

# The Changes and Realistic Functions of the Blang Ethnic Group's Traditional Beliefs\*

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With the development of society, the Blang ethnic group's traditional beliefs have changed a lot. However, some traditional beliefs and manners and customs still exist. Based on the findings from survey and interviews, it is found that low productivity in the history leads to the Blang ethnic group which is difficult to understand and withstand all kinds of natural disasters. Then, the primitive religious concepts such as "natural worship" and "totem worship" are resulted. The "Jie mu long" ceremony of Shidian County, the "Ji long" ceremony of Shuangjiang and the belief of Theravada's Sthavira are the real reflection of those concepts. Nowadays, the existence of some ritual activities in the Blang ethnic group has lost the practical significance. However, some traditional beliefs and manners and customs still have been inherited in real life of the Blang ethnic group, this is mainly because they can satisfy Blang people's requirements, and they have these functions: regulating mind, ecological protection, and integrating society.

*Keywords:* the Blang ethnic group, belief, change, the scattered group

In the history of the Blang ethnic group, it was difficult for them to defend against attacks of various natural disasters with their low level of productivity and backward mode of production. At the same time, all human's production and means of subsistence all depended on nature, because of the extremely poverty of scientific knowledge, it was difficult for them to understand and handle the various phenomena occurred in the nature and the ever-changing phenomena such as life and death encountered in social life. As a result, they had fear and attached psychology. They thought that some supernatural powers drove and mastered the production and living and all things in the world were spiritually (the trace of consciousness can be found in many history legend of the Blang ethnic group). To pray for the god's blessings and helps, they worshipped many natural phenomena, so the primitive religious concepts such as "nature worship", "totem worship", and "ghost worship" were produced. "Animism" theory plays a leading role in the around Blang people's thoughts and throughout their entire religious life.

## The Primitive Religious Beliefs

The Shidian's Blang ethnic group worship horse as totem, they strictly forbid to kill horses and eat horse

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meat. The Shuangjiang's Blang ethnic group worships cock and bee as totem. There is a beautiful legend behind each kind of totem worship.

The Shuangjiang's Blang ethnic group believes that all have spirits and worship polytheist. "Tree and stone, rock and cave, farmland and stockaded village, whole grains, god is everywhere" (Feng, 2003). So all kinds of ceremonies are held frequently all year around, such as "offer sacrifice to the Loong (a god created by Blang people which rides white horses with white clothes)", "offer sacrifice to the God of cotton", "offer sacrifice to the God of the whole grains", "offer sacrifice to the Vulcan", "worship ancestors", and so on. In all the ceremonies, the Loong worship is the most important festival of a year.

### **The Jilong Ceremony in Shuangjiang Bangxie**

Jilong commonly called "ji yue mu xi mu" by Blang people, is the most solemn ritual activities of the Blang ethnic group. Jilong ceremony should be held on the first Horse Day, August of the Dai calendar. In case of suffering special circumstances such as war or natural disaster, the Blang people will worship Loong several times a year. Every family of the whole village sends a man on the day of worshiping. Under the command of "Zhaose" who carries a chicken, "Wengse" who takes a pig, "Wenglai" who leads a cattle, Blang people are starting from the center of the village with the rest of the goods. After arriving at the Loong jungle, firstly, Zhaose lit up a wax under the Loong tree. Then he kowtows the tree three times to pray, and other people should keep quiet. He cuts off a piece of wood, set up a simple table under the Loong forest. The chicken, pigs, and cattle which are brought by Blang people to sacrifice to the Loong, should die with sticks to their heads. Absolutely, it is not allowed to slitting its throat and bleeding it in front of the "Loong". The slaughtering of livestock has a clear division of labor. Zhaose kills the cock, Wengse kills the hen, and Wenglai kills the pig and the cattle. After preparing the chicken and pigs, the Blang people will put them into a large pot, mix them with rice, then cook to rotten. Zhaose will lit up a wax under the tree, then put the whole chicken, pigs, cattle, part of the meat, well-cooked rice on the plate which is placed on the wood table. What calls for attention is that the heads of chicken, pig, and cattle should not be faced toward the Loong forest. Four bowls (must be sand-earthenware or soil bowls) are put on four corners of the wood table, some elders pour wine into bowls, and light up a couple of wax at each corner of the table. Zhaose kowtows to the tree across the table, prays:

X day X month X year is a good day. The sky is blue and clear, the clouds are pure and white, the date is perfect. The sun shines, the stars twinkle. It is a good day, a very auspicious day. It is a year of harvest, a year of wealth, a year of good fortune and happiness, a generation of old trees end up with a generation of new sapling's reducing, a generation of old people end up with our young people growing. We just come to undertake the end of the branch, all the things are created by our ancestors. The Zhaose, Wengse, Wenglai have been existed since antiquity. The tributes have been put on the table and filled with the bowls, sour, bitter, taste good. Let us beg our god who is handsome forever and shining like gold, sail your canoe and befall the Manmengdenghan (the nickname for Bangxie). Please enjoy the delicious food. (said by Chun-hua Feng, recorded by Chun-ai Xi, 2001)

After bowing down to their gods for about half an hour (It held for a long time and it meant subjects religiously bow and serve to the Loong to enjoy the sacrifice), the Zhaose prayed again: "Bowing down to the Semansesaiquan, bowing down to the God with twinkling satin, bowing down to the God who is handsome forever and shining like gold, when you eat up, we, your subjects eat the leftovers". After bowing, people pick up and remove the simple wooden table. Then, the activity is successfully finished (Feng, 2003).

### **The Ceremony of Jiemulong in Shidian Mulaoyuan**

Blang people think that God exists everywhere, they believe in the primitive religion and admire their

ancestors and nature. There are differences in worship ceremony among villages, the two major ceremonies are Jishanshen and Jiemulong, Jiemulong is more solemn. "Jiemulong" is the most important Blang's ceremony, it originated from an old legend, long time ago, the ancestor of Blang people had to choose a place for their habitat, then a highly skilled carpenter told him the way to make choice.

You chop down the highest tree in the top of hill, I will carve it out in the shape of Loong, then you put it into river and let it drift freely, the place it stops is the habitat which Loong choose for you.

So the ancestor did it in that way, the Loong drift on Kuke river, then it stuck in Hulukou, the feet of Bixia Hill, ancestors of Blang made their home there, sure enough as the carpenter said, there is good weather every year, as a result, they had bumper grain harvest, then flourishing days came. So they named this place Mulongyuan, which is called Mulaoyuan today. In honor of their ancestor and Mulong, all the Blang fathers and elderships gathering together to burn incenses and paper money on the second day every year (in Chinese, lunar calendar), they set table for ceremony and held ceremony Jiemulong. Before Jiemulong was held, a person in charge of the ceremony (Dangqi in Blang language) will be chosen by all the village people. On the ceremony day, a pig will be sacrificed and all the family in village will be asked to offer two tubes of rice and one kilogram of wine. The person in charge will gather everybody to dine together, each family can be assigned a portion of baked pork. Everyone in the village will attend the Jiemulong ceremony beside well of Loong by the noon. There are ten instrumental performers wearing cloth with five different colors (yellow, green, white, red, and black) playing suona, flute, sanxian (three-stringed instruments) and lusheng (a reed-pipe wind instrument) while they circle the well once. Clothes with five colors stand for rainbow and mean the rainy weather. Then the elder will kowtow (a former Chinese custom of touching the ground with the forehead as a sign of respect or submission) to pray, with their moving lips, for the harvest next year. When all this finished, people setting off firecrackers all the way, the person in charge will move the pain tree (which was cut down in advance) back to his home, that means the Muloong has been already fetched back. There will be music playing when circling tree times around the tree. After that, this phase is to the end. All the people in the village will gather together in the home of person in charge to have activity called "Dage", at first, the "Dage" passes the head of pig to the leading singer. The leading singer circled around the "Mulong" three times, dancing and singing "a bowl of porridge and two bowls of meat, singing until the sun comes up". The Blang people think that only the water can cook the rice and having the porridge is the result of good harvest. Singing into the night, "Dage" has to serve people with peanut rice candy. Before dawn, they cook the head of pig and give it to the singer to eat.

When the ceremony finished, the head of village called the villagers to deliberate and choose a "Dangqi" from the villagers to set about preparing to the next year's things about Jiemulong (The Work Group, 2005).

### **Buddhism Beliefs**

The Shuangjiang's Blang ethnic group is deeply influenced by Dai Nationality, so the most area (besides Lingdi Village in Bangbing County, there is an interesting legend on this) of the Blang ethnic group worship Theravada's Sthavira.

Most villagers in Bangxie are Buddhists. There are Buddhists and Buddha in the village. A few years ago, under the Buddha's bed sent forth a reishi. It became a good thing to all villagers and strengthened the mysterious force of the Buddhist. The author was granted access to the living room of the Buddha (to keep the

reishi grew with freedom, the Buddha has been moved out) to see its elegance. It was the tallest and most graceful reishi he had never seen before. It askew grew out from the mud walls, gracefully erected and was looked so outstanding. In Bangxie, the festivals of Buddhism are the most cheerful and important festivals. Now the Worshipping Flora (the Water-Splashing Festival), the Opening Festival, and Closing Festival are continued. Then the festival atmosphere is throughout the village. The relatives of nearby villages are invited to the village to celebrate the festival (said by Feng Guiyun, Lao Dao, and Wu Zhaomei, recorded by Chun-Ai Xi, 2010).

About the Buddhism beliefs of the Shidian Blang ethnic group, the author's field investigation does not match to the relevant literature. In relevant literature, some scholars find out that the Shidian Blang ethnic group worships the Buddhism,

In the history, the Blang ethnic group of Shidian and Changning had worshiped the Mahayana Buddhism, but the time when it spread to counties is unknown. Based on the auspiciousness and inauspiciousness of the stockade, each three years or five years say once Dajiao (say Mass for the departed souls), and request Mr. Zhali to recite sutras for seven days and seven nights. There is no permanent monk in the temple. People take turns charging the temple, burn incense and take offerings on the first and 15th of every month, then, alternate to other people. But in recent time, religious beliefs of the Blang people here are getting more and more faint. (Mu, 1999)

In the history, the local people worship the Mahayana Buddhism. Before liberation, they have their own temples that are straw houses made of wood. The temple is divided into three parts and the idols they worship is belonged to three systems. The main part of the temple is Kwan-yin, Manjusre, Wei Tuo, Bodhidharma, and Jingang (the Buddha's warrior attendant), the other part is Lord Kuan; and in the Dongyue Temple is the Judge, the Goblin, and so on. (Yunnan Province Editorial Board, 2009)

However, in the author's survey, he has talked with more than 10 people included the older at about 60. Their answer is "our Mulaoyuan here does not worship the Buddhism". Researchers have two theories about this: The first is that the Buddhism has been faded away from the life of the villagers for a too long time that the living elder do not have relevant memories; the second is that the Shidian in the above literature may not include the Mulaoyuan, the local people may point to the ancestors of other Blang ethnic group besides the Mulaoyuan. In short, it is difficult to find out the Buddhism in the daily life of the Mulaoyuan. Even the fragment of the historic memory is hard to find.

### **The Change of Traditional Beliefs**

The Blang ethnic groups of Shidian and Bangxie believe that all have spirits, their main religion is primitive religion that includes natural worship, totem worship, ghost-god worship, ancestor worship, and so on. The Bangxie's Blang ethnic group also believes Theravada's Sthavira. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, primitive religion and Theravada's Sthavira play an important role in the social of Blang ethnic group. Their sacrificial ceremony and witchcraft activity are held very frequently, for example: the Blang ethnic group of Shidian's Mountain Festival, Tiaohui, Jiemulong, and the ceremony of Jilong which Bangxie hosted at the eighth month in Dai lunar calendar each year; the ceremonies sacrificed the God who blesses stockade village and sends Vulcan, the ceremonies such as consecrating Buddha and dripping to worship ancestors host during some Buddhist holy day like Dai Songkran, Closing Day, Opening Day, and so on. What is more, the ceremonies hosted when villagers building their new houses like calling souls back, exorcism, and sweeping the house, and those hosted in agriculture production such as sacrificing the field of ghost, calling the soul of rice, tasting fresh rice, and so on. During the Cultural Revolution, the religion beliefs

and worship activities of the Blang ethnic group have quieted temporarily. With the reform and opening-up policy thorough, the national political environment changes gradually loosely. The religion beliefs are revived in the social of the Blang ethnic group, but they also have been changed a lot. First of all, the holiness decreases. Beliefs and ceremonies in real life are no longer like that in the past that worship the gods very much. Otherwise, some ceremonies are even added performance (The ceremony of worshipping the Loong had been filmed by the TV station), then the holiness decreases. Secondly, the forms of faith groups have been changed.

With the increasing communication with outside and the increasing number of people attending school, working outside, and getting married outside, the forms of faith groups have been changed. Some young people's religious beliefs have gradually been weakened. In some large traditional sacrificial ceremonies, the range of attending people has tended to reduce, less and less young people participate in. Thirdly, the frequency of religious activities has been reduced. With the change of the social environment, some ceremonies have been lost their realistic significance and gradually faded away. Such as the ceremony of sending Vulcan and washing cattle's feet have been kept out of the public eye.

### **Practical Functions of the Traditional Beliefs**

Through a cultural phenomenon of a society in history, religion can exist for thousand years. It informs that its existence is reasonable and embodies the social function of the religion. In *Sociology of Religion*, Dai Kangsheng and Sun Shangyang put forward that the religion has functions such as integrating society, controlling society, individual socialization, and regulating mind (Dai & Peng, 2000). In the life of the Blang ethnic group, the traditional religion beliefs have the following major functions.

#### **Regulating Mind**

In ancient times, the Blang ethnic group's ability to transform nature is relatively weak. Natural disaster, psychological troubles, and social oppression are threatening their very existence. It is difficult for them to deal with difficulties and obstacles of the human society and the tough nature by themselves. So they tend to have some sense of fear, helplessness, and loneliness. As a result, they tend to put their life and death in supernatural spirit to strengthen the courage that overcomes the nature and difficulties. Then, they can get some sense of security. Also, they depend on and believe in the gods to obtain the psychological and spiritual comfort to release their anxiety and fear, to ease their uneven feeling and to get away from the various troubles of the life.

#### **Ecological Protection**

In the Blang people's mind, the dense primeval forests are the mysterious image of the noble. The long-term slash-and-burn living way makes the Blang people rely heavily on the forest. People's lives have close relationships with the forest that makes contribution to the people's worship of nature. The Blang people construct a Loong, the residence the Loong lives is called "Loong forest". In the Blang people's view, the Loong is Sovereign God, so the Loong forest is the holy place where nobody can do something bad there. Every tree and bush, bird and mammal are all divine and inviolable, then, many taboos come into being from the Loong worship. Do anything that might offend the Loong that can provoke it, which leads to severe punishment and retaliation. When visiting the Bangxie, Mr. Li in school system said very serious to the author that an outsider offended the Loong: A few years ago, when the county cadre XX arrived the Bangxie, he did not listen to the dissuasion or warning of the local people and rashly offended the Loong. After getting home, he constantly met disasters and diseases. Then, the head of Loong, held a series of ceremonies to free himself.

It emphasizes that the truth of the event and adds more mysterious color when he looked grave and told the real names of the story's lead characters. People have no doubt that the Loong has supernatural forces, so the taboos about the Loong have more specifications and binding forces. The Loong forest is still a piece of supreme holy land. Nobody can easily access to the forest. The Blang people firmly believe in that if someone cuts wood and raises animals inside, then disturbs the god forest, the total stockade could suffer. Therefore, ecological environments become worse today, the forest of the Blang ethnic group is still a thick forest and is still a primeval forest of thousand-year-old trees. Many outsiders tend to shock by this kind of scene. They can hardly imagine that the well-preserved primeval forest can exist close to the stockaded villages. Objectively, people's worship to the Loong, it plays a role in protecting ecological environment and maintaining ecological balances: The Loong forest's vegetation is protected well, it has ecological values not only as conserving water, breaking wind and fixing sands, preventing debris flow and landslides, but also regulating the climate, purifying air, and so on. Besides that, some taboos in the worship of the Loong have a great significance to the protection of biodiversity, maintaining and protecting the Blang ethnic group's agriculture ecosystem functions well and have a virtuous circle.

### **Integrating Society**

The core element of religious beliefs is that believers share the same beliefs. Through sharing the same beliefs, believers have the same, exceeding mundanity, and holy values. It makes individual desire subject to group goals and contributes to individual who has sense of identification and belonging to the community. Then, the religious organization has a strong cohesion; next, when the religious belief has been reflected to the behavior, it must make the social norms to be sanctified and the implementation has a high self-consciousness. Then, the behaviors of all believers can get together. It makes the individuals and groups have different social status, different needs, and a variety of social roles can live in a society by the function of integrating society. Whether Shuangjiang's or Bangxie's primitive religious rites both play an important role in strengthening the community's national identity and maintaining the community's stability. Rites are group activities which make them have social strengths, make individuals and groups put in touch with the value, and raise positive emotions to the groups.

When rites are in a stage of liminality, it creates an ideal society: have love, equality, and harmony, without ranking possessions and status. People have a state of integration and sharing. In the rites, people create an emotional power of solidarity and altruism (Mike, 2005).

### **Conclusions**

Some traditional beliefs and manners and customs still exist and have been inherited in real life of the Blang ethnic group, it is mainly because they can satisfy people's some requirements. If their origin is because of people's close dependence on the nature, people's limited capacity, or people's fear and exploration to their surroundings, then these factors still more or less affect its existence today.

There are a lot of times in his life having strongly desire to understand the future. If he does not know the scientific method to predict the future or he is unable to carry out, he is likely to turn to the mysterious symbols, especially when these cultural activities have existed and are easy access to... Habit, belief, religious activity, folk custom, social convention and philosophy, their existence can satisfy some psychological needs of people. (William, 1989)

In other words, they adapt to the requirements of some people or the society.

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