

## A General View of The Chinese Lisu Ethnic Group's Religious Beliefs

*Qiaoyang LI*

Department of Ethnology, School of Ethnology and Sociology,  
Guizhou Minzu University, 550025, Guiyang, Guizhou Province, China

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**Abstract:** Before 1949, the Lisu Ethnic group worshipped many gods, nature and multitudes of other things. This appeared to be a remnant of totemism. Religious professionals made a living by offering sacrifices to ghosts and fortune-telling. During their religious activities, animals were slaughtered and money was wasted in the past. In the middle of the 19th century, Christianity and Catholicism were spread into the area by Western missionaries. After 1949, great changes have already taken place, however, the past religious beliefs still influence their life till today.

**Key words:** Lisu Ethnic Group • Religious beliefs • China • Chinese community • Worship

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### INTRODUCTION

With a population of 702,839 [1, covering 0.0527% of the total Chinese population, Lisu Ethnic Group belongs to one of 55 Chinese ethnic groups, mainly living in Nujiang and Weixi Lisu autonomous prefectures of Yunan Province, the Southwestern China, some others live in its some scattered areas as in Li Jiang, Diqing, Dali, Baoshan, Dehong, Lincang, Chuxiong and Kunming city. Lisu Ethnic Group, like all other groups, with the maturing religious consciousness, primitive sorcery gradually developed into primitive religion, as is a super-stratum construction of a clannish society as well as a concomitant of a tribal society. They believed that everything in the natural world was spiritual and it could control their social-cultural activities as well, till today, we can see it through their activities.

In other words, the Lisu People used to believe in Polytheism and worship the nature, believing that all things in the universe are subjected to the authority of Misi (heavenly god) and below Misi, there are over 30 types of Nis (ghosts and spirits). They also worship ancestors and keep some remains of Totemism. The wizards and priests conducting all religious ceremonies are called either Nibas or Nigubas. Since the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity and Roman Catholic have also reached out to this area [2, as is officially accepted by the government.

**The Basics of the Lisu People's Religion:** Having faith and unceasing soul. In the past, all the Lisu Ethnic Group believes that soul exists around them, i.e. God Worship in a religious perspective. In their points of view, human beings are living because they have souls which will be separated after they are dead. They also think that soul has super power that can be existent independent of the human body. Therefore, they worship the soul as a kind of mysterious dependence in daily life. In this condition, no matter it was a man or a women, the Lisu People practiced such a ritual as giving twice names in life: one took place when they were born before long and the other did when they got married or they were engaged. The first one was named as "soul name" which was forbidden to address it when they grew up till he died because they thought that the soul would be gone and died if it was continued to use.

Funeral rites were a big event among this group. They imagined that he would become a ghost or a spirit which could be a good or an ill one when a human being was gone: the good would bring the living fortune while the evil bring disaster to them. Therefore, they created much completed rites in order to have the good rather than the bad. For example, all the villagers would stop working for two or three days to mourn the dead and the relatives of the dead had to take wine and meat to its home, helping wash the dead's face, comb its hair and had the dead put on the cerements in Bijiang area. After that, the wizard

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**Corresponding Author:** Qiaoyang LI, Department of Ethnology, School of Ethnology and Sociology,  
Guizhou Minzu University, 550025, Guiyang, Guizhou Province, China.

would take out bow and arrow and shoot three arrows, he would keep praying as he was shooting, repeatedly warning the dead to hurry up to join its ancestors, as is addressed as “Majjama”(means opening the road for the soul of the dead).

The Lisu Ethnic Group opted for burial. The corps was put into the coffin before it was buried. And also it had such a custom to choose a date to bury the corpse. Its family had to cook for the dead three meals, besides, all the villagers had to dance for the dead in order to ingratiate themselves with the dead.

When burial, what the dead had used, such as, the chopper, crossbows, bow quiver would be hung at his tomb if it was a man, while what she had used, such as, weaving tools, linen sacks, cooking tools would be hung at her tombs if it was a women. Such doing showed that the living hope that the departed could live as he did when he was alive in other world even if they were dead now.

Unlike other ethnic groups, the Lisu Ethnic Group had no evidence to exist a customs as ancestor-worship in history. When a person died, the tomb would be built after its death and after 3 years, the departed’s family would visit its graves and they would not sweep the tombs any more after that. At the same time, the Lisu Ethnic Group did not enshrine their ancestors’ tablets at home.

**Totemism:** Before 1949, there existed a barbarism clan society among the Lisu Ethnic Group. And totemism was then popular. Each clan had its own tribal name and the name could be served as both its mark and its totem as well. Take some of the Lisu Ethnic Groups in Yunan Province for an example, the tiger, the bear, the monkey, the goat, the snake, the bird, the fish, the chicken, the bee, the buckwheat, the jute, the vegetable, the bamboo, the teakwood, the frost, the plough, the boat, the fire and so on was once served as their totem in history. Each totem had its own story. For instance, tiger clan had such a story that the tiger in the mountains saw a girl when she went up to the mountain to cut the firewood for her family, the tiger who turned himself a handsome guy would like to take her as his wife, or he would kill her. She had no choice but to marry the tiger and their offspring was Tiger clan. The Lisu language’s name is “Napa”. While the buckwheat clan considered their first female ancestor ate the buckwheat and bore children who became their ancestors. Such legends highlighted their outlook of the origin of the people; they tried to explain in those days where the human beings came from. They imagined

a certain plant or an animal as their ancestors and mystified them. Thus the totemism gave birth to. However, as the time goes on, the Lisu people’s totemism fell away though they still know their totem, but most of them know nothing about their first meaning and their legendary.

**Animism and Others ( Animatism):** Lisu people practiced an animistic religion, that is, everything on earth had spirits like human beings, Sun and Moon, Mountains and Rivers, Clouds and Stars, Trees and Animals, all these things are the objects of their worshipers. Lisu people consider all the unseen natural phenomena as their “Ni”(spirits), they have as many worshiper as 30 more, such as, Heaven spirits, Home spirits, Mountain spirits, Water spirits, Chronic spirits, Blood spirits, Women spirits and so on. Besides, Lisu people used to be humiliated by other ethnic groups in history; therefore, they also had such spirits as Bai People ghosts, Naxi People ghosts and Han People ghosts. The Lisu people think that all the unfortunate things resulted from all kinds of ghosts around them; it was the ghosts that were in charge of their fates. Thus, they would perform varieties of ritual activities in order to drive off all the natural and man-made disasters each year.

For example, Sky spirit(Baijiani), the ferocious one. It would have the people suffer from such diseases as headache, epileptosis, cough. In the past all these diseases would cause the patients dead. The Lisu people thought then that the sky spirit brought it to them. In order to live a peaceful life, they created such a ritual to please and worship it: a female buffalo and a cock were killed (or a buffalo and hen instead) to hold such a memorial ceremony. At the same time, such immolations as Pine, white poplars, bamboos, briars were used to help them to send the spirit to the Heaven. Home ghost (Haikuani), this ghost would have the people to suffer from heartache that had the child die soon if a child had it. It was said that home spirit could have a married woman not to be pregnant after she was married for a long time. Also, the Lisu people created a ritual to drive it out of their home. Often the Lisu people would use twelve “baba” (a kind of rice cake) and a bowl of baijiu (a kind of liquor) to send it to the sea.

In all, ritual scarifications were often done by sorcerers who had two kinds, one was called “Nipa” and the other called “Nigupa”. Each village had one or two sorcerers who were thought to be Channelers between human beings and ghosts. They had higher social status; some of them per se were the heads of the village. “Nipa”

mainly engaged in expelling the evil spirit and practicing divination to tell other's fortunes, as well as in presiding over the sacrificial practices; while, "Nigupa" had a lower social status compared with those of "Nipa", what they did was just to practice divination to tell other's fortunes, kill the animals and expel the ghosts, meanwhile, they had to do manual work to live on. There were all kinds of divinatory symbols, while, bamboo stick divinations, knife divinations, shell divinations, hand divinations and ten of them were popular. When someone was ill, the Lisu people would firstly asked them to be at the patient's home, deciding which divination they could use to expel the ghosts and then began to practice a series of activities.

**Christianity and Catholicism:** Since 1869, quite a few explorers, geographers, colonialists, missionaries in the Western Countries came to Nujiang River and Dulong River and in 1907, Annet Genestier, a French Roman Catholic priest had the Lisu People build two Catholic churches in Baihaluo, Gongshan, starting with Catholicism. And his successors later built another 4 churches and had 1016 Catholics [2]; there were Roman Catholic clergymen and 3 Lisu Catholic clergymen, subjected to the jurisdiction of the Kangting Catholic diocese. In 1913, an Englishman James Fraser was the first to be in Southern China to preach Christianity [3] And then missionaries such as James Fraser, Allyn Cooke and Isobel Kuhn and her husband, John, were working with the Lisu of Yunnan [4. Lisu Church is a Christian church of an ethnic minority of southwestern China. Christian missionaries had been laboring in the Lisu area since then.

Later, James Fraser developed the written Lisu language named as Fraser Alphabet, as now is officially accepted by the Chinese government. Writing and reading in Lisu has been mainly developed by the church. In some villages the membership of the Christian church comprises far more than half the population. The Lisu Church has both the Holy Bible and a Christian hymn book in its own language now [4]After 1978, the Chinese

Lisu Church has training centers, training evangelists, in Fugong and Lushui. Lisu pastors are trained at the Theological University of Kunming. There is a great shortage of pastors in the Lisu churches, according to representants of the church in the area. The church is part of the official Protestant Church of China, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Sunday service in church is mainly in Lisu [5].The Chinese government's Religious Affairs Bureau has proposed considering Christianity the official religion of the Lisu [6]. According to OMF International estimates, as of 2008, there are now more than 300,000 Christian Lisu in Yunnan, Christianity is becoming the dominant religion among the Lisu people gradually [5]

## CONCLUSION

In all, The Basics of the Lisu People's Religion are the hope of immortality, they are the believers of Totemism, Animism and others and after middle part of the last century, they converted to Christianity and Catholicism, while the old religious beliefs still influence their life nowadays, as times goes on, they are strongly influenced by the cultures of Han and other ethnic groups.

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