantations to pray for good fortune, and then start making the drums. Usually a pair of male and female drums are made, with the female drum being large and the male drum being small. Besides, head-hunting sacrifice, headhunting is usually associated with blood revenge, tribal revenge and other movements, also known as headhunting blood sacrifice. Before the war, the warriors will perform blessings and religious prayers for the victory of war or revenge. After a successful head hunt, it will be preserved by the hands of a mage. While the ritual is in progress, the head is placed on a special rack made by the shaman, and incantations are recited and ritual dances are performed. Usually, they are used to praying for a good life and a good harvest for the family. Usually, the ritual is accompanied by animal sacrifice and is preserved to this day. However, after the reform and opening up, the cruel human sacrifice, which was considered barbaric and primitive, was replaced by the head-hunting sacrifice with the head of a dog.

#### **3.2. The process of cultural change in Moba**

Until the mid-20th century, the Wa people in the central area of Ximeng had experienced a long primitive society and retained their primitive production and way of life, and their socio-economic and cultural exchanges were very closed and lacked modernity. After the 1950s, with the transformation and change of the Wa society, economy and culture in Ximeng, the Moba culture has been subjected to unprecedented impact. Especially in the 21st century, with the accelerated pace of globalization, traditional lifestyles, ideologies and value standards have undergone major changes, and the cultural changes in Wa society have intensified.

In traditional society, the Wa have deep religious beliefs and many religious rituals. They believe that everything is governed by ghosts and gods, who are everywhere, and that all human activities and wishes must be permitted or granted by them. The social role of Moba in modern society has changed fundamentally. In the Wa settlement, all aspects of social life show the interweaving of tradition and modernity, and the transition and change from tradition to modernity. The relatively stable traditional values and belief systems are being impacted or replaced by the pluralistic modern values and belief systems, and the social ecosystem such as political organization, social system, social interaction, and interpersonal relationship on which the Moba rely has been completely changed. At the same time, the cultural ecosystem is also undergoing profound changes

in the attitude of the community toward the original religion and beliefs, the attitude of the community toward the Moba, the community's trust and psychological demand for the Moba, and the transmission of the Moba and the way of transmission.

### **3.3. The Influencing Factors of Moba Culture Change**

Since the reform and opening up, there are three main factors that have influenced the change of "Moba" culture: the change of Wa social structure, the change of cultural structure, and the change of individual personality structure.

Social structure is the social relationship network of Wa society, the structure of the population and production methods. Cultural structure is the value beliefs and cultural symbol system of Wa society. Personal personality structure is the motivation of Wa people's actions, and the system of integration patterns of psychological needs. In the context of globalization, the social and cultural isolation of the Wa society, i.e. the social network based on the region, has been broken. Population growth, migrant workers, monetization, and urbanization have weakened the simple social behavior and social structure based on villages in the past. The Wa society is becoming more and more complex internally, modern technology and culture and value systems are changing, unlike the previous single cultural values and identity patterns value orientations tend to be diversified. Changes in social and cultural structures have changed people's religion, production life and values. The Wa people's split personality regarding the need for security of heart through religion, the pursuit of values and the reorganization of the motivational system of personal behavior are destroyed. Reason and emotion are no longer in harmony and stable. Wa society is now in a period of transition in which traditional cultural patterns have been gradually disintegrating, while new cultural patterns are being reorganized and have not yet been finalized. Wa society has thus formed a diversified social and institutional structure. Under the new historical conditions, the change of Moba culture is inevitable.

## **4. REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

The famous folklorist Mr. Zhong Jingwen once pointed out that "national culture is a bright mirror, it can illuminate the face of national life, it is also a kind of X-ray, can shine through the inner 'lungs' of national life. It is also a kind of footprint left by history, which can show the path the nation has taken. It is a kind of bulldozer that can push the national culture forward" [14]. In my opinion, based on the theories of many people in China and abroad, I believe that cultural integration, taking the best and removing the worst, and developing a new

culture that adapts to the development of society is the best choice for Moba culture.

The social status of the Moba has also undergone a fundamental change, as they have stepped down from the sacred and lofty altar of the past and reverted from divinity to humanity. However, it should be clear that the changes in Wa culture and Moba culture do not directly indicate that the Wa subjects have lost their cultural identity, but rather that they are exploring new, more universal and flexible beliefs and value models in today's society. According to Stewart's theory of cultural adaptation, when two unique cultures interact and collide they spread to each other, creating a situation where you and I have each other, forming a pluralistic unity with each individuality. In this process, cultures come into contact, mix, and merge, while at the same time changing, dividing, and dying out. However, in reality, in the process of cultural adaptation and collision, ethnic minorities are mostly on the passive side to accept and change, just like the Wa ethnic group as well. Because minority cultures are in a disadvantaged position in terms of cultural status, they tend to be passive in making acceptance and changes. Just like today, ethnic customs have disappeared, stories have been lost, and even some rituals are only known in their form but not their original meaning. In this situation, ethnic minorities have to choose to adapt to policy choices accordingly, and this is where the problem lies today.

Wu Zhenhua points out that the current socio-cultural changes of the Wa can be analyzed by the integration strategy and "multicultural model" of Canadian cultural psychologist Rebay[15]. In his theory, when the ethnic culture is in separation mode, it is easy to breed nationalistic sentiment, which usually leads to overly aggressive cultural exclusion and self-enclosure, and eventually leads to the stagnation of ethnic cultural development. At the other extreme is the "assimilation" model, in which the Wa people will seriously lose their ethnicity, or in short, "over-assimilation", which makes them lose their foundation, sense of belonging and identity. The worst case is the "marginalization" model, i.e., the marginal zone or intersection of the above two models. In this case, the nation loses its national self-confidence due to the cultural shock and fails to identify with the foreign culture, which is the worst result of adaptation. Therefore, the "integration" model should be chosen as the best option for a people to move towards a better future in the face of various cultural shocks. Benedict has analyzed the wonderful aspects of this model of North American Indian cultural adaptation. Ultimately, the cultural integration model is the process of recasting national culture, accepting foreign culture and mainstream culture while preserving the native culture, taking the essence and removing the dross in the process, and continuously integrating. Finally, a new culture is formed to adapt to the mainstream. In this way, we can keep up with the mainstream culture while

ensuring the uniqueness of the local culture. China has also worried about the gradual "assimilation" of the Wa in the face of the accelerated expansion of mainstream culture after the reform and opening up. However, it has been proved that under the practice of "integration" model, the ethnic minorities have not only not been "assimilated", but also become more advanced, adaptable and vital in terms of civilization.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Based on the theories and analysis above, to sum up, the process of inheritance and change of Moba culture is actually the process of continuous adaptation of culture to the environment, adaptation brings change, and the demand for social development and progress in cultural adaptation is the choice of the future path of Moba culture in the current context.

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